Fade Into Me

by Tender_is_the_ghost

Summary

Daryl has carried so much on his shoulders since the apocalypse began to keep his adopted family alive that he's barely taken time to breathe. But, with the Governor's failed attack on the prison behind them and with Rick working to make the cold stone walls a home for them all, he finally feels that he can relax just a fraction. That is until a life-altering encounter with Rick in the woods one night reveals the secret he's been so desperate to share but mortally afraid of letting out and everything between them changes irrevocably.

- Inspired by Wet Tiles by lecherous_portmanteau
- Inspired by Deep by lecherous_portmanteau
- Inspired by Full Moon by lecherous_portmanteau
- Inspired by Rumble by lecherous_portmanteau
Daryl sat on the rise above the prison surveying the area, the night a living, breathing entity around him full of Mother Nature’s nocturnal noise. From his vantage point he could just make out Glenn’s silhouette on the blown out watchtower keeping vigil, a rifle slung over one shoulder as he rubbed...
his hands together for warmth in the chill night air. Daryl shifts his gaze, running it across the darkened hulk of the cell blocks and the yard, his mind’s eye envisioning each member of his adopted family in their respective sleeping quarters. He huffs out a breath, watching it plume in the air around his head, content that his friends are safe, at least for this night, and turns his attention to the surrounding woods instead, his senses sifting through the myriad of scents and sounds for anything that doesn’t belong in his world. A possum crosses upwind of him, its chubby torso shuffling through the undergrowth and he debates for a moment if he should get up and make a meal of it, his stomach giving a small clench at the thought. Ultimately he decides against it, his need to stand watch outweighing his hunger even though the stew Carol had made them for dinner had been barely enough to whet his appetite, the portion seeming woefully small now that their group was expanding.

A change in direction of the cool breeze over his face brings the rich aroma of freshly dug soil to his nose, making it twitch as he smiles inwardly thinking of Rick and Carl working side by side to turn the earth earlier that day. The wind’s direction also carries his scent to the ambling possum ahead of him causing it to give a frightened squeak and disappear rapidly into the thickest part of the low bushes between the trees. The leaves rustle above his head as the wind picks up slightly and he tilts his head back, catching another scent on the air, one of decay and death. Narrowing his vision, he can see the indistinct outlines of at least three walkers making their way in erratic lines through the trees, their aimless journey causing them to stumble over the roots in their path without a care, faces slack and devoid of any remnants of the humans they once were. Daryl had long ago stopped thinking of them as people who’d had lives and hopes and dreams of their own, people who didn’t deserve the hand that fate had dealt them. Now he just saw them as predators, killing machines with only one driving goal - to feed on the living.

He adjusts his position just a fraction, tracking them with only the slightest movement of his eyes and his ears, ready to intervene if he feels they’re getting too close to his home. Some nights he’ll come out to the woods and actively seek out every walker he can find, dispatching each one in an almost berserker rage, venting the anger and frustrations that this life has driven him to, looking for retribution for all the family he’s lost since this began. Other nights, he lets them be, only stepping in if they get too close to the prison or if they come at him, the urge to destroy them replaced with a feeling of numb apathy.

He relaxes a little as the walkers pass by his position without acknowledging his presence, his muscles uncoiling from the battle-ready state they had reflexively slipped into and he blows out another breath, watching it melt to nothing in the darkness. He can feel the time slipping into the early hours of morning and thinks to himself that he should be heading back inside soon, satisfied that the area is secure for now but he doesn’t move, taking a moment for himself to just enjoy his freedom.

Undercover of the night’s dark, forgiving embrace is the only time he really gets to be himself, to let the hidden part of his soul be free. He lets his mind wander, reliving the same daydream he has time and again, imagining himself walking into camp and revealing his true nature to everyone, letting them see him for what he actually is. He wonders, as always, how they’d react – even after all this time he still can’t predict how they’d treat him. Would they shun him, drive him out of their world out of fear and anger at his betrayal? Or would they try to kill him where he stood, seeing him as yet another abomination? He knows in his heart that he would let them, if it came to that, knows that he couldn’t live without them, that he wouldn’t even want to try. His bond to them goes much deeper than he ever imagined it would and he’d rather not exist than be alone without them. He knows without a doubt that Carol would defend him with her life if necessary but what of the others – Carl, Maggie, Hershel – their faces swim into focus in his mind. Rick. He inhales a sharp lungful of cool air and exhales it slowly, giving himself a mental shake. As much as he wants to be honest with his family, no matter how much it eats at him every day that he has to hide a part of who he is from
them, he knows that he can’t risk revealing himself to them. He needs each of them in his life and for more than just their mutual survival.

He stands, feeling the untapped power rolling through every fiber of his being, and heads down the incline back to the prison, his passage through the trees making no sound as his body instinctively knows where to tread to mask his footfalls. He emerges from the trees close to the wooden bridge that spans the width of the water running parallel to the prison fence, stepping down the bank to take a drink from the slow moving water before he goes back inside. As the ripples on the water still from where he had disturbed the surface, he catches sight of his reflection, indistinct in the moonlight but enough to cause him to start a little for a second while his brain scrambles to adjust to the unfamiliar visage looking back at him. It’s not often he gets to see himself in this form, in fact he could probably count on one hand the number of times he’s had the opportunity in his lifetime. He tilts his head, watching the reflection in the water do the same but his brain still can’t reconcile what it’s seeing with the image it’s used to being presented with when he looks in a mirror.

Instead of the strong lines of his face with the patch of coarse beard covering his chin, the ragged dark mess of his hair and the familiar blue of his eyes staring back at him – what he sees is the face of a large, black wolf, the eyes set further apart but still an unnatural shade of blue, the powerful jaws parted slightly to reveal razor sharp teeth and a glimpse of pink tongue. He tilts his head back again, watching the movement of his ears with fascination, studying the sleek lines of his skull and marveling at the width of his powerful shoulders.

Distracted as he is by this rare glimpse of his other self, it takes him a moment to realize that another sound has started up in the woods behind him. He lifts his head, ears swiveling in that direction, as he picks up the sound of running feet followed by the noise of hungry walkers in pursuit, back up the way he’d come from. Pivoting away from the water, his enormous paws pushing deep gouges in the damp earth, he races back to the trees, the sounds increasing, and his heart pounds as he hears a distinctly human grunt amongst the undead’s groans. Before he can see what’s happening, the night breeze brings him a new scent and his step falters as he inhales it deeply, knowing it as intimately as his own. Pushing faster, he bursts between the trees into a small clearing, watery moonlight bathing the nightmare tableau before him of Rick surrounded by at least half a dozen walkers, his face contorted with effort as he kicks one away from him and takes out another with his knife to its brain, pulling back sharply to thrust the blade up into the jaw of yet another. A glint on the ground shows him Rick’s discarded Colt, probably knocked from his hand before he could use it.

With a fleeting pang of guilt, Daryl recognizes the three corpses that passed him earlier but he doesn’t have time to question his decision to let them go. Instead he launches himself into the fray, pouncing on the walker Rick had kicked to the ground before it can rise again, planting his forepaws on its bony shoulders as he sinks his teeth into the back of its neck and separates its fetid-smelling head from its torso with a sharp twist of his muzzle. Turning, he takes on the next, catching a brief glimpse of Rick’s wide-eyed face as he catches sight of him before his attention is fully taken by the walker snapping at his throat. Daryl shreds the walker at his feet, its bloated rotting body parting like silk under his onslaught, and then spins to check on Rick, finding him struggling to get the upper hand over the beefy-looking walker he’s fighting, two more lying dead at his feet. Daryl hesitates for a split-second, evaluating the best way he can help and then Rick loses his footing over a tree root and goes down, the walker tumbling after him in a tangle of limbs. Daryl dives forward, darting his head into the heaving, twisting mass on the ground, trying to get his jaws locked around any part of the walker to pull it far away enough from Rick so that he can safely finish it.

Rick is putting up the fight of his life keeping the walker’s face away from his skin but its weight is severely restricting his movements and its hands are flailing crazily for his face, ready to peel his flesh from the bone. Daryl manages to sink his teeth into the putrid shirt on its back, bracing his feet and dislodging it enough for Rick to suck in a great whooping breath but his achievement is short-
lived as the moldering cloth rips in his grasp and the walker lurches forward once more. With a roaring growl of frustration, Daryl snaps his teeth aiming for one of the walker’s waving arms, everything narrowing to that one act, time speeding up as he’s rewarded with the feel of his canines sinking into solid flesh.

Too late, he realizes that it’s not the walker that he has in his jaws but Rick’s very much living forearm which he had just thrown up to ward off another attack in the same instant that Daryl had lunged. The moment seems to stretch for an eternity around him, his surroundings fading to nothing until all that exists is him and Rick, the walker suddenly inconsequential as Daryl tries to take it back, jerking his head away with an anguished roar, panic lancing through him like wildfire. He knew he’d bit and bit hard, had broken the skin, felt his teeth part the flesh like tiny poisoned daggers and he could taste Rick’s blood on his tongue, igniting something else inside of him that he pushes angrily aside. With a snarl, he lowers his head and shoves it forcefully between Rick and the walker, straining against its considerable weight as he leverages them apart, flipping the walker just far enough away that he can get on top of it, ripping into it with his mighty jaws until it’s nothing but a dismembered corpse, its mouth still clacking futilely as he stands over it, head down, his sides heaving.

His ears are buzzing, his mind reeling at what just happened – the taste of Rick still ripe on his tongue – and he can’t move, he’s frozen in time just staring down at the decapitated head between his paws. He flinches as Rick passes him on his knees, leaning over to stab his blade into the walker’s skull, extinguishing whatever force was keeping it tethered to its hideous existence. With that final blow, Rick’s knife slips from his fingers and he bows his head to his chest, his ragged breathing filling the quiet night with its harshness. Daryl can smell the coppery tang of Rick’s fresh blood on the air, his nostrils quivering and his mouth growing wet at the scent, pulling a soft whimper from his throat causing Rick’s head to jerk up, their eyes locking together. For a second they stare at each other, man and beast, and then Daryl’s instinct for self-preservation kicks in and he turns tail, fleeing into the welcoming darkness of the woods. He doesn’t stop until he’s back at the water, making a beeline for the place he’d stashed his clothes and weapons earlier before he Shifted into his other form. With barely a pause, he pushes himself to make the change back to his human form, pushing aside the panic that’s threatening to overwhelm him as he calms his body and his mind. It’s been so many years that the transition from wolf to human is practically instantaneous for him now - he really just has to concentrate on which form he desires and his body does the rest for him, the remodeling of his muscles and the realignment of his skeleton no longer giving him anything more than the merest twinge of pain as his body snaps into its new form. It’s a far cry from his first experience where he had screamed to the heavens to let him die, his body feeling as if it was tearing apart to slowly rebuild itself and he throws up a silent prayer that he can perform the Shift as easily as blinking his eyes now. Quickly redressing and snatching up his crossbow and knife before plunging back into the trees again, he curses at the limitations of his human body even though he’s stronger and faster than any human could ever be.

He finds Rick still in the clearing, taking his knife to each of the remaining walker’s skulls to make sure they’re finally finished. At the sound of Daryl’s approach, he whips out his pistol, only lowering it when he recognizes the face that’s approaching him out of the darkness.

“I heard a fight,” Daryl tells him, breathlessly. “Got here as soon as I could but it looks like you took care of it.”

“I had help,” mumbles Rick, turning to look at the scattered remains on the ground.

Daryl holds his breath but Rick doesn’t elaborate and Daryl wonders what he would even say.

“You’re hurt?” Daryl makes it sound like a question even though the answer is already burning a
hole in his soul.

“Yeah, there was… I… It’s not a walker bite. You know I’d tell you if it was.”

“I know,” Daryl replies quietly, acknowledging the unspoken pact between them to never let the other suffer. “We should get you back and take care of it. C’mon.”

He shoulders his bow, turning to lead the way back to the bridge and across to the gap in the fence, untying the bungee cords with practiced fingers and then securing it behind them.

“What were you doing out there anyway?” Daryl asks, as they walk up the incline towards the prison, signaling Glenn that everything’s fine.

“I was looking for you,” Rick replies, pitching his voice low.

“Me?”

“Yeah. I know you’ve been leaving most nights, patrolling, hunting, doing whatever it is you do out there in the dark. Tonight something told me I should come after you, I don’t know, maybe let you know that you don’t have to be out there if you’re doing it out of some sort of self-proclaimed duty to protect us.”

Rick stops walking as they approach the gate, reaching out to rest his uninjured hand on Daryl’s shoulder and look him in the eye.

“We’re safe here, Daryl, well as safe as we can be in this world. The Governor is gone, we have the walkers pretty much under control – tonight notwithstanding – and our numbers are growing. You don’t need to be out there by yourself anymore. We’ll protect our home together. All of us.”

Daryl answers his words with a curt nod, chewing miserably on his bottom lip as he turns to unlock the gate and let them in. He follows Rick into the cell block, making him sit at one of the tables while Daryl busies himself gathering first aid supplies to tend to his arm. He winces as Rick slips out of his blood-stained shirt, his gorge rising as he takes in the sight of the damage left by his own teeth. He quickly disinfects the wound, working as gently as he can, noting Rick’s rigid jawline as he wraps the dressing around his forearm and fastens it tight. With that done he stands awkwardly for a moment, fingers fidgeting with the first aid kit on the table, unsure as to whether he should find a way to broach the subject of what Rick saw or just keep quiet. Rick makes the decision for him, thanking him for treating his injury, telling him they should try to get at least a couple of hours sleep before sunrise and, just like that he’s gone, disappearing into his cell and pulling the curtain across the entrance, leaving Daryl alone in the common area with nothing but the turmoil of his thoughts to keep him company.

The next morning, not having slept at all, Daryl is sitting on the stairs leading to the upper level of cells, sipping from a mug of terrible coffee and watching the doorway to Rick’s cell like a hawk. He’s spent the last few hours arguing with himself until he had finally decided that he had to come clean with Rick, that he wanted to in fact, not least of all because Rick might be about to go through something that could change his very existence and that was on Daryl. So, he’d decided he had to stop being a pussy and tell Rick the truth, take his chances that the bond he thought – hoped – existed between them was real and that Rick would be able to handle what Daryl was throwing at him, no matter how unreal it sounded. Merle’s negative tones had argued the case against revealing his nature, whispering in his ear so insistently that he’d turned his head more than once fully expecting to see his big brother’s face leering back at him in the pre-dawn light. But now his mind
was made up – he would tell Rick the truth and take his chances with the consequences.

When Rick finally pulls back his curtain, blinking in the sunlight filtering through the bars on the high windows, Daryl feels a nervous sweat break out on his palms and he puts his coffee cup aside to wipe them against his thighs. He takes a steadying breath, about to push up from his seat, when Rick looks in his direction, almost as if he knew Daryl was there and was seeking him out. His eyes hold Daryl’s for a moment, his expression unreadable, and Daryl’s resolve melts into nothingness as Rick gives him a cursory nod before walking through the open gate and out of Daryl’s line of sight. Letting out a shaky breath, Daryl slumps back against the unforgiving metal of the staircase and stares morosely into his coffee cup, the bitter taste souring on his tongue. Disappointed in himself once again, he gets to his feet with a grunt and makes his way outside.

The prison is already alive with activity as everyone in the group works to keep their home viable. Daryl nods greetings to a few people as they call his name when he passes, still trying to familiarize himself with all the new intakes from the past few weeks. While he’s happy to see their little community grow, knowing that there’s strength in numbers, he’s never been a part of such a large group of people trying to co-exist before and it makes him nervous, the wolf inside him wanting to shy away from everybody except the people he knows he can trust, his own core pack. He looks for Rick as he crosses the yard and spots him, sleeves rolled up, out in the field turning the soil with a long-handled hoe. Daryl hesitates, thinking that this is his opportunity to try his conversation again but then Carl comes into sight beside his father and Daryl turns away, seeking out the only other person that he knows can soothe his mood.

He finds Carol tinkering with the tap on one of the large rain barrels at the side of the yard, muttering to herself under her breath as she twists the stubborn connection with a wrench. With an amused quirk of his lips at the colorful language spilling from her lips, Daryl treads soundlessly up behind her and reaches out to pluck the wrench from her fingers.

“Jesus, Daryl,” she exclaims, turning to slap a hand against his arm, “you scared the crap out of me!”

“Thought you might need a man to help you out,” he shrugs, tapping the wrench against the flat of his palm and puffing up his chest.

“The day I need a man to help me with anything is the day you hang up your bow, Mr. Dixon,” she tells him haughtily, snatching the wrench back out of his hand and applying it to the obstinate tap once more.

Daryl gives a gruff chuckle and moves away to let her work, grabbing a stack of buckets and moving to the next rain barrel in line to start filling them, ready to haul inside the prison for the day’s needs. They work in a comfortable silence for a while, Daryl’s thoughts still occupied with his impending talk with Rick and all the repercussions that might follow. Finally, Carol is satisfied with her repairs on the leaky tap and steps back to wipe her brow with the back of her hand, staring at him with her cool blue eyes.

“What?” he asks, setting down the last bucket in the line he’s made.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on in that busy mind of yours today, Pookie, or am I going to have to beat it out of you?” she inquires with a tiny smile tugging at her lips as she circles the wrench in his direction.

He grunts in response, both hating that she can read him so well and yet loving the secure feeling that their familiarity fills him with, not even minding the ridiculous pet name she’s started calling him, much to everyone’s amusement.
“Let me guess,” she says, taking a seat on the low stone wall behind her. “Rick?”

Daryl narrows his eyes at her, wondering when she’d taken to actually reading his mind.

“Oh, don’t give me that look,” she chides him. “I know you well enough to know that there’s only a handful of people that can get under your skin enough to create the mood you’re in now and usually the top candidate is our fearless leader. What did he do now?”

“He followed me into the woods last night,” Daryl tells her, keeping his voice pitched low and he sees her face pale a little at his words.

“And?”

“And I bit him and infected him and he’s going to be a freak like me if it doesn’t kill him horribly first,” he wants to yell but instead he just shrugs his shoulders miserably and drops his gaze.

“Daryl, did he see you Shift?” she asks, stepping up to force him to look at her, crowding his personal space, but he doesn’t back away from her. “Does he know?”

He shakes his head in the negative and can see the relief on her face as she reaches out a hand to place on his chest.

“Then there’s nothing to worry about, your secret is still ours to keep. You just have to be more careful, you big lug.”

He’s just about to tell her the whole story, wanting desperately for her to share his burden, when he hears soft footsteps approaching and his nose twitches as Rick rounds the corner.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” he says coolly and there’s a look on his face that just makes Daryl want to put his metaphorical tail between his legs and run for the hills.

“No, its fine,” Carol says, stepping away from Daryl and turning to face Rick. “What did you need?”

“Just this,” Rick replies, grabbing a dented watering can from the makeshift rack by the rain barrels and bending to pick up one of the buckets Daryl just filled.

He nods at them, his eyes not meeting Daryl’s and then goes back the way he came, leaning slightly with the weight of the water in his hand.

He shadows Rick for the next few days, watching him as closely as he dare while trying not to be too obvious about it, something that’s no easy task in quarters as confined as theirs. By the fifth day Daryl is starting to breathe a little easier, he knows that most transformations occur within 3-5 days of...
infection and he’s seen no symptoms in Rick for almost a week. For the first time since their encounter in the woods, he actually allows himself to sleep through the night, waking as the first fingers of light creep through the bars above him and he stretches languidly under the thin blanket that’s covering him. He laces his fingers behind his head, enjoying the rare moment of solitude and the sense of relief that’s creeping over him, wriggling his bare toes against the lumpy mattress beneath him. He thinks about the day ahead, contemplating if he should make a run or not, deciding he’ll check with Hershel first and see what they’re most in need of before he chooses where to go.

And then he hears it, soft at first but getting louder – the sound of a rasping cough coming from the lower level – and he sits up just as Rick emerges from his cell, the back of one hand pressed firmly to his lips. Daryl’s heart stills in his chest, a coldness sweeping his body, leeching the warmth from his soul as Rick coughs again and Daryl can smell the sick heat streaming from his pores, can distinguish the subtle changes in his unique scent that signal the wolf blood has claimed him. Rick disappears into the other room and Daryl can hear the sounds of him gulping cup after cup of water, knowing that he won’t be able to quench the thirst that’s probably burning at his insides by now. Dressing swiftly, Daryl checks his pack, knowing that he has to get Rick away from the prison as soon as possible, once the infection has hold there’s no telling how fast it will progress until the first Shift rips through his body and either kills him or changes his life irrevocably. Now all he has to do is find a plausible reason for the two of them to take off for a few days together on their own.

His salvation comes in the form of Hershel, who calls an impromptu council meeting that morning, everyone gathering in the library with the notable exception of Rick which was becoming the norm these days. When everyone is settled, Hershel informs them that one of their newest recruits - a teenage girl named Sandy that Glenn had found hiding under a car at a nearby gas station and who had remained practically mute since the day she had arrived – had suddenly found her words and had told him about a place she’d holed up at for a single night of shelter during a bad storm. Although she said that the place had been mercifully free of walkers, she’d told him that it had creeped her out because it was obviously some kind of research lab and the rooms she’d looked into had been littered with the carcasses of test animals that had starved to death locked in their cages. When Hershel had questioned her further, she’d been unable to tell him what kind of lab it was, whether it was medical or cosmetic. She’d been too freaked out by the dead animals to do more than look in a few rooms before finding a janitorial closet to hunker down in for the night, stating she still couldn’t sleep because she could hear something moving someplace else in the building and she’d had nightmare visions all night of those poor creatures coming to eat her alive.

The next day Sandy had left without looking back and couldn’t even remember if she saw the name of the place anywhere on the inside or outside. What she could recall, however, was how securely the place was locked up, she’d had to scale a pretty high fence to get in and she’s only gained access to the building itself because a downed tree had broken one of the upper windows and created a natural ladder for her to climb. With the storm raging, she’d gone down to the main floor without even investigating the top level, feeling more secure with the bars that were on all the windows down there in case another tree had been uprooted in the wind during the night.

“Now she’d been marking on a map all the places she’s stopped at, case she ever needed to use one of them again but it’s at least forty miles out,” Hershel tells them, looking around at their small group. “We have to decide if it’s worth a run or not. I’ve talked to some of the other new folks but nobody seems to know anything about any type of research facility in the area, which doesn’t surprise me. Those aren’t the types of places that are normally hanging a welcome sign outside advertising their business. And, until we get out there, we won’t know if we’ve struck a goldmine of medical supplies or a lifetime’s supply of lipstick. What do we think, people?”

“I think we have to try,” Carol puts in immediately, her strong voice resonating in the room. “With all the extra bodies we’re bringing in, we’re gonna need as much help as we can get. If this place
really was performing drug trials, there could be all kinds of things there that we could use.”

“I agree,” Michonne says, “but I think we should send out a small team first, two or three of us max, just to scout it out. If the resources are there, we can always send more people or maybe they’ll find some means of transport when they’re there.”

“I’ll go,” Daryl throws in and nobody seems surprised. “Maybe take Rick with me.”

He looks pointedly at Hershel who nods his agreement, knowing that everyone has noticed the way Rick has stepped back from the group’s decisions recently.

“I think that would be a good choice,” agrees Hershel.

“I’ll go too,” Michonne adds, “keep you boys out of mischief.”

“No,” states Daryl, hearing the word come out much harsher than he intended and spotting the small frown that creases Michonne’s brow. “Don’t need more n’ two of us on this, no sense in spreading ourselves too thin. ’sides, I need somebody in the car with me who ain’t gonna make me listen to show tunes the whole goddamn time.”

He watches as this smoothes the lines from her forehead and she gives a low chuckle as she pushes up out of her seat.

“We’re agreed then?” Hershel asks and everyone voices their assent. “Then let’s get to it.”

“Philistine,” Michonne grumbles at him, elbowing his arm as she passes him on the way out of the room. “I try and bring a little culture into your life.”

Daryl doesn’t give her the satisfaction of an answer, just stands quietly aside waiting to talk to Hershel as the room clears, catching Carol as she exits and asking her briefly if she’d mind packing up some supplies for the trip, lowering his voice to add that he wants enough for at least a week. She tells him that she’ll take care of it, make sure everything’s in the car ready to go, but he can see the concern and puzzlement in her eyes at his request. He lays a hand on her forearm, a rare gesture for him to initiate even with her and gives her a look coupled with an imperceptible shake of his head to let her know he doesn’t have time to explain now but he needs her to trust him. She covers his fingers fleetingly with her own and bobs her head before turning and leaving the room.

After a brief conversation with Hershel to determine where he’s going, the pair of them poring over Sandy’s map until Daryl pretty much has his route memorized, he heads outside to the field, the late morning sun blazing on the back of his neck and making his already naturally hot skin prickle under his shirt. Rick looks up as he approaches, his hands black with the soil he’s working, sweat plastering his hair in curls against his neck and Daryl can see the redness rimming his eyes, smell the fever burning in his veins.

“Hey,” Rick says, going back to what he was doing.

“You okay?” Daryl asks, looking down at him.

“Fine. What’s up?”

“Hershel has a job for us. A run.”

“I’m kinda busy, Daryl,” Rick tells him and Daryl can hear a tension in his voice, something he’s been noticing in the past few days during their brief interactions but he’d just chalked up to his own paranoia. “Why don’t you take Glenn?”
“He’s out fixin’ the fence.”

“Michonne? Tyreese?”

“Look, if you’re not feeling up to it, man, it’s fine. I just thought you might like to stretch your wings a little, s’all.”

Daryl knows it’s a cheap shot and Rick will see straight through his lame attempt at goading him into going by suggesting that he’s not up to the task and he’s desperately trying to think of another argument to throw at him. Rick, however, just grits his teeth and stares at his filthy hands for a second before rising from the dirt to look Daryl in the eye.

“When do we leave?” he asks gruffly.

“Soon as you get washed up and pack your bag. We’ll probably be gone a few days.”

Rick nods and pushes past him, leaving Daryl with a sudden rush of mixed emotions all of which he attempts to squash down inside him so that he can concentrate on what has to be done.

An hour later they’re on the road, their goodbyes having been said, the compact car loaded with as many meager supplies as could be spared, Carol having been true to her word and packing them at least a week’s worth. They drive in silence, Daryl behind the wheel and Rick staring straight ahead through the windshield, Hershel having brought him up to speed before they left. Daryl pushes the car as fast as he dares, watching the road for anything that’s going to be a danger to them but eager to get to their destination as soon as possible. Now that he’s alone in such a confined space with Rick, he can practically taste the tension hanging between them, knowing for sure it’s not just his imagination and the feeling is starting to burrow under his skin making him want to slough off his human form and take on the wolf instead.

A small knot of cars blocking the highway slows their journey briefly, Daryl practically leaping from the car to work on moving them aside, desperate to take a break from the stifling atmosphere inside the vehicle. He and Rick work as a team as always, clearing the jam and dealing with the few inquisitive walkers that are drawn to their location by the sounds of the engines. Back on the road, Daryl feels a little better, the fresh air and physical work having revived him somewhat but a sideways glance at Rick brings the reality of his situation crashing in on him again and he feels sick to his stomach at what he knows he has to do.

“I know what happened in the woods the other night,” he says in a hushed tone, the words spilling from his lips before he can even think about them.

“What?” Rick answers him, his head turning in Daryl’s direction so fast Daryl can hear the creak of his muscles as it does.

“I know what you saw,” Daryl continues, thinking that now he’s started he has no choice but to follow through to the end, let it all out no matter that his heart is beating hard enough to burst from his chest and his hands are slick with sweat on the wheel. “The wolf.”

“You saw that?” Rick asks in a guarded tone.

“I have to tell you somethin’,” Daryl says, not answering Rick’s question, keeping his eyes on the road ahead, his knuckles white where they’re wrapped around the steering wheel, “and I need you to listen to me and not talk until I’m done. Can you do that?”

“Yes.”
“This ain’t gonna be easy for you to hear and you’re probably gonna think I’m crazy. If you do, well, that’s fine but it don’t make it any less the truth.”

Daryl takes a shaky breath, calling on the wolf to calm him but its strength eludes him and he darts a fleeting glance at Rick’s stoic façade staring at him from the adjacent seat.

“Before all this went to shit, there were things in the world that were older than any of us, older than man,” he continues, letting the words fall rapidly, the words he’s wanted so badly to share with Rick for such a long time. “Things that have stayed hidden for a number of reasons but mostly out of fear for their existence. These things ain’t like most people, they’re different, and, if people knew they were real they wouldn’t understand, they’d try to kill ‘em for sure. But these things ain’t evil, least no more than one man is evil against another I guess. They’re just livin’ their lives like we are, tryin’ to survive. Most of ‘em didn’t ask to be the way they are, they didn’t get a choice but they do their best with what they’ve got and they deal with the hand that was given ‘em. Life ain’t easy but you do what you have to, it don’t make you an evil thing.”

“Daryl,” Rick interrupts him softly and Daryl quietens, knowing he’s saying all the wrong things, that he’s not telling Rick what he wants him to hear and he’s frustrated at himself for not being able to articulate himself properly.

“I’m the wolf,” he states simply, wanting the torture he’s feeling to be over, drawing in a shuddering breath and holding it as he turns his face to Rick.

“I know,” comes Rick’s simple reply and the car suddenly seems to Daryl to be impossibly small once more as it’s filled with a suffocating silence.
Rick hears the rushing exhale of breath from Daryl’s lungs just before he steps hard on the brakes and the car skids to a halt on the leaf-strewn highway. From habit, Rick quickly scans their surroundings for any imminent danger before directing his gaze back to Daryl’s confused and
expectant countenance.

“What d’ya mean, ‘you know’?” Daryl asks.

“I thought I was a goner that night,” Rick starts, after a moment’s hesitation. “I was cursing at myself for coming after you, for letting myself get cornered like that. When I saw the wolf, that was it – game over. I knew if the walkers didn’t eat me then the wolf would for sure. But, instead, it dove in to help me and I seriously had to wonder if I was dead already and this was my animal guide, come to lead me to the next life or some shit like that.

And when the fight was done and I go to look at my savior, I mean really look, I could see all the things that were unnatural about it – the size, the way it had acted – and then it looked at me and I knew for sure that I was dead because I was looking into your eyes. Then I blinked and it was gone. By the time you found me, I’d convinced myself that I must have been hallucinating from the adrenalin or the shock of being bitten. It wouldn’t be the first time my mind’s played tricks on me.”

“How come you din’t say nothin’?”

“What would I have said, Daryl? ‘Hey, how’s it going, by the way, do you turn into a wolf by the light of the full moon?’”

“Don’t need the moon,” Daryl mumbles.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Rick exclaims, pinching the bridge of his nose to ward off the headache he can feel threatening to explode behind his eyes. “I’m not even sure what to ask you first. I thought people rising from the dead to eat the living was going to be the weirdest thing I’d ever have to deal with in my lifetime but this, this may just top that. I’m not sure whether I think you’re crazy or I am for believing you. How am I supposed to react to this, Daryl, what am I supposed to say to you now?”

“Look, I’ll tell you everythin’ you want to know, I swear,” Daryl says, looking him straight in the eye before putting the car back into drive and setting off along the highway again, “but first we need to get where we’re goin’, okay?”

“Am I in danger?”

“From me?” Daryl asks, whipping his head in Rick’s direction and Rick’s heart aches a little at the look of hurt in his friend’s eyes but he has to know, has to be sure, so he nods. “Never.”

Daryl spits the word out so emphatically that Rick feels a weight rising from his shoulders. He’d wanted to believe that was the truth - was convinced that it was - but a part of him just needed to hear it said out loud, having been betrayed so many times already in this new life.

“But there is a danger?” he asks and he can see the tightening around Daryl’s jawline as he concentrates on the road ahead.

“I bit you,” Daryl says, his voice flooded with raw anguish. “I didn’t mean to, it was an accident. That walker had you pinned down and I was tryin’ so hard to get it off you. Everythin’ happened so fast that I couldn’t stop it.”

Rick looks down, pulling his sleeve up to reveal the white bandage wrapped securely around his forearm and suddenly it seems that the wound hidden beneath those protective layers is burning as if there was a hot coal embedded in his flesh. He feels his chest constrict as the implications of Daryl’s words sink in, he hadn’t even given the bite a second thought, being as wrapped up in what he’d seen as he was but now a hundred snatches of information from books and movies started churning
in his brain. He’d been bitten by a wolf, a shape-shifter – and here his mind stuttered over the word – a werewolf and didn’t that always end the same way in every piece of folklore and bad movie cliché his mind was throwing at him? Didn’t the victim always become the beast – going through horrific changes until they were no longer human? Without a doubt he knows that this is why Daryl has brought him out here and fear grips at his insides, his mind rebelling at the rush of thoughts paralyzing it and suddenly he wants out of the car.

He can smell the stink of fear pouring off of him in waves and it disgusts him, clouding his mind until his body takes over and he’s dimly aware of Daryl flinching beside him and then yelling his name as his sweating palm wraps around the warm metal of the door handle and he opens it, pitching himself out onto the harsh tarmac surface of the road. Winded, he lays there for a moment, hearing the car screech to a halt a few yards away and then his body’s flight response kicks in and he’s on his feet again, taking off through the trees lining the highway with no notion of where he’s going, his body and mind just telling him to flee as far and as fast as he can. He’s running so fast the breeze is lifting his damp hair from his face and streaming it out behind him, the air is burning in his lungs with each ragged breath he takes and he can feel something inherently different inside his own skin, something that’s driving his limbs to work harder than they ever have before.

He bursts into a clearing among the trees, the sunlight bathing the high summer grass and the smattering of wildflowers at its center, and suddenly he’s airborne, the weight of another body tackling him to the earth and landing on top of him. He inhales a mouthful of rich soil and the pungent aroma of the flowers causes a wave of dizziness to wash over him as he struggles against his assailant and tries to right himself. With a grunt of effort he manages to twist his body enough so that he’s flat on his back, turning his head to spit the dirt from his mouth and then looking up at Daryl who is straddling him, his strong hands pinning Rick’s to the ground either side of him. He has another moment of panic when he sees that Daryl’s eyes are no longer just their usual crystal blue but are blazing at him with some kind of internal light and he can see pointed fangs pressed into Daryl’s lower lip as he concentrates on keeping Rick subdued. Rick’s natural response is to escape from the threat his brain is perceiving but, with an annoyed snarl, Daryl shakes his head and his features resolve back to their regular state.

“Quit wrigglin’, man, I ain’t gonna hurt you,” he tells Rick through gritted teeth.

Rick’s body gives one final lurch and then he stills, going limp beneath Daryl’s straining thighs, his sides heaving as he relaxes his arms and feels Daryl loosen his grip. Daryl slides off of him, landing on the soft grass next to him and looking warily at Rick from under his bangs, one ankle still tangled between Rick’s as if he’s scared to let him go completely. Rick pushes himself up into a sitting position, running his hands through his hair, his breathing starting to slow down.

“What have you done to me?” Rick asks and he sees Daryl’s body jerk at the words as if they’ve scalded him but Rick can’t care right now, he needs to know what’s coming, how this is going to affect him and his family.

“When you were bit…” Daryl falters for a second and then lifts his head higher, squaring his jaw as he meets Rick’s gaze. “When I bit you, I had to wait and see what would happen. Some people get bit and nothin’ ever happens, the bite heals and they move on.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Rick asks grimly.

“Once you’re infected, only two ways it can go down – your body makes the first Shift and it either kills you in the process or you end up a freak like me.”

Rick swallows thickly around the sudden lump in his throat and tries to process this new information.
“So what do we do?” he asks quietly.

“Do?”

“To get me through this, to make damn sure it doesn’t kill me. That is why you brought me out here, right? You have something to help me survive this, some type of mystical medicine your kind has?”

Daryl looks at him long and hard.

“There’s nothing we can do. Your body is already making the first changes. I know you’re feelin’ sick and you’re gonna get a helluva lot worse before this is over but it can’t be stopped and it can’t be reversed. All you can do now is fight and you’re the one person I know who can get through this by sheer stubbornness alone.”

Rick nods, trying to steady his resolve, battling with the crippling fear that’s still ripping through him and gets shakily to his feet, reaching down a hand to pull Daryl up after him.

“Then let’s get moving.”

They head silently back to the car, Rick surprised by just how far his headlong flight through the trees had taken him, and then they hit the road again. Rick maintains their silence, knowing Daryl won’t speak unless he does and he needs some time to try and put some order on his thoughts. He’s scared, there’s no point in denying it, but he’s had to deal with so many things in his life that he has had no control over that he knows he can’t give in to the feeling, that it will only make him weak and, right now, he needs to be strong, not only for himself but for the people who rely on him. A small corner of his mind is still insisting that this can’t be real, that this is some elaborate ruse Daryl has concocted to mess with his head, but he keeps pushing that argument aside, telling himself that, until recently, re-animated corpses were only figments of people’s fevered imaginations and now they were as real to him as anything else in the world. Why shouldn’t werewolves be real, he asks himself, staring intently through the passenger window as they pass a small knot of walkers kneeling over the eviscerated corpse of a young deer, after all there are already so many genetic anomalies in the world, why shouldn’t this one be real too? He wonders what it will be like, to be able to change his body into another form, to Shift as Daryl called it, to see the world through different eyes. His mind races with the possibilities, thinking about the sheer size Daryl was in his other form, how easily he had sliced through the walkers attacking Rick and he feels a nervous excitement start to flutter in his stomach.

A nudge to his arm and Daryl’s voice cuts into his musings and he blinks stupidly for a moment, not realizing how far he’d let himself drift.

“I think this is it,” Daryl informs him, slowing the car to a halt and staring up through the windshield at the pair of towering, wrought iron gates looming in front of them, nestled securely in an equally as high red brick wall.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, pretty much. That girl, what’s her name? Sandy? She’d marked on her map all the places she’d holed up at. Hershel copied it onto one of ours for us but I’m pretty sure we’re in the right place. It’s in the glove box if you wanna check.”

Rick leans forward, popping the button to lower the flap between his knees and pulls out a hastily folded map, awed as always with how Daryl can memorize any route after studying it for just a few minutes. He’s never failed Rick yet and a quick glance at the map tells him he didn’t fail him this time either.
“So how do you want to handle this?” Daryl asks and Rick appreciates his tone and his deference to Rick as his leader even though they both know that Daryl is calling the shots on this one.

“I thought she said there was a fence?” Rick asks, opening up his door to step out and examine the solid-looking wall in front of him, stretching off in either direction to disappear into the trees.

“Maybe at the back.” Daryl offers, getting out to stand on his side of the car, one elbow resting on the roof as he scans their surroundings.

Rick contemplates the wall and gates for a moment, looking for any clue that might indicate what’s hidden behind them but, apart from a small brass plate on one gatepost inset with an intercom button and street number, there is nothing else. Peering through the bars of the gates which are locked tightly together with a length of thick chain and a fair-sized padlock, he notes that the tree-lined driveway beyond curves sharply after the first 50ft or so, hiding any buildings that might be just beyond that bend or miles further back.

“I don’t want to risk trying to find a way around,” he tells Daryl, a cough ripping unexpectedly from his chest and he’s suddenly all too aware of the fever burning through his body, its intensity having increased in the last part of their journey while his mind was otherwise occupied. “We don’t have any idea how big the property is and I think we’d be asking for trouble, wandering around in unfamiliar woods looking for a way in. I say we take the gate, get the car in and approach from the front. Save our strength for anything we might find inside. Besides, I don’t like leaving a car full of supplies sitting out here in the open neither, you never know who might stumble on it.”

“Agreed. The gate it is then,” Daryl nods and Rick catches the fleeting look of concern that pulls at his features as another cough tears loose from Rick’s chest.

Daryl moves to the rear of the car, popping the trunk to rifle through the fully-stocked toolbox stored there until he pulls out a hefty-looking pair of bolt-cutters and makes short work of snipping through the padlock before loosening the chain. He meets no resistance as he pushes the heavy metal gates apart, their electronic controls long since dead. Rick walks around and climbs in the driver’s side, pulling the car just inside and then waiting while Daryl secures the chain on the gates, locking it tight with a new padlock he pulls from the trunk and then slipping the key into the front pocket of his pants. Closing the trunk with a soft click, Daryl opens the rear door of the car and reaches in to retrieve his crossbow, signaling to Rick that he should drive ahead. Rick steers the car along the gravel drive, his window down, one eye trained on the rearview mirror so he can watch Daryl following him a few feet behind, every line of his friend’s body telling Rick that he’s on high alert.

As the car rolls slowly forward along the winding channel cut between the trees, Rick realizes that there’s a distinct lack of noise coming from outside apart from the purring rumble of the car’s engine. The woods seem devoid of any natural sounds, no birds or small animals calling to each other in the undergrowth and it unnerves him a little, his already frayed nerves jangling a little when they round a final bend in the lane and the space opens up in front of them.

A large institutional-looking building sits at the end of the drive, nestled amongst what were once neatly manicured lawns and well-tended flower beds but are now just an overgrown mess of colors and weeds. The two-story building itself is built from the same red brick as the outer wall and looks as solid as a fortress. As they approach the front and Rick parks the car to get out, he can see all of the downstairs windows have vertical bars across them although the upper floor is clear, confirming at least that there was something going on in there at some point that the owners didn’t want anybody to have access to. The solid wood of the front door is locked as they expected but rather than try to force it, Rick plucks absently at Daryl’s sleeve and indicates that they should work their way around the building’s exterior. It’s pretty much rectangular in shape, the short sides at the front and back, and as they make their way along one of the longer sides, Daryl stops periodically to bang the hilt of his
knife against the bars, waiting each time but hearing nothing from within. The windows are set just high enough and are fitted with a tinted glass reflecting the sun’s glare that makes looking inside impossible unless you haul yourself up on the bars which Daryl does a couple of times but he drops back down with a shake of his head.

“Offices,” he grumbles as he and Rick continue around the back of the building.

There they find the downed tree that Sandy had mentioned, one of four or five in what had been a nice yard with picnic tables set up randomly under the trees which Rick assumes were for the employees that had worked there to enjoy in their breaks. To one side there’s a small paved area with a basketball hoop and beyond that he can see a chain-link fence surrounding a tennis court, nature encroaching on it from all sides. Stretching away from the back of the building are a good couple of acres of grass, growing almost waist high and rife with wildflowers now that there’s nobody to keep it in check. Beyond that, Rick can see the treeline surrounding the property, even more thankful now that they hadn’t decided to walk that way to gain entry. He’s starting to feel much worse, like his body is starting to succumb to an intense bout of flu - his limbs are aching, his joints feel like fire and there’s a cold sweat pooling at the base of his spine. He looks to Daryl, noting the small frown creasing the other’s forehead as he looks Rick up and down before turning to the downed tree.

“I’ll go first,” Daryl tells him, shouldering his crossbow and sheathing his knife.

Rick watches as his friend tests his weight against the fallen tree’s trunk, climbing agilely onto its inclined surface once he’s happy it’s not going to move. He makes his way as surefootedly as a goat up its length, pausing at the top to draw his knife before pushing through the tangle of branches and disappearing inside the broken window.

“Clear,” comes his voice a minute later, his face reappearing at the window and Rick exhales a breath he didn’t know he was holding.

Under Daryl’s watchful eye, he holsters his gun and climbs the tree, not quite as gracefully as Daryl he’s sure but at least he doesn’t slip and make an ass out of himself. At the top, Daryl’s hand reaches out to grab his own and haul him safely inside. A quick glance around the room shows it to be nothing more than an office supply closet, the dusty hulk of a copier sitting dormant in one corner and shelves lined with reams of paper and other necessities filling the other walls and strewn across the floor in the wake of the tree’s destructive invasion. The door to the room is open and Rick cautiously sticks his head out into the hallway, Daryl poised on the balls of his feet by his side. The large windows at either end of the long hallway provide enough natural light for him to see the place is empty.

“Don’t smell nothin’,” Daryl whispers close to his ear, “but with a lot of the doors closed I might not.”

Rick nods and with Daryl at his heels, they swiftly move out to their left until they reach the last door before the hallway comes to a dead end at the floor-to-ceiling window. Working in tandem, they systematically enter each room, checking first and foremost for any threats until they find themselves standing at the top of the stairs leading down to the ground floor. The upstairs rooms were revealed to be mostly offices, seemingly undisturbed as if their inhabitants had not left in a hurry but had more than likely decided to leave early on in the outbreak and had just never returned. At the far end of the hall, the rooms they had searched first had turned out to be the most interesting – two dorm rooms complete with separate bathrooms and four single beds apiece and, across the hall from those, a large recreation room with sofas, a tv, refrigerator and, to both their delight, a fully stocked vending machine, the sight of which had them sharing a victorious grin despite their current situation.

Poised at the top of the stairs, Rick looks to Daryl who gives him a nod and then starts cautiously
down, crossbow raised against his shoulder. The light is a little dimmer down there, not as many visible windows and they stop for a moment to let their eyes adjust, Rick’s adrenalin forcing his heart to beat a little faster, his palms slick around the butt of his gun and his knife. They’re in a foyer, the wooden front door across from them with a reception desk placed at the bottom curve of the stairs. To the side of the desk is a large door that the keypad on the wall beside it suggests would normally be closed at all times but right now is sitting propped open, a thick rubber doorstop wedged under its bottom edge and buried in the plush pile of the carpet. He looks once more at Daryl but his partner just shrugs and moves off across the thickly carpeted lobby and into the tiled hallway beyond, his feet making no noise as he transitions from one surface to the next. The layout downstairs is a different configuration, the outer wall they’d walked along housing a cluster of offices and two more supply rooms, these containing a variety of lab supplies and cleaning equipment with one room dedicated entirely to a wide range of animal food, confirming that this was indeed some type of research facility. One of the supply rooms is obviously where Sandy had hidden for the night, a makeshift bed of empty boxes still on the floor against the back wall.

As they approach the four widely set doors on the opposite side of the hall, leaving just one smaller door at the end that’s shut tight, Rick can smell the faint odor of decay lingering on the stale air. The first door is open, leading to an antechamber housing computer stations and an array of equipment that Rick can’t even begin to fathom the function of. A door set in the opposite wall leads to the lab itself, through an adjoining airlock, and Rick steps up to peek through the glass window into the sunlit room beyond. His stomach churns a little at the sight of a row of cages in varying sizes against one wall, each of them filled with the corpses of a small animal – dogs, monkeys, rabbits and rats – all of them emaciated by the starvation that must have killed them, left behind by their human captors. There are no areas to hide within the lab itself so Rick doesn’t bother to open the door.

“How are we smellin’ them?” Daryl asks quietly from beside him, his nearness making Rick’s skin prickle. “Ain’t these places supposed to be airtight to keep whatever it is they’re messin’ with inside?”

Rick reaches out to grasp the stainless steel door handle, pushing it down and meeting no resistance, knowing the door will open easily if he pulls on it.

“When the power went out I guess the fail safes that keep these sealed stopped working too – it wouldn’t do to have your staff trapped inside now would it? It’s still airtight but I’m betting Sandy opened it which is why the smell is on the air. Didn’t you say the dead animals freaked her out?”

“Yeah but I didn’t think she was dumb enough to open a lab door. You don’t think she let out some sort of disease or somethin’ we should be worried about, do ya?” Daryl asks glancing nervously around.

“Well, I think it’s too late if she did. If it was something airborne, we’ve probably already been infected but I don’t think it’s that type of lab. I think we’d see more security measures in place if it was. Remember the CDC?”

Daryl grimaces and the nods, the thought of Jenner and his plan to blow them all to kingdom come obviously still striking a chord with him.

“Come on,” Rick tells him, “let’s go check the other rooms and then maybe we can take a look at some of the paperwork in those offices, see if we can’t figure out what it was they were doing here before we open any more of the inner doors.”

“Or,” Daryl counters, slyly, “you can do that while I haul our stuff up from the car and secure the perimeter.”
Rick chuckles slightly, covering his mouth as the sound turns into another wracking cough and he wheezes for a moment until he can catch his breath again.

“Good plan,” he tells Daryl hoarsely, mustering up a small smile for his friend to show that he’s okay but knowing that Daryl sees straight through his bullshit.

Pulling himself up a little straighter, he leads the way back out to the next door along and they quickly check the other labs which leads them to the last remaining internal door and the one set in the back wall which obviously leads to the patio at the back of the house. Whether it’s the fever that’s starting to take a hold on him or the fact that he’s feeling like they’ve stumbled onto a pretty secure location to make a base for a few days but Rick’s guard is down as he pulls open the last door which is marked ‘custodian’ only to have a gnarled-looking walker fly out, its hands reaching for his throat as it takes him to the floor.

“Rick!” he hears Daryl yell as he struggles to lift the emaciated corpse from his body, something that’s proving difficult in his weakened state.

There’s a brief cracking sound and suddenly the walker is motionless on top of him, a foul viscous fluid dripping from it onto his burning skin before its ripped away and Daryl is reaching down to pull him to his feet.

“Thanks,” Rick tells him, wobbling a little as his equilibrium balances out. “I guess we found what was making the noise Sandy said she heard in the night.”

Toeing the walker with his boot just to make sure before he steps over it, Rick looks into the room it came from, covering his mouth with his hand to ward off some of the putrid scent inside. The custodian’s room was obviously a well-organized place when he was living, a small cot in one corner is neatly made with a half-size refrigerator next to it holding a microwave and a portable tv. There’s a desk under the window that obviously doubled as a workstation for small repairs and the back wall holds a small closet and a rack of cleaning supplies. Rick crosses to the desk finding a radio still turned to the on position, its batteries long since dead, and he can picture the custodian sitting here, probably the last person left in the place once his employers had decided to evacuate. Rick wonders how long he held on for, maintaining the building, caring for the animals, until it became obvious that nobody was ever coming back and he wonders how he died. He finds his answer in an empty pill bottle tucked under the edge of an open toolkit on the desk, turning the container thoughtfully in his fingers for a moment before setting it down again.

“Looks like our buddy here opted out,” he tells Daryl as he enters the room.

“Yup, but he left us a little gift when he did,” Daryl replies and Rick turns to find him dangling a set of master keys from his fingers. “No more climbin’ that damn tree!”

Confidant that they have a secure place to stay for the next few days, Daryl sets about bringing in their supplies from the car, carrying everything up to one of the dorm rooms on the second floor, waving off Rick’s attempts to help, insisting that Rick takes a look at some of the files in the adjacent offices before they lose all their natural light. By the time Daryl reappears in the office doorway, swigging water from a plastic bottle, Rick’s eyes are burning and he feels as if he could just sink into sleep if he was to rest his head on the desk, even for a moment.

“Hey,” he says, hating the tremor he can hear in his voice, “how are we looking?”

“Good,” Daryl replies, wiping the back of his hand across his lips and handing the bottle to Rick who takes it gratefully. “I moved the car, there’s a lean-to on the other side that should keep it out of sight, more or less, the doors are all locked and I think we’re pretty secure. Those doors are so tough,
we’ll hear anyone trying to break in a mile off.”

“What about the room up here with the tree if someone else decides to follow our lead?”

“Locked that too,” Daryl replies, jangling the keys a little, “and I dragged out one of the desks from
the room next door and shored it up with that, piled a couple of chairs on top. Anyone comes
through that way, we’re gonna hear them.”

Rick just nods, a weariness creeping over his body that’s starting to scare him more than a little.

“How’d you make out?” Daryl asks, his voice suddenly seeming extremely loud in the quiet space
and Rick winces, briefly closing one eye.

“Well, it’s definitely medical research, not cosmetic, which is good news for us,” Rick tells him,
shuffling the papers on the desk in front of him to distract himself from the blinding headache that’s
suddenly assaulting his skull. “Even better, they weren’t messing with anything dangerous, seems it
was all just drug trials, you know, testing for side effects, that kind of thing. I think tomorrow we’ll
open up the labs, see what we can find. I recognize some of these brand names they have in the files,
we might get lucky and find us a whole bunch of things we can actually use.”

“Tomorrow, yeah,” agrees Daryl and Rick can almost hear the added, “if you’re still alive by then”
even if Daryl doesn’t say it out loud. How about right now we get you somethin’ to eat and you take
a nap there, slugger? I think you’re about done for today.”

Rick doesn’t even have the energy to protest, he just gets up, swaying wildly for a moment and then
follows Daryl down the hall to the dorm room where Daryl guides him onto one of the beds and lays
him down. He sinks into the soft comfort of the mattress with a weary sigh, immediately closing his
eyes. He hears Daryl say something about getting him some food but his voice sounds like it’s a
million miles away and Rick can’t tell if it’s real or imagined as he lets his mind lose its grip on
reality.

The next thing he’s aware of is somebody gently shaking his shoulder and the mouthwatering aroma
of rabbit stew invading his nostrils. He blinks his eyes open with a Herculean effort, the soft glow of
the hurricane lamp beside his bed causing him to wince. Daryl is standing over him, a bowl in one
hand and a look of concern pasted on his features.

“How long was I out?” Rick asks, pushing himself up in the bed and rubbing a hand over the back
of his neck, noticing that Daryl has drawn all the curtains in the room to keep the light hidden inside.

“’bout an hour,” Daryl tells him, handing him the bowl which Rick takes eagerly, inhaling the
delicious smell before spooning some into his mouth.

“You made this?” he asks, feeling a little confused.

“Nah,” Daryl chuckles. “Carol packed it for us, I just warmed it up.”

“Oh,” says Rick, feeling he would have known that had his brain not felt so full of fog at this
moment.

“I did a little more lookin’ around while you were asleep.”

“Hmm?” mumbles Rick around another mouthful of meaty stew.

“We might have running water,” Daryl boasts, unable to keep the glee out of his voice.
“You’re shitting me.”

“Nope. I was takin’ a look around outside and found a generator, industrial type, enough to keep this place going if the power went out, at least temporarily. It was getting too dark to take a proper look at it but we might be able to get it going. Also found the well shed, over by the tennis court, seems our custodian friend kept everythin’ in tip top condition until the end. No reason it shouldn’t work if we can get the generator going for the pump.”

“That’s good thi-,” Rick’s words are cut off as a spasm suddenly rips through his mid-section, the half-eaten bowl of stew falling from his fingers to crash onto the floor.

He wraps his arms around his stomach, his whole body convulsing as the pain radiates out into his limbs. Turning his head, he vomits the partially digested food in a noxious stream, retching until his stomach is empty and then collapsing back down onto the bed, his body wracked with uncontrollable shivers.

“Daryl,” he pleads, eyes unable to focus, his hand reaching blindly out into the air. “Help me!”

“I can’t,” he hears Daryl’s tortured reply come back and feels a strong hand wrapping around his.

“You just have to let it come. Don’t try to fight it, it’ll just hurt more. Let your body do its thing but don’t give in to the pain. You’re gonna feel like you want to die, like it’s never gonna end but it will, I promise you. You’re the toughest sonovabitch I know, you can do this. Focus your mind. Think about Carl and Judith, they need you to get through this.”

Rick tries to answer him, wants to tell him he’ll fight anything to be with his kids but the words won’t come. His world narrows to a molten lake of pain, every part of his body igniting with some type of agony, and he can hear the blood rushing through his veins and the sickening snap of his bones and muscles as they shift unnaturally under his skin. He tries to follow Daryl’s instructions, tries to detach his mind from the pain, pulling every memory of his children from the corners of his subconscious to give him strength. He doesn’t know how long he’s been trapped like this – minutes, hours, days – time has lost any meaning for him, everything is measured now by the varying degrees of pain shaping his body into a new form. He can hear a distant screaming, muffled by the blood pounding in his misshapen ears and he wants to tell Daryl to silence it, that the sound will draw walkers to them but then, with a jolt, he realizes that he is the one who is screaming and with that knowledge his mind finally loses its grip on consciousness and he sinks into a merciful oblivion.

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It’s a memory he’s had a thousand times before but this time he knows it’s a dream.

He’s sitting at a polished wooden table in a room that time has left behind, the collar of his buttoned up shirt is scratching at his neck and the tie that his mom insisted he wear feels like a noose around his throat as he takes dinner with Lori’s parents for the very first time.

Her father is to his right, her mother to his left, both of them silent caricatures of the people they had been in life, their faces a little indistinct if he looks at them directly.

Lori sits across from him, by contrast her features are as clear to him as the moment this happened, so many years ago. She looks impossibly young, 17 maybe, her long brown hair pulled back into a loose ponytail, no trace of makeup on her skin and he knows that he was just a year or so older, barely out of high school, cocky in his youth, ready to take on the world.

In this dream-memory of his they eat and make meaningless small-talk, the words never really reaching his brain, just the nuances of the conversation, the feeling he’d had of being appraised by
her family like some sort of prospective employee applying for the job of dating their daughter.

He looks down, finding that the plates are suddenly empty, and then back up to see Lori standing in the doorway to the hall, beckoning him with a shy smile.

He knows that he will get up and follow her out into the hallway as he always does and that she’ll slip her small hand in his and lead him to the front door, giggling with the joy of her parents’ obvious approval of him as her choice of mate. At the door, she will step into his arms, the weight of her small breasts firm against his chest and she will kiss him, the first time she had, the first time any girl had, and he will respond as expected. Their future will be carved in stone, leaving no room for the indecision and confusion that had crowded his mind that day.

This time, however, when Lori crooks her finger at him from the open doorway, just out of sight of her inanimate parents, he doesn’t stand but sits there, contemplating the lines of her face for a while, her dream-self frozen in that moment.

When he feels he is ready, he pushes back from the table, thanks her parents for their hospitality and then turns his back on Lori’s smiling face, exiting the room through a door that had never existed before, either in reality or in his previous recollections of this pivotal moment in his life.

He pushes it open and steps out into the familiar white glare of the Georgia sun, the ghostly echo of Lori’s voice in his ears as she calls his name. He hears rather than sees the door slam shut behind him as the white light envelopes him, growing brighter and brighter until he has no notion of where he is or where he should go.

Panic starts to bubble in his stomach, replacing the warm glow that had come from his choice to change his destiny, and a cry for help is forming on his lips when he feels somebody take his hand in the brightness.

A hand wraps around his, one as large as his own, the skin rough and calloused and an overwhelming sense of relief and safety washes over him, a feeling of being exactly where he belongs as another voice echoes as clear as a bell in his mind.

“\’I’ve got you now, brother.\’"
Daryl was freaking out, a state of mind so alien to him that he had nearly succumbed to a full-blown panic attack before he had mentally slapped himself and gotten his emotions under control. That
feeling was still lurking under the surface though, had been since the first second Rick had dropped his food and thrown up before calling his name, it was just waiting to raise its ugly head and claim him again. He’d cleaned up as best he could, finding paper towels and cleaning spray in the kitchenette part of the rec room, but the acrid tang of Rick’s vomit still burned at his nose beneath the overwhelming scent of lemon disinfectant. With Rick lost in a delirium that Daryl had found terrifying, he had busied himself making sure that his friend was comfortable, undressing his flailing form, knowing that his changing body would rip right through his clothing, and wrapping his burning flesh with a thin blanket. He had soaked towels in the tepid water they had brought with them, not wanting to take time away to go draw cooler water from the well, and had laid one on Rick’s chest and one on his forehead to try and ease some of the fever that was coursing through his veins. He had also briefly toyed with the idea of going down to one of the labs to see if he could find any kind of pain meds he could use but, in the end, he knew it would be pointless, the drugs would burn through Rick’s system in seconds.

Instead Daryl had sat impotently at his side, watching as his best friend’s body was pulled apart and remade from the inside out, cursing himself every moment for having inflicted this kind of hell onto the one person he needed most in the world. Daryl had Shifted countless times in his own life but had never seen someone in the throes of their first time, had never seen the agonizing slowness with which the body re-wrote its own DNA to incorporate the mutation. His own first time was nothing more than a blur of painful memories, images of Merle’s face swimming in his mind, watching over him through his ordeal until he had awakened bruised and battered the next day but with an undeniable strength coursing through his body.

In the early hours of the morning Rick had started screaming, an endless, harrowing wail that had cut Daryl to his core. He had paced the room, tears streaming unchecked from his eyes, Rick’s words from earlier echoing in his ears - “What did you do to me?”

Daryl wasn’t sure what was worse, the screaming or the death-like trance Rick had fallen into just as the sun was cresting in the sky signaling the start of a new day. His body had completed the Shift, one moment Rick’s familiar countenance had been laying in front of him and the next an enormous wolf, its deep grey pelt shot through with a vivid silver, had been staring back at him with pain-filled blue eyes. He had held the form for a few minutes and then his human side had reasserted itself and Rick was once more looking back at him, the same blue eyes seemingly lucid for a moment before he had sunk into the comatose state he was in now.

So, here they were, Daryl slumped on the floor at Rick’s bedside, his back against the small side table, listening to the steady beat of Rick’s heart, his fingers clasped tightly over Rick’s, mumbled words falling repeatedly from his lips like a mantra.

“I’ve got you now, brother.”

He has no idea how long he sits there, only peripherally aware of the sun tracing its arc across the sky, a gap in the curtains behind him creating changing light patterns on the rough carpet underneath him, the physical discomforts of his own body being ignored in his need to maintain his vigil. Eventually there’s a deep hitch in Rick’s breathing and Daryl fearfully lifts his head just as Rick’s rough voice reaches his ears.

“I guess I’m not dead then, unless God’s recruiting redneck angels these days,” he rasps, tapering off into a wheezing cough.

“Easy there, big guy,” Daryl chides him, blinking back the tears which are threatening to fall from his eyes again, “why don’t you save the comedy routine for when you’re feelin’ better.”

Rick nods, closing his eyes again and Daryl realizes that he still has Rick’s hand held tightly in his.
He’s about to release him, feeling suddenly self-conscious when Rick’s fingers tighten around his own and he opens his eyes once more, meeting Daryl’s with an intense look.

“I heard you,” he whispers and Daryl feels his face flush. “Wherever I was, you pulled me back. Thank you.”

“Well, I had to,” Daryl mumbles, embarrassment creeping over him.

“It was everything,” Rick tells him sincerely, squeezing his fingers before letting Daryl’s hand go and Daryl can do no more than mutely nod at him.

“Think you can sit up? Daryl asks, pushing up off of the floor, his body giving a protesting groan.

“You been down there all night?” Rick asks, leveraging himself into a sitting position and practically snatching the water bottle that Daryl holds out to him, chugging most of it in one go.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Daryl tells him, pushing back the curtains to let the sun flood in. “Somebody had to watch over your sorry ass.”

“So what now?” Rick questions, rolling his eyes at Daryl over the neck of the bottle.

“You wanna take a much needed piss and get somethin’ to eat and you’re gonna stay exactly where you are until I tell you otherwise. We clear?”

“Yes mom,” Rick shoots back at him and Daryl glares at him before he heads into the bathroom.

With his more urgent need taken care of, Daryl crosses the hall into the kitchen and fixes them a late breakfast. Taking the bed besides Rick’s, Daryl watches from the corner of his eye as Rick attacks the food he gives him with gusto.

“It tastes different,” Rick states, pushing his powdered eggs around the plate with his fork.

“That’s cos you’re really tastin’ it for the first time,” Daryl tells him, setting his empty plate on the floor and stretching out on the bed with a satisfied sigh. “Everything’s gonna be different for you now, what you taste, what you see, what you hear. Tell me what you can smell right now.”

Daryl rolls onto his side to face Rick across the gap between them, hooking an arm up under his head as the other man delicately sniffs the air.

“Eggs. Burnt coffee. Some kind of lemon cleaner. Vomit – wait was that me? Sorry, man. Umm, sweat. That’s about it.”


He watches Rick inhale again, longer this time, his nostrils flaring.

“You,” he tells Daryl.

“Memorize that one,” Daryl instructs him, “that way you’ll always be able to track me if we get separated. What else?”

“Fabric softener on the bedding. Something medicinal – you know that smell that always permeates hospitals when you visit. Decay.”

Daryl see his eyes go wide on the last one.
“How is that possible? That room is underneath us, the stairs are at the opposite end of the building.”

“That’s just the beginning, you wait until you get outside and the whole world explodes in your face.”

“How do you do it, control it, I mean? How does it nor make you crazy?”

“You learn to adapt,” Daryl shrugs, “it’s like any new skill you teach your body. You just have to train your senses to filter out anything that’s unnecessary. It’ll seem overwhelming at first but you’ll soon pick it up until you don’t even think about it anymore, it just becomes second nature.”

Rick falls silent and Daryl feels the weight of his eyelids threatening to close, the stress of the night before catching up on him.

“What about the wolf?” comes Rick’s soft voice and Daryl’s eyes snap back open. “You said the moon doesn’t matter, so what does? Is there a trigger?”

“No, the wolf is always there, inside of you. It’s your choice how often you release it but it’s not a good idea to leave it too long or you’ll find your body making the choice for you.”

“Will I still know who I am?”

“Yes, you’ll still be you, that doesn’t change, only your shape. We’re not monsters, Rick, we’re just different. You’ll still have all the same thoughts and fears that you do as a human, you’ll just deal with them differently is all.”

Daryl closes his eyes again, ready to sleep off the tension that’s been running his body for the past few hours, when Rick’s voice asks another question.

“Were you bit?”

Daryl sighs inwardly, opening his eyes once more, knowing that Rick must have a hundred questions that he wants answers to but right now what Daryl really wants for him is to rest as he knows the next few days are going to be a rough adjustment for his friend.

“No, I’m a legacy,” Daryl tells him then, seeing the confusion cross Rick’s face, he adds, “I was born this way.”

“So, when-“

“You get two more,” Daryl interrupts him.

“Two more?”

“Questions. For now. I get that you have a burnin’ need for answers but I ain’t goin’ nowhere so you don’t need to know everything all at once. I know you’re feelin’ all kinds of shit right about now so you need to let your body get some more rest. Shut off that big ol’ brain of yours for a bit, let yourself get strong and then we can talk. Deal?”

Rick looks at him warily for a moment before answering.

“Deal. But I still get two now, right?”

“Shoot,” says Daryl circling his hand in the air before tucking it back under his chin.

“So, you were born this way, does that mean Merle was like you and your parents?”
Daryl flinches a little mentally at the question, not sure he’s ready to open that can of worms just yet. Trust Rick to ask the hard questions first, he thinks.

“My old man was like me, my mom and Merle weren’t,” he answers tersely and he can see Rick wants to pursue the question further but he changes tack instead.

“Have you ever told anybody else?”

“Uh-huh, once,” Daryl states simply although the truth is a little more complicated than that and, with those words, he rolls over onto his other side, putting his back to Rick and closing his eyes against the past.

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Daryl sleeps as best as he can, waking intermittently to check on Rick, satisfying himself that the other man is resting peacefully. He wakes properly just as the sun is going down, stretching his body the length of the bed, thinking it’s been a long time since he was this comfortable. He rolls over to wake up Rick and finds the other bed empty. He’s on his feet in a second, nose twitching as he scents the air, huffing out a sigh of relief as he picks up Rick’s scent across the hall in the rec room. He pads barefoot after him, trying to remember when he’d taken off his boots, his toes curling on the short stubby pile of the carpeting and finds Rick wrapped toga-style in his blanket standing morosely in front of the darkened vending machine.

“I’m hungry,” he says plaintively, his back to Daryl, “but I can’t figure out what I want.”

Daryl starts a little as Rick turns in his direction, the last of the dying sunlight highlighting the thickened ridge of his brow and glinting off of the elongated canines crowding his jaw.

“Rick,” Daryl says quietly, raising a hand to his own face and watching Rick mimic the move, a look of surprise crossing his half-human face.

“What happened?” he asks Daryl, a tiny note of panic in his words. “How do I stop it?”

“Just breathe,” Daryl tells him, keeping his tone low and calm, taking a step closer. “Draw it back in.”

“I don’t know how.”

“Just concentrate on your breathing, don’t think about it, let your body do it for you.”

He watches as Rick slows his breathing to a series of measured inhales and exhales, his chest expanding and contracting rhythmically until, with a tiny blur of movement, his features return to normal.

“I felt it,” he says excitedly. “I could feel myself controlling it. But how can I stop it from happening whenever it wants?”

“Well, that’s why we’re here,” Daryl tells him. “It’ll come quick, trust me, but a few days practice away from everyone is the best idea.”

Rick nods and Daryl can tell from the look in his eyes that he hates to be away from his family any longer than he has to.

“Now, how ‘bout we get out of here, take a run?” Daryl asks, clapping Rick on the shoulder, wanting to distract him from his thoughts. “I’m pretty sure that field of grass out back is jumpin’ with
a whole bunch of fat, lazy rabbits just waiting for us to make a meal of them.”

“Go out?” Rick replies, looking dubiously out of the window at the rapidly darkening sky. “Is that such a good idea.”

“Rick,” Daryl says, squeezing his friend’s shoulder and giving him a little shake, “ain’t nothin’ out there can harm you, you’re the predator now.”

He watches as Rick digests that information for a moment and releases his shoulder.

“C’mon,” he says, leaving the rec room and Rick follows him, walking back toward the dorm room. “Where ya goin’?”

“Oh, getting dressed,” Rick tells him in a tone that says that should be obvious.

“Why?” Daryl asks mischievously. “Ever seen a wolf wearing a suit and tie?”

Daryl swears he sees Rick blush a little under the dark stubble lining his cheeks and gives him a quick smile before he turns and heads along the hall to the stairs, hearing Rick trailing behind him.

“You say we’re the predators now but what about walkers? They’re still a danger, even to us, right?”

“Yeah, a big enough group could probably still tear you apart if you let yourself get cornered but a few of them comin’ at ya is nothin’ to worry about. Their bites and scratches don’t affect us – not like this and not as the wolf.”

“How do you know?” Rick asks curiously.

“Merle,” Daryl says with a derisive snort. “Back at the start, before everything really went to shit and fast, we found a walker out in the woods near our place. There weren’t too many of them at that point, people were still treating it like some damn sickness, like they had rabies or somethin’, you know? We knew it made people crazy and they’d try and bite ya if you got too close but the authorities were still tellin’ us that they was just infected and, if you saw one, you were supposed to try and contain them until somebody came to pick them up.

So, we’re out there checking traps one mornin’ and this geek comes wandering up to us so Merle, being the dumb shit he was, decided to start messin’ with it. I don’t know what was going through that damn fool mind of his but he was teasing this thing and it was getting real agitated and I’m yellin’ at him to knock it off and help me tie it up when the sonovabitch gets in under his guard somehow and he shoves it at me. Damn thing latched onto my arm until Merle put his knife in its head and finished it off, which is how we figured out how to take ‘em down too, but it had already drawn blood.

The next few days my arm looked and smelled like fresh roadkill, I was as sick as a dog – which for us never happens – and then it just started getting’ better and a coupla days after that, there was no trace it had even happened.”

“Something in your – our – DNA makeup provides a natural immunity,” Rick muses thoughtfully.

“I guess,” Daryl shrugs, never really having cared for the explanation of it, just satisfied to accept it for what it was.

They step out into the rapidly cooling night air which is leeching away the day’s heat, and Daryl slowly scans the area, scenting the breeze for anything out of the ordinary. A glance at Rick tells him that his friend is already being bombarded by the abundance of sensations that are flooding his
“Next time it was my own damn fault,” Daryl continues, using his words to give Rick something to focus on while his body processes its surroundings.

“What happened?” Rick asks and Daryl can see him narrow his focus solely in Daryl’s direction.

“I was careless, got a little cocky out on a hunt and let myself get backed up against the edge of a cliff by a bunch of walkers. Teeth and claws will only get you so far when you’re outnumbered and one of the sneaky bastards managed to get its jaws around my leg. Fur’s thin there so it managed to break the skin ‘fore I could get it off.”

“How’d you get away?”

“ Took a dive off the cliff and swam down-river until I could find a place to climb out. Smelled like wet dog for a week, Merle made me sleep in the back of the truck.”

Rick chuckles softly.

“And the bite? Did you get sick like before?”

“Nah, that was the weird part. I mean, we heal pretty fast as long as the wound isn’t too deep but, by the time I got out of the water and Shifted back, there was nothing there, not even a scratch. It’s like the wolf part accelerated the healing even faster than normal against whatever crap it is the walkers are infected with.”

“Interesting,” Rick says distractedly and Daryl can see his brain working over this new information.

“Hey, it’s not something you want to try out for fun,” he warns.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” says Rick, lifting his head as a new scent on the air catches his attention.

“Alright,” asserts Daryl, taking charge of the situation once more, “let’s go do this. I want to check the perimeter, make sure the fence is still intact – we don’t want any unexpected surprises out there while you’re still finding your feet. Then we can see about catching dinner.”

“So, uh, how do I do this?”

“We’re gonna have to shock your body into it the first time but we’ll worry about that in a minute,” Daryl tells him hastily, seeing the look of apprehension on Rick’s face. “It’s kinda hard to describe it but when you Shift, there’s a point of change that feels like nothin’ you’ve ever felt before – kinda like a ripple startin’ at your center and movin’ through your whole body and you need to concentrate on that. I know it’ll be hard, it’s gonna happen quick, but that’s your trigger.

Once you’re ready to Shift back, you need to find that feeling again and just let your body do the rest. It’s something I can’t put into words, man, your body is just going to do it on instinct alone. I’m not going to Shift until I’m sure you’ve got it, okay? But when I do, I need you to stay close to me. I know the temptation will be to just let rip and see what you can do but you’ve got to keep it in check, at least until we make sure this place is safe. Understood?”

Rick nods his acknowledgment and Daryl wipes his suddenly damp palms on his thighs.

“You ready?” he asks, seeing Rick lift his chin a little higher, the muscles tightening along its underside and Daryl offers up a silent prayer to whatever might be listening to let this go off without a hitch.
The first blow catches him by surprise, Daryl’s fist whipping out to connect with his jaw so fast that it was nothing but a blur before a searing crack of pain ricochets Rick’s head back. As he pulls his
vision back in Daryl’s direction, he can taste fresh blood in his mouth and he feels something stir in the pit of his stomach. He doesn’t see the second blow coming either but, when Daryl’s fist connects with his face, something snaps inside him and he can feel the instant changes that are happening internally. He puts all his concentration into what’s going on with his body, feeling the alien push and pull as his human form re-shapes itself. There’s a brief moment of the purest pain followed by something he can’t put into words and he knows that this is the moment Daryl was speaking of. As it passes, he knows it’s something he’ll never forget, his brain already locking it securely away.

Abruptly he’s in a different body, one that he knows instinctively belongs to him but at the same time feels like he’s slipped into a suit that was tailor-made for somebody else. As he drops to the ground, the blanket that was wrapped around him now pooling at his feet, he feels a shudder run throughout his form and he plants his feet firmly as he takes his first look through his new eyes. The perspective has changed but not by much and everything looks sharper somehow, he thinks as he looks around. Taking a deep breath, he staggers a little as he’s inundated with a barrage of smells, each one clamoring for his attention. A rustling noise beside him, sounding like thunder to his sensitive ears, has him reeling in that direction only to find that his new form is uncooperative as it pulls his hind legs out from under him and pitches him onto the dirt.

“Easy there, hoss, gotta find your sea legs.”

Rick looks up as Daryl moves into view, one hand stretched out, palm first, in a placating gesture and Rick is surprised to hear a soft growl emanating from his throat.

“Now, you know I didn’t mean nothiin’ by it,” Daryl says softly, “just had to get your body moving.”

Rick huffs out a breath and tries to smile at Daryl to let him know that there’s no hard feelings for the punches. His overly-long tongue flops from his mouth as he attempts to rearrange his face into the expression he wants and he wonders if he looks as ridiculous as he feels. Probably, he thinks, judging by the smirk he can see Daryl hurriedly trying to suppress.

“Why don’t you try your legs out?” Daryl suggests. “It’s a pretty fast learning curve once you get moving. Just try to stop thinking like a man and think like a wolf instead.”

“And how in the hell am I supposed to do that?” Rick grumbles inside his head but he does as Daryl says, taking a few tentative steps as his body adapts to its new center of gravity.

Over the next hour or so, Rick gets to grips with being the wolf, surprised at how easy the transition is for him. He’s a little concerned that he’s not freaking out as much as he thought he would although the whole situation still seems pretty surreal to him but the wind in his fur and the rich earth under his paws tell him he’s not dreaming. Daryl’s soft tones are ever-present in his ears, coaching him and encouraging him until he seems satisfied that Rick has enough control. Daryl quickly shucks his clothes and Rick can’t help but stare, fascinated as the lean, smooth lines of his friend’s body appear to ripple before his eyes and, in the space of a heartbeat, a sleek black wolf is staring back at him.

Rick studies Daryl’s new form, tracing his musculature with his eyes, noting the power coiled beneath his skin, the formidable jaws and the stark intelligence in his strangely blue eyes. With a small chuff of air from his lungs, Daryl turns tail on Rick and sets off in the direction of the perimeter fence. Heeding Daryl’s previous instructions to stay close and follow his lead, Rick trails after him, letting his altered senses experience his surroundings.

They scout along the inside of the 8ft fence, following its course around the edge of the property. Surprisingly they only find one breach in its entirety where another tree has fallen, its weight pulling the fence half down at that point but not creating any kind of gap big enough for a walker to slip through. Daryl sniffs the ground around the break, moving inward from the fence and Rick follows
suit, finding that he can smell the distinctive decayed odor of walkers quite strongly at the fence’s edge but as he moves away it lessens, telling him none of them have made it inside. Raising his head, he cocks his ears, focusing on the shadowy woods beyond the fence and, with a little concentration, he’s able to pick up the sounds of two, maybe three walkers shuffling through the trees. Their erratic footfalls are easily discernible from the other nocturnal creatures living in the woods and Rick has no trouble establishing the direction they’re taking, knowing they pose no threat to either him or Daryl.

With the perimeter secure, Daryl nudges Rick’s shoulder with his and steers him into the long grass filling the center of the property. Rick can feel a nervous excitement bubbling inside him and the urge to fling himself headlong into the grass and see what he can shake loose has him practically dancing in place. A warning growl from Daryl curbs his enthusiasm but only the merest fraction and, when Daryl signals for them to split up, Rick eagerly delves into the undergrowth, his nose flaring wildly as he catches the scent of fresh prey. In his lifetime, Rick had watched dogs chasing rabbits a hundred times or more but he had never for a second imagined that something so simple could feel as good as it did to him now. As soon as the first cottontail had broken cover in front of him, he’d felt the wolf take over, every nerve and muscle in his body working on pure instinct as he’d pursued it across the sweet-smelling earth. He realized that, if he wanted to, he could catch it in an instant, his sheer size and agility making him the ultimate predator but he also realized that he didn’t want to. Instead, with a joyous yip, he let the rabbit lead him on a merry chase, always letting it keep ahead of him.

He has it cornered against an old tree stump, can hear its frantic breathing and rapid heartbeat, when a wet snapping sound close to his left halts him for a split second. With the noise the night breeze brings him a new scent, that of fresh blood, and his mouth salivates at it. A new urge takes him, something altogether darker than the euphoria he’s been feeling up until now and, with the merest hint of a growl, he pounces pulling the screaming creature from its hiding place and devouring it in two swift bites. He closes his eyes as the warm blood washes down his throat, exhilarated by the way it makes him feel, something primal stirring within him. Immediately he turns his attention to finding another rabbit, hunting and killing it within minutes this time, licking the blood from his muzzle with relish. He feels Daryl’s presence beside him before he sees him, the other wolf regarding him for a second before lunging forward to nip at Rick’s flank with his teeth and then race away from him, disappearing in the direction of the building. Rick gives a short snarl, feeling his lips pulling back from his canines and then bolts after Daryl, the two of them running full out until they’re back in the shadow of the house, its solid brick façade giving Rick a sense of comfort and protection even if it is just an illusion.

He arrives just in time to see Daryl Shift into his human form before collapsing on his front on the soft grass, his sides heaving. He lifts his chin at Rick’s approach, his eyes gleaming in the moonlight that’s bathing his skin and Rick stops dead, a sudden panic filling him as he tries desperately to recall how to recapture his human state.

“Just breathe,” Daryl says calmly, his tone soothing Rick’s rising dread. “You’ve got this, man.”

Inhaling deeply, Rick lets it back out slowly, casting his mind back to his transformation earlier, remembering how his body felt as it took on its other shape and, in an instant, he has it, his bones morphing back until he drops to his knees beside Daryl and flops to his belly in the dirt. He rolls onto his back, the stars a dizzying array above him, no concern for his naked state – modesty was something that was long gone in the world as it was now – and just breathes, great lungfuls of fresh night air, as he tries to organize the multitude of thoughts assailing his brain.

“Why don’t you change everyone?” he asks finally, wide-eyed and breathless, tipping his head in Daryl’s direction.
“‘cos it don’t work for everyone,” Daryl replies after a moment’s thought, propping his chin up on his balled fists. “I’d probably end up killin’ as many as I saved.”

“But don’t you think that they should at least have the choice, know that there’s something more? Rick insists. “This could be how we end this, how we survive. Man’s next natural evolution.”

“It ain’t no way to survive,” Daryl replies tersely. “It’s a curse is what it is. It’s never gonna save no one.”

With that, he pushes up from the ground, bending to scoop up his discarded clothing as he goes and disappears around the side of the building without another word. Rick watches him leave but doesn’t move to follow. He laces his fingers behind his head, staring up to the sky, his body still sparking with residual energy from his newfound gift and he contemplates on how what’s happened to him could affect his future and everyone else’s. Regardless of what Daryl might say, Rick has a feeling that this ‘curse’ could be their greatest chance at putting the world back into the hands of the living.

They spend the next days in relative peace, the threat outside their haven and their imminent return to it an ever-present thought in both their minds. Daryl and Rick explore the building more thoroughly, starting outside with the generator, Rick assuring Daryl that he can get it running again, that they’d had one just like it back at the Sheriff’s station. Daryl had left him to it, telling him he was going to find the basement access and check it out, waving off Rick’s offer to accompany him. Rick opens the generator panel, familiarizing himself with the layout, making sure everything is in order before moving to check the fuel level which is unsurprisingly empty. Checking the nearby well-shed, he finds a reserve tank behind the sturdy locked doors and begins the task of re-filling the generator.

Daryl comes back a short time later to find him leaning against the wall, a growing sense of frustration making the beast inside him uncurl just a little. He wipes his face with a grimy sleeve, smudges of dust and oil streaking his skin.

“Problem?” Daryl asks, giving the silent generator the once over.

“I don’t know, I did everything I was supposed to. Even found a manual,” Rick says wearily, pointing to the crumpled book on the floor which had so obviously been thrown there in a fit of pique. “I can’t understand why it’s not working. I guess we’ll just have to make do without it, won’t be the first time and I’m sure it won’t be the last. Sorry piece of…”

Rick watches as Daryl turns his attention back to the generator again, walking over and unlatching the panel that Rick had slammed shut in his frustration. With a small smirk in Rick’s direction, he reaches in and flips the main switch, watching as the panel lights up like a Christmas tree and then settles into just a few green lights and the air is filled with the soft hum of the quietly running generator. Maintaining his silence he turns and walks past Rick, heading towards the back door.

“Smart-ass!” Rick calls after him, catching up to him just inside the building. “So, what did you find?”

“Basement access, c’mon,” Daryl says, leading the way through a hallway which is now glowing softly with emergency lighting. “Most of the rooms down there are locked. Keys we got don’t fit so’s I was gonna take another look around upstairs to see if I could find another set and, if not, grab a crowbar and get in that way. The ones that were open were mostly general supplies, more food for the lab rats, cleaning equipment, but there’s four doors down there all covered in warnings and shit, bio-hazard, medical, that kind of thing. Could be what we’re lookin’ for.”
“Well let’s try the key thing first. I’m thinking if each of those rooms is piled high with medicine and supplies it might be more than we can take back with us in one shot. Would be nice if we can keep it under lock and key until we get back.”

“Let’s get lookin’ then.”

Heading upstairs, they start a room by room search, checking desk drawers and filing cabinets in each of the offices lining the halls. Rick is searching the last room at the end of the hall, hearing Daryl’s disgruntled noises at finding nothing in the room next door, when he prides open the top drawer of the desk he’s sitting at and there he finds a small set of four keys on a single fob. He gives a triumphant yell, lounging back in the comfy leather chair behind the desk, a wide grin on his face as Daryl comes barreling in, a handful of candy bars clutched in his fist.

“Sweet tooth?” Rick asks, jangling the keys in the direction of the candy bars.

“I thought Carl and Michonne might like ‘em,” Daryl says gruffly, piling them up on the desk in front of Rick. “Found a whole stash of them in the desk next door, seems somebody had a secret addiction.”

Rick’s mind wanders to the ongoing chocolate war between his son and Michonne, an ache stealing around his heart as he wonders how his family is doing without him, praying that everything is safe and sound with them.

“C’mon then,” Daryl says, breaking into his thoughts, “let’s go see what we’ve got. Day’s wastin’.”

Rick gets up and follows him as he heads back down the stairs, the two of them stopping outside the first storage room with an air of nervous anticipation, neither of them daring to hope too much. The first two rooms are a bust, Rick’s shoulders sagging as he takes in the empty shelves lining each space. However, when Daryl unlocks the third and fourth doors, Rick feels a small rush of dizziness overtake him as his eyes feast on the neatly-stacked boxes filling the shelves inside, names that he actually recognizes springing at him from the generic-looking white boxes everywhere he looks.

“Holy shit,” Rick exclaims, clapping Daryl hard on the shoulder, his face beaming. “I think we just hit the mother lode.”

“Looks like they had the same idea you did,” Daryl says, picking a box from the shelves and grinning as he shakes it to hear the familiar sound of pills rattling inside. “Thought they’d come back for the rest.”

“Well, from the looks of the dust down here, nobody’s been back in a while. I think we’re safe to say they’re long gone or all this wouldn’t still be sitting here. Looks like we’ve got a small supply of first aid stuff in here too – bandages, gauze, iodine. Hershel is going to flip when we bring him this back. Let’s lock this back up for now until we’re ready to leave. We should still clear the labs, see if there’s anything of use in there too.”

Daryl nods his agreement, watching as Rick securely locks both doors on their treasure trove and they head back up to the main floor.

Opening each of the labs provides a bittersweet feeling for Rick. He’s happy when they find more of the medicines they need, easily filling the two backpacks they brought with them, but at the same time he’s also uncomfortably aware of the dead animals still trapped in their cages. Rationally he knows that they served a purpose in life, that without them the very medicines he’s now loading into his pack would probably not exist, but just the thought of them living out their existence in those cages, never being free and then dying slowly in there has the wolf inside him itching to be outside.
He’s desperate to escape the four walls surrounding him to go outside and Shift but he holds himself in check until they’ve finished their search and they close the lab doors behind them. With their haul safely stashed under the beds upstairs, Daryl suggests they go outside and take a run, telling Rick that he needs to keep Shifting as much as he can while they have the freedom to do so uninhibited by the restraints of their usual lives. Rick can read the yearning to let loose on his partner’s face as clearly as he can feel it on his own and he practically races Daryl down the stairs.

Once outside the building’s confines, Rick inhales deeply, feeling the beast inside himself clamoring to be free and he senses the same urgency in Daryl as they scramble in a mad rush to discard their clothing. In his haste, Rick somehow manages to get tangled in his pants and takes an ungraceful dive to the grass where he lays, laughing uproariously at himself and is surprised to hear Daryl laughing right along with him, the sound something he hears so rarely. Daryl hauls Rick to his feet and they finish undressing without further incident, hightailing it into the long grass where they spend the afternoon chasing and stalking each other across the field until the sun starts to slip faster across the sky towards the horizon. Looking back to the building in the growing dusk, Rick can see lights blazing from at least three of the upper rooms on this side and he curses himself mentally for not thinking to check the switches in each room once they had the generator running.

The last thing they need is to announce their location to anyone who might wander too close to the fence in the dark so, with a short bark to Daryl, he bolts back to the building. Shifting just outside to pull on his pants before going inside he takes the stairs two at a time, racing between rooms to douse the lights. He can hear Daryl moving from room to room downstairs and knows that he’s doing the same thing. Entering the rec room, Rick sets about preparing them something to eat, wondering if it’s too much of a risk to use the fire pit out back instead of cooking on the tiny propane stove they brought with them. He’s tries out the taps over the sink now that the generator should be working the well pump, banging his fist excitedly on the countertop when fresh water finally pours out after a few coughing spurts as the plumbing kicks back in. Daryl appears in the doorway and Rick turns to him, the smile dying on his lips as he catches the serious look on Daryl’s face.

“What?” he asks, one hand reaching instinctively for his knife.

“Do you know what I’ve just thought of?” Daryl asks, his face a solemn mask and Rick shakes his head.

“Hot showers!”

Daryl’s face splits into one of those incredibly rare shit-eating grins that always catch Rick off guard and he slaps the doorframe with his palm before disappearing across the hall to their dorm room. Rick ruefully eyes the meal waiting to be cooked, then hangs his head for a second before giving a deep sigh and following Daryl across the hall.
A couple of hours later and both of them are sitting at one of the picnic tables close to the back of the building, finishing the last of Rick’s meal, their hair still damp from the prolonged showers they’d
both taken. With a satisfied belch, Daryl watches Rick push his plate away and rest his elbows on the table, contemplating Daryl across the space between them. Daryl finishes eating, licking the grease from his fingertips, acutely aware of Rick’s eyes on him until he can’t stand it any longer.

“Got somethin’ to say?” he asks Rick, looking squarely at him.

“You and Carol spend a lot of time together,” Rick says quietly, the words almost forming a question.

“She’s good people,” Daryl replies cautiously, wondering where this is going.

He knew there was speculation over his relationship with Carol, he saw the looks and heard the whispers the others had aimed their way over the years, choosing to ignore it as it was nobody’s business but his and hers. He had never given any thought to what Rick might think, knowing that there was always so much going on in the other man’s life that idle gossip must be the furthest thing from his mind which is why he would be surprised now if that’s what Rick was going to ask him.

“Oh, I know she is. I was just… you said you’d told one other person. Was it her?”

Daryl takes a deep breath, looking away from Rick for a minute to stare out into the darkness.

“Wish I had a smoke,” he muses, half to himself. “All of these people who musta worked here and not one of those assholes had anythin’ more than a candy habit? Sucks, man.”

He turns his gaze back to Rick, seeing nothing but curiosity in the other man’s eyes and he knows that anything he says in this place, at this time, will stay between them. He knows that he can trust Rick, not only with his life as he’s done already, but also with who he is. He’s never really had a friend before, not someone that he could confide in and share himself with because, in his world, that was a weakness, something to be ridiculed and shunned. But, in this new world, with these people he now calls his family, he was coming to realize that he could have that. Showing a part of himself he normally kept hidden didn’t make him weak, it made him easier to connect to, less of an outsider and that only made all of them stronger.

It had taken some time but gradually his thought process had begun to evolve, thanks firstly to Carol’s insistence that he was as much of a man as all the rest of them and then with the way that Rick had started to look to him, to seek his counsel, both before and after Shane’s death. Daryl had followed Rick’s leadership at first because he was adrift without Merle, he didn’t know how else to function without that strong influence to guide him, but he had soon slipped into the position of Rick’s right-hand man with an ease that surprised him. He respected the man intensely, something he’d never had with his own brother and certainly never with his father and, while he trusted Rick to make the right decisions for all of them, he also trusted him enough to know that he could disagree if he thought Rick was making a wrong choice and know that Rick wouldn’t hold it against him. Daryl knew that he was adaptable, the curves that his life had thrown at him so far proved that but he was also starting to feel that he wasn’t nothing anymore, that he actually mattered to the people around him, and a lot of that came from the man seated opposite him now, watching him with an open look, waiting patiently while Daryl made up his mind whether to share a part of himself or not.

To Daryl the choice was surprisingly easy as he folded his hands on the table in front of him and began to talk.

“When my old man met my mom, he never told her what he was, I don’t know all the ins and outs of it but I do know that she didn’t find out until Merle was around 17 and my dad was expectin’ him to Shift for the first time. When it never happened, well that was when she really hit the bottle and lookin’ back on it now, I’m not sure she didn’t drop that ciggie on purpose just to find a way out of
the nightmare she was in.

My old man took it hard, first Merle not inheritin’ the family legacy and then her dyin’ like that, even though they’d fought like cats n’ dogs every day of my life, her showin’ the marks of his handiwork most days. He took me n’ Merle off into the woods, kept us in isolation most of the time I was growin’ up. I barely went to school ‘cepts for when the town’d send somebody out to our place to threaten him with jail if he didn’t send me then I’d go for a few weeks before he forgot again and I’d be stuck at home with him n’ Merle, when Merle weren’t locked up in juvie that is.

Time went on, he just got crazier and crazier, I had no idea why. I didn’t know what he was, what Merle should’ve been, nobody said nothin’ to me. Until finally one day Merle comes to me and tells me that we weren’t like other folks, that our family was special, and that’s when he told me what my old man was, what I might be. Jesus Christ, I was a fuckin’ kid, my mom was dead, my daddy was batshit crazy and now my brother was fillin’ my head with some kind of story about monsters n’ freaks and he was tellin’ me I was going to be one too. I lost it, man, I didn’t for one second not believe him, he was Merle, y’know, he was my big brother, everythin’ from his mouth was the Gospel to me at that age but this was too much, I just bolted from the house and started runnin’, headed into the woods and didn’t stop.

Nine days I was out there, nine days of takin’ care of myself with no help from no one, just me n’ the woods thinkin’ about the shitstorm that was my life. The sad thing was, neither of them knew I was gone, my old man was too wasted and Merle had been hauled in on some B&E charge. When I finally found my way home and told my father where I’d been, do you know what he said to me? ‘You shoulda stayed gone.’ Then he took his belt to me and gave me a beatin’ I never forgot, tellin’ me Merle n’ me were abominations, that we never should have been born, that he thanked God every day that Merle hadn’t been cursed like he was but that he just knew I was gonna to be. Said he could smell it on me already. Told me he’d made a mistake and I was gonna pay for his sins.

Years later, when it was just me n’ Merle out on our own, he got really bombed one night and told me that the old man had killed a guy while he was the wolf and he’d never forgiven himself for it until it had driven him crazy. He’d vowed never to Shift again and, far as I know, he never did – not voluntarily anyways but you leave the wolf inside long enough and it’s gonna come out one way or the other. And, if it forces itself on you, the pain’ll make you wish you were dead. I think he saw it as his punishment or some shit like that.

And Merle hated it, hated that it passed him by, all that power and instead it went to me, his li’l runt of a brother. I was 19 before I had my first Shift, a late bloomer by Merle’s standards of course, and I was startin’ to think it was never going to happen, that my old man was just full of shit and Merle had been playin’ me all along. But when it finally did, oh man, it was somethin’ else. When I let the wolf out for the first time, out in the woods at the back of our trailer, I felt like I was flyin’. I never knew I could feel so in control of anythin’, so in control of my life. I was powerful and strong and goddamn free every time I took on that shape. And the more I showed I liked it, the more time I spent out there runnin’ wild, the meaner Merle would get so I learned to hide it from him.

I would just spend days out there, weeks if Merle was locked up someplace, just livin’ that other life when he wasn’t around because I knew he couldn’t understand it and I knew there’d be some way it would get taken away from me if I let on how much it really meant. And that’s just how it was, even when the world went to shit and it was just the two of us, I never told him how bein’ the wolf made me feel. Of course I was Shiftin’ more often then just to keep one step ahead and keep food in our bellies but even then I could tell he hated it, still resented the fact that it was my gift and not his.

Now, with him gone, I feel as if I don’t have to hide it anymore when I’m out there. I’m grateful every damn day that I can use my ability to keep you and the others safe.”
Daryl stops talking, reaching blindly for the water bottle at his elbow to quench the dryness in his mouth, his gaze turned inwards, lost in his recollections of the past, only vaguely aware that Rick is even there anymore.

“I never meant for Carol to find out, never meant for any of y’all to find out. But you know her, she just couldn’t let well enough alone, had to keep pushin’ me and pushin’ me.

Back on the farm, when we were still lookin’ for Sophia, I felt like it was my fault we didn’t find her that first day. You, me, Glenn and Shane, we were out there lookin’ for her as soon’s you came back to the highway alone and I had her, had her scent in my nose, tracked her all the way to the river with no problem. And then I lost it. I should have done it, Shifted so’s I could pick up her trail again but I was scared, frightened of what all of you would do if I revealed myself to you.

When we split up I thought I’d stand a better chance if it was just me and you but I still couldn’t bring myself to let go enough to pick up her trail. When you had us head back to the others, I should’ve stayed but I knew you’d only stay with me if I’d insisted and I couldn’t risk you being out there too. That’s why I hit the road again later that night, thought I could slip away and Shift, make a proper hunt but then Andrea decided to tag along and I felt like my hands were tied again.

The day that little girl came out of the barn and I held her mother in my arms while she watched you put her down, I was ‘bout ready to ask you to put one in me too. It was my fault she was there, my fault for being too scared to help her properly. She was a child, a single human in a mass of death and yet I couldn’t find her scent to save her life. And I tried, Lord help me, I tried until I was exhausted to my core. She was one of my pack and I failed her, hell I failed all of y’all. When you shot her, I vowed it was never gonna happen again, not to another single member of my family even if it meant givin’ up my secret.

Carol came to me a couple of nights later, tryin’ to thank me for what I’d done but I didn’t want to hear it, I couldn’t, knowin’ the truth of what I’d failed to do. So I pushed her away, yelled at her like an asshole, but she fought against what I was sayin’ – damned if she ain’t the toughest, most stubborn woman I ever met. We must’ve argued for over an hour, I’m surprised nobody else came out to see what the ruckus was about. I guess maybe we were just far enough away from the house that nobody heard.

I was tryin’ so hard to control myself, keep the wolf at bay, but it gets hard sometimes ‘specially when you’re as exhausted as I was, practically droppin’ on my feet and eventually she pushed me too far and I snapped. I pushed the wolf out just enough in my face so that she came crashin’ to her knees and I couldn’t even feel guilty about it at the time, I was so far past done with everythin’.

I stood lookin’ down at her, not knowin’ what to do next, y’know, and she looked back up at me with those eyes that look into your soul. She thought I was her goddamn salvation come to deliver her up. Begged me to make it quick. That was when I just gave up, pulled the wolf back inside and hit the ground beside her. I was disgusted with myself for what I’d done and I was disgusted with her for givin’ up, for asking me to end it after she’d been so strong.

We sat there all damn night, neither of us sayin’ anythin’, both of us lost, until just before dawn she finally raised her head and looked at me and there was no fear in her eyes anymore – it was like she’d turned a corner, like somethin’ in her had changed. She just started asking me these questions, one after another, non-stop and suddenly I found myself tellin’ her everythin’ – about my past and what I was and what that meant. I just didn’t want to hide anymore. I was so tired of hidin’.

At the end of it all, she forgave me, told me that no matter what I thought, she didn’t blame me for not finding Sophia in time, any more than she blamed you for leavin’ her out there. She knew we’d both done what we had to and there was nothin’ more to it.
I asked her if she was going to tell you and the others about me but she just shook her head and told me it was my secret to tell if I chose and she wouldn’t speak of it unless I wanted her too.”

Daryl falls quiet again, watching Rick absorb his words, knowing he has something to say but he’s waiting to see if Daryl is finished before he speaks. What Daryl doesn’t share with him is that he had also asked Carol if she thought he was an abomination, a monster, knowing her to be a religious woman and she had shaken her head vehemently and told him no. Taking his face between her soft palms to assure herself that he was really listening to her, she had told him that she had known true monsters in her life and that he was far from that. She had let him know that she thought he was the most decent, honorable man she’d ever met apart from Rick and that they were cut from the same cloth even if he couldn’t see it yet. “Rick has his demons too,” she’d told him, “just because they don’t manifest with teeth and claws doesn’t mean that they aren’t there.” The pair of them had parted just as the sun was on the rise, Daryl watching out for her as Carol made her way back to the farmhouse, each of them irrevocably changed by what had passed between them.

“And then the farm fell,” Daryl continues, thinking he may as well get the rest of it out while he can. “All of Carol’s words meant nothin’ as we all got torn apart. I tried but I couldn’t be everywhere at once - there were just too many of them. It was a sheer dumb luck that I even managed to find her. When we got to the highway and met up with you guys and Andrea was missin’, I felt I’d failed again. I wanted to go back for her. I was desperate to. I thought I’d be able to track her without anybody around. But the way you looked at me that day, I could see you needed me more to help keep the others safe and there was another of those hard decisions. I know that in the end it was the right thing to do but it sure as hell didn’t feel like it at the time. It felt like losin’ Sophia all over again.

And now, with the prison, there ain’t nothin’ I won’t do to protect what’s ours. We fought so damn hard for that place, sacrificed so much. I don’t care if I never sleep again. I’m gonna use what I have to keep my family safe. Judith, Carl, all of them, you need to know I’ll kill anythin’ that tries to harm them or I’ll die tryin’.”

“I know,” Rick says quietly, his face solemn in the shadows thrown by the dying flames in the fire pit. “I have no doubt of that. I never did. Even before I knew what you are, what we are now. You call it a curse, Daryl, but you tell me it’s the best thing that ever happened to you. I can’t even begin to imagine what your life was like, the way you had to grow up but when you talk about being the wolf, talk about how it’s made you free, I can’t see any curse there. Only hope.”

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Then you ain’t been listenin’. My father killed a man because of the wolf and it drove him crazy. And I’ve felt that in me too. Been in plenty of bar fights where the urge to just let the beast do its thing was right below the surface.”

“But you never did,” Rick states, staring Daryl in the eye. “Hell, I’ve seen you in a dozen confrontations, with me even, and never once did I see you lose your control. I’ve seen you pissed and mad at the world but I’ve never once thought you were a danger.”

“That’s because I’ve had years of practice reelin’ it in. You don’t think all those times Merle’d provoke me, I didn’t think about tearin’ his throat out once or twice? Or my old man, for the life he gave us?”

“But you didn’t because, deep down, you were a good man, Daryl. You already had the man you are today locked inside you – he just needed a reason to come out.”

“Well, that might be but it ain’t gonna be the same for everyone. You’re talkin’ ‘bout me changin’ everybody we know, makin’ ‘em some kind of super-human, but it’s not gonna work. What if the ones that don’t die can’t handle it? What if the rage and the bloodlust is too much for them and they go feral on us? I’ve heard of it happenin’. Then we’d have a whole ‘nother problem on top of
walkers.

Just imagine if I’d turned Shane, knowin’ what we do now. Can you even think what this type of power would have done to him?”

Rick doesn’t answer and Daryl can see that his words have hit home. He doesn’t want to keep arguing about this. He understands where Rick is coming from but, for him, the risk is just too great. A bone-crushing tiredness washes over him, a headache pressing at his temples from all the talking he’s not used to doing. Climbing off of the wooden bench, he crosses to the fire pit to extinguish the last of the glowing embers before turning back to snag his plate and water bottle from the table.

“I’m going to bed,” he informs Rick. “You comin’?”

“In a minute,” Rick tells him, his gaze settled somewhere in the darkness ahead and Daryl knows his friend’s mind is turning over all the new information he’s just received.

“Suit yourself, I’ll leave the door open.”

“Okay,” Rick replies absently and Daryl heads inside, cleaning his plate and falling asleep before Rick even makes an appearance.
Breakfast the next day is a subdued affair and Rick can feel something has changed between them. He’s amazed and grateful that Daryl shared so much of himself with him - that he felt he trusted Rick
enough to be able to open up like that. He knew Daryl’s life must have been hard. His own fights with his parents now seemed petty and insignificant in the face of what Daryl had endured but he’d also seen Daryl grow in a way that astounded him if he thought back to his first encounter with the sullen, angry redneck he’d met at the camp. Rick liked to think that he was a pretty good judge of character and he’d seen something in Daryl; a spark of something that might be if it was nurtured properly and he’d made it one of his missions to make sure it was. He’d put his faith in this man, his life and the lives of those dear to him, on more than one occasion and Daryl hadn’t let him down yet.

Even when he’d left the group to be with Merle, Rick had understood. He’d known how deep that bond ran so, even though it had broken his heart to let Daryl go, he’d known it would be wrong to make him stay. Ultimately he’d been rewarded with Daryl’s return to the fold; to the family of his choice, not of his blood. Rick thought that Merle’s death, as hard as it was for Daryl, had finally closed the door on the man he’d been and had paved the way for the man sitting across from him now. Daryl’s chin was resting on the heel of his hand, his elbow propped up on the smooth surface of the kitchen table as he stared intently into the cooling mug of coffee in front of him.

“So, what’s our plan?” Rick asks, breaking the silence between them that’s been in place since they both woke up. “Are we ready to leave?”

Daryl turns the intensity of his gaze in Rick’s direction, obviously thinking before he speaks.

“Not yet,” he tells him, his voice gravelly still from sleep. “You’re not ready yet. Maybe tomorrow or the day after. We’ll see how you get on today.”

“With what?” Rick asks apprehensively.

“With practicin’ your self-control. C’mon.”

Daryl gets up, tossing the dregs of his coffee down the sink and rinses his mug then stands impatiently by the door while Rick follows suit.

They head outside to the back of the building, Daryl leading the way to the tennis court, its fake turf gleaming in the morning sun. The net has long since disintegrated, its tattered remnants hanging from its support posts. There’s an abundance of overgrowth pushing through the fence’s links on all sides giving the impression of four solid green walls surrounding them. The court’s surface is springy under Rick’s feet as he follows Daryl out to the center and they both stop, Daryl turning to face him, lifting a hand to shadow his eyes against the low-slung sun. He looks Rick up and down in a single glance and then locks eyes with him.

“You might want to lose the boots and the shirt,” he advises, peeling his own shirt off over his head and dropping it to the ground. “Maybe unbutton those pants a little too.”

“What are we doing here, Daryl?” Rick asks, unbuttoning his shirt and tossing it aside as he toes off his boots, the morning air sending a ripple of gooseflesh over his heated torso.

“Like I said, we’re gonna test your self-control, Officer Grimes,” Daryl informs him, starting a slow circle towards him which Rick automatically imitates, moving in the opposite direction. “You’ve done pretty good at the whole Shifting thing, taken to your wolf-shape a lot easier than I ever did but what about in this form, huh? You think you can stay in control when every part of you is screaming for you to Shift to protect yourself?”

Rick pulls his lips back from his teeth in a feral grin, knowing exactly where this is going.

“Why don’t we find out?” he asks, sidestepping as Daryl darts across the space between them to try
and land a punch to Rick’s midsection.

He’s not so fast on the follow through and Daryl manages to hook his ankle around Rick’s, sending him crashing to the spongey surface beneath him, their choice of location now abundantly clear.

“Is that all you’ve got?” Rick asks, springing to his feet, Daryl bouncing back and forth in front of him like some boxer in an apocalyptic prize fight.

They spar for a while, each of them testing out the other in a way they’ve never done before, trading what would be punishing blows for anyone without their superior abilities.


With a grunt Rick aims a kick at Daryl’s kneecap, satisfied to feel the solid crunch of bone when he connects.

“That’s better but I think Judy kicks harder than that,” Daryl ribs him, sending a painful jab to Rick’s shoulder.

Growling in frustration, Rick pushes back, holding his own against Daryl until Daryl pulls some super-fast maneuver that Rick doesn’t even see and he finds himself flat on his back with Daryl pinning him.

“Pathetic, man,” Daryl grumbles over him as Rick struggles to free himself. “Maybe Shane was right, maybe you ain’t cut out to be no leader. Wonder how things mighta gone if you hadn’t killed him – maybe we wouldn’t have lost Andrea or T-Dog.”

Daryl’s words are like a bucket of iced water being poured over Rick’s scalding skin, each syllable hitting harder than any blow from his fists. The rational, human part of Rick's brain knows exactly what Daryl is doing. His words are designed to get the maximum response from Rick but he can feel something else stirring within him, something that wants to lash out for the sting of those words. With another growl and a burst of strength he flips Daryl off of him to land on his back, aiming a well-placed kick to his opponent’s ribs before climbing to his feet. Daryl follows him up, hands spread wide in a fighting stance, knees slightly bent, a fine mist of steam rising from his glistening skin.

“You’re weak,” Daryl spits, his fist connecting with the side of Rick's head in a blow that has his ear ringing. “You’ve always been weak. Too weak to protect Carl, to protect Judith. Hell, you couldn’t even keep Lori alive.”

At the last one, something inside Rick snaps, no matter how hard he tries to stop it or how much his brain is telling him that Daryl doesn’t mean what he’s saying, he can feel the wolf unfurling within him. With a roar, he lashes out at Daryl, seeing his hands transformed into elongated versions of their normal form, cruel-looking claws sprouting from the tips. He can feel the other changes in himself, knows his face is contorted and misshapen, his teeth suddenly huge in his mouth and the ripple of fur thickening on his spine. Faster than he can track, Daryl is behind him, his arms reaching around to restrain Rick’s, pinning them to his torso as Daryl clings to him in a death grip.

“Rick!” he yells. “Let it go, man, pull it back in. I’ve got you.”

Rick can feel his sides heaving, can feel the rage burning through his veins but somehow he contains it, concentrating in Daryl’s voice. His mind is playing through a loop of every fight he’s ever seen Daryl be a part of, seeing him never lose his control once, not even for an instant no matter what the provocation. Rick slows his breathing, pulling the wolf back in until he’s sagged in Daryl's tight
embrace, his head hung low, feeling their skin stuck together from the rivers of sweat pouring from both of them.

“We good?” Daryl asks from behind him, waiting for a nod from Rick before he releases him, turning him around to face him. “Then let’s do it again.”

They fight throughout the morning, past lunchtime and into the afternoon without a break, Daryl provoking Rick with every jab of his knuckles, every word he can muster on Rick's failings. Try as he might, he can’t keep the anger from rising with each slur that falls from Daryl's lips. Daryl knows him probably better than anyone else and he knows exactly the right buttons to push to bring forth the beast. Slowly though, as the day wears on, Rick starts to find that he's feeling more in control, learning to suppress the part of him that wants to lash out until, eventually, Daryl calls a halt to their session. He tells Rick that he's done, that he can't teach him anymore, that it’s up to Rick now.

Rick sinks to the ground, his whole body trembling from the physical and mental beating it's taken for the past few hours. He can feel blood coating his nose and chin, the taste of it coppery against his tongue, and he can barely open his left eye. Rolling his head painfully in Daryl’s direction, he's gratified to see that his sparring partner appears to be in pretty much the same state, blood seeping from a nasty-looking split lip and the whole side of his face swollen and blackened. Rick drops his head back down and they lay side by side for a while, nothing passing between them but the ragged sounds of their breathing as they stare up into the brilliant blue sky overhead, whispers of white cloud floating lazily over its pristine surface.

“Rick?” comes Daryl's soft voice to his right and Rick starts a little at the sound, realizing he had been starting to drift off.

“Yeah?” he replies, his voice rasping its way out.

“Those things I said… you know… you know I didn’t mean any of them, right? You know I was just trying to get you riled up?”

Rick turns his head again, less painfully this time, and studies the worried lines of Daryl's face, watching him nibble nervously at the split in his lip.

“I know,” Rick tells him, making direct eye contact so that Daryl will know he's telling the truth. “You just did what you had to do. There’s no hard feelings, I swear.”

“Good,” Daryl answers and Rick can see the relief softening his features, “’cos I didn’t want you to think I – I…”

“Well, I did think the dig about me eating too many donuts back in the day was a little too harsh but I think I can forgive you,” Rick says, stepping in to override Daryl's guilt with a small chuckle.

“Hey, you called me a short-arsed meth-head,” Daryl retorts, following Rick's lead with a snorted laugh of his own.

“Oh, oh, don’t make me laugh! It hurts,” wheezes Rick, clutching at his ribs.

“C’mon,” says Daryl, pushing stiffly to his knees and then to his feet.

“Where are we going? Can’t I just lay here and bleed for a while?”

“Thought we’d Shift, get somethin’ to eat,” Daryl informs him, slipping from his worn pants and stretching his bruised arms to the sky, naked before him. “It’ll help your body heal faster.”
Rick stares for a moment, transfixed by the feral beauty of him, his eyes tracing the bruises and welts Rick had inflicted on him and he winces a little. Averting his eyes before Daryl can catch him staring, he rises to his own feet and peels off his sweat-drenched jeans. Letting the sun warm his skin for a moment, he Shifts and drops down to all fours. Shaking himself, he stretches fully before following Daryl from the tennis court and out into the open field beyond thinking wryly to himself how comfortable he is to let Daryl take the lead. They race each other through the tall grass, the feel of the earth under his paws and the wind rippling through his thick coat blowing away any last remnants of the day’s events. He feels so at ease as the wolf that he can hardly believe it’s barely been a few days since his first Shift, he can feel his confidence growing with each bound, the potential he feels in this form filling him with an unbridled euphoria. He knows it will be hard but he’s also hopeful that he has it under control now. He has to, he thinks grimly, tomorrow they should really head home. They’ve been away long enough now and it’s making him antsy to get back.

They leave early the next morning, carefully packing the car after scouring the building one more time for anything they might have missed. After a short debate, they agree to leave all of the medicine behind apart from what they found in the labs. The storage rooms are securely locked and the place has been untouched long enough that Rick hopes it will stay that way a little longer. They leave the lab doors wide open, however, pulling out drawers and making a general mess to make it appear that the place has been thoroughly looted and hopefully to deter anyone from looking further. He’d feel more secure coming back with a larger group to transport the rest of it, worried that if something were to happen to him and Daryl on the way home, everything would be lost. Instead they secure the building, taking both sets of keys and switching the generator back off, Rick wearing a rueful smile as he closes the access panel. With a last look at the building that housed the birth of his new life, Rick climbs into the driver’s seat and puts the car in drive, taking it slowly down to the gates where Daryl is waiting to close them behind him.

Their journey home is uneventful except for one instance where they have to pull off of the highway when they suddenly come across a seemingly endless herd of walkers crossing in front of them. Before more than just a few stragglers are attracted to the soft purr of the car’s engine, Rick has them turned around and speeding back the way they came, Daryl working his magic with the map to find them an alternate route. They drive mostly in silence, there’s not a lot more that can be said between them at this point, Rick nervously turning over thought after thought at what his secret might mean for his life as it was. Occasionally Daryl rifles through the meager CD collection that the group are gradually adding to each vehicle, scoffing slightly at Michonne’s obvious selections, until he finds something that they both can agree on and the car is filled with the echoing sound of guitars from people who will never play them again.

Rick knows that Daryl is trying to occupy his mind for him and his heart is grateful for the warmth that knowledge brings. Letting himself bathe in the unwavering support he has from Daryl for just a minute, he knows undoubtedly that he’ll never find someone like this again in his life. As they turn onto the familiar roads surrounding the prison, Rick feels the familiar lightening of his heart that always accompanies coming home to his children, his spirits lifting enough that he starts singing along with the song on the stereo, the long-forgotten words coming back to him in a rush. That is until Daryl slyly reaches out and switches the music off, his shoulders shaking with mirth at Rick’s indignant huff.

“Something you want to say about my singing, Dixon?” Rick asks, darkly.

“No, man, it’s all good. Next time we need walker bait to clear the fence we can just stand you at the other end with your ipod!”
Rick reaches back over and flips the CD back on, cranking the volume way up and begins singing as loudly and tunelessly as he can, slapping at Daryl’s fingers when he attempts to turn it back off. It feels good to just do something that used to be so normal, it’s the little moments like this that are so few and far between these days, that give him hope for the future. Just enjoying a laugh with a good friend is something he didn’t realize how much he’d missed or how much he needed it. His and Daryl's relationship had been born of fire and destruction but somehow it had evolved to this moment, they had evolved into the men they were now, and Rick knew that he was stronger with Daryl by his side both emotionally and physically.

As the prison comes into sight, Rick falls silent, switching the stereo off so that the only sound is that of his heart thudding in his chest as he catches sight of Carl running down to open the gate. He pulls the car inside, not even killing the engine before he opens the door and jumps out, running to meet Carl in a crushing embrace, his boy’s head reaching almost to his chin. He holds him close, drinking in his scent, memorizing it until Carl squirms in his arms.

“Dad,” comes the plaintive teenage voice of someone who thinks you’re embarrassing them.

“Judith?” Rick asks, releasing Carl to arm’s length and ruffling his hair with a chuckle.

“She’s good,” Carl answers, looking his father straight in the eye and drawing himself up a little as much as to say, ‘I took care of her, don’t worry.’

Rick claps him on the back, pulling him in for another quick embrace, before turning back to the car where Daryl has climbed out of the passenger seat and is carefully watching their reunion. Rick gives him a nod to let him know that everything is fine with him and Daryl slams his door, walking around to get in the driver’s side and pull the car up to the inner gate while Rick follows with Carl.

Once inside the yard, a small group comes out to meet them including Carol with baby Judith crooked safely in her arms. Rick can’t keep the smile from his face as he takes his daughter from Carol and buries his face into her sweet baby smell, her tiny hands reaching for him as he gently kisses her delicate skin. After a brief round of heartfelt greetings, Daryl offers to unload the car with Carol’s help while Rick goes inside with the others to bring them up to speed on what they found. Heading up the cell block steps with Judith still nestled against his chest, Rick takes one last look back at Daryl, meeting his eyes for just a second before Carol blocks his line of sight, the glance they share loaded with everything that’s happened in the past few days and the weight of the secret they both now carry. Sighing softly, he enters the cold stone building he calls home, sending out a little prayer for luck as he passes into the shadowed interior, ready to deal with whatever fate is bringing him next.
Daryl watches, eyes slightly narrowed, as Rick walks away from him to enter the prison building, carrying his precious baby bundled safely in his arms. For a moment their eyes lock, an
acknowledgement of all they’d been through passing between them before Carol steps in front of him and Rick is gone, leaving Daryl with a strange sense of loss even though he knows he can follow at any time. If he was honest with himself, he had liked it being him and Rick out on their own – nothing to hide between them anymore. As if she had read his mind, Carol steps closer to him, nudging his elbow with hers and he looks at her to see curiosity etched on her elfin features.

“So,” she asks slowly, “did everything go okay?”

“Went great,” he replies, pulling one of the stuffed backpacks from the hatchback and handing it to her. “We found a shitload of stuff. The place didn’t even look like it had been touched. We need to organize a bigger group to go back as soon as possible. Rick didn’t want us to risk bringin’ it all back if it was just the two of us.”

“Daryl, that’s amazing, really,” she tells him, a huge smile lighting up her face as she peers into one of the backpacks at the medicine stored inside before closing it again and slinging it over her shoulder to pick up one of the other bags. “And everything else went okay? No problems?”

“Nah. There was only one walker inside when we got there and the whole place is fenced in so they didn’t bother us once we were in. Had to make a detour on the way home though. There was a pretty big herd crossin’ the highway so we had to backtrack a bit to get around but it didn’t slow us up too much.”

“And Rick, everything’s okay with Rick?” asks Carol, lowering her voice as they head towards the infirmary only to find it empty.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”

“Because, before you left, you told me he’d caught you in the woods and you had me pack you a week’s worth of supplies for a two-day run that you insisted on going on with Rick and nobody else. I thought maybe he’d said something to you or you’d decided to come clean with him and you needed some space to do it.”

For an instant, Daryl considers telling her everything but then he realizes that’s not his decision to make.

“Nope,” Daryl says, busying his hands with unloading the supplies onto one of the empty countertops for Caleb to take a look at when he returns. “I just thought it would do Rick good to get away from here for a while. He’s been so hell-bent on gettin’ this place workin’ like a real community that I knew he wouldn’t take a break unless someone forced him to. He can’t keep runnin’ on full steam like that or he’s gonna crack again.”

Carol nods at his words, silently stacking the rest of her boxes next to his until her pack is empty. She folds it in her hands then leans her back against the counter and gives him one of her impish grins that he knows means he’s in trouble.

“What?” he asks gruffly, fishing the last few loose pill packets from the bottom of his pack and shaking it to make sure he didn’t miss anything.

“So, you had a little vacation, you and Rick,” she says slyly.

“Pfft, I wouldn’t call it no vacation,” Daryl snorts.

“No? How about honeymoon then, is that better?”

“Carol!” Daryl yelps and he can feel the tips of his ears burning with a crimson fire. “Hush your
nonsense, woman.”

“Aww, come on, you know you can tell me. I want all the juicy details. Who made the first move? Is he a good kisser? Damn, he is isn’t he? Has to be. Give it up, Dixon, my chances at romance in this place are pretty much non-existent, I have to live vicariously through you.”

Carol steps into his personal space, grabbing his shirtfront lightly and shaking him jokingly, her eyes sparkling with mirth as he bats her hands away.

“Stop,” he hisses at her through gritted teeth. “Ain’t nothin’ happened and it’s never gonna so stop beatin’ a dead horse.”

Carol raises her hands in submission and backs away from him but he can still see the smirk playing across her lips. He gives a mental sigh and wonders how his life ever came to this, with all his secrets laid bare to this woman who had wormed her way under his skin and opened him up like an overstuffed piñata.

Their relationship had grown into a friendship that blossomed and developed in ways neither of them had ever imagined or could explain. On the surface, they seemed an unlikely pairing – the hot-headed redneck and the quiet, downtrodden woman – but each of them saw something in the other that had drawn them together and made them stronger as they grew into the people they were now. Somewhere along the line, they had started to share snippets of their pasts – secrets or memories both good and bad. Daryl had happened across Carol sitting on the floor of the prison laundry one day, bawling her eyes out and he’d frozen, unsure of what to do, feeling helpless in the face of her tears. He had been about to back away before she caught sight of him, not wanting to embarrass her, but something had stopped him. Instead, he had crossed to where she was sitting, crumpled on the floor, and had dropped down to sit cross-legged in front of her. He didn’t speak or try to touch her and she had raised her head at his presence and looked at him through tear-stained eyes, seeming to find no shame in him seeing her cry.

When her tears had subsided a little, she’d told him that she had been talking to Maggie earlier and somehow the conversation had turned to weddings and something she had said had triggered a memory for Carol from her life with Ed. Sophia had been maybe six years old and was going to be a flower girl at the wedding of one of Carol’s cousins. She’d been so excited, talking about it for weeks but, on the morning of the big day, Ed had woken in a foul mood and things had escalated until suddenly Carol was in the ER nursing yet another broken bone and Sophia was inconsolable at not getting to be a part of the wedding. Daryl had listened to her story, wishing as always that Ed was still alive so that he could exact retribution for every hurt he’d ever put on the family he didn’t deserve.

When she was done, her tears dry on her cheeks, she had looked at Daryl with a watery smile and apologized for being so silly. He had shaken his head, telling her that it was okay, that she should let these things go if she could and then, in a moment completely out of character for him, he’d stood and pulled her to her feet before scooping a handful of the sudsy water from the sink and flicking it at her. She had stood there in total shock for a second, bubbles sliding down her cheeks, and then her face had exploded into a huge grin and Daryl knew he’d made the right move as she’d plunged her hands into the frothy water and thrown it back at him.

And so had begun a strange kind of therapy session between them. Whenever one of them was feeling haunted by their pasts, they sought out the other and the tradition was born to let it go – sometimes with laughter and sometimes with more symbolic acts like committing the memory to paper and then burning it. Gradually they learned more about each other, what made the other tick, their strengths and weaknesses and Daryl surprised himself by finding that he not only felt better for
sharing himself with Carol but he also enjoyed the sense of satisfaction it gave him to be able to help her too.

So it came as no surprise to him the day she pulled his second biggest secret from him. Carol had been on watch in the guard tower one morning and Daryl had taken lunch up to share with her, the pair of them sitting side by side in the shade, legs dangling over the concrete edge. Daryl had been distracted, as he so often was, by Rick working in the field below, the dark hair across his bare chest standing starkly out against the paleness of his skin. He had stopped in his endeavors to take a long drink from the water bottle beside him, his head tipped back, and Daryl had been fascinated by the bobbing of his Adam’s apple as he had swallowed. His eyes had trailed down, following the taut lines of Rick's ribs and abdomen until his gaze had come to rest on the faded black jeans slung low on Rick's hips and Daryl had mused to himself about how much he missed seeing Rick's gun belt strapped around his narrow waist.

When Rick had caught sight of them as he had lowered the bottle, he had acknowledged them with a smile and a small wave which Daryl had returned. Placing his hand back on the railing in front of him, Daryl had noticed Carol staring at him with a sideways glance, a soft smile quirking up the corners of her mouth.

“How long?” she had asked, fixing her eyes on his.

“How long what?”

“How long have you been in love with Rick?”

The question had caught him off guard, his stomach churning suddenly over his half-eaten lunch as his brain fumbled for the correct response but none came. A hundred denials had sprung to his lips, words of righteous indignation burning on his tongue, but he didn’t deliver any of them. He had just held her gaze and remained mute under her scrutiny.

“I knew it,” she’d declared softly and he'd stared at her, reading her face for any signs of judgment or disgust but finding nothing but his friend looking back at him.

“How?”

“Because I know you, Daryl Dixon, maybe better than you think. I’ve seen the way you look at him when you think nobody is watching, the way you light up when he's nearby. At first I thought it was just respect, a blind man can see the way you idolize him even when the pair of you are butting heads. Then I started to realize it was more than that, something deeper.”

“You didn’t say anythin’?”

“I didn’t need to. I can’t imagine how hard it must have been for you, Daryl, to come from where you did with those kinds of feelings inside you. Between the wolf and this, there couldn’t have been one moment of peace in your life. But I see how you are now, how you’ve opened up and grown, and I don’t think that this is something you need to let go. You don’t have to hide it anymore.”

Daryl had lowered his forehead to the cool surface of the metal railing and rested it there to still the wave of dizziness that was washing across him.

“Does it bother you?” he’d asked, not looking at her but fixing his eyes on Rick instead who had gone back to vigorously digging the earth, oblivious of his involvement in the conversation above him.

“Really, you have to ask?” she’d replied, laying her warm hand on his forearm and drawing his
“I wasn’t sure… what with you being a religious woman n’ all. Don’t you think it’s a sin?”

“Daryl, my faith, what’s left of it, has nothing to do with it. I was raised to believe that God loves all of us equally and you can’t assign exceptions to that rule just because people are different from you. We’re all different, every person on the planet is unique in their beliefs, their color and the way they love. That’s what makes the world such an inspiring, exciting place to live in despite the cruelty and the horror that goes hand in hand with it.

I didn’t ask you about it because it’s not important… I mean it doesn’t define who you are to me. I couldn’t care less if you want to sleep with men or women or both… or nobody at all. All that’s important to me is that you’re my family and I love you and all I ever want is for you to be safe and happy. And if being with Rick is what it’s going to take to give you some kind of peace in this Godforsaken world then I am right there with you. If you’re sure of how you feel then you have to act on it, seize the day, make a stand for what you want for once and don’t let any fears you have hold you back. We all know that life is too damn short, I don’t want you to ever regret something because of the way things used to be. It’s a new world Daryl and the old rulebook has gone up in flames.”

I’m not naïve, I know it won’t be easy, I can see every obstacle you’re throwing in your path – Carl, Judith, the group – but you can’t let that stop you and if anyone has a problem with that then they’ll be dealing with me.”

Daryl had stared, open-mouthed at her for the longest moment once her passionate outburst was over, his heart swelling for her faith in him.

“I think you’re forgettin’ one important thing in all of this,” he’d told her, turning his gaze back to Rick with a slight nod of his head. “Ain’t much point in wantin’ somebody who ain’t never gonna want me back.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Pfft… cos Rick ain’t like that. He had Lori and the kids.”

“And no man has ever done that before to hide how he truly feels? You of all people should be painfully aware of what it’s like to have to hide your true self from the world. I think you’ll find Rick has more layers than any of us can even imagine.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“I don’t know, call it a hunch or women’s intuition. But you’re not the only one sneaking secret glances when you think you’re alone.”

Carol had gotten up then, stretching the kinks out of her lower back before she had leant down to place a chaste kiss on his temple.

“Don’t forget what I told you, Pookie, not everyone’s inner demons have teeth and claws. Think about that.”

With that she had left him alone on the tower with his jumbled thoughts. While he wanted to have faith in her words, he just couldn’t bring himself to believe it could be true. He’d seen the way Rick had been with Lori, his very existence had been all about protecting her and Carl, and Daryl didn’t see how that could have been if he didn’t love her completely. Whatever Carol thought she’d seen, she had to have been mistaken, there was no way Rick had ever looked at him the way she
So, Daryl had done nothing, pushed his feelings aside as his life had taught him to do to survive. Carol, however, wouldn’t let it go no matter how much he begged and pleaded with her, even resorting to yelling at her on one occasion. She just kept up a steady litany of suggestions that he should tell Rick how he felt, urging him to at least give it a try. He had ignored her as best he could, knowing that he never wanted to jeopardize what he and Rick had built so hard to grow together over some foolish fantasy Carol had planted in his brain.

With the meds all safely stowed in the infirmary, he and Carol set off for the library to join the others just in time to find everybody leaving, the meeting over. Rick catches sight of them coming down the hall and quickly finishes the conversation he’s having with Michonne.

“Daryl, a word,” he calls, giving Carol a pointed look that says he means alone.

Carol gives Daryl a sneaky poke in the ribs as she walks away, throwing a wink back at him over her shoulder that renews the flush to his ears.

“‘sup?” he asks Rick as he draws level with him, his eyes drawn to Judith snoring softly in Rick’s arms.

“There’s another group going out tomorrow. Gonna take two vehicles, I’m thinking the pickup for bringing the boxes back in. Take the other car for backup in case we run into any trouble. Michonne’s going. Glenn and Maggie, Sasha, Tyreese.”

“Okay, I’m on it. With a bit of luck we can be back the day after.”

“I can go, you don’t have to.”

“No, it should be me. You don’t need to be goin’ out again so soon, put yourself at risk of gettin’ into a bad situation while you’re still adjustin’. Stay here, spend some time with Carl and Li’l Asskicker here. You’ve been gone for days, I’m sure you have beans to harvest or somethin’.”

Rick chuckles deep in his chest and Judith stirs against him, blinking open her sleepy eyes and staring up at him.

“If you’re sure?” Rick tells him, gently rocking Judith back and forth.

“Don’t even sweat it,” Daryl replies, reaching out a hand to lay it briefly against the softness of Judith’s head. “Honestly, I’d feel better knowin’ you were here.”

“Okay,” Rick nods, “but you be careful out there. I need you back in one piece.”

Daryl looks up from the baby between them and meets Rick’s eyes, wondering for a second if he sees something more in the look that Rick is giving him than friendly concern and then shaking himself mentally for indulging in wishful thinking. Carol really does have a lot to answer for, he thinks as he shuffles his feet a little and gives Rick a grunt of affirmation. Daryl turns, the conversation over, leading the way back outside with Rick close behind him until they emerge into the daylight and Michonne calls Daryl’s name. He answers her with a wave of his hand and, with a last glance at Rick, he walks over to join her at one of the tables set up in the yard, giving greetings to people as he passes.

They spend the evening discussing their strategy for the next day, the group that’s going on the run all sitting together and looking over the map that Michonne has spread out on the table’s rough surface. She wants everyone to be clear on where they’re going in case something should happen to
any of them and they get split up on the way. Daryl looks over the map, planning alternate routes in case the walker herd they encountered on the way home is still in the vicinity but he’s only half listening to Michonne as asks him questions about what they’ll find when they arrive. Instead he finds that his gaze is repeatedly drawn to where Rick is sitting, deep in conversation with Hershel on the other side of the yard. It makes him a little nervous to go out on a run again so soon after Rick's first Shift and leave him by himself but he knows he doesn’t have any choice. This is too big of an opportunity to let go by hesitating, they need to get the rest of the meds safely back to the prison as soon as possible before anyone else stumbles on them. But he's also worried about what might happen if something goes wrong here while he's gone, that something might force Rick to Shift unintentionally and everything will fall into chaos.

With an exasperated huff, Daryl realizes that he's just going to have to put his faith in the fact that Rick can handle whatever happens and, as much as he wants to be there to protect him, that’s not always going to be possible. He drags his eyes away from Rick, looking around until he sees Carol standing behind the grill, partially hidden by the smoke rising in front of her. Excusing himself from the group at the table despite Michonne’s protests that they’re not done yet, he saunters over to stand next to Carol, putting his hands on his hips and looking disapprovingly at the half-charred meat in front of her she’s poking with a pair of tongs.

“'You crematin’ it or cookin’ it?’” he asks in a scornful voice, leaning back as she whips the tongs menacingly in his direction.

“Don’t start with me, mister,” she warns him. “I can think of seven ways to kill you with these tongs alone.”

“Just seven?” he snorts. “You’re slippin’.”

“Yeah, well I have mouths to feed. I only have time for the quick ones right now.”

Daryl gives her a grin as he reaches out to pry the tongs from her grasp. They both know that barbecue isn’t her strong point although she hasn’t given anyone food poisoning yet but he also knows that she’s too stubborn to ask him for help. She doesn’t fight him though as he takes over her cooking duties, just turns her attention to the things she knows she can handle and the two of them work quietly side by side. Her presence calms some of the thoughts rumbling around his brain until he feels the tense muscles along his neck and shoulders start to ease up a little and he starts to think that maybe everything is going to be okay, after all. The run will go smoothly, there’s no reason it shouldn’t, and Rick will have a quiet day with his children safe behind the prison’s walls, Daryl thinks. As Carol calls out to everyone that the food is ready and they start lining up, Daryl feels some of the weight of the past few days lifting from him and he even manages a smile or two for the people thanking him for their dinner. He's doing fine until Rick approaches the cooking area, his eyes sliding from Daryl to Carol and then back again before he holds out his plate and Daryl takes it to fill and then passes it to Carol who adds the finishing touches and then hands it back to Rick.

“You two make a good team,” Rick says, his eyes not leaving Daryl’s.

“Well, if it was up to him,” Carol says, giving Daryl’s hip a bump with her own, “we’d all be eating raw squirrel and berries every night.”

Rick gives a soft laugh and moves away to make room for the next person in line, Daryl’s eyes tracking him until he sits back down with Hershel and starts eating. Ignoring Carol as she mutters something about his boyfriend and wondering exactly when the fluttering started that he feels inside his chest whenever Rick gets close to him, Daryl inwardly curses himself for being such a pussy with a schoolgirl crush and scowls at Glenn as he slams a hunk of meat onto the other guy’s plate.
The next morning finds Rick lying awake in his cell long before the day starts just listening to the soft sound of Judith breathing in her crib. He thinks it’s funny how much he’d actually missed his
own bed while he was gone, how he now comes to think of a prison cell as his home. Concentrating his hearing in Judith’s direction, Rick realizes he can hear the strong, rhythmic thud of her heartbeat over his own and smiles broadly into the darkness. Casting further, he finds he can easily pick up the white noise of body sounds coming from his sleeping companions and, very faintly, the not so pleasant groans of the walkers out at the fence. He inhales deeply, testing to see how many scents he can differentiate around him, trying to catalog each one for future reference. His concentration is so centered on his sense of smell that, at first, he misses a new sound filtering down to him from the cells above. It’s a repetitive soft grunt that sounds almost as if it’s being muffled somehow and Rick is reaching out for his gun before he figures out what it is. Blushing in the dark of his cell, he lets his hand drop back to his side as he works on trying to tune out the now obvious sound of somebody having sex on the upper level. Probably Glenn and Maggie, he surmises, trying to focus on anything but the soft moans which are now accompanied by the gentle squeaking of a bedframe.

Rick centers his thoughts on the wolf instead, wondering just how much control he has over bringing aspects of it forth. Regulating his breathing to a steady pace, he stretches out his fingers over the blanket, tapping into the feeling he has when he Shifts but not letting it loose completely. He’s a little surprised when it actually works, feeling his fingers re-shaping at his command and, when he flexes them and gives them a quick shake, they return to normal. Pleased with his achievement, he spends the next hour experimenting with Shifting different parts of his body and then bringing them back to human until it becomes as easy to him as flicking a switch. He's so engrossed in what he's doing that he doesn’t notice the first fingers of light creeping around his curtain and the sounds of movement outside as the prison comes to life for a new day. It’s not until Judith gives a small series of gurgles that his attention slams back into the here and now. Slipping from his bunk and pulling his clothes on, Rick lifts his daughter from her crib, soothing her morning fussiness with soft murmurs and light touches.

Laying her onto his bunk while he changes her, he thinks about how he can’t wait to tell Daryl of his progress, wanting once again to plead his case that this could be the solution everyone needs to survive this apocalypse. With a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, he remembers that Daryl is leaving today, supposedly at first light, to head out back out to the testing facility. Finishing up quickly with Judith, Rick pulls back his curtain to see that Daryl's place on the perch is already empty, his bedroll stowed away and his crossbow gone. Hurrying outside, Rick is just in time to see the pickup and the battered green Honda waiting at the gates to leave, Carol just about to pull on the rope to let them go. With a grunt of frustration, he just catches a glimpse of Daryl at the wheel of the pickup with Michonne beside him before the vehicles move through the open gate and Carol closes it rapidly behind them. He stands watch until they’re out of sight, angry at himself for being so distracted that morning that he let Daryl and the others leave without him wishing them luck.

Carl appears at his elbow, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and Rick smiles at his son’s bed-tousled hair.

“Mornin’,” he says cheerily, burying his annoyance at himself.

“They left already?” Carl asks, his voice still tinged with sleep.

“Yeah, looks like we were both up a little late this morning, buddy.”

“I wanted to ask Daryl if he could get me the good candy before Michonne takes it all. He told me you guys never emptied the vending machine.”

“I’m sure he’ll remember,” Rick tells him with a chuckle. “He made sure you got first pick of the last lot, didn’t he?”

“I guess,” Carl answers with a sigh, pausing before, “I just wanted to say goodbye to everyone as
well, you know?”

“I know, I did too,” Rick says, feeling his stomach tighten a little again. “They’ll be fine, Carl, they’ll be back tomorrow.”

Rick gives his son’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze, looking up as Carol approaches them across the yard.

“Hey,” she greets them, her fingers automatically reaching for Judith’s grasping hand. “You want me to take her for you?”

“Sure,” Rick answers, placing a gentle kiss on Judith’s forehead before handing her over to Carol’s welcoming arms. “I changed her but she hasn’t eaten yet.”

“Well, we better take care of that hadn’t we, Princess?” Carol says, cooing over the baby as she takes her inside.

“Come on,” “Rick tells Carl, clapping his hand against his shoulder. “What say you and I get some breakfast and then get to work?”

It seems to Rick that the day is passing in slow motion. Try as he might he can’t get his mind off of Daryl and the others no matter how hard he throws himself into the manual labor of tending to the small farm that’s growing inside the prison’s fences. He wishes once again for the convenience of reaching into his pocket and using his cell to make a call. He has a sense of unease coiled in the pit of his stomach and he knows it’s more than just concern over how the run is going. He misses Daryl, misses the security that comes from knowing he’s nearby. Thinking back over the craziness of the past few days, of Daryl’s revelation to him and his own transformation, Rick considers just how much Daryl means to him now. It’s been a tough road for both of them, there’s no denying that, but Rick thinks they’re stronger for it. They may not have always agreed with each other’s choices but they’ve never not been there to back the other up.

His mind turns to the previous night, watching the intimate ease with which Carol had interacted with Daryl, thinking about the moment before he and Daryl left on their run when he had come across Carol standing pressed into Daryl’s personal space. He had felt something stir in him that day, something that had been building for a while even though he had been willfully trying to ignore it. When he had questioned Daryl back at the lab about his friendship with Carol, he hadn’t asked the one question that had been blazing in his brain like a neon sign – was there more to their relationship than just friendship? It hadn’t seemed appropriate at the time in the midst of all that was happening and, really, he knew it was none of his business. Looking at them together, recalling each of their interactions together over the time that he’d known them, it was obvious to him that they were a couple, plain and simple, and no amount of wishful thinking on his part was going to change that. Any imagined fantasies that he’d had about thinking he sometimes saw Daryl looking at him with something more than comradeship in his eyes, were just that – fantasies. It was time for Rick to man up and accept that what he wanted in life was once again out of his reach and he should just be happy that two people he held dear to his heart could find solace in each other.

At lunchtime he and Carl join Hershel and Beth at the wooden tables outside by the grill, the kids sitting at the table adjacent to theirs just far enough away not to be overheard and Rick gives them their privacy by tuning out their conversation as he talks with Hershel.

“So, how’s it going?” Hershel asks raising his water cup to his lips and eyeing Rick over the top.
“You tell me,” Rick smiles, “you’re the farmer here, I’m just the apprentice.”

“Looks to me like it’s going fine,” Hershel says returning Rick’s smile and Rick feels a wash of pride flow over him, it means so much to him to have Hershel happy with the effort he's making.

A high giggle from Beth causes both of them to turn their heads, seeing her throw back her head at something Carl has said and Carl with a slight flush to his cheeks as he looks shyly back at her.

“Give it another couple of years and she’s going to be looking at him like that,” Hershel says in a low voice, turning back to his meal.

“You think so?” Rick asks, amused, still watching the kids at the other table.

“I guarantee it. He’s turning into a fine young man, Rick, one you can be proud of. You did the right thing, keeping him beside you here while you took a step back. It’s made the world of difference in who he’s shaping up to be.”

“Thank you,” Rick says, his heart swelling even more.

They eat quietly for a moment, Rick taking a little extra time to spend with Hershel, always eager to hear his thoughts or insights on the world.

“So, you think a Greene-Grimes wedding is on the cards one day, huh?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Hershel chuckles. “The joining of two great houses. We’ll be able to start our own dynasty. Rule the world eventually.”

Rick laughs out loud at that, earning him an inquisitive look from their kids at the other table.

“Maybe I better work on getting those peas harvested first before we think about world domination,” he says, standing up and then raising his voice, “Carl, let’s go.”

“Every journey starts with a single step, Rick,” Hershel advises him as Beth moves in to clear their plates, nodding her goodbye to Carl as he heads back down the slope to the field.

Rick gives Hershel a small salute and follows after his son, his thoughts turning immediately back to where they were before the welcome distraction that Hershel had brought. What he needs to do, he decides, is just what he's done since the day he woke up in the hospital to this insane new world – take care of his family and try to give them a shot at survival in this unforgiving life. His personal wants and desires have to come second to that, without question. He had lost focus on that once already, his guilt over losing Lori almost taking him to a place he couldn’t come back from. He knew he was damned lucky to have Daryl and the others to anchor him, to finally pull him back from the abyss. He wasn’t stupid nor was he naïve, he’d known that the baby Lori was carrying wasn’t his but he’d accepted responsibility for Carl’s sake, to protect him from his mother’s infidelity and keep his family together. If it meant he had to be a husband to her in every way, to keep her with him instead of Shane, then he was damn well going to do what it took. He’s still not sure how things got so fucked up and out of control, first with Shane, then Lori and finally with Carl and the lessons he was learning from all of it, but as soon as Judith had been born he’d claimed her as his own, telling himself that she always had been until this was the only truth that existed in his mind. This was his life now, he reminded himself, digging furiously into the earth at his feet and he didn’t have the luxury of chasing after pipe dreams any more no matter how much his heart wanted to.

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He gasps as the body slides against him, the warm heat of its skin caressing his with a smooth touch.
His mouth is open in a circle of pure, soundless pleasure as strong hands touch him with a confidant intimacy, claiming him as theirs. The scratch of stubble, rough against his abdomen causes him to reach out and bury his hands in the thick, dark hair before him. His back arches up as callused fingers wrap around his rigid cock and the wetness of willing lips slips down over his length sending a shockwave throughout his body.

“Daryl,” he moans, his body aching with desire.

Rick's eyes flash open in the dim light coming from the hurricane lamp beside his bunk. He holds his breath, not sure if he'd spoken out loud or only in his mind, his body trembling with the after-effects of his dream. The only sound is that of Judith’s gentle breathing and the occasional nocturnal noise from the other cells. He exhales a shuddering breath, his heart beating way too fast as he retrieves the book he’d been reading from its fallen place on the floor, laying it on the table before he turns off the lamp. He lays his head back down against his pillow, one arm thrown up behind his head, his body still tingling from the imagined touches of Daryl's hands on his flesh. He's covered in a film of light sweat, can feel it beading at his temples and trickling down to pool under his back. His feet are tangled in the thin woolen blanket and, as he moves his body to free them, he moans under his breath at the weight of his cock pressing hard against the fabric of his underwear.

There’s a deep ache in his balls, his stomach clenching with need, and he knows he’s never going back to sleep in this state. Raising his hips, he slips his underwear down to his knees, sighing as his cock springs to full attention now it’s free of its constraints. He wraps his fist tight around his shaft, closing his eyes as he begins a slow stroke up and down his length. It’s been some time since he touched himself like this, even longer since he's woken up with a raging hard-on, and his body responds eagerly to the stimulation. Biting his lip to stifle the moans that want to break free of him, his mind replays snatches of the dream that woke him – images of a hard body, slick with sweat, pressed against his own; teeth scraping at his flesh and then that staggering sensation of his cock being surrounded by a wet heat that makes him want to scream. He strokes harder and faster at his cock, his other hand coming down to tug and roll his balls between his fingers, feeling his body rushing to its release. In his mind he looks down to the person who has him in their grasp, seeing those familiar blue eyes staring back up at him from beneath swinging bangs as Daryl bobs his head to take Rick's length again. That image has him unravelling in a second, his body tensing as his balls tighten and his cock jerks in his hand, ejaculating up and over his stomach and chest. Biting hard enough on his lip to draw blood, he can feel the beast inside him clamoring in a frenzy to be let out, but he stays in control, his body rocking with his orgasm until he's done.

Steadying his breathing, he rides out the sensations flooding his body until he feels he can move enough to grab a dirty t-shirt from the end of the bunk and use it to clean himself off, tossing it to the floor when he's done and slipping his underwear back up his feverish body. He feels like a guilty teenager again, his face burning as he smells the scent of his sex on the air. Rolling over onto his side, he pulls the blanket up around his chest, his mind whirling with thoughts of the man he'd spent all day telling himself was off limits. It’s a long time before sleep claims him again but, when it does, it’s mercifully dream-free and he wakes the next morning with a mixture of self-loathing and deep-seated satisfaction rolling through his body.

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The group returns just after noon the next day, Rick opening the gate to let them back in and then running up to greet them as they pile out of the vehicles, his eyes seeking out Daryl immediately to reassure himself that he's back in one piece. Everyone looks a little worse for wear and Glenn explains that they encountered a pretty large group of walkers at the lab gates when they tried to leave that morning and had no choice but to take them out so they could get the vehicles through. Michonne is sporting a pretty nasty-looking cut over her right eye and Hershel ushers her away to
take care of it while the others gather to unload the boxes that are stored safely under the tarp in the back of the pickup. Rick finds himself at Daryl's side before he really knows how he got there, his body seemingly drawn into the other's orbit of its own volition, and he drinks in the scent of him, tasting the dirt, blood and decay in the back of his throat along with Daryl's own musky odor.

“Okay?” he asks quietly, flushing slightly as Daryl's blue eyes meet his and he has a flash of the last time he’d seen those eyes, looking up at him before Daryl had slid his cock into his mouth.

“Fine. Nothin’ we couldn’t handle. Michonne took a bad crack when one of them managed to ricochet her blade back at her but she’ll live. Not gonna let her forget it though,” Daryl replies with a chuckle and then soberes a little. “How ‘bout you?’

“All quiet on the home front,” Rick tells him with a smile and he can see Daryl's body relax a notch at his response.

“Good. Not that I was worried or nothin’, Daryl states, hefting two of the boxes of meds in his arms and turning towards the prison. “Let’s get this shit put away so I can go find Carol and see if she has any of that rabbit stew hidin’ anywhere. Michonne wouldn’t let us have breakfast ‘fore we left this mornin’ and I’m about ready to go out there and catch somethin’ for myself.”

Rick's heart drops a little at the mention of Carol but he just smiles at Daryl and follows him inside to unload their boxes in the infirmary.

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Life resolves into something resembling normalcy for everyone at the prison over the next few weeks. The daily grind of building their home into something that can sustain them all is a never-ending task but with his additional strength and the security that brings him, Rick finds that the work is somehow less daunting than it was before. Daryl still can't break the habit of leaving the prison most nights to patrol its perimeter but now Rick goes with him, the opportunity to Shift outweighing any tiredness he may feel the next day. And, though he won't admit it to himself, any chance to be alone with Daryl, to have this one thing that is theirs alone gives him a sense of contentment that nothing else can except for his children. He’s starting to feel an upturn in his life that he would have laughed at only a few months ago but now he seems to be slipping comfortably into the new skin he’s been given and making it work for him.

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Rick lowers himself to the ground, camouflaging his silvery pelt in the undergrowth, and stills his body. There’s an adrenalin fire burning through his veins and he can barely keep still but he knows he must. He and Daryl have been tracking a deer all afternoon, a large buck that’s kept one step ahead of them the whole way but, gradually, they’ve managed to herd it closer to the prison so that it will be easier to carry once they make the kill. With Daryl behind it still, Rick has circled around, running hard and fast to get ahead of it so that they can trap it between them. It’s been an exhilarating chase for him, the first time they’ve hunted anything this large together and the thought of taking home the bounty for his family has his mouth hanging open in a canine grin. A slight rustling up ahead of him has him holding his breath until he sees the buck break cover, heading straight for him. He knows it hasn’t caught his scent yet and he doesn’t want to reveal himself too soon so he waits, trying to still the urges inside of him, until it stops about twenty feet away from him, its head suddenly shooting up and its ears swiveling like crazy.

Rick springs from his hiding place, seeing the panic in the deer’s huge eyes, and seemingly out of nowhere Daryl appears, his wolf body nothing but pure power and grace as he swiftly takes down his startled prey. With a sharp snap and twist of his mighty jaws he tears its throat open, a loud whine
escaping him as its blood fountains out and he buries his muzzle into the wound to lap at it with his
tongue. Rick watches, spellbound, his long tongue reaching out to swipe around his muzzle and he
gives an answering whine of his own. He initiates his Shift back into human form just as Daryl’s
head whips up at the sound, his lips pulled back in a bloody snarl that dies as soon as he sees Rick
standing there. He Shifts, pulling himself upright to stand before Rick, his face smeared with the still-
warm blood of his kill, drops of it falling down to his chest like crimson tears. Rick can’t take his
eyes off of him, thinking that he’s never seen anything more beautiful in his life than Daryl in this
moment. His hair is a wild mess, the piercing blue of his eyes radiating out from between his dark
bangs as he stares at Rick. His blood-spattered chest is heaving erratically, his body is shining from
the sheen of sweat that’s covering him, and Rick can’t stop looking at the raw feral beauty in front of
him.

Every last vestige of resistance Rick has had over the past few weeks crumbles and he crosses the
space between them in a heartbeat – acting on instinct just as Daryl has taught him – not questioning,
not rationalizing, just giving in to what his body desires. Daryl doesn’t step back at his approach,
doesn’t even flinch at Rick’s hands coming up to grab his face, and Rick’s heart aches for the
unadulterated trust that Daryl puts in him. His mouth clashes against Daryl’s, hard and unrefined, his
tongue swiftly parting Daryl’s lips in his desire to taste him. Rick’s mind reels as Daryl’s heady scent
fills his senses and he can taste the fresh blood still ripe on Daryl’s tongue, enraging the still
simmering wolf who he has barely pulled back inside. He presses his body flush to Daryl’s, their
hipbones bumping and their chests sliding together, wanting for there to be nothing between them.
He can feel a hunger growing in him, a desire that’s on the verge of being unleashed and he’s
vaguely aware of his cock stiffening against Daryl’s skin but it’s not about that. It’s about the way
that Daryl is kissing him back, his blunt fingers scrabbling for purchase on Rick’s hips and then
digging viciously in as he rolls his tongue around Rick’s and whines deep in his throat. It’s about all
the moments they’ve ever stood back to back against the world, all the times they’ve shared a look
that didn’t need words to convey what they were feeling. It’s about the way Daryl makes Rick feel
every time he looks at him, how he wants to know every part of him, mind and body, wants to
protect him and keep him safe from the horrors of the world, show him that he’s worthy and
honorable and deserves nothing more than to be loved completely.

With a ferocious roar, Daryl rips apart from him and Rick’s heart screams in response. He stands
helpless as he watches Daryl back away from him, his eyes wide and unforgiving, the back of one
hand raised to his mouth. Turning, Daryl drops and Shifts, racing off between the trees and Rick falls
to his knees on the earth beside the dead deer and buries his face in his hands. His brain is misfiring
on so many levels he doesn’t know what to do, he feels like he wants to rip his skin off as the level
of self-disgust rises inside him. ‘What have you done?’ His brain is screaming at him over and over,
nausea filling his stomach as he considers what he might lose from his self-indulgent actions. He
settles back into a sitting position, drawing his knees up to his chest to wrap his arms around them
and lay his forehead down, the press of his softening erection against his stomach an unwanted
reminder of his foolishness. He stays by the deer, not knowing what else to do, riding out the anger
at his actions until his mind can rationally turn over what happened. A small glimmer of hope sparks
in him as his mind replays the whole thing – Daryl had kissed him back. He didn’t pull away
immediately when Rick kissed him, he’d responded and returned the kiss for a fair amount of time
before he’d retreated.

A noise ahead of him in the trees has him raising his head, his heart thudding painfully as he sees
Daryl emerging, fully dressed, and carrying Rick’s clothing and weapons in his hands along with a
length of rope and a stripped tree branch. Without meeting Rick’s eyes, he tosses his clothes at him
and sets about binding the deer’s legs, ready for transport.

“Daryl,” Rick murmurs, his voice cracking over the word.
“Don’t,” Daryl replies harshly, spitting out the word, his tone causing any hope that was alive inside of Rick to die. “We have to get this back ‘fore it’s no good.”

Rick dresses quickly, turning to help Daryl get the deer onto the tree branch, the pair of them hefting it up onto their shoulders to hang between them as they silently make their way back to the prison, Rick staring at the angel wings on Daryl's back the whole way and wishing he knew what he could do to make this right.
Daryl digs savagely into the deer’s stomach with his knife, working on field dressing it, ready to take inside the cool interior of the prison until it can be butchered properly. He and Rick had carried it into
the yard and laid it out in the far corner away from the main area where he’d dismissed Rick with a curt few words telling him he could handle it from there. He had set to work, not allowing himself a second to think about what had happened. He was aware of Rick’s presence at first, just standing mutely across from him, watching him, but he had refused to acknowledge him further and eventually Rick had turned and left. Daryl focuses his mind on the task at hand, years of practice guiding his movements without any real help from him, until he becomes aware of somebody else standing on the other side of the table. Without raising his head from his work, a quick scent of the air tells him that it’s Carol and he knows undeniably that it was Rick that sent her to him although he wonders what explanation Rick gave her, not the truth certainly.

“Daryl?” she asks tentatively. “What’s going on?”

He looks up at her then, silently, his eyes holding hers as he fights to keep his feelings suppressed.

“What is it? What happened? Talk to me, Daryl.”

“Leave me be,” he tells her, casting his gaze downwards once more, wanting her gone, wanting everything gone.

He can feel the concern radiating off of her as she hesitates, so obviously wanting to say more, but in the end she backs away and he is both grateful and resentful for her ability to read him so well.

With the deer ready to be stored he hefts it over his shoulder, not caring if anyone should see the ease with which he lifts it, and carries it down into the basement level of the prison to the cold, dark room they’re using as a meat locker. After hanging it securely from one of the hooks in the ceiling and giving a cursory once over to the other game they have stored in there, he heads back upstairs to the cells, slipping inside unnoticed to retrieve clean clothing before walking back to the showers. As it’s still relatively early he has the place to himself and showers just quickly enough to wash the accumulated gore and grime from his body before roughly drying himself with a towel from the pile and pulling on his fresh clothes. Tossing his dirty things into the laundry heap before he goes, he hesitates for a moment outside the door, not wanting to go back outside where he runs the chance of seeing Rick or having to deal with anybody else and yet not wanting to be inside either. With a grunt he thinks of the one place he can go where he can be alone without the risk of anybody coming across him and he heads back to the administration block, the ring of prison keys clutched firmly in his hand.

There’s nobody else around as he unlocks the door to the roof and goes outside, securing it behind him. Finding a hidden spot as far away from the door as he can, tucked between two defunct air conditioning units, Daryl puts his back to the wall and slides down until he’s sitting on the rough gravel with his legs splayed out in front of him. From up here he can hear the sounds of the prison as everybody goes about their business oblivious to the turmoil that’s pushing at his insides. He's angry, so angry he's barely been able to contain himself since they got back but somehow he's kept it down, acted like the wolf wasn’t growling in his head in a constant rage. At first he thought he was angry with Rick for what he'd done, violating the trust between them, but now he’s realizing that it’s not Rick he’s angry at but himself.

He reaches up hesitant fingers to his lips where he can still feel the burn of Rick’s kiss, the sheer weight of the passion behind it and Daryl recalls the sensation of how he was lost in that moment, clutching at Rick to anchor himself against the onslaught of emotions pounding at his body. And then the reality of what was happening had punched him in the face with an iron fist and he’d panicked, running as far and as fast as he could to get away from Rick, taking refuge in the wolf. He’d tried to outrun the feelings that had accompanied the kiss but he’d found that he couldn’t so he’d just boxed them up into a corner of his mind, enough for him to be able to retrieve their belongings
and take them back to Rick. When he'd seen him sitting there, looking so lost and fragile, Daryl had thought his heart would break and yet he couldn’t let himself talk to Rick about what had happened. Huffing out a sigh, he runs his fingers into his hair, leaning his head back against the wall. He's feeling so confused – isn’t this what he wanted, what he'd been secretly yearning after for months? Rick had kissed him. He had kissed him. And that was the problem. With initiating that one kiss, Rick had unleashed all of Daryl’s insecurities, built from years of physical and mental abuse at the hands of his family. Who was he kidding, Daryl thought, with all his fantasies of him and Rick being together? Letting Carol fill his head with her nonsense about how they would be perfect together. It was a joke and he’d let himself believe it, let himself think that perhaps he was changing, becoming someone worthy of being loved by a man like Rick. He would never be worthy, he didn’t have the first clue about maintaining a real relationship, let alone one with someone so far out of his league, a man with an integrity that Daryl could only dream of achieving. Daryl knew he was nothing, less than nothing, a redneck ex-junkie with a lush for a mother and a killer for a father. He was a freak who had infected the only man in his life who had ever treated him with respect, as someone whose opinion mattered. How would he ever be worthy in Rick’s eyes?

It was a mistake, Daryl concludes, it had to have been. Rick was just caught up in the thrill of the hunt, his wolf so close to the surface that he had gotten carried away. Daryl knew all too well the arousal that could come from being in that form, how his body reacted sometimes to the primal state he was in, every sensation heightened. Rick must have been feeling the same way, he tells himself, nothing more. Daryl just happened to be in the right place at the wrong time when Rick had nobody else to attach those feelings to and something had happened that was never meant to. He’s sure that Rick is probably feeling mortified by what he did, embarrassed no doubt at not only kissing a guy but for that guy to be Daryl. The more he thinks about it, the more his brain starts to accept it as the truth. If he tries hard enough he can ignore the way Rick's hands had held his face and the way he had groaned softly as he’d parted Daryl's lips with his. Those actions can be chalked up to the heat of the moment and nothing more.

As the sun slips down behind the trees, Daryl curls himself into a fetal ball, head resting on one arm and he lets himself relax a little. He’s not quite ready to go back inside just yet, thinking he’ll spend the night up here, but a sense of calm is settling over him now that he’s convinced himself that it was nothing more than a heated mistake. He decides that when he sees Rick the next day, he won’t even acknowledge it, just put it behind them to save Rick from any further embarrassment and carry on like it never even happened. Satisfied with his decision, he lets the stress of the day lull him into sleep, unaware that there’s a slight smile pulling at his lips as his last thoughts are of steely blue eyes looking deep into his as Rick’s face closes the gap between them.

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Rick doesn’t catch up with him until lunchtime the next day, not that Daryl was actively avoiding him but just that he had been busy helping Glenn and Tyrese clear a knot of walkers from along the south fence and then dispose of the bodies. When he eventually comes face to face with Rick as he’s stripping off his work gloves outside of the tower and taking a well-earned drink of water, he tenses momentarily and then draws in a breath as he meets the other man’s gaze.

“Can we talk?” Rick asks in a low voice, concern drawing his brow into a deep furrow.

“Sure,” Daryl replies, capping his water bottle. “I think we’re gonna need to shore up the south fence somehow, walkers’ve been coming at that side repeatedly and it’s startin’ to show the strain. What do you think?”

Rick stares at him with confused eyes for a second and then Daryl can see him working it through
and figuring out that this is how they’re going to play this.

“I think you’re right,” he tells Daryl slowly, nothing in his tone to imply he’s thinking about anything else but the fence. “Maybe you can take a couple of people out and cut down a few trees, make some supports.”

“Alright. This afternoon, then. Better get to it sooner rather than get another buildup we can’t handle.”

“Fine,” says Rick and this time Daryl does catch the split second of hesitation in his voice before he continues. “Do you want me to come with you?”

“Nah, s’fine, we got this. I’m sure you got plenty to do without babysitting a bunch of guys choppin’ down trees. We won’t go too far out, I know a spot we can try where there’s a pretty good line of sight all around, we shouldn’t get into too much trouble.”

“Well… if you’re sure,” Rick trails off.

“Yup,” Daryl answers, stowing his gloves in his back pocket and leaning down to gather up his crossbow before he turns and walks away, ending any further interaction between them and hoping that Rick will take that as a clear sign not to pursue a conversation about what had happened in the woods.

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They fall back into their routine although it takes a while for Daryl to be comfortable being alone around Rick anymore and even longer for him to want to Shift and hunt with him. He knows that Rick goes out alone at night, as does he, and he tries not to worry, curbing the urge to follow him each time, knowing that it will do Rick good to find his own way as the wolf for a while. Eventually though he gets tired of being alone again, missing the camaraderie they had shared in their other form and, with their human relationship pretty much back to where it was, he starts joining Rick when he leaves the prison at night again. Although Rick doesn’t put it into words, Daryl can tell that he’s pleased to have him back by the exuberant way he behaves around him once they’re safely in their wolfen skins. Daryl lets the kiss fade like it never happened, just content to be at Rick’s side where he should be.

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They’re out in the field, late one afternoon, Daryl helping Rick build a pen for the wild pigs they’d managed to trap in the woods, when Rick broaches the subject of his transformation and how he thinks it could still be the answer to all their problems.

“Nope,” mutters Daryl around the mouthful of nails he’s holding as he hammers a plank of wood flush against the joists they’ve set in the ground. “I don’t want to talk about it, I already told ya.”

“But, Daryl, this could be our chance. Look at how far I’ve come already. I feel stronger and faster every day. Walkers wouldn’t stand a chance against a group of us like this. We could go on the offensive instead of hiding behind these walls, take back our world.”

Daryl looks at Rick, seeing the flush of passion on his face at his idea, and he growls inwardly, not wanting to rehash the same argument again.

“That’s just you though, it ain’t gonna be the same for everyone. Some of them would die and die horribly, is that what you want?” he tells him, raising his voice slightly.
“No, you know it’s not. But they should have the choice, Daryl, that’s what I’m saying.”

“And Carl, what about him? You want to give him the choice? I already know what his answer will be.”

“He’s strong, he’d make it,” Rick snaps and Daryl is shocked.

“I can’t believe you’re even considerin’ that. He’s not even done growin’ yet. You’re crazy if you think you could do that to him,” he yells, seeing Rick’s jaw tighten at the word ‘crazy’ but not caring.

“Then what’s the alternative, Daryl, huh? We keep bringing people in here, stretch our resources thinner and thinner while the walkers pile up at the gate until we’re trapped like rats? There has to be more than just surviving. We have to look at the big picture for all our sakes.”

Rick is yelling back at him now, his hands flexing into fists at his sides, neither of them caring who might overhear.

“We fight, man,” Daryl says, dropping his hammer to the ground to face up to Rick. “It’s what we do. We protect each other and stand against whatever comes up to those gates. This is our home and our family and I’m not willin’ to risk it over the possibility of making others like us. It ain’t gonna happen and you need to stop thinkin’ about it.”

“Then you’re on your own,” he spits in disgust. “I don’t want any part of it. You’re gonna bring a world of hurt down on this place, on your family, just think about that.”

“Fine. Then go,” Rick throws at him, “it’s what you’re good at.”

With an angry snarl, Daryl wheels around and leaves, the blood boiling in his veins as he struts furiously up the slope back to the yard. At the gate he passes Michonne, the look on her face showing that she had obviously seen him fighting with Rick.

“Daryl?”

Her voice is soft and questioning but he doesn’t want to hear it so he brushes her off with a scowl as he storms inside the building. He doesn’t want to talk to any of them, he knows he’s too angry and he’ll just lash out at the wrong person and regret it. Taking the stairs two at a time up to his perch, he blindly throws a handful of his belongings into his pack then grabs his crossbow and leaves again. Marching determinedly down the run to the gap in the fence, studiously ignoring where Rick has resumed working on the structure in the field, he’s suddenly aware of footsteps behind him and Carol catches up with him just as he’s reaching out to untie the cord holding the fence shut.

“Wait!” she calls, running up beside him. “Where are you going? Michonne said you were fighting with Rick?”

He bows his head, not wanting to look at her, his fingers clinging to the links in the fence.
“I gotta go,” he tells her quietly and he can hear the quaver in his voice.

“Why? What happened? Daryl...”

“I can’t,” he cries, turning to look at her, seeing the confusion and the fear on her face. “I just have to go. Just let me go.”

“Are you coming back?” she asks in a hushed voice.

“Don’t know,” he answers her truthfully and then, impulsively, he reaches out to draw her quickly to him in an awkward, one-armed hug before he slips through the gap in the fence and strides quickly away into the treeline, not even looking back.

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He walks until long after the sun slips from the sky, no particular destination in mind, just wanting to put distance between himself and the prison. Between him and Rick. He’s starting to feel numb, now that the heat of the fight has left his body, and his anger is turning into a ball of hurt and regret instead. He knows he shouldn’t have left, knows he should have stayed and tried to reason with Rick, but his words had dug deep into Daryl’s latent fear that he really wasn’t needed, that the group could exist just fine whether he was there or not. He knew Rick was making a big mistake even though he could understand his reasoning behind it and he knows that if Rick does go ahead with his plan then Daryl should really be there. Regardless of if he thinks Rick is right or wrong, this is still his family and he cares about them and, whether he wants to admit it or not, he’s worried about Rick too. It’s not the first time Daryl’s seen him become so focused on one thing that everything else fades into the background and he can’t stand the thought of Rick snapping again or something irreversible happening to him or one of the others just because he hurt Daryl’s feelings. With the darkness growing deeper around him, he finds an empty house to bed down in for the night, taking shelter in the garage when he finds the mangled corpses of the previous tenants still inside their home.

He’s not sure how long he’s been there, a couple of hours maybe, before a pretty big storm blows up outside and he’s hunkered down on a battered sofa that reeks of ancient motor oil and cigarettes. He’s given up all hope of trying to sleep, the rain and the wind howling around the edges of the draughty building are agitating the wolf too much. His mind is tracing back over his fight with Rick and he’s feeling increasingly stupid for having stormed off when he did instead of facing the problem head-on and trying to work it out together like they always did. A noise outside the garage door catches his attention over the steady beat of the rain on the roof and he reaches out for his crossbow, straining his ears to see if it comes again. It does, a scuffling of feet on the wet gravel, and Daryl eases himself up off of the sofa, stepping with a light tread as he inches over to the door to determine what’s out there. As he closes the gap to the door, a familiar scent comes to him and his heart bangs painfully in his chest as he grabs the base of the rolling door and heaves it up, raising his crossbow at the same time.

The door shoots up to reveal Rick standing outside, his clothes soaked to his skin, rainwater running in rivulets from his hair down his face, his Colt up and aimed at Daryl’s head.

“You gonna shoot me, Sheriff?” Daryl growls.

“Only if you don’t let me in,” Rick replies, giving him the merest hint of a smile before holstering his gun and walking into the garage.

Daryl shoulders his crossbow, pulling the door back down and securing it, wondering what the hell Rick is doing there.
“How’d you find me?” he asks, walking warily back to the sofa and sitting down at one end.

“Tracked your scent, just like you taught me. It’s not quite so easy in this form but I was doing okay until the rain came. Luckily for me, you smell like day old roadkill most of the time so I kept picking up your trail again. I knew you’d stopped here, I was just trying to figure out which way you’d gone next.”

Rick takes a seat on the other end of the sofa, pushing his hands through his hair to squeeze out some of the wet.

“Well, now you found me, whaddya want?”

“I just want to talk.”

“Talk? I think you already said all you had to, back at the prison. Made your position quite clear. What else is there to say?”

“That I was wrong,” Rick tells him, turning his body in Daryl's direction and looking him straight in the eye. “That I’m sorry.”

“And I’m just supposed to believe that, like you didn’t tell me you were going to do things your way and I could go to hell?”

Daryl can feel his anger and hurt at Rick’s words earlier rising to the surface again and he pushes up from the sofa, pacing in the empty garage to stop his emotions from boiling over into something else.

“It’s the truth,” Rick says calmly and his tone makes Daryl quit his frantic pacing and come to a stop, looking down at him. “I don’t know what I was thinking, why I took it so far. I mean, I do know, I still think it’s a good idea, something that might save us all but I can’t do it by myself. I wouldn’t even want to try. And Carl? I would never do that to him, I couldn’t, you have to know that. I guess I was just feeling frustrated, you know? I feel like you and I have all this power and the potential to use it for something more than patrolling our home and catching rabbits. But if something is going to happen, it has to come from both of us, I know that. This is too huge for one person to make that decision. I knew it the second you walked away from me, I was just too damn stubborn to call you back.”

“Yeah, well you are the most stubborn jackass I’ve ever met,” Daryl tells him, sinking back onto the sofa beside him, relaxing a little but still feeling the strain between them lingering on the air.

“I know, I know,” Rick says with a wry chuckle. “Seriously, I am sorry. I never wanted you to leave, you know that, right? I want you to know that I couldn’t do any of what I do without you, not just since the wolf, but all of it. I need you by my side. I’m not sure what I would’ve done if I hadn’t found you.”

“Don’t sweat it, man, I figured we both needed some time to cool off. I know you think this is the solution and, hell, maybe it is. I just don’t think it’s the right time yet. I think we should carry on with what we have been doing, building a safe home for everyone, getting our numbers up. Down the line, maybe we can approach one or two of the others to start with and see what they think. Michonne definitely. Can you imagine her as one of us. Shit, the damn walkers’ll probably just drop dead when they get a look at her.”

Rick gives a throaty laugh and, like that, the tension in the room is gone and they’re back to their usual selves once more.

“Glenn and Maggie for sure,” he adds.
“Glenn? Really? Well, I guess he’s not the punk-ass kid he was in Atlanta anymore. He’s certainly grown some major balls in the past coupla years. We should include Carol too, I think she’d want it, in fact I know she would.”

“Yeah, I have no doubt that that lady would kick some ass as a werewolf,” Rick sighs and pauses for a second before he continues. “She yelled at me today.”

“She did? What for?” Daryl asks, raising an eyebrow at the thought of Carol going toe to toe with Rick over anything.

“For fighting with you, for letting you go. She told me she didn’t care what it was about but I better get my ass out here and fix it or she was going to make me wish I’d never been born.”

“Yep, that sounds like her,” Daryl snorts. “She’s probably going to kick my ass when we get back too, for leavin’.”

“Nah, I think she’ll just be happy to have you back,” Rick says thoughtfully. “Can I ask you something?”

“Shoot.”

“How come you’ve never offered to change Carol before? I mean, I get that there’s a risk and all, but I’m surprised the two of you haven’t done it. Like you said, I’m sure she could handle it and I figure you’d want her to have the extra protection what with you two being… well, you know… a couple.”

Daryl shoots an eyebrow up in surprise, fixing Rick with a hard stare.

“Me and Carol ain’t no couple, I thought you knew that, we talked about it back at the lab?”

“No, we didn’t. You told me how Carol found out your secret but we never talked about your relationship with her. I’m sorry, I just thought… you two are so close, always together and I hear the others talking sometimes…” he tails off and Daryl can catch the embarrassment in his tone at having admitted to listening to idle gossip.

“We’re friends, nothin’ more, and it would do some people good to keep their opinions to themselves once in a while.”

The room falls silent around them, the rain having stopped sometime while they were talking and, like a switch is flipped somewhere, Daryl can suddenly feel another change in the atmosphere between him and Rick.

“Why did you run, Daryl?” Rick asks and Daryl can feel the weight of his words hanging in the air, he doesn’t even have to ask him when it is that he’s referring to. “If it wasn’t because of Carol, then why? You were right there with me in that moment and I know you felt something as much as I did and then you were gone and I still don’t know why. I thought maybe I’d made a mistake, read something wrong, which is why you made it seem like it had never happened but I wasn’t wrong, was I? You kissed me back and I know it was more than just the heat of the moment but you took off. Why?”

“I didn’t want you to have to tell me it was a mistake,” Daryl blurts out before he can stop himself, feeling the heat rise on his face.

“Why would you think it was a mistake?” Rick says incredulously.

“Because what reason would you ever have to want me?” mumbles Daryl, looking away from
Rick’s face and down at his hands.

“What reason? How about every reason,” Rick tells him and, before Daryl is fully aware of what’s happening, Rick closes the gap between them and is sliding his hands around Daryl's face to draw him in for another kiss.
There’s that initial moment of resistance again, Daryl’s lips feeling like stone under his, and then the dam bursts once more and he’s opening his mouth to Rick, making a small keening sound in his throat as Rick gently pushes his tongue forward to stroke against Daryl’s. His senses explode with the overwhelming taste and scent of the man now clinging to his shirt front, the heat from Daryl’s hands sending a flurry of involuntary shivers across Rick’s skin. Rick takes it as slow as he can, trying to quiet the urgent growling he can feel from the beast within that just wants him to take Daryl
hard and fast, letting his hands stroke the rough contours of Daryl’s jawline as he explores every inch of his mouth. He thinks that he could do this forever, that all he needs to exist is the feel of Daryl’s mouth on his and the press of his body flush with Rick’s, his hands still hot against Rick’s torso. He’s as hard as a rock, can feel his cock pressed painfully against the rain-soaked material of his jeans, but he doesn’t care—this moment, right here right now, isn’t about that for him. Yes, he wants Daryl, desires him and would kill to explore every part of his body but it’s more than that for Rick, this kiss is the culmination of a need that’s been building in him for months and that’s finally been allowed into the light.

Another sudden deluge of rain on the garage roof breaks his concentration and Rick inhales sharply as he feels Daryl move under his touch, pulling ever so slightly away from him. Rick breaks their kiss, running his tongue over his bottom lip as he catches his breath and staring into Daryl’s eyes which are glowing with an unearthly luminescence in the semi-dark that has Rick wondering if his look the same. As they sit, silently staring at each other with the rain drumming on the low roof above them, Rick can hear the rapid beat of Daryl’s heart matching his own and feel the tremors coursing through his body where he’s still pressed against Rick’s torso.

“I want you,” Rick breathes out, his voice hoarse and cracked from the desire that’s fuelling him.

Without hesitation, Daryl slips from the seat beside him, kneeling between Rick’s thighs and deftly reaching to unbuckle his belt, popping the button on his jeans before Rick even has a chance to think.

“Oh-what are you..?” he trips over the words as Daryl’s fingers pull at his zipper, releasing some of the pressure on his aching cock.

“Don’t worry, it ain’t my first rodeo,” Daryl growls, not meeting his eye and Rick grabs at his hands before he can go any further.

“Daryl, no,” Rick says forcefully, pushing up off of the decaying sofa and pacing away, one hand pushing frantically through his hair and the other re-zipping his fly before he turns back to face the man on the floor.

Looking like nothing more than a dog that’s just been reprimanded by its master, Daryl’s face is bowed to the floor and it breaks Rick’s heart to see that kind of hurt in him, especially if he’s the cause.

“Is that what you think I meant?” he asks, stepping closer to Daryl again, who still doesn’t lift his gaze from the ground at his feet. “That what I want from you is some sort of.. of instant gratification? That all I need from you is to get me off? Is that what you think this is?”

Daryl shrugs his shoulders and Rick knows that it is, that Daryl truly believes that this is all that’s expected of him, and more than anything Rick wants to rip that feeling from him and bury it so deep that Daryl will never have to experience it again.

“Daryl,” he says softly and this time he does raise his head, his eyes unreadable in the dim light but he takes the hand Rick offers and lets him pull him to his feet.

Gently, like handling a wild animal, Rick brings his hands back to Daryl’s face, his palms sliding down under his jaw while his thumbs brush across the patchy hair on Daryl’s cheeks. Tilting his chin up to make sure that he has Daryl’s attention, Rick inhales a deep breath and then exhales it slowly, feeling Daryl respond in kind.

“Let’s try that again,” he says softly, keeping up the gentle caress with his thumbs and carefully
emphasizing his words. “I want you. I want you and I – us – I want us to do this together. I want to be with you, to share this with you as equals, as it should be. This isn’t about what you can do for me, it’s about what we can do for each other. But, if you don’t want that, if you’re not ready or this is still some kind of mistake that you want to get out of then, for the love of God, tell me and this stops, right here, right now. No hard feelings, no recriminations, just us as we’ve always been. Understand?”

He can almost see Daryl chewing over his words, looking for the lies or a catch and finding nothing but the truth and he nodds his head just a fraction but that’s all it takes for Rick to push his hand back behind Daryl’s head and pull him to him in a gentle kiss. His other hand drops to Daryl’s chest, feeling the thrum of his heart behind his breastbone, and he slips his hand into the open neck of his shirt, the ball of his thumb rubbing back and forth over Daryl’s collarbone. Taking his time, Rick parts his lips from Daryl’s and gradually works them along the line of his jaw, nipping with his teeth occasionally and being rewarded with another of those small keening sounds from Daryl's throat. To his surprise and delight, Daryl makes the next move, his hands sliding up under Rick’s shirt where his blunt fingernails scratch through the coarse hair covering his chest before pulling out again to unbutton it and push it from his shoulders. Still running his lips and tongue along the underside of Daryl’s jaw, Rick returns the favor by quickly unbuttoning Daryl’s shirt and slipping it off along with his leather vest. Daryl presses against him, the fire that always seems to lie dormant just under the surface of his skin warming Rick’s torso which is still chilled and damp from the rain outside and he moans a little as Daryl’s fingers find their way to the waist of his jeans. Skimming them around to Rick’s back, Daryl runs a hand up his spine, the other one resting firmly on Rick’s hip as he tilts his head to give Rick better access to the base of his throat where Rick is sucking hard enough to leave a mark.

It’s Rick’s turn to let loose with a sound fuelled by his lust as Daryl unexpectedly pushes his hand into the back of Rick’s jeans and squeezes hard at his ass, his fingers kneading at the firm flesh. When he skims lightly between his cheeks, the tips of his fingers just teasing him, Rick just about loses it. All thoughts of taking it slow and giving Daryl the opportunity to back down if he needs to are lost in the face of Rick’s overwhelming desire to get Daryl naked as fast as is humanly possible and just devour every inch of him. With a low growl, Rick pulls away from Daryl’s hot hands, grabbing roughly for his pants and practically tearing them from his body, tipping Daryl back onto the sofa to yank off his boots until he’s laying naked before him. Rick stops, his breath heaving in his chest, as he looks down at Daryl’s exposed body before him, appreciating every inch of him as though it’s the first time he’s ever seen him like this.

“You gonna stand there n’ stare or you gonna get those pants off n’ join me?” Daryl asks, raising himself up on his elbows and cocking his head at Rick.

Rick doesn’t need telling twice, quickly toeing off his boots and wriggling out of his jeans, watching Daryl’s face as his cock swings loose, standing hard and proud out from his body. Climbing onto the sofa, he slides his body flush against Daryl’s, his nerve endings lighting up as their skin meets and he resumes his exploration of Daryl’s throat with his tongue. Daryl’s fingers dig in against his scalp as Rick works his way lower, his lips tracing over every beauty mark and scar he can find until his tongue finds its way to the patch of smooth skin at the hollow of Daryl’s hipbone. With a small suck at the tender flesh there, Rick moves in from that point, laying kisses at the edge of Daryl’s thick thatch of hair and then raises his eyes to meet Daryl’s. The look he sees there gives him all the acknowledgment he needs and he finds he’s practically drooling in his eagerness to taste Daryl’s cock. Inhaling deeply, he savors the musky aroma from Daryl’s skin before he uses his tongue to lick a broad stripe up the underside of his shaft, using his hands to steady Daryl’s hips when he bucks up underneath him.

He repeats the move, this time lingering when he reaches the head, swirling his tongue around it and
pressing it against the slit, making Daryl curse above him and tug on Rick’s hair.

“ain’t gonna last, you keep that up,” Daryl mutters, drawing Rick back up his body where Rick just grins down at him.

“That’s fine,” he murmurs, nipping his teeth at the underside of Daryl’s jaw, “just means I get to work on you all over again.”

“Quit it,” Daryl snorts, pushing away Rick’s face but Rick can see the flush of arousal creeping across his skin.

“You want me to stop?” he asks, half-serious, rolling his body off of Daryl’s to lay beside him, his spine pressed to the rough surface of the sofa back, consciously making sure that Daryl won’t feel trapped in any way.

“No,” Daryl whispers, turning his body to face Rick’s and twining their legs together on the narrow sofa.

His free hand reaches out to caress Rick’s skin, starting at his ribs and working in light strokes up over his chest and then down to his stomach, following a path over and over. Rick feels his breathing slow at the touch, content to just let Daryl explore him in his own time, still painfully aware that he could be pushing too far and too fast here even though his aching cock is begging for release. Daryl shifts his weight a little, his hand sliding up to the back of Rick’s neck to curl into his hair and pull his head forward for another kiss which Rick is happy to lose himself in. He can feel the weight of Daryl’s cock nestled snugly against his, the smooth length of his shaft rubbing his as their bodies move with the intensity of their kiss and he trails his fingers down over Daryl’s hip to end up lying flat against his abdomen. When Daryl continues to kiss him, his lips sliding wetly over Rick’s, he gently moves his hand until he has his fingers wrapped around Daryl’s length and he begins a slow stroke up and down. He loves the way Daryl feels in his hand, the thickness of him and the way he can feel every vein ridging his shaft as he slides his palm along it.

A small, purring growl has started in the back of Daryl’s throat, the sound only increasing Rick’s arousal and he breaks their kiss so that he can see Daryl’s face while he squeezes his cock in his fist. Daryl’s growl increases and Rick finds himself answering in kind, the sound only faltering when he suddenly finds Daryl’s rough hand tightening around his, the smooth length of his shaft rubbing his as his bodies move with the intensity of their kiss and he trails his fingers down over Daryl’s hip to end up lying flat against his abdomen. When Daryl continues to kiss him, his lips sliding wetly over Rick’s, he gently moves his hand until he has his fingers wrapped around Daryl’s length and he begins a slow stroke up and down. He loves the way Daryl feels in his hand, the thickness of him and the way he can feel every vein ridging his shaft as he slides his palm along it.

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Daryl moans loudly, the sound reverberating through his skin into Rick’s mouth and it’s the final straw for his over-stimulated body. With a thrust of his hips, he comes hard, covering both of them with thick splashes of cum as Daryl milks him until he’s done, his head swaying and his body drowning in more sensations than he can cope with. To his credit he does manage to keep his hand wrapped firmly around Daryl’s cock, his stroke only faltering for a minute while he comes and then recovering as he regains some of his senses. Daryl’s head is back, his mouth open in that purring growl once more and his eyes fixed firmly on Rick’s as Rick teases his cock with a few more
strokes, muttering mostly incoherent words of encouragement until Daryl suddenly stiffens in his
his eyelids fluttering as he shoots his load between them. Rick keeps his hold on him, biting his
lip as he witnesses the total loss of control he knows Daryl is experiencing and feeling humbled that
Daryl trusts him enough to expose his vulnerability to Rick in that way.

Pulling his hand up Daryl’s shaft one last time, Rick lifts his fingers to his mouth, moaning a little as
he licks Daryl’s cum from his skin and he sees Daryl’s eyes widen a little at the sight. Pushing his
body into Rick’s again, Daryl crushes his lips to Rick’s, his tongue working its way between his lips
with an eagerness that has Rick responding immediately. Their frantic clash of tongues slowly
subsides into a gentle stroking as they find a comfortable position that has them as flush against each
other as they can be. Rick’s fingers are softly travelling up and down Daryl’s spine, wanting to keep
him as close as possible but ever conscious that he’s treading new territory here and he’s not sure
where this new development in their relationship is going to lead.

“You okay?” he asks when their kiss finally tapers off.

“Well, I ain’t running if that’s what you’re worried about,” Daryl answers, giving him an almost shy
half-smile that gets Rick’s heart beating just a little faster again.

“Good, because I’m too fucking tired to chase after you anymore tonight,” Rick tells him and Daryl
gives him a derisive snort in return.

Content not to push the conversation any further and just bask in the here and now, Rick shifts his
weight on the sofa, turning himself onto his back and lifting his arm to flex his fingers to return the
feeling from where he’s been laying on it. There’s an awkward moment where he’s not sure where
he should reposition it but Daryl makes the choice for him, curling tighter into Rick’s side on the
narrow seat and Rick tucks the arm behind him to support Daryl’s head. Daryl’s hand slips its way
across Rick’s midriff to lay against his ribs and Rick wonders if he’ll ever stopped being surprised by
this man and hoping that he’ll have time to peel back some of his layers to find the person he knows
is lurking beneath. But, for the moment, he’s just happy to be here with him, hoping that this step
marks the start of a new journey for the pair of them, something that’s just going to make them even
stronger. A comfortable silence falls over them, the rain having lightened to nothing more than an
occasional smattering of drops on the roof and Rick can feel his body relaxing under the weight of
Daryl pressed into his side.

Rick’s not sure how long they lay like that, he thinks he may even have dozed a little, but he’s sure it
can’t have been too long as Daryl is still clinging to Rick’s chest, one leg wrapped possessively
around Rick’s ankles in a position that seems already comfortably familiar. Both of them are still
slicked with a layer of cooling sweat and the room is redolent with the scent of their sex. Rick can
feel a tenseness in Daryl’s shoulders as he strokes his fingertips across his warm skin and he knows
that something is bothering him but he also knows that he has to wait for Daryl to put a voice to it
rather than Rick ask the question. They lay in silence for a while, their breathing mirroring each
other’s, Rick enjoying the weight of Daryl’s head where it’s resting on his shoulder, tucked down
under his chin. Then he hears the smallest hitch in Daryl’s breathing and feels the slight tightening of
the muscles under his touch and he knows something is working in Daryl's mind.

“Were you and Shane…” Daryl asks in the smallest voice Rick's ever heard coming from his lips.
“Did you… were you..?”

“Together?” Rick replies. “Like this?”

Daryl nods silently against Rick's chest.

“No,” Rick states emphatically, nudging Daryl's chin up to look him in the eyes, pushing his sweat-
drenched bangs back from his forehead with a soft touch. “Not like this. Never”

“Good,” mutters Daryl, burying his face back against the crook of Rick’s shoulder. “I just thought that maybe… you’d known him a long time. Things happen.”

“Not that. Shane was as straight as they came. I think he knew about me though, in fact I’m sure he did but we never talked about it. I think he just pretended not to see. It’s not like I was broadcasting it to the world. Heck, I’d barely figured it out myself when Shane and I first became friends.”

Silence falls between them again but Rick can tell Daryl’s not done, can read his body language well enough already to know that there’s more he wants to say. He just keeps up his slow caress of Daryl’s spine, giving him the time he needs to find the words he wants to say.

“I always knew I think, even as a kid. But I soon learned that I couldn’t ask no one about how I was feelin’. ‘Be a man.’ ‘Don’t be such a pussy.’ That was the normal line in my house, anythin’ less than 110% manliness meant you were one of those queer freaks and that was somethin’ a Dixon was never gonna be. So, I kept it inside, buried along with the possibility of becomin’ the wolf. For a while I thought that maybe they were part of the same thing somehow and if I did change into a wolf, maybe it would be the cure for all the other ‘evil’ thoughts I was havin’.

Of course, you know that Merle took it upon himself to make sure I was a man as soon as he thought I was old enough. Set me up with some woman he knew at one of his regular bar haunts, got her drunk or high enough to agree to sleep with his baby brother and make him a man. I was barely fourteen, all skin and bones, so uncomfortable in my own body I could barely stand it and I was as nervous as fuck. There were a million places I wanted to be that night and none of them involved sittin’ on the steps of some beat up trailer out in the back woods while I listened to Merle fuckin’ some trash woman who was old enough to be his mother and knowin’ I had to do it next.

And it was a hundred times worse than I’d imagined. She was layin’ there, naked and strung out and she just kinda waved me over and told me to get on with it. I didn’t have the first fuckin’ clue what I was doin’. I mean I knew what I was supposed to do, Merle had made me sit through enough porn and look at enough girlie mags that I should’ve been good to go. But I just felt nothin’. Shit, I couldn’t even get hard at first, she had to do it for me. My whole body was just tellin’ me ‘no’ but Merle was yellin’ from outside and the last thing I wanted was to go out and face him if I didn’t go through with it. So, I sucked it up and just got on with it. At least it was quick, there was that. I just closed my eyes so I didn’t have to look at her, prayin’ that she wasn’t gonna want to kiss me like I’d seen in Merle’s movies because I thought that I might puke on her if I did. But she just laid there while I did my thing and when it was over, she called me a ‘good boy’ and told Merle I’d done him proud when he asked, even though I don’t think she really had any fuckin’ clue what was goin’ on.

When I got older and we would go drinkin’ together, there were always girls hangin’ around and I’d take them home now n’ then, just to keep Merle off my back but it was always just for show. It just never felt right to me but I just accepted that was the way it was and there was nothin’ I could do about it. When the wolf finally took me, I practically ran straight for the nearest bar once I had it under control and picked up some girl, desperate to know if I was ‘fixed’. When it was done and I realized I still didn’t feel any different, then I knew that that was who I was and there was no changin’ it.

About a year later, me n’ Merle were at some party at his dealer’s house, the place was trashed, people had been there getting’ off their skulls all night and I was gettin’ pretty buzzed myself which is not an easy thing once you have wolf blood in you, let me tell ya. I lost Merle somewhere in all the confusion and I was looking for a bathroom to take a piss before I tried to find him. When I found one that I thought was empty, I opened the door and came face to face with this guy I sorta knew in
passin’, hung around on the edges of the people we knew, sittin’ on the can jerkin’ himself off like the world was about to end. I backed up, closin’ the door, and he yelled to me to wait. I don’t know what it was that made me stop, somethin’ about how he looked maybe or just my own curiosity. It was the first time I’d ever really seen another guy naked apart from Merle or my old man and it was absolutely the first time I’d ever seen someone gettin’ themselves off like that. I asked him what he wanted and I was tryin’ so hard not to look at where he was still strokin’ himself while he spoke to me. He told me he’d pay me twenty bucks if I’d let him blow me while he got off so I told him to fuck off but he just kept pleadin’ with me, tellin’ me how he was really good at it and shit. Part of me was disgusted that I was even thinkin’ ‘bout it but there was a bigger part of me achin’ to say yes and I was already as hard as iron just from the thought of it so I locked the door behind me and I let him suck my dick while I watched him jerk off.

When it was over, I took his money and told myself that it was done, that it was a one-time thing. I’d satisfied my curiosity and now I could move on with my life. But, somehow before I knew it, we were hookin’ up whenever the urge took me. I was a mean sonovabitch to that guy, treated him like he was dirt, only went around to his place when I wanted to get off and barely spoke to him while I did but for some reason he just took it. I guess ‘cos there weren’t a lot of other options for guys like us where we lived. We never talked about it and if we saw each other in public it was nothin’ more than two guys shootin’ the shit about mindless crap.”

“How long did it last?”

“Coupla years on and off until one time I went over and he was just gone, place cleared out, no explanation. I never did find out what happened to him.”

“That must have been rough.”

“Nah, not really. It’s not like I was in love with the guy or anythin’,” Daryl says with a shrug. “He was just a means to an end, y’know what I mean? What ‘bout you, is that how it was for you or..?”

“Me? Kinda, I guess. I didn’t know, not until I was in my late teens anyway. I was a late bloomer, you’d say, I’d never really been interested in girls up to that point, I just figured I hadn’t seen the right one. Then, when I was seventeen, I spent the summer working at one of those camps off in the woods where parents send their kids for a couple of weeks to give themselves a break. I was sharing a room with another boy my age who went to a different school than me and we became friends. It’s one of those clichéd stories, I know, but I woke up one night to find him in my bunk with me, I always slept naked in those days, and he had one fist wrapped around my cock and the other wrapped around his own.

I didn’t know what to do at first, my instinct was to push him away, to challenge him for what he was doing but it just felt so goddamn… right. And so fucking good. I’d never been touched like that before, hell I was still a virgin, but the way he was stroking me, his breath hot on my skin – I knew that this was it, this was who I was. It was the perfect summer, most nights we’d be in my bunk exploring each other’s bodies until the sun came up and others, we’d sneak out into the woods to go skinny-dipping or just make out under the stars. The first time we fucked properly I thought I was going to explode, I never wanted it to end.”

“So what happened?” Daryl asks fixing him with solemn eyes that say he already knows the answer.

“What always happens,” Rick answers with a sigh. “Summers end and real life slaps you hard in the face and tells you to wake up. I don’t know what I thought was going to happen. That I was going to bring this guy home with me, introduce him to my family and say, ‘Oh by the way, I think I’m in love and you can say goodbye to all those dreams you had of grandkids, mom.’ There was just no way that was ever going to be my life. I couldn’t do that to my family. So, I never spoke to him again
even though he lived close enough that it would have been easy to have met up. Shane had already introduced me to Lori and she was everything I should have wanted so I buried that summer somewhere deep inside of me and convinced myself that it had never happened. I courted Lori in the old-fashioned way, was the perfect gentleman until our wedding night and when I fumbled my way through sex with her for the first time, trying not to cry the whole way through, I let her believe it was because I was a virgin and I was so nervous about making her happy.”

“But you loved her, right - Lori? I saw the way you were with her, the way you protected her.”

“Of course I loved her, she was my wife after all, the mother of my children. But I don’t think I was ever ‘in love’ with her and I think she knew that and she resented it. She always said I had a part of me she could never reach and she didn’t understand why. In the end I think that’s why she turned to Shane. I just couldn’t give her all of myself.”

“But she thought you were dead then, man, gone. I get that she needed somebody else to take care of her and Carl.”

“No, what they were started before any of this went down. Things were wrong for a very long time before that and we both tried so hard to make it right but it was just never going to be. Deep down I always wanted something else and she was frustrated that she couldn’t give it to me, that she wasn’t enough for me.”

“You knew, about Shane I mean? And you didn’t do anything about it?”

“Yeah, I knew, wouldn’t have been much of a cop if I didn’t. I couldn’t blame her, Daryl, couldn’t be mad at her for wanting something I was never going to give her and he was my best friend, my brother. In a weird way I would have rather it was him than some nameless guy she picked up at the grocery store. So, I turned a blind eye, let them do what they wanted and I found my pleasure where I could. There was a bar I used to go to, a few towns over from ours, when I needed to scratch the itch. I wonder now if they knew - Lori and Shane - I’d be surprised if they didn’t but they just chose to do what I was doing and let it go.

But when I was shot and I woke up to this… this hell… I knew the rules had changed. I could see she was with him the moment I found them, could read the guilt written over both their faces but I didn’t care. Carl was alive and she was too. She was the mother of my son and I knew I needed to do everything I could to keep her with me and keep her alive because I couldn’t stand the thought of him losing her, even if that meant I had to be the husband to her I’d never been before. What I wanted wasn’t important anymore, all that mattered was protecting my family.”

“Yeah, it’s just a shame your boy Shane thought the same way, stepped right into your shoes while you were hanging on life support and made himself at home with your family,” Daryl says, his opinion on that matter evident in his tone. “He sure as shit didn’t care about any arrangement once you came back. All bets were off and he was angling to be head honcho around there.”

“Maybe,” Rick agrees quietly, the familiar tug of guilt washing over him as his thoughts turn to Shane.

“It was always gonna be you or him,” Daryl tells him, as though he can read Rick’s mind. “Couldn’t have ended any other way, no matter how you tried to play it, man. You can’t take that on yourself.”

Rick nods, knowing that he’s going to carry the guilt of Shane’s death on his conscience for the rest of his life, no matter how justified he convinces himself that it was. Lori’s too, for that matter, if he’s being totally honest with himself.
“Hey,” Daryl says, nudging his fingers against Rick’s ribs and breaking the dark route his thoughts were starting to travel down, “you hungry?”

“Huh?”

“Hungry?” Daryl asks again, rolling his body up into a sitting position and stretching his arms out to either side.

“I guess,” Rick answers, sitting up behind him.

“C’mon then,” Daryl tells him, shooting him a grin back over his shoulder before dropping forward and Shifting as soon as his hands hit the floor.

Rick grins as Daryl shakes himself in his wolf form, his thick fur rippling out to the tip of his tail, before he pads over to the garage door and gives a low whine. Following him over, Rick lifts the door to let them both out and then lowers it again before he makes his own Shift, chasing after Daryl who is already disappearing into the surrounding trees. Rick lets the wolf take over, his paws flying silently over the soaked earth, its rich aroma rising in his nostrils as he shakes off his thoughts of the past and concentrates his attention on his present and his future.
Daryl and Rick hunt silently side by side, scaring up enough small game to make a decent meal for both of them, not that Daryl is really that hungry – he just made the suggestion as a distraction to
nudge Rick away from the dark mood he could sense falling over his friend. His friend, Daryl thinks with a soft snort, can he even call him that anymore? There had been a split second where he had wanted to die when Rick had stood up from the sofa and Daryl was convinced that a scathing rejection was coming, that he had somehow done something to fuck everything up before it even started. When Rick had pulled him to his feet and explained in no uncertain terms that they were equals in this, Daryl had felt his overwhelming self-loathing fade into almost nothing, placing all his heart and faith into Rick’s words. Now, he can feel Rick’s presence as surely as if his hands were still laid on Daryl’s burning skin, small tremors rippling the coarse fur along his spine as he inhales Rick’s scent on the cool night air.

With their appetites sated, they turn as one and head back to the house, Shifting outside to let themselves in, Daryl automatically scanning the area for any danger and finding nothing. With the door secure behind them, he has another moment of awkwardness as he wonders about their sleeping arrangements – not wanting to be more than a hands-breadth from Rick at any point but also not wanting to show just how much he needs that, still unsure of the rules in their new relationship. Rick solves his dilemma by sprawling out on the couch with his spine flush against the back and his arms open to welcome Daryl, who curls up in front of him, his back pressed to Rick’s chest. Rick spoons around him, their legs intertwining, his head resting on Rick’s right arm and his left coming tightly around Daryl’s middle. Although he’s sure he’ll never sleep, Daryl lets his eyes close, lulled by the repetitive huffs of Rick’s breath against his shoulder and the soft stroking of his thumb against Daryl’s abdomen.

Cracking an eye open in the grey morning light filtering through the filthy windows, Daryl has that moment of disorientation that comes with waking up in a strange place but he relaxes instantly as he feels the comforting weight of Rick at his back. He breathes deeply, his mind flashing on the events of the previous night and he feels the heat of remembered arousal creeping across his skin.

“Mornin’,” Rick says softly from behind him, squeezing him slightly with the hand still wrapped around his midriff.

“Mornin’,” Daryl yawns, stretching his stiff limbs just a little, not wanting to move out of Rick’s embrace until he absolutely has to.

They lay in silence for a moment, their breathing coming into line with each other and Daryl is excruciatingly aware of every part of Rick that his body is in contact with, his nerve endings sparking with every brush of skin against his. Slowly, Rick pulls his hand back from around Daryl’s middle and runs it lightly up over his back instead, Daryl sucking in a breath as Rick’s fingers gently start tracing the scars there. Apart from Carol, Rick is the only person who’s ever seen this part of Daryl, seen the story of his past etched into his skin, and Daryl is torn between wanting to bolt for the door and wanting to give a part of himself to Rick that he’s never been able to share with anyone else.

“Got that one for spillin’ the old man’s beer one night when he was on one of his benders,” he whispers, huffing out a shaky breath and feeling his skin tremble under Rick’s fingers.

Rick doesn’t pull back though, just slides his touch down to skim across the next line of raised skin.

“That was for leavin’ the lid offa the milk jug.”

He feels Rick’s caress move lower, working his way along one of the longer lines and Daryl squeezes his eyes tightly shut, trying but failing to block the memory that’s crowding its way into his mind.

“Some days I just didn’t move outta the way fast enough,” he tells Rick, his voice hitching a little
near the end.

With that, Rick’s turns Daryl in his arms to face him, sliding his hand up over Daryl’s chest to rest over his heart as he meets his eyes.

“That’s not you anymore, Daryl, do you hear me?” Rick says and Daryl can hear the emotion thick in his voice and see the wetness in his eyes. “It shaped you, that’s for sure, but it didn’t break you and it sure as hell isn’t who you are now.”

Daryl nods miserably, wanting Rick’s words to be true, for it to be as simple as that, but he knows that it’s not – what happened to him goes far deeper than he could ever explain to somebody on the outside of it all but he’s clinging to the tiny glimmer of hope that one day he’ll be able to finally put it to rest enough that it doesn’t cloud his every judgement the way it does now. He knows that being friends with Carol first had gone a long way to repairing some of the damage his family had done to him – she understood him on a level he didn’t think anybody else ever would, just like he could read her as easily in return. He wants to be able to have that with Rick too, has been working on opening up to him as he began to trust him more and more but he’s still worried that he may never be able to fully give himself in the way that he wants to.

“You couldn’t heal them?” Rick asks, the touch of his hand on Daryl’s chest seeming to travel all the way to his heart.

“Don’t work like that… I tried. Guess because they were already part of me before I changed.”

Rick nods and Daryl can see the empathy in his eyes, knowing that he doesn’t feel sorry for him but he wishes it could be different. Impulsively, he leans in to capture Rick’s mouth in a hard kiss, something that takes them both by surprise for a second and then Rick leans into it, his hand sliding up to wrap around Daryl’s jaw as he softens their pace and Daryl relaxes into the kiss.

“Damn,” he says with a small grin when they break a few minutes later, looking into Rick’s crystal clear eyes, “you taste like a dead polecat! I told ya not to eat that thing.”

“Fuck you,” Rick tells him, giving him a small shove back which sends Daryl crashing from the sofa onto the floor and the heavy mood in the room lightens with Rick’s soft chuckle.

“I guess we should get back to the prison,” Daryl says, climbing to his feet as Rick swings his legs over the edge of the sofa and sits up, stretching his arms to the ceiling.

“I guess,” Rick answers slowly, his eyes travelling the length of Daryl’s body and coming to rest pointedly at his groin where Daryl knows he's sporting a semi hard-on from having been in such close proximity to Rick’s naked body. “Or we could just take our time, maybe have a little… breakfast.”

Daryl feels his skin flush at Rick’s emphasis on the word, his cock twitching slightly as he thinks on what that might entail but, as much as he’d love nothing more than to hide away here with Rick all day long, the protector in him is aching to get back to the rest of their family and make sure everything is okay with them.

“Tempting, Sheriff, very tempting but we really should go. We covered a lot of ground yesterday and I’d like to get back before somebody goes and gets themselves into somethin’ they can’t handle without us.”

Rick gives an exaggerated sigh but gets up off of the sofa anyway and Daryl can read in his face that he’s just as eager to get back to their family as he is but he still takes time to pull Daryl to him for one
more bone-crushing kiss that leaves Daryl more than a little flustered when Rick releases him and starts pulling on his clothes. He’s never been one for the whole kissing thing – it somehow seemed too intimate to him, almost more so than actual sex in a weird sort of way – as though by not kissing the men he chose to sleep with, he could distance himself from it, make it like it meant nothing to him. Shaking his head as he buckles his threadbare pants over his slightly aching cock, he thinks that he might have kissed Rick more in one night than he had everyone else he’d ever kissed all added together and he found that he was more than comfortable with that fact. Slinging his crossbow over his shoulder, they set off for the prison, walking mostly in silence through the unfamiliar terrain, always on alert for danger either from walkers or other humans.

It’s almost noon by the time they make their way into more familiar surroundings and Daryl can see the urgency build in Rick as his thoughts obviously turn to his family ahead.

“We can run if ya want,” Daryl suggests, half serious but Rick shakes his head.

“No need, we’ll be there soon enough. I’m just anxious to see Carl and Judith is all.”

“I know. You hate leavin’ them, I get it. I do too. But I’m sure they’re fine.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“But you just have to see it, right?”

Rick nods, shooting Daryl a grin before turning his attention back to the trail ahead of them. Daryl follows at his heels along the narrow path, a sudden trepidation creeping over him as they get closer and closer to their destination.

“So what happens now?” he asks softly. “When we get back, I mean.”

“Happens with what?”

“Us,” Daryl answers, using the term for the first time to mean both of them as more than just friends and feeling a nervous sweat break out along his spine.

“Nothing happens, Daryl,” Rick says, stopping in his tracks to turn and look at him. “We live our lives as we’ve been doing and how we choose to spend our time together is our business and nobody else’s. If people know, then they know – I don’t care. If you want to tell, then tell but I’m not letting any one of them pass any kind of judgment on either one of us if they don’t like the fact that we’re together.”

“Together? Is that what we are?”

“I thought so. I thought I’d made it quite clear that I want to be with you but if that’s not what you want, Daryl, then tell me now and what just happened becomes nothing more than a memory.”

“No,” Daryl states emphatically, stepping into Rick’s personal space to grasp at the front of his shirt, needing to somehow anchor himself to him. “It is what I want. I just… there’s Carl and…”

“Carl will be fine,” Rick says, raising his hands to rest them on Daryl’s upper arms and give them a light squeeze. “Daryl, I’m not saying we walk in there hand in hand and make some grand announcement. I think that we still need to figure out how this is going to work first before we worry about how other people are going to react but if you want to keep it just between us, then that’s fine too. I’m just saying that, with a place as tight knit as ours, it won’t be long before people know. And when they do, nothing they can say or do is going to make me feel any differently about you, understood?”
Daryl nods, digesting Rick’s words and finding that while he agrees with him in theory, he’s still worried mostly about Carl’s reaction but he guesses they’ll cross that bridge when they come to it. For now, he’s just content for it to be only the two of them that know, wanting to work things out between them first before they make their relationship more complicated by letting other people know about it. He gives Rick a small smile, part of him liking the fact that there’s now another secret that binds them together that’s theirs alone and Rick grins back at him. Leaning forward, Rick presses his lips firmly against Daryl’s and they kiss slowly for a few minutes, Daryl’s fingers still clutched in Rick’s shirt.

“Although, you know,” Rick breathes out, resting his forehead against Daryl’s for a moment, “there’s gonna come a time when I’m going to want to do that to you so bad, I’m just not going to care who the hell is watching.”

Daryl closes his eyes, his fingers tightening just a fraction against Rick’s shirt before he tilts his head to lightly brush Rick’s lips with his one last time. The moment stretches, the firmness of Rick’s torso burning hot through his shirt as Daryl leans into him, their surroundings fading away until all he’s aware of is the two of them, their lips sliding gently against each other. Rick gives a barely perceptible hum in the back of his throat and Daryl pulls back just a fraction, opening his eyes to meet his gaze and all he really wants to do is lose himself in that look for as long as he can.

“C’mon,” he mutters reluctantly, pulling back from Rick’s hands and turning him on the path in front of him to continue walking.

Rick sets off in front of him again and Daryl falls into step behind him, the pair of them dropping back into silence until the prison finally comes into sight and Rick yells an enthusiastic greeting to Carl who is up in one of the guard towers. Once they’re safely inside the gates and Daryl is watching Rick as he reunites with Carl, he feels like he can let himself breathe a little. He's heading up to the cell block, giving everything the once over until he’s satisfied that it all looks normal, when he spots Carol hurrying down the steps ahead of him, baby Judith clutched carefully in her arms. He can read the relief in the lines of her body before she even gets close to him although there’s a scowl plastered on her face as she passes him by to hand off the baby into Rick’s willing embrace. Without a word to Daryl, she turns on her heel as soon as she’s free of her burden and heads off in the direction of the south fence, leaving Daryl to share a look with Rick. Sighing, Daryl hands off his pack and crossbow to Carl who’s all too eager to carry the over-sized weapon and then sets off in the same direction as Carol.

He finds her clearing a small knot of walkers that’s built up at the fence, meticulously dispatching one after the other with sharp thrusts from the crowbar she has clutched in her fists. Grabbing one of the tools that’s hanging on the fence, he lines up beside her, silently taking out walkers until the last one has fallen and they’re both standing there staring at the pile of corpses on the other side.

“I want to say that you don’t owe me an explanation, that it’s none of my business,” Carol says coolly, not looking at him but raising her hand to hook her fingers through the chain link fence as she stares out at the woods beyond, “but part of me just can’t accept that. I thought we were more than that, Daryl, that we’ve built some kind of trust here. You just left and I didn’t know why.”

Now she does look at him and Daryl feels himself shrinking under the accusation in her eyes, knowing that she has every right to be pissed at him, that he’d feel exactly the same if he was in her shoes. But, beyond that he sees that she was genuinely scared that he wasn’t coming back and he feels a surge of guilt for being the cause of that fear.

“Rick kissed me,” he blurts out before he can even think about what he’s saying and he sees her eyes go wide.
“And that’s what you were fighting about yesterday?”

“Yeah,” he tells her, thinking that it’s not exactly a lie but still not wanting to reveal Rick’s transformation without his knowledge. “I just had to go. I’m sorry.”

Carol turns away from the fence to look at him full on and he can see some of the anger dropping from her face as she meets his eyes, her mouth quirking up at the corner.

“Well?” she asks, resting one hand on her hip.

“Huh?”

“What happened, dumbass? With you and Rick. Come on, you know you owe me all the dirty details after that shit you pulled. Spill it, Pookie.”

Daryl snorts, busying himself with wiping the walker gore from his hands onto his jeans but, when he looks up again, she’s still staring at him and he sighs resignedly.

“Everythin’s fine,” he mumbles, hoping she’ll take that as an answer but knowing that she probably won’t.

“Daryl Dixon, I swear to God, I am going to pin you to this fence and let the damn walkers nibble on you if you don’t tell me what happened,” she tells him in an exasperated tone but he can see her eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Okay, okay,” he says, lifting his hands up in surrender and turning to face her. “If you really have to know… he followed me after I left and we talked.”

“And?”

“And… things are good with us now.”

“Good or gooood?” Carol asks, giving him a wink that has him blushing to the tips of his ears.

“I don’t know,” he shrugs, “we’re still figurin’ shit out but…”

“But what?”

“What if he’s makin’ a mistake? A guy like Rick deserves better than me, don’t matter whether the world’s in the crapper or not.”

“Do you love him?”

“You already know the answer to that,” he tells her, bowing his head a little to tip his hair across his face.

“Then I think he’s damn lucky to have you and I’m sure he knows that too, Daryl. You don’t give yourself enough credit, you never have, but I see it and I know Rick sees it too. You have to trust me on that. Just take things slow and try to keep that hot head of yours under control and everything will be fine, I swear.”

Daryl peers out at her from under his bangs, wanting so desperately to believe her words, bolstered by her unwavering faith in him and knowing that, even if Rick doesn’t love him back, he’s still going to do everything in his power to make sure he's protected along with his family.

“What about the other thing,” Carol asks quietly, shooting a quick look around to make sure they’re
really alone, “the wolf? Are you going to tell him?”

“He’ll know,” Daryl answers, twisting the truth just slightly once more.

“That’s going to be fine too,” she tells him, reaching out to lightly squeeze his forearm. “I have a good feeling about it. Rick’s far from stupid - once the shock wears off, he’ll have to see what an asset you are to the group, he couldn’t think anything else.”

“Yeah,” Daryl grunts, moving to strike at an additional walker that’s approached the fence while they’ve been talking and then changing the subject once it’s lying with the others. “Guess we should go clear this mess, huh?”

“Guess so,” agrees Carol and the pair of them set off to get the flatbed to haul away the bodies, their conversation put on hold as they take care of the gruesome task at hand.

“I don’t believe you,” Daryl says, following Rick into the woods late one afternoon.

“’s’true,” Rick assures him, looking back over his shoulder with an innocent smile plastered on his face.

“Bullshit,” Daryl snorts. “You’re tellin’ me that you ain’t never smoked a joint not once in your life? Not even in high school or at that camp in the woods you were tellin’ me about?”

“Nope, never. Not in high school, not in college, never. I guess I just didn’t hang out with the guys that did it.”

“Man,” replies Daryl, shaking his head, “you had the wrong friends. I can barely remember a time in school when I wasn’t wasted. ‘cept when the wolf came, then it was just pointless. Every time Merle would go get shit-faced, I’d go with him – wantin’ to try anythin’ to escape where I was, what I was, ya know – but we burn through drugs and alcohol like they’re not even there, less’n you keep up a steady input like my old man used to. If I kept sittin’ still, I could get a pretty good buzz goin’ but once I was up n’ movin’ it just vanished. Your kind was always hangin’ around, trying to pull me or Merle over for somethin’ but by the time they’d stop us, I’d be sober as a judge no matter how wasted Merle was in the passenger seat. Used to drive ‘em crazy!”

Rick laughs ahead of him and Daryl smiles at his back, taking his time to admire the lines of Rick’s body under the tight shirt that’s stretched across his shoulders, his eyes travelling down to where it’s tucked into his jeans, his thick belt cinched tight around his narrow waist. Much to Daryl’s delight and constant sexual frustration, Rick had reinstated his gun belt after an offhand comment Daryl had made in the heat of passion one night about how much it turned him on. It had been almost a month since their first night together in the woods and things had fell into a new, albeit sometimes awkward, routine with them as they found their feet as lovers as well as friends. Rick had been right when he had said nothing would change with them, they were still living their lives as before – building a home for their family during the day and protecting it at night as they patrolled together or alone as wolves. The only difference was the addition of their intimacy with each other, frenzied sex in the woods after the thrill of a hunt or stolen kisses in the dark halls of the prison – Rick often taking Daryl by surprise with his passion, pinning him against the cold concrete and devouring his mouth until Daryl was practically whimpering under his touch. Daryl found his trust in Rick growing exponentially, no matter that a tiny part of him was always screaming at him that it wasn’t going to last, that it couldn’t be true that Rick actually wanted him. He managed to squash the voice most of the time, which alternated with the tones of his brother and his father, even letting himself share things with Rick that he had never imagined he could.
Their bond has strengthened to a point where they barely needed to speak anymore to communicate, their bodies as readable to each other as the words on a page, whether they’re hunting, protecting or lost in the thralls of passion. So, when Rick stops dead in his tracks ahead of him, Daryl’s entire body is suddenly thrown into high alert as he reads the tenseness in Rick’s spine.

“You smell that?” Rick whispers, his voice barely above a murmur but Daryl has no trouble hearing him.

“Buncha uglies,” Daryl answers, scenting the air and catching the overwhelming stench of decay as the breeze changes and lifts in his direction. “Up ahead. We should probably go back, sounds like there’s a few of ‘em.”

He turns and starts walking quietly back the way they came, pausing after a few steps when he realizes that Rick isn’t behind him. He looks back to find him still standing in the same spot, head tilted to one side as he listens intently to the walkers that aren’t yet visible through the trees.

“What’s wrong?” Daryl asks, walking back to stand beside Rick.

“Nothing,” Rick sighs, turning away on the path. “I just was hoping to go that way today, is all.”

“Why?” says Daryl, his curiosity piqued a little as it occurs to him the Rick had been leading them in a specific direction ever since they left the prison instead of heading to their usual hunting grounds.

“No reason,” Rick answers but Daryl can see the slight smirk tugging at his lips. “We can go another day. It’s not important.”

Daryl watches him as he starts off down the path they came along, knowing that something is going on with Rick but not knowing what and that frustrates him at a cellular level.

“Well, maybe there’s not as many as we think,” Daryl says quietly, stepping forward onto the path between the trees, heading in the opposite direction to Rick. “S’only one way to find out.”

“Daryl, no!” he hears Rick yell frantically behind him and feels the thud of his boots on the earth but it’s too late.

Daryl clears the line of trees just as Rick catches up to him, his fingers skimming Daryl’s bare arm a fraction too late as he stumbles down an unexpected incline and finds himself in the center of a small clearing. The last of a large clutch of walkers are just making their way into the trees on the other side of the small open space when they all pivot as one and fix their eyes on Daryl.


Daryl hesitates for a split second, weighing his odds, and then rapidly draws his knife, knowing that his crossbow is useless at this point as anything more than a blunt object. As the first of the walkers swarm him, he takes a steadying breath and starts taking them down, one after the other, kicking and shoving at the ones coming at him while he’s finishing each one. In seconds, Rick is at his side, working his way into the knot from behind until both of them are surrounded. It’s bloody, brutal and exhausting even given his superhuman strength and, by the time they’ve killed every last one, Daryl can feel his body trembling from the adrenalin and the prolonged effort. His arms are stinging from a multitude of scratches but he couldn’t care less as he turns to check on Rick only to find him standing there with a look of utter disbelief on his face.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Rick asks, his tone low as he wipes his gore-stained knife on the leg of his pants and slips it back into its sheath. “I told you to run.”
“Weren’t time,” Daryl answers defensively, squaring his shoulders as he sees the furrow appear between Rick’s eyebrows that usually signals he’s pissed about something. “Anyway, we were fine.”

“It was reckless and stupid,” Rick says, a tiny hint of anger creeping into his tone that sets the hackles on Daryl’s neck rising in response. “There were too many of them, we should have just left.”

“Well, you were the one hell bent on goin’ this way,” Daryl yells, suddenly feeling stupid because he knows that Rick was right and he’d only gone forward because he’d wanted to please his man like some kind of stupid lapdog.

“And I said we should go back when we knew there was trouble. You’re the one who went off half-cocked like some kind of jackass,” Rick shouts back, pushing forward into Daryl’s personal space until Daryl can feel the heat radiating from his body.

“What does it matter? It’s done,” Daryl rumbles defiantly, raising his jaw as he meets Rick’s steely eyes.

“What does it matter?” Rick asks emphatically, a nerve twitching along his jawline as he stares at Daryl. “It matters because I can’t fucking love you if you’re dead and when you pull shit like that it makes me question how the hell long my sanity would ever last without you.”

Daryl looks at him, dumbfounded, his mouth opening and closing as he tries to find the right words to respond and can’t.

“Rick,” is all he can manage, the word coming out as a single breath and seeming to hang between them, heavy with the weight of his emotions.

“You don’t think,” Rick tells him, his voice softening and now Daryl can hear the fear behind his words. “It’s not just you anymore, Daryl. I love that you’re fearless and brave, of course I do, but I also love that fact that you’re breathing and I want you to stay like that for as long as possible.”

“I’m sorry,” Daryl whispers, feeling ridiculously like he might cry and wanting the ground to open at his feet.

“You’re a dumbass,” says Rick, reaching out a hand to clasp around the back of Daryl’s neck where he gives him a tiny shake. “A crazy, brave, pig-headed, impulsive, heroic dumbass. But you’re my dumbass and I love you.”

Daryl’s heart is beating in overdrive as Rick dips his head and gives him the briefest of kisses before squeezing his neck once more and then releasing him.

He loves him.

Rick loves him and Daryl heard the words with his own two ears - not his own wishful thinking, not Carol trying to convince him it’s true but straight from Rick’s own lips. And he’d meant it too, Daryl had felt it in every fiber of his being and not even the echo of Merle’s voice in his ear telling him it was a joke could convince him any differently. Rick loved him. That was all there was and for the first time, Daryl realizes that maybe their relationship isn’t just about a need that each of them fills for the other, a simple case of gratification just because the other is willing, but it is actually about them and how they feel about one another.

“Hey, space cadet,” Rick says, waving his hand in front of Daryl’s face and Daryl blinks, guessing he’d been lost in his thoughts for a moment. “I said, we may as well get going again now that you cleared the path, Superman.”
Daryl gives himself a mental shake, still a little lost inside himself but pulling it together enough to focus on his surroundings again as Rick leads them out of the clearing and back onto the path among the trees. Neither of them speaks as they walk, Daryl doesn’t trust himself to open his mouth, keeping his mind on his surroundings instead so there’s no repeat of what just happened.

A few minutes later, they emerge from the tree line onto the overgrown lawn of a nice-sized family home that looks vaguely familiar to Daryl.

“Why’re we here?” he asks as Rick leads him around to the back of the house. “Thought we cleared this place already?”

“We did,” Rick tells him, turning to walk backwards in front of him, giving him a sly smile, “but we missed something. Come on.”

Daryl follows as Rick unlatches the gate to the back yard and then secures it behind them before leading Daryl out onto the wide expanse of flagstones that make up the patio at the house’s rear. Although there are weeds growing through the cracks and the grilling equipment to one side has started to rust, Daryl can tell that the owners of this place must have had some serious money back when such things mattered. The sheer size of the yard with its once-manicured landscaping and the fact that not only is there a full-sized pool up ahead but also a pool house sitting snugly on the opposite side of it are a dead giveaway to the fact that this is a place Daryl would have never have set foot in. Although he seems to remember the house itself, he doesn’t recall them coming out back when they had been scavenging in the area before – there wouldn’t have been any real need to and he’s wondering why Rick has brought him here now.

“What am I missin’?” he asks in a puzzled tone as Rick stands facing him with a shit-eating grin on his face. “Unless you want to take a dip in the pool, I’m not sure why we’re here. And if that’s your plan then, man, you are on your own if you think I’m climbin’ into that swamp.”

“It’s not the pool, Daryl. Look around – what else do you see?”

Daryl casts his eyes around again, wondering what it is that’s got Rick so animated, but he can’t see anything out of the ordinary. And that’s when it dawns on him – he can’t see anything out of the ordinary because nothing is. The electric carriage lights hanging on either side of the pool house door are glowing brightly even in the afternoon sun and he realizes that he can hear the underlying hum of electricity on the air. Even though the pool is a mass of green algae and dead leaves, he can still hear the quiet bubbling of some type of pump or filter close by and, when he walks over to the pool house door and opens it, he’s met with a puff of air-conditioned coolness blowing out.

“What the..?” Daryl asks, glancing back at Rick’s smiling face. “How?”

“Look up,” Rick tells him and Daryl steps back out of the doorway to check out the roof. “Solar panels. The house has them too. They’re hooked up to a generator in both buildings but I guess something shorted out in the one in the house. I was out this way last night, got the scent of a wild pig and thought maybe I could try herding it back to camp close enough to kill it. I saw the lights through the fence, wouldn’t have if the angle hadn’t been just right, so I thought someone was here. Figured I’d take a look seein’ as I was the big bad wolf but it turned out there was nobody here. This place has probably been running on a timer since the owners left. The fence is pretty high and overgrown enough that nobody’s even noticed what was behind it – we certainly didn’t when we cleared the house. I took a quick look around inside and found that pretty much everything was still working. I thought maybe we could bring some of the guys out here, someone a little more tech savvy than us, and they could see if this is something we could make work at the prison, maybe even get the other panels down off of the house too.”
“So that’s why you dragged me out here today – to climb the roof?”

“No,” Rick chuckles, nudging Daryl with his elbow, “I’ve got something else in mind for you. Go inside.”

Daryl does as he’s asked, stepping into the blessedly cool interior and waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness inside, the windows shadowed by the foliage that’s growing over the outside and blocking most of the natural light. The low-ceilinged room is luxuriously furnished, a wide sofa dominating the living space which leads to a small kitchenette and a short hallway Daryl assumes carries on to a bedroom and bathroom. The entire place is easily twice the size of the last place he was living in with Merle before the apocalypse and, for a second, he feels that familiar twinge of being somewhere that’s out of his league, that he shouldn’t be in. The feeling disappears when Rick steps up behind him and turns him to lay a deep kiss on his mouth, his lips parting Daryl’s with an ease that has Daryl turning to jelly within seconds.

“Mmm…” Rick murmurs against his lips a few minutes later, gently ending their kiss much to Daryl’s disappointment. “Ready for your surprise?”

“Surprise?” Daryl asks in confusion but he follows without hesitation when Rick gently tugs on the front of his shirt and leads him across the room.
Chapter 12

Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, tmd-dump-station

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Rick leads Daryl down the short hallway and into the master suite at the end, the room bathed in a cool green light from the overgrown windows, and stops to let him take a look around. When Rick had been here the previous night the place was untouched, everything covered in a thin layer of dust but looking pretty much as pristine as it had the last day he guessed the maid had visited. As soon as he’d opened the bedroom door, thinking to check the medicine cabinet in the bathroom before he left, he’d taken one look at the queen-sized bed dressed in fancy white linen and only one thought
had been on his mind. It only took him a few minutes to find clean bedding in a nearby closet and redress the bed, stuffing the dusty sheets out of sight, all the while his mind focused on the thought of bringing Daryl here. Now he slips up behind him, wrapping an arm over his chest and leaning him back into him, nestling his chin over Daryl’s shoulder to whisper in his ear.

“Do you like it?” he asks, wondering for a second if this was a stupid gesture to make for a man who’d probably never cared about the luxuries of life because he could never have afforded them. “I just wanted to spend a night with you in a real bed. Someplace where we can be a normal couple for once and I don’t have to fuck you on your knees in the dirt, hidden out in the woods, or we don’t have to sneak away to the roof like horny teenagers.”

Daryl doesn’t answer for the longest time, standing silent in Rick’s embrace, and Rick can feel the steady beat of his heart under his hand and hear his soft measured breaths filling his lungs. When he finally turns to face him, Rick can immediately see the raw look of gratitude shining in Daryl’s eyes and he knows his idea was a good one.

“Nobody’s ever done nothin’ like this for me before,” Daryl tells him, his hands snaking out to lay against Rick’s hips. “It’s…it’s…”

Rick can see him straining to find the right words but he doesn’t need to, Rick can see how he feels written all over his face so he rescues him by kissing him softly on the lips.

“I know it’s early but how would you feel about coming to bed with me?” Rick asks quietly, running his lips along Daryl’s jawline.

“I-I don’t want to mess up your nice sheets,” Daryl stammers, his fingers clutching at Rick’s waist as Rick dips his head to suck hard at his throat.

Rick pulls his head back, holding Daryl at arm’s length and looking him up and down for a moment.

“Hmm, I guess you are kinda a mess,” he smiles, stepping back and placing his hands on his hips.

“Hey, you’re no rose garden yourself there, Officer Grimey,” Daryl retorts, poking at the streaks of walker blood soaked into the front of Rick’s shirt.

“Good job I have the perfect solution then,” Rick grins, grabbing Daryl’s arm and towing him into the en-suite bathroom.

The bathroom is every bit as luxurious as the rest of it, a huge walk-in shower dominating at least half of the room with a floor-to-ceiling window in place of one of its walls looking out over the overgrown beauty of the back yard.

“Tha fuck?” Daryl exclaims, looking from the window to Rick.

“It’s tinted glass,” Rick explains with a chuckle. “I checked it from the outside. Here, wait until you see this.”

He steps past Daryl, opening the door to the shower and turning on the water which sprays from at least six different showerheads all strategically placed to offer maximum effect. Stepping back out, he sees Daryl’s eyes widen as the first curls of steam start to fog up the glass.

“Is that..?”

“Hot water? Yep,” Rick grins. “It’s all tied to the generator. Can you imagine if we had this back at the prison?”
Daryl shakes his head mutely, watching the water spray against the inside of the glass until Rick steps closer to him, breaking his concentration.

“Better not let it go to waste,” he says, reaching out to slip his hands inside Daryl’s leather vest and push it back off of his shoulders.

Daryl shrugs it the rest of the way off, letting it drop to the smoothly tiled floor behind him and Rick eagerly sets to work undoing the buttons on his sleeveless shirt.

“I was thinking about the showers back at the research place,” Rick says, tugging off Daryl’s shirt and tossing it after his jacket before he gets to work on Daryl’s jeans. “It’s a shame we weren’t together back then… all those nights we had alone there… it would’ve been nice to have taken advantage of them.”

“Uh-huh,” Daryl agrees, his hands reaching for the front of Rick’s shirt now that Rick has him mostly naked.

Rick can feel himself getting hard as soon as Daryl’s fingers start to work at his buttons and his belt, his body tensing in anticipation of what’s to come. With a sudden sense of urgency, they step apart to remove their boots and free themselves of the pants now pooled at their ankles before Rick grabs the shower door open again and hustles Daryl inside. He gasps as the first spray of hot water hits his skin from the dual showerheads, closing his eyes as he immerses himself under the soothing stream. A piping hot shower after a long day at work had always been one of his biggest pleasures and one of the things he misses most about their new existence – a chance to just wash away whatever had happened during his day and find himself again. The makeshift, hand-pumped showers at the prison that T-Dog had managed to cobble together performed their function but they were nothing compared to the heaven he was standing in right now. Turning himself under the massaging pulse of the water, he cracks an eye open to find Daryl staring at him with an amused look on his face, water from the other showerhead bouncing wildly off the broad expanse of his shoulders.

“What?” Rick asks, opening his other eye to focus on the beads of water that are trickling down over Daryl’s chest.

“You’ve been moaning for about two straight minutes. I was gonna ask if you wanted me to leave you and your new toy alone together.”

Rick feels his face flush with embarrassment, grateful for the heat of the water to cover it up but he knows Daryl can probably see it anyway.

“Turn around,” he says gruffly, grabbing at Daryl’s shoulder to steer him in the other direction.

Reaching for the shampoo from the nearby shelf, Rick pours an overly generous handful and then tugs Daryl’s head back under the spray with his free hand so that he can apply it to his hair. Daryl doesn’t flinch, just stands stock still letting Rick work the rich, sweet-smelling lather through his hair, combing his fingers through the tangled mess to work out all the knots. Rick repeats the process a second time, methodically massaging Daryl’s scalp until the water pouring from his dark hair is no longer the color of mud and Rick’s fingers can glide smoothly through to the ends.

“Now who’s moaning?” Rick whispers against the side of Daryl’s neck before planting a light kiss on his shoulder.

“Fuck you,” Daryl rumbles good-naturedly, shooting an elbow to Rick’s ribs as he turns back to face him. “Your turn, asshole.”
Rick grins, facing away from Daryl and tipping his head back to let the water soak into his filthy hair, delighted that Daryl is indulging him in this time together. He sighs contentedly as Daryl’s fingers work their way into his hair, rubbing the frothy shampoo against his scalp and working it through to the ends.

Once Daryl has squeezed the last of the shampoo from Rick’s squeaky-clean hair, Rick turns around, smiling as he meets Daryl’s gaze and, as one, they both reach for the bottle of bodywash on the shelf. Laughing, Daryl bats Rick’s hand away and grabs the bottle to pour himself an overflowing handful. Rick snatches the bottle from him and does the same thing before tossing it back on the shelf. He splits the slippery liquid between his palms and quickly raises his hands to smear it over Daryl’s shoulders and chest just as Daryl does the same to him. Their hands glide over each other’s bodies, stroking small circles wherever they can reach, liberally adding more and more soap until the bottom of the shower is inches deep in bubbles and it reminds Rick of the time he had accidentally put hand soap into the dishwasher and had come home to find it had erupted white, foamy lava all over the kitchen floor. Scrubbing his hands across Daryl’s back and down to his waist, Rick’s not sure if he’s ever felt this clean in his life and, though it may be a silly indulgence that they probably don’t have time for, he thinks it’s worth it for the feeling of lightness it’s given him, both mentally and physically.

Pouring out another palmful of bodywash, Rick moves back around in front of Daryl, maintaining eye contact with him the whole time as he slips his hand down over Daryl’s abdomen and wraps it loosely around his stiff cock to give him a slow stroke up and down. As he slides his hand lower to cup Daryl’s balls with his soap-covered fingers, Daryl returns the favor and Rick groans as his cock is enveloped in Daryl’s slippery palm. Pressing in tighter to Daryl’s chest, Rick leans forward to kiss him, his tongue eagerly tasting Daryl’s while he moves his free hand around Daryl’s back to rest on his ass. Daryl deepens their kiss, his tongue fighting for dominance over Rick’s, his hand making unfocused motions against Rick’s cock as Rick slips his fingers between his cheeks and teases at Daryl’s entrance with one soapy finger. He works at him gently, pushing in just a little and then withdrawing, going a little deeper each time before he adds a second and then third finger, feeling Daryl relax and loosen up around him, their kiss becoming a frenzied clash of teeth and tongues.

It’s Daryl that breaks them apart, a wild look in his eyes as he stares at Rick for a second and then proceeds to turn away from him, his wet skin rubbing deliciously against Rick’s until he’s facing the tiled wall under the showerhead and his ass is nestled snugly against Rick’s crotch. There’s no doubt as to what he’s offering and Rick’s cock twitches at the thought but still Rick hesitates, needing to be absolutely certain before he proceeds. Although it’s certainly not the first time Daryl has been on the receiving end, Rick still has that deep-rooted need to make sure that he never feels trapped or pressured by anything that they do and so, whether by choice or subconsciously, Rick always looks to him for confirmation even when the thought of being buried balls deep inside Daryl has him practically salivating.

“You sure?” he whispers, pressing his lips against the dripping skin of Daryl’s shoulder.

“Just fuckin’ do it already,” Daryl growls, nudging himself back against Rick’s cock in an undeniable invitation. “Don’t think I didn’t see the bottle ya hid at the back there.”

Rick grins against Daryl’s skin, knowing there’s nothing that slips by him, and he reaches over to push aside the various toiletries to wrap his fingers around the tiny bottle of lube he’d left there the night before.

“Always gotta plan ahead,” he tells Daryl cockily, slapping a hand on the shower’s controls and cutting off the water that’s deluging over them.
"Goddamn Boyscout Grimes," Daryl smirks, throwing Rick an amused look over his shoulder as Rick pops the cap on the lube.

He squirts some onto his palm, the gooey liquid warmed by the heat of the shower and thinks to himself that they really need to make another drugstore run pretty soon before they have to resort back to using good old-fashioned spit. Sliding his hand onto his straining cock to coat it, he moans softly under his breath in anticipation, taking his hand when he's done and pushing his lubed fingers back into Daryl who firmly plants his feet and arches his back towards Rick.

"Quit fuckin’ teasin’," he grumbles as Rick fucks him slowly with his fingers for a minute.

Rick doesn’t need telling twice, he's already feeling like he might explode and he's so desperate to slip inside Daryl that his cock is already dripping with pre-cum. Smearing it along his length to mix with the lube, he takes himself in hand to position himself, the tip of his cock just pushing against Daryl’s entrance. Daryl emits a soft whine in the back of his throat that amp’s up Rick’s arousal tenfold and, in one fluid move, he grabs at Daryl’s ass, parting his cheeks, and thrusts himself forward. The noise coming from Daryl’s throat ratchets up into a purring growl as Rick buries himself in his ass, curling his hips forward to go as deep as he can then holding steady for a moment as they both adjust their positions. The sensation of having Daryl clamped around him combined with the wet heat from the shower has his freshly cleaned body pouring rivers of sweat that makes Rick suddenly dizzy and he lowers his forehead to rest on Daryl’s shoulder.

"Easy there, big guy," Daryl soothes and Rick can feel his voice reverberating through his skin.

With a shake of his head to clear his focus, Rick pulls back, his fingers painfully tight in Daryl’s flesh as he withdraws and then pushes back in, starting up a comfortable rhythm that soon has him panting loudly in the steam-filled enclosure. Daryl is pushing back to meet his every thrust and Rick can see his fingers curling onto the slick tiles in front of him, finding nothing to grasp onto. Letting go of Daryl’s ass with one hand, Rick reaches around to grasp at Daryl’s cock and starts stroking it in tandem with his thrusts inside him, rubbing his thumb up and over Daryl’s oozing slit until the purr in his throat deepens into an all-out growl. The sound has Rick’s hips bucking faster, stirring the beast inside him and he’s not surprised to see that Daryl’s fingers are curling into claws against the white tiles – the wolf in each of them had gradually appeared during their love-making, mostly when they were lost in a bout of raw, frenzied fucking that called to the animal in them. Rick had to admit that it had disturbed him a little at first but now it was something that just added another dimension to the experience and he willingly let the beast loose just a fraction when the mood was right. Now, with his cock sliding over and over into Daryl’s ass and his hand wrapped around the thickness of his lover’s shaft, Rick encourages the wolf to come forth, feeling his face change as his mouth opens to accommodate his elongated teeth.

Daryl is writhing under him, a litany of curses falling from his lips that even Rick’s never heard before and he’s breaking Rick’s rhythm, moving just enough to disrupt the perfect friction Rick had established. With a warning growl, Rick lowers his head to the side of Daryl’s neck, his nostrils flaring at the scent of Daryl’s sweat and sex combined, already overpowering the fresh scent of the bodywash they had so liberally used. He lets his lips graze Daryl’s skin, nibbling his way along the curve of his shoulder as he squeezes his fist tighter around Daryl’s cock and slams back into his ass at the same time. Daryl snarls, the ridges of his spine suddenly pushing starkly out through his flesh and Rick loses it, baring his teeth in a snarl of his own and sinking them deep into the flesh of Daryl’s shoulder. The snarl on Daryl’s lips turns to a keening whine as Rick’s teeth penetrate his skin and Daryl’s salty blood fills his mouth and overflows to run in tiny rivers down his back and chest. Daryl’s pushing harder against the tiles, his clawed fingers scrabbling for purchase as Rick pins him in position, the alpha in him feasting on the feeling of dominance that’s coursing through him as he fucks him hard and fast.
“Rick…” Daryl utters, his voice low and dangerous, sending a quiver along Rick’s spine that he feels down to his toes. “Harder.”

Rick growsls around the mouthful of Daryl's flesh that he still has held between his jaws and pushes even further into Daryl’s tight hole, his fingers rapidly jerking him off, desperate for Daryl to come undone around him. It takes less than a minute before Rick hears the familiar groans start to fall from Daryl’s lips and his body spasms under Rick’s touch as he shoots his load high against the tiles in front of them, Rick stroking him until he’s done. Sliding his hand away from his cock to clutch around Daryl’s waist, Rick releases his bite on Daryl’s shoulder, feeling his blood slicking his chin and throws his head back in a primitive howl as he comes hard, trying to stay buried inside Daryl but slipping out at the last minute to cover his back with his cum.

Hanging onto Daryl, feeling both of them shake from the adrenalin and their release, Rick buries his face in the back of Daryl’s wet hair, breathing him in and uttering soothing nonsense words as he strokes at Daryl’s skin.

“Aw, man, I’m sorry,” he whispers as he pulls his head back and catches sight of the blood coating Daryl’s shoulder.

“For what?”

“This,” Rick replies, laying the lightest of kisses over the spot, noticing that the wounds have already closed.

“Pfft, s’nothin’,” Daryl scoffs, turning in Rick’s arms and pushing him gently until his back is pressed against the cooler glass of the window overlooking the garden where Daryl proceeds to lay a kiss on him that Rick thinks might just have him coming again before too long.

“Huh,” chuckles Daryl, parting his lips from Rick’s to look him up and down.

“What?”

“Must be a real purty sight from outside,” Daryl snorts, bumping his hips against Rick’s, making his butt cheeks squish out against the glass.

Rick laughs, pushing Daryl away and leaning over to turn the shower back on before grabbing for the bodywash once more.

“Let’s try this again, should we?”

The bed had proven to be even better than Rick had imagined, the two of them sprawled together in its welcoming comfort, able to move for once without the clash of heads or the sharp pain of an unexpected elbow to the ribs. Although, as darkness had fallen and after they had taken a short run together to eat, Daryl had automatically curled into Rick’s side once they had turned in for the night, taking that possessive position across him that Rick loved more than anything. It wasn’t often that they got to share a sleeping space and he treasured every moment of it, from feeling the heavy weight of Daryl’s head against his shoulder to falling asleep listening to the rhythmic sound of his breathing.

He’s lost in a dream once more, his body responding to the stimulation it’s being given by the warm hand he can feel wrapped around the base of his cock as his mind conjures up the image of Daryl’s face grinning up at him just before he slides Rick’s length between his spit-slicked lips. Rick moans deeply, the sound bouncing off the walls of the bedroom and his eyes blink open into the dim light or early dawn only to find that he’s not actually dreaming this time and Daryl actually does have him
firmly in hand. Rick’s brain stutters a little as he takes in the sight of Daryl’s mouth wrapped wetly around his cock, his lips practically touching the fingers he has circled at Rick’s base and his blue eyes glowing softly as he looks up at Rick.

“Daryl,” Rick murmurs as Daryl slides his mouth back up to the tip of Rick's cock and pulls off with an obscenely wet noise.

“Mornin’,” he answers briefly before dipping his head again to just suck the tip between his lips, swirling his tongue against the sweet spot that has Rick grasping at the sheets as his back arches up involuntarily.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” exhales Rick, watching as Daryl ducks his head again to encompass his whole length, the sight of his hollowed out cheeks making Rick moan even louder.

Daryl takes his time, sliding up and down along Rick’s shaft a few times before releasing him to wrap his tongue around the tip once more and suck at his slit. Rick is helpless to do anything but watch and enjoy - Daryl owns him completely in this moment and they both know it – he can’t even lift his hands to rest against Daryl’s head as much as he wants to. There may be certain social graces that Daryl Dixon is lacking in but he has a mouth that makes Rick want to weep every time he's blessed enough to have his cock pleasured by it and this time is no different. Rick can barely keep up with all the different angles and pressures Daryl is applying to his now throbbing cock, the licks and sucks and barest hints of teeth scraping along his length that have him shuddering and breaking out into a cold sweat. Daryl pays attention to every part of him, pushing Rick’s legs up and out so that he can take a hand and gently caress his balls before sucking them softly into his mouth and stroking them with his tongue before releasing them to turn his attention back to Rick’s cock. Rick knows he’s close to coming and he knows that Daryl can read his body as easily as he can because he pulls off Rick’s cock for a moment to slide his forefinger into his mouth and coat it in spit before dropping it down to press into the puckered tightness of Rick's asshole.

“Fuuuck,” Rick yells, feeling his blood pounding through his veins at the welcome violation.

Daryl just smirks briefly at him before wrapping his lips around Rick’s shaft again and sliding him into the back of his throat, all the time working that single digit in Rick's ass. Rick can feel his thighs trembling as he pushes his hips up of the bed into Daryl’s willing mouth and his vision blurs as Daryl growls deeply around his cock and Rick comes, jerking between Daryl’s lips over and over as Daryl sucks and swallows every last drop from him. Trying desperately to catch his breath, Rick can’t even form a single word as he watches Daryl pull off of his sticky cock and lick his lips before he climbs up Rick’s body to press his lips hard against his in a deep kiss, making sure Rick gets to thoroughly taste himself on Daryl’s tongue.

“Every mornin’,” Rick croaks when Daryl finally sits back up, kneeling between his thighs like some kind of fallen angel come to wreak havoc on earth with his wickedly talented mouth. “I want you to wake me up like that every mornin’.”

“Ha! You wish,” Daryl crows, slapping Rick’s thigh with a resounding crack that just makes him moan again. “C’mon, time we hit the road, Sheriff.”

Rick groans, this time in a different sort of frustration as Daryl climbs from the bed and disappears into the bathroom where Rick can hear him taking a piss before he flushes the working toilet with a triumphant laugh. When he hears the sound of the shower splashing to life, Rick grumbles resignedly but pushes himself up and pads into the bathroom where Daryl is already immersed under the water pouring from the double heads and giving him a look as if to ask what took him so long.

They manage to actually take a shower without any additional distractions although there is probably
far more bumping of bodies together than is strictly accidental while they dry themselves off and get dressed. Rick sighs as he pulls on his filthy clothes over his clean skin but comforts himself with the fact that, if they can get these solar panels dismantled and somehow rigged up back at the prison, there might be a lot more hot showers in his and Daryl’s future.

“Hey,” he says, just as they’re about to walk out the door, wrapping a hand around the back of Daryl’s neck to pull him to him for a quick kiss. “I love you.”

He barely whispers it, bringing his lips close to Daryl’s ear, holding him there for a second and then releasing him before turning away to open the door into the bright sunshine of a Georgia morning. He doesn’t need Daryl to say it back, certainly doesn’t expect it for a second and he’s not hurt when it doesn’t happen but he needed to say it, wanted it to be out there and known and for there to be no ambiguity about how he felt for the man securing the door behind them and trailing him across the yard.

The journey back to the prison should have been a walk in the park in theory but it seemed like the universe had a different plan in mind for them, maybe as punishment for the fact that they’d gotten to enjoy life for a little while, Rick muses as he takes down yet another walker. He can feel Daryl at his back as always, the pair of them making quick work of the small group of the undead they’d come across blocking their path. This was their fourth such encounter in the matter of an hour, small knots of walkers that they thought would be easier to take down rather than circumvent and take them out of their way too far. As the last walker hits the floor with an enthusiastic grunt from Daryl, Rick looks down at his sweat-stained shirt, now sporting a fresh coat of gore and tries desperately to remember what being clean had felt like even though it had only been that morning.

“You got a little…” Daryl says, reaching up to wipe something Rick can’t even identify off of his cheek and then grinning at him, the sheen of sweat coating his arms making him undeniably more attractive while Rick feels about as sexy as one of the corpses lying at his feet.

“Thanks,” he mutters, a little more tersely than he intended to – after all it’s not Daryl’s fault that they’ve encountered walkers at every turn on the way home.

“No problem, Officer Grump,” Daryl smirks, raising one hand to shield his eyes from the sun as he looks at Rick.

“Bite me!” Rick tosses back, sliding his knife back into its sheath.

“Already did,” Daryl grins, his smile lighting up his face and Rick can’t help but smile back at him despite the sour mood that has suddenly crept over him.

Daryl nudges him with his elbow before slinging his crossbow over his shoulder and leading the way back into the trees, setting a brisker pace now that the prison is just minutes away.

They exit the woods on the river side of the fence and Rick can immediately sense that something is wrong even before he sees the car that’s parked between the two sets of gates at the main entrance.

“Daryl,” he warns, walking even faster across the small wooden bridge and along the side of the fence but he knows that Daryl has already seen what’s going on and is unhooking his crossbow as they move.

They forfeit going through the hole in the fence, wordlessly choosing not to draw attention to it in favor of approaching the gate from the outside, Rick noting that there are two strangers standing by
the unknown car and Michonne and Glenn are beside them. The group turns to them as they approach, Glenn moving to open the gate while Michonne keeps a steady watch on the newcomers.

“What’s going on?” Rick asks, clapping Glenn on the shoulder as he passes, noting the tense lines around his friend’s jaw.

“These fellas just got here,” Michonne tells them, indicating the two men standing by the car. “Said they saw the prison on a map and thought it might be a good place to look for shelter.”

Rick looks from her, standing rigid with her hand hovering over the trigger of the rifle she’s carrying, to the two men who are now focused solely on him. They look like any other survivors out there, worn around the edges, dirty and tired but there’s something about them, an underlying hardness that he can see just simmering beneath the surface that has him and his people obviously on edge. He sees Daryl move from the corner of his eye, taking up a more defensive position between the men and the inner gate to the prison and he can smell the change in Daryl’s body chemistry as he passes behind him, knows that he’s expecting a fight.

“Hi, I’m Sam,” says the older of the two guys, stepping forward with his hand outstretched, a smile on his face that in no way reaches his eyes which are coldly appraising Rick. “This here is Michael.”

Rick ignores the gesture in favor of resting his hand on the butt of his Colt so that there’s no question of this being a social event and Sam drops his arm back to his side.

“It’s a pretty nice setup you have here, secure,” Sam continues in the face of Rick’s silence. “We’ve been on the road since this whole thing went down, stayed in a school for a while but a big group of freaks came through one night and we lost most of our people. We’ve been looking for someplace new ever since.”

“And it’s just the two of you?”

“Yes, just us,” Sam answers but Rick sees the fleeting glance he shoots at his partner and reads the lie in his words.

Rick hears the deep exhale of breath from Daryl behind him as clearly as if Daryl had said the word ‘liar’ and, without looking up, Rick knows that Carol is secreted in the dark shadows at the side of the watchtower, no doubt with her rifle aimed at Sam’s head.

“Well, here’s the thing,” Rick says in a tone that brooks no argument, “as much as we’d like to help you folks out, we’re not taking people in right now.”

“Why not?” Michael interjects, stepping forward which causes Michonne to slip her finger a little closer to the trigger. “Seems like you got plenty of space. Don’t tell me all those cells are full.”

“No, they’re not,” Rick agrees, tilting his head to look at Michael, “but what we have now is a manageable group.”

“But you have a fucking farm in here, what difference would two extra mouths make? We’ll pull our weight.”

“It makes more difference than you think. We grow just enough to sustain the people we already have. If we take in every stranger that walks up to our gates, we’d all be dead within months. But we’ll gladly share a few supplies with you fellas, see you on your way.”

“This is bullshit,” Michael yells and Rick feels Daryl step up beside him but he reaches out a hand to lay against his abdomen, stopping his forward movement.
“Hush,” Sam admonishes Michael, shooting him a harsh look. “If that’s the way it is then we have to respect that, no hard feelings. I understand that you gotta protect what you got, I’d do the same. We’d be grateful for anything you could give us.”

Rick nods and then turns to signal Glenn who briefly disappears into the base of the guard tower and then comes back out with a box of basic supplies. While the group has been actively hunting for people that they can bring into the fold and they’ve readily accepted wanderers that have turned up at the gate, they’ve also had to deal with turning away more people than Rick can remember when they’ve thought they wouldn’t work out. Having a ready-packed box of supplies on hand often went a long way to softening the blow of rejection and, so far, they haven’t had any issue with persuading people to leave. Glenn hands the box to Sam who stows it away on the back seat of the car with a nod of thanks.

“Thanks, we appreciate it,” Sam says, once more offering his hand to Rick who takes it this time and shakes it briefly, feeling the insincerity behind it.

“You’re welcome,” he replies as the two men climb back into their car and Glenn opens the gate so that they can reverse back out and turn around.

The group stands together, watching until the car’s taillights disappear around the bend in the road and then heaves a sigh of collective relief. Rick can feel the tenseness radiating off of Daryl where he’s beside him at the fence, his eyes narrowed as he scans the treeline.

“They’ve gone,” Rick tells him, turning as Carol reappears on the tower and gives him a jaunty salute. “I think they took the hint.”

“Yeah,” Daryl mutters, “you never can tell though. Those guys were as shifty as they come. No way they’re alone out there. And they left way too easy.”

“I know, I know. So, we’ll double the guard for the next few nights, just to be safe. Now, come on, we have plans to make to get some more power in this place, maybe get Glenn that hot shower he so desperately needs.”

“Huh?” says Glenn, coming in on the tail end of the conversation. “Who has hot showers?”

“Well, maybe us if you play your cards right,” Rick smiles, resting a hand on the back of Glenn’s neck to steer him up to the prison.

Just before they go inside, he realizes Daryl isn’t with them and he turns back to find him still standing at the gate, his body locked into high alert mode, staring out into the trees.

A/N

This was the inspiration behind the shower scene, a piece by the deliciously naughty lecherous-portmanteau. Please like and reblog the original here and add this amazingly-talented smut diva to your follow list. You won’t regret it. Also available on AO3 here.
Daryl maintains his vigil all through the afternoon, climbing up into the watchtower to relieve Carol and staying there until the summer sun is slipping slowly beyond the horizon. He only relinquishes his position when Maggie comes up to take over from him, shooing him out of the tower and telling him that Tyreese and Glenn are right behind her to start walking the perimeter. He heads inside, still harboring an uncomfortable feeling that this afternoon wasn’t going to be the only encounter they had with Michael and Sam. The pair of them had triggered every warning sense in Daryl’s body –
the wolf in him taking an instinctive dislike to them based on nothing more than their scent. It was hard to explain, he wasn’t even sure that Rick understood it completely yet, but some people just smelled ‘wrong’. There was no other word for it and Daryl’s instinct had never failed him yet which is the reason he always made sure he was around when new recruits arrived and why he took it upon himself to take part in most of the scouting missions.

Entering the cool interior of the cell block, he quickly makes his way to find Rick who is perched on the bottom of the staircase trying to feed a wriggling Judith.

“She’s in a mood,” Rick informs him as Daryl sits down next to him. “Aren’t you, Princess?”

Judith responds by batting away the spoonful of mashed potato that Rick is unsuccessfully trying to get her to eat and stretching out her chubby arms to Daryl instead. Rick sighs in mock exasperation and Judith squeals in delight as Daryl plucks her from her father’s grasp and swings her high in the air before settling her on his lap.

“There’s my Li’l Asskicker,” he croons softly as she reaches out to tangle her fingers in his hair. “How about we make your old man happy and eat his crappy mashed potatoes, huh?”

Keeping her firmly in place with one hand, Daryl holds out his other towards Rick who hands him the spoon fully-loaded with a new helping of potatoes. As soon as Judith catches sight of it, she lets go of the death grip she has on his hair and makes grabby hands motions in the direction of the spoon instead, eagerly opening her mouth as Daryl feeds it to her.

“Every damn time,” Rick grumbles softly beside him, holding out the bowl for Daryl to scoop another spoonful, but Daryl can hear the softness in his tone and knows that he’s happy. “So… everything was cool outside?”

“Yeah,” Daryl tells him, wiping potatoes from Judith’s chin with his thumb and sucking it into his mouth. “I’m thinking we should still go out for a look though.”

“We just got back,” Rick answers hesitantly, staring longingly at his daughter, “but I guess you’re right.”

“Well, there ain’t any real need for both of us to turn out again, I suppose. I could just take a quick run, make sure they really left.”

“I don’t know, Daryl, maybe it’d be better if we both went.”

“I’ve got this, seriously it’s no big deal. You stay here and put this li’l lady to bed and I’ll take a quick run – be back before ya can even miss me,” he says, nudging Rick’s shoulder, knowing that the thought of taking care of Judith’s bedtime routine is enough to sway him.

“Alright,” Rick says, smiling at Judith, “but be careful. Recon only. Any sign that those guys are still hanging around out there, you come straight back and we’ll deal with it together. You hear me, Dixon? I don’t need you to be the damn hero, okay?”

Daryl nods, touched by the concern that he hears in Rick’s voice, knowing now that it’s more than just a good leader looking out for his people – he wants Daryl to come back safe because he needs him, not just the group. Leaving a small kiss on Judith’s upturned face, Daryl hands her back to her father, his fingers lingering on Rick’s skin for a fraction longer than necessary and then he scoops up his crossbow and heads out.

Slipping out of the building into the warm night air, Daryl heads down to the fence, passing Sasha along the way with a brief greeting. Everyone within the prison’s walls has become accustomed to
his late night excursions, accepting it as just another quirk of his character without question, especially when he returns laden with a batch of fresh kills slung over his shoulder. He exits through the hole in the fence, as always keeping an eye out for any walkers straying too close to his location as he ties it securely closed behind him. He heads away from the main entrance, passing quietly over the wooden bridge and immersing himself in the welcoming dark of the woods. He inhales the rich scent of the trees and the earth, feeling his wolf stir in anticipation of being let loose and he wishes Rick was beside him to enjoy the night. Ten minutes away from the prison’s boundaries, he arrives at a small knot of trees where he and Rick usually stash their gear before Shifting, the trunks having grown close enough together to form a natural locker of sorts.

He quickly strips and, as the first caress of night air blows across his skin, he has a brief flash of memory of his time with Rick in the pool house the night before and he feels a coil of heat stirring in his belly. Shivering a little at the sensation his memories are bringing, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, he secures his crossbow carefully in between the trees along with his clothes and then stretches his body in preparation to Shift. Wondering absent-mindedly if he might be able to persuade Rick to take a trip up to the roof when he gets back, he steps away from the trees and, in that second, he realizes that he’s not alone – all his senses screaming at him at once. A sudden flare of light brightens the darkness to his left accompanied by a soft ‘whoomph’ of displaced air that Daryl knows all too well. He tries to move but he knows it’s futile and, in a fraction of a second, his world explodes into a ball of white-hot pain as a bullet rips into his upper thigh. He drops from the impact, his mind screaming, landing awkwardly and desperately trying to initiate his Shift despite the searing pain that’s clouding his control of his body. His transformation hasn’t even begun when he’s struck hard from behind at the base of his skull and he pitches forward onto the forest floor.

“Well, what do we have here?” comes a voice to his left and he’s not surprised to find that it’s Michael’s.

Daryl struggles to rise, his ears ringing from the blow he took to his head, but a booted foot is jammed heavily into the base of his spine, pinning him brutally to the earth.

“Looks like some kinda pervert to me,” answers Sam’s derisive voice above him. “Is that what you are, boy, one o’ them perverts? Out here in the woods, gettin’ buck naked so you can… what? Jack off while a bunch of freaks watch you?”

“Or, maybe, he likes to find a nice ripe one and do her till she pops,” Michael suggests, coming into Daryl’s line of sight with a shit-eating grin on his face.

The pair of them dissolve into fits of raucous laughter but Daryl ignores them, concentrating on centering himself, pushing away the fire that’s consuming his leg so that he can properly assess the situation. He curses himself for letting them get the jump on him, knowing that he was distracted and it was his own damn fault that he’s in this mess. He knows that he could handle them easily if he wasn’t wounded and down but his current state combined with the way they’re cautiously watching him despite their seemingly laid-back attitude tells him that the odds are against him. Still, he knows he has to try and what he does have is the element of surprise up his proverbial sleeve, he thinks, as he arches his spine up a little under Sam’s boot. He’s pretty confident that, even with the wound in his thigh, he can Shift enough to get the upper hand and take them both out before they’d even know what was going on. The fact that they’re still lurking around the prison just reinforces the bad vibes he was getting from them earlier in the day and, though he doesn’t know what they’re planning, he does know that he wants to cut it dead before it has any chance to affect his family.

Drawing in a deep breath, he initiates his Shift, his muscles expanding rapidly as his bones realign and he surges upward, knocking Sam away from him and catching sight of the look of horrified amazement on Michael’s face as he backpedals away, trying to un-shoulder his rifle. Daryl slaps it
out of his hands with a vicious snarl, towering over him in his half-human, half-wolf state, and he smells the sharp acrid stench of urine as Michael’s bladder lets loose. Disgusted, Daryl backhands him, sending him flying into a nearby tree to crash to the ground at its base as he senses Sam coming at him from behind. Whirling, Daryl catches him just in time, wrenching away the knife that was aimed at Daryl’s midsection with a crunch of broken bones and a shriek of pain from Sam. Shooting out his other arm, Daryl wraps his clawed fingers around the other man’s throat and lifts him from the ground as if he were nothing more than a bag of garbage waiting to be tossed at the end of the day. Bringing him up to eye level, Sam’s hands are tearing ineffectually at the grip on his throat, his feet kicking wildly above the earth as Daryl applies more pressure to his windpipe. The wolf in him is straining as it hears the rapidly increasing beat of Sam’s heart and smells the pure fear dripping from his pores and Daryl’s lips draw back in a feral smile.

He’s just about to finish Sam when he hears a footstep behind him and, too late, catches the scent of a third human on the air – another stranger that he doesn’t recognize. He snarls a warning, dropping Sam’s wheezing form to the ground, but whatever it is that hits him in the head this time is bigger and heavier than the last and his vision slips up to the tangled tree branches above him, his consciousness fading into oblivion.

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He’s moving. Or rather, the vehicle under him is moving and Daryl has that sickening moment of disorientation as he tries to remember where he is and how he got there. He opens his eyes, only to find that he can’t see anything and he realizes that he can feel the thick, rough wool of a blanket covering his head and body. He slows his breathing, taking stock of his situation and, with a jolt, he recalls his encounter with Michael, Sam and their mysterious ally. Casting out with his senses, trying to tune out the sound of the vehicle’s engine and the rising panic that’s threatening at the edges of his mind, he discovers that he can’t find anyone in his immediate vicinity so guesses that all three men must be in the cab of what he assumes is a flatbed truck of some sort. At some point his body had reverted back to his human shape and Daryl can feel the cold metal pressed into his naked flesh as the truck races through the darkness, jostling him over every bump in the road. He knows that he’s bound but he still tries tentatively stretching out his body only to find that he’s hog-tied like a pig on its way to the slaughterhouse – his arms pulled tightly behind his back with his ankles bent back up until they almost touch, an intricate web of rope crisscrossing every inch of his torso leaving him no wriggle room at all. He huffs out a resigned sigh, his body protesting at being in such an unnatural position and he wonders how long they’ve been travelling. Gingerly, he pushes his mind out to inspect the molten heat that his thigh has become, knowing that there’s a bullet still lodged deep in his flesh that has to come out soon or he’s going to be in serious trouble, accelerated healing or not.

With a growing feeling of dread, Daryl wonders what Rick will do when he doesn’t return – how long will he wait before he assumes the worst and, even if he can track Daryl as far as where they loaded him into the truck, how will he be able to follow them once they took off. He’s so lost in his thoughts that it takes him a few seconds to notice that the truck has stopped moving. He hears the doors to the cab open and three pairs of footsteps approach the back of the truck. There’s the sound of another door opening, this one attached to a building of some sort, and another person joins the others.

“Did you get one?” asks the newcomer.

“Sure did,” Sam replies and Daryl can hear him unlatching the truck’s tailgate. “In fact we got somethin’ even better than we planned on.”

“Really?”
“Oh hell yes. Let’s get him inside and we’ll tell ya all about it.”

Daryl lets his body go limp as he’s grabbed by two sets of hands and hauled roughly out of the back of the truck, making himself as much of a dead weight as possible.

“Keep him covered,” Sam instructs and Daryl can hear him puffing a little under the strain of the weight he’s carrying. ‘Noah, get the door, you fuckin’ retard.’

He feels himself being carried up a couple of steps and then taken inside where the two men holding him shuffle across a wide room and then unceremoniously dump him onto what feels eerily similar to one of the bunks at the prison.

“He dead?” asks yet another voice elsewhere in the room and Daryl is aware of the smells and sounds of at least eight separate people in close proximity to him.

“Nah, and he ain’t sleepin’ either,” comes Sam’s authoritative tone accompanied by a well-placed kick to Daryl’s wounded thigh which causes him to yelp involuntarily from the sudden pain. “Now you listen to me, Dog-boy, this can either go easy or hard, the choice is yours.”

Daryl growls low and deep in his throat, having no intention of making one thing easy for these people and just waiting for the opportunity to sink his teeth into one or more of them and tear them apart.

“Suit yourself,” Sam tells him and Daryl can hear him moving away. “Noah, get your worthless ass in here boy. I’ve got a job for you.”

Somebody new arrives at his side, his scent laced with a heavy dose of adrenalin and fear, and Daryl can feel the wolf salivating at the heady mix.

“Now, when I say so, boy, you’re gonna unwrap our guest here and get him out of those ropes before he’s no good to anybody.”

“Sam, is that such a good idea?” Michael asks nervously, his voice tinged with concern and rightfully so, thinks Daryl.

“It’ll be fine,” Sam answers confidently.

“Whatever, man,” Michael tells him but Daryl can hear the underlying tension in his tone and remembers the look of sheer terror on Michael’s face when he had seen Daryl’s true nature.

“Okay, Noah, you ready?” Sam asks and there’s a familiar clank of metal on metal, accompanied by the sound of a key turning in a lock, that tells Daryl exactly where it is he’s being held.

He evens out his breathing, pulling the wolf forth into his face and running his tongue over the elongated points of his canines, ready to fight in any way he can. Without warning, the blanket is yanked from his head and he snarls viciously, snapping his teeth as he narrows his eyes against the harsh fluorescent light that’s filling the room.

“What the fuck..?”

“What is that thing?”

“The fuck?”

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph.”
There’s a chorus of exclamations ringing in his ears but Daryl fixes his attention on the silent figure in front of him, who is clutching the blanket to his narrow chest and staring down at Daryl. To his surprise, he’s just a kid – no more than nineteen at the most – all skin and bone, the rich brown of his skin gleaming with a sheen of nervous sweat in the harsh light. If it’s possible, the boy’s clothes seem even more rundown than anyone else’s he’s met along the way, they’re little more than rags held together with duct tape and dirt. The air stills in Daryl’s lungs, his ears ringing for a moment as he catches sight of what’s fastened around Noah’s neck – a black leather dog collar which even has a silver tag still attached that clinks gently as Noah breathes rapidly in and out. Daryl feels a wave of nausea roll over him that has nothing to do with the searing pain in his thigh or the hopelessness of his situation but has everything to do with the welts that he can see under the edge of the tight leather band that tell him Noah’s been wearing it for quite some time and making his position in this group quite apparent.

Looking up, he meets Noah’s eyes and one glance tells him he’s never going to hurt this kid, every ounce of his anger rushing from his body as he lets his face relax back into his human form. He’s surprised to see that there’s no fear in the boy’s eyes as he stares back at him and he realizes that the scent of it coming from Noah is not because of Daryl but must be a constant part of his makeup. He’s looking at him with obvious wariness and curiosity but mostly his eyes are filled with a bone-crushing weariness that has Daryl’s hatred of this group growing by the second.

“Now you listen here, freak,” comes Sam’s voice and Daryl feels the hair on the back of his neck bristle at that word but he doesn’t take his gaze from Noah, “our boy Noah is gonna untie you and look to dressing that leg of yours. If you make one wrong move, you’re gonna be in a world of hurt, you understand me?”

Daryl shifts his eyes from Noah’s face, raising his head to see over his shoulder to where Sam is standing, the ropes that are binding him digging painfully into his skin. He’s not surprised to see there’s a rifle aimed at his head and a quick glance at the other men in the room paints a similar picture. He nods curtly and Sam inclines his head at Noah who begins the arduous task of stripping away all the coils of rope that are looped tightly around Daryl’s body. While the boy works, Daryl takes the opportunity to familiarize himself with his surroundings and the other men in the room. As he’d suspected from the earlier sound of the metal door closing, he finds he’s being held in a jail cell.

Once Noah has him untied and he can raise himself into a sitting position, he can see that there are four cells, including the one that he’s in, running along the back wall. They’re facing an open plan room which stretches between him and the chest high front desk which separates the office part from a small waiting area on the other side. The plate glass of the front windows and door are heavily boarded and nailed over with heavy blankets to keep the light from showing through to the outside. The desks and chairs in the office have been pushed aside in favor of setting up a half dozen camp beds in the middle of the floor. Daryl can see a door beside the last cell in line that leads, he presumes, to the locker room and weapon storage for the Sheriff’s station.

He tries to recall if this is somewhere they’ve scouted before but his brain is currently too occupied with the agony Noah is unintentionally inflicting on him as he dresses his wound to give it too much thought.

“You hungry?” Sam asks and Daryl just gives him a blank stare. “C’mon, you must be – you spent most of the day standing out there like a good dog, watching the fence to make sure we weren’t coming back. Tell me, do your people know what you are?”

Daryl doesn’t answer, just maintains eye contact, his mind turning now to what these people have planned for him. His quick assessment of the others in the group has told him that they’re just regular guys, most likely a hard group who’ll take what they want to survive, but none of them seem to be anything more than that except for Sam who is the obvious brains of the group.
“Yeah, I didn’t think so,” Sam continues, lowering the gun he has aimed at Daryl’s face. “We’ve been watching the prison for a few days now and I don’t somehow think your group would be quite so comfortable around you if they knew what you were, especially not your leader, what’s his name? Rick? Yeah, I think Rick would be as surprised as we were if he knew there was a monster living side by side with his baby girl. This turn of events has certainly put a twist on our plans, that’s for sure.”

“Which were?” Daryl asks, his voice gravelly.

“You guys have a damn sweet set up over there – food, water, a whole bunch of healthy women – things that make surviving in this world a whole lot easier. We’re not stupid, we knew you’d take one look at us and that would be it, no way you’d let us join you. So we figured we needed another way in, a bargaining chip if you will, something that Rick couldn’t say no to. We were ready to be patient, wait for one or two of you to come outside those nice secure fences and then scoop you up and use you as our ticket to get in. Then, once we were in, taking over would be a piece of cake – take out the men and the women would be no problem.”

“Really?” Daryl snorts incredulously, wanting more than anything to see this douchebag try to subdue Carol, Michonne or Maggie. “That was your great plan? Don’t you think that people like you have tried to take what’s ours before? Did you see the guard tower on the way in? Do you think walkers did that? You’re crazy if you think Rick, or any of us, would give in to you that easy. Don’t matter who you have as a bargaining chip, there’s no way he’ll give in. You mess with our family and you’ll be dead before you know it.”

“Well, maybe that was so but then you fell into our laps, like a blessing from the Gods, and I’d say that changes the odds, wouldn’t you, freak? Who needs a bargaining chip when we have the power to change all of our destinies sitting right in front of us. All of us - becoming just like you – there ain’t nobody or nothin’ in this world that’s gonna stop us from taking what we want. That prison you’re so protective of, those women, they’ll be ours in a heartbeat once we’re like you.”

Daryl’s blood runs cold in his veins, an overwhelming panic rising in him as he absorbs the full meaning of Sam’s words and the other men in the room start voicing their opinions at their leader’s proposition.

“We don’t even know what the fuck he is,” Michael says, stepping up beside Sam to turn him to face him, “and you want us to be like that? You’re out of your fucking mind.”

“He’s a Lycan, a shape-shifter, a werewolf – call him what you want, the world has a hundred different names for his kind but it doesn’t matter anymore. What matters is what he means to us and that’s an opportunity to be stronger, faster and more badass than anyone else that’s left on this godforsaken rock. Just think of it, Michael, think of what we could do.”

Michael shakes his head, backing away a little from Sam but Daryl can see the other men in the room thinking on his words and he feels sick to his stomach at the thought of even one of them becoming like him. He'd rather be dead than see one of them with the power that he has and he vows to himself that he’ll end his own life before he lets them force him into turning them.

“How do we even know it would work?” asks a sallow-looking guy at the back of the room, rubbing his hand nervously over his jaw.

“Yeah, don’t it have to be a full moon or somethin’?” asks another.

“Is it a full moon right now?” Sam replies, turning to fix the guy with a harsh stare.
“No.”

“And did you see his face? Does that answer your question? Look, I know this is fucking weird and you all want answers but you have to look at the big picture here, this could be our salvation. Don’t you want that?”

Daryl swallows back the bile that’s rising in his throat as he watches the men in the room considering Sam’s words and his mind replays the endless arguments he’s had with Rick over the very same subject. He can’t believe this is happening, that he let himself get trapped in this situation and he’s desperate to find a way out of it.

“How do you even know it will work, that he can make us like him?” Michael asks, staring at Daryl.

“I don’t,” Sam shrugs, “but I’m willing to figure it out. I’m pretty sure all it will take is a bite from him, isn’t that how it works, Dog-boy?”

“I ain’t telling you shit and, if you think for a second, that I’m going to turn any of you assholes into a freak like me then you better think again. I wouldn’t piss on y’all if you was on fire, I sure as shit ain’t gonna give you this,” spits out Daryl vehemently, fixing Sam with a glare.

“Well, we’ll see about that,” Sam chuckles and Daryl’s neck bristles again. “I think you’ll find I can be pretty persuasive when I really want something. But, for now, me and the boys are gonna take this discussion outside and you can sit here and contemplate my earlier question of whether you want to do things the easy way or the hard way. Michael… get Noah outta there.”

Daryl fleetingly considers making a break for it as Michael moves to unlock the cell door and let Noah out but he ultimately decides against it, not wanting the kid to get caught in the crossfire if the group tries to take Daryl down. Instead, he just watches silently as Michael locks the door again and the rest of the men relax, filing outside at Sam’s direction and closing the door behind them, leaving him alone with Noah. Taking a deep breath, Daryl drops his head into his hands, wishing he was a million miles away from this place and even more than that, wishing that Rick was here with him.

“Here,” comes a quiet voice a few minutes later and Daryl raises his head to find Noah holding out a folded shirt and pants to him through the bars. “Thought you might appreciate these. We found a bunch of uniforms in the storage out back but none of the guys wanted them. I think those should fit you.”

Daryl stands, taking the offered clothes and shaking out the pants to slip into them, finding them a little snug but better than nothing. Even though he’s just as comfortable being naked, if not more so, he knows that there’s a certain psychological disadvantage to being undressed in a room full of your enemies and he feels a little better as he pulls on the shirt.

“How long?” he asks, eyeing Noah as he buttons up the shirt across his chest.

“Huh?”

“How long have they been holding you?” Daryl asks, his fingers raising in the direction of the collar at Noah’s throat and then dropping his hand as he catches sight of the look that crosses the boy’s face.

“Don’t really know, it’s kinda hard to keep track. ‘bout six months, I guess,” Noah answers, walking into the cell next to Daryl’s and sitting down on the bunk to look at him through the bars.

“You were on your own?” Daryl says, wincing as he sits down and the material of his new pants pulls tight across the bandage covering his thigh.
“I was with my dad,” Noah says, after a moment’s hesitation looking down at the concrete floor beneath his feet. “He… it went bad. I was hurt – busted up my leg - but I managed to find a place to hide. Would’ve died for sure if these guys hadn’t found me.”

“That don’t mean you owe them,” Daryl tells him, sickened by the thought of what Noah might have been through.

“I know that,” Noah spits, his head whipping up defiantly and Daryl can see anger and shame warring for a place in his eyes.

“Hey, we all do what we gotta to survive and, more often than not, we get dealt a shitty hand but you have to believe me when I tell you there are still good people out there, okay? My group… my family… they’re good people. We get out of here and I’ll take you back with me, I swear. Ain’t nobody deserves to live like this.”

Noah nods and Daryl can see that he wants so badly to believe him but it’ll take more than hollow promises to convince him that Daryl is telling him the truth.

“You think we can? Get out of this, I mean? Seems like Sam’s got a hard on for you that he’s not going to let go of any time soon. Can you really do what he says, change them so that they’re like you?”

“Yes, but that’s never going to happen, I can’t let it. They have no idea what they’re messing with and, if it comes to it, I’ll end myself before I give them what they want and take as many of ‘em out with me as I can.”

“Will your people come for you?”

“Don’t think so, they probably don’t even know that I’m gone yet and they ain’t gonna have a clue where to even start lookin’. It’s better that they don’t, anyway. I don’t need ‘em caught up in this mess.”

“Because they don’t know that you’re…? Sam was right, wasn’t he? I saw your face when he said it, your people have no idea what you are.”

“A couple of them do but, no, most of them don’t. We get there, I’d appreciate you keeping it that way.”

“Are you kidding me? You get me outta here and anything you want is yours, man.”

“No,” Daryl says sharply and then feels guilty as he sees Noah flinch so he softens his tone, “we get outta here and you don’t owe me nothin’, you understand? Don’t work like that where I’m from. We’re a family, we’ve got each other’s backs. It’s the only way any of us are survivin’ this thing, you got me?”

Noah nods mutely, tears shining in his eyes and Daryl resolves to get this kid loose no matter what else happens. He’s just about to ask Noah some more questions about Sam and the others when the door bangs open and the group comes back inside. Daryl can only imagine the conversation Sam must have had with his men, judging by the sly glances they keep throwing in his direction, each of them looking away without fail when he makes eye contact with them. Eventually he lays back down on his bunk, the throbbing in his thigh dulling to a sickening ache and he watches as Noah makes dinner for the group, seeing the way that they treat him as nothing better than a slave with harsh words and deliberate pushes as the boy limps his way between them. Daryl refuses to eat even when Noah implores him with his eyes and just keeps up his watchful vigil, listening to the back and
forth among the men as they eat. With their appetites filled, they turn in for the night, shutting off the lights which Daryl realizes are powered by a softly humming generator he can hear outside the back of the building and locking Noah into the cell next to Daryl’s. It doesn’t matter to him, he can see just as well in the dark and he has no intention of sleeping – he has a problem to solve, one that hopefully ends up with him and Noah leaving this place alive and making their way back to the prison with nobody left alive here to follow them. Lacing his hands behind his head, he stares up at the ceiling, listening to the various nocturnal sounds that come from a group sharing close quarters and wonders how in the hell he’s going to pull this off.
Rick is barely breathing, his nostrils just flaring slightly as he narrows his eyes and surveys the building in front of him, a nerve twitching along the line of his jaw which is clamped harshly together. It’s taken him almost two weeks to get where he is right now and he’s feeling like a barely-controlled ball of white-hot rage, every fiber of his being straining to let go and wreak havoc on the
people who’ve stolen from him. In the grey light of the pre-dawn, he can see Michonne creeping stealthily towards the alley that leads to the rear of the boarded-up Sheriff’s station, following his instructions to watch the rear of the building for anyone trying to flee that way. Carol is standing to his left and he can feel every nerve in her body thrumming in nervous anticipation although the sound of her heartbeat is calm and steady to his ears and he knows that she’s just ready for him to say the word.

When Daryl hadn’t come home that first night, Rick had gone out himself in the early hours of the morning, a nagging feeling of unease pulling at him which had exploded into a major panic when he had found Daryl’s belongings in their usual place and had seen the signs of a scuffle nearby. He had instantly picked up the fresh scent of Daryl’s blood on the ground, his heart clenching so painfully in his chest for a moment that he had thought he was going to pass out and had spent a full minute with his head hanging down between his knees before he could continue. It took him mere seconds to find and follow the trail of Daryl’s blood that led through the trees a way and then ended at a set of tire tracks set deep in the dirt just off the road. He had practically howled in frustration, pacing back and forth along the edge of the dirt track which led back to the main road. Pulling himself together he had raced back to the scene of the struggle, tearing off his clothes and stowing them with Daryl’s before Shifting and lowering his muzzle to the ground to familiarize himself completely with every nuance of the scents belonging to Daryl’s abductors. He’d recognized Sam and Michael’s scents immediately, his lips peeling back from his teeth a little in a snarl, but there was also a third scent, someone unknown to him which he’d committed to his memory before heading off back to the road.

It had taken him a week and a half to catch up with them, the tire tracks only taking him so far before he’d had to go purely on instinct and guesswork, using their general direction to start scouting around until he’d picked up their scent again. The fact that he had found Daryl’s clothes abandoned with his bow and the fresh scent of both his human and wolf form at the scene of his abduction filled Rick with a deep-rooted fear, his mind drawing conclusions he didn’t even want to think about. He had returned to the prison each day under the pretense of gathering more provisions for his search but in reality he was torn between his hunt and making sure his people were safe. Naturally everyone had wanted to join him in looking for Daryl but he had forbidden it, engaging in a verbal sparring match with Michonne when she had told him she was going whether he liked it or not. He had only kept her at the prison by pointing out that Michael and Sam might stage some kind of attack and asking her if she wanted to be responsible for any more deaths at the hands of men like the Governor. It was a low blow and he’d regretted it the moment it was out of his mouth, seeing the look of hurt in her eyes, but he didn’t have the time or the words to make it right with her and he couldn’t waste time in his human form in order to have her come with him.

So he’d set out alone, taking a car and widening his search perimeter every day until he’d finally lucked out and found Michael’s scent on a bunch of animal traps out in the woods near to the outskirts of a town they’d already cleared. His gut had told him that they were holed up somewhere in the area and he wasn’t surprised when his nose led him to the solid brick building of the Sheriff’s station. He’d sat silent and still under cover of the trees opposite the front of the building, his body grateful for the reprieve after the punishing pace he’d set for it over the past few days, and had secretly observed the group. As much as he’d wanted to just burst in there and take Daryl back, he’d known he had to be smart about it – going in gung-ho was probably just going to end up with both of them dead. There had been two guys sitting on the front steps outside cleaning their weapons when Rick had arrived, their conversation carrying clearly to him in his hiding place. He’d known Daryl was there, could smell his scent through the open door to the building, but he’d had to wait to get an accurate count on how many others there were holding him.

So he’d sat and watched, taking stock of his surroundings and the setup in front of him until, eventually, he’d tracked seven different guys coming in and out with one more distinct scent coming from inside which made a total of eight. Knowing the odds were against him, even with his
enhanced abilities, Rick had been about to leave to bring back help when something the two guys sitting outside had said caught his attention. He'd been tuning out their typical male banter until the word ‘wolf’ had filtered into his brain and he’d turned his attention to what they were saying in time to hear them discussing Sam’s plan for the group, one of them asking the other how long he thought Daryl would be able to hold out before Sam tortured him into changing them. Rick’s vision had clouded, the situation becoming even direr than just a simple kidnapping which is what he’d first suspected – expecting Michael or Sam to eventually show up and demand sanctuary in exchange for Daryl’s life – but now his darkest fears were confirmed. He’d turned tail and fled back to where he’d hidden the car, driving as fast as he dared until he’d arrived back at the prison just as dusk was falling and raced through the yard in search of Carol.

He’d known she would be the only one he could trust with this, as much as he wanted to take an army with him, he couldn’t risk exposing Daryl’s and his true nature. He’d found her outside, feeding scraps to the pigs in their pen, and he'd watched her face pale under her tanned skin as he’d hurriedly explained what he'd found and then added that Daryl’s captors knew what he was. Her eyes had widened at the news that he obviously knew too and he’d thrown all his chips on the table by confessing to her that he was also now a part of the secret, knowing he’d done the right thing when she didn’t back away from him or badger him with a mess of questions. She had simply squared her jaw, looked him directly in the eye and said, “Then let’s go get our boy back.” His heart had swelled at her bravery and her loyalty but he didn’t have time to acknowledge either with anything more than a quick squeeze of her shoulder – he knew they had to move and move fast. Grabbing weapons from the locker at the base of the guard tower and taking a new vehicle from the yard, they had almost been away without anybody questioning them when Michonne had stepped in front of the car at the gate and demanded to be told what was going on. Cursing inwardly, Rick had given her the abbreviated version, telling her that he’d found where Daryl was being held and that he and Carol were going to get him back. She’d eyed him suspiciously for a moment, knowing perfectly well that he wasn’t telling her the whole story but she’d wordlessly climbed into the car anyway and Rick had to admit that he was grateful for her presence.

Now, here they are, standing ready to go and Rick can feel the wolf begging to be let loose as he hears a soft whistle on the still morning air signaling him that Michonne is in position.

“Nobody lives,” he breathes to Carol, knowing that he doesn’t have to ask her if she's ready.

She doesn’t answer him, just pulls up the bandana tied around her neck to cover her nose and mouth and then tightens her grip on her handgun. Rick nods, covering his own face and takes a calming breath before marching swiftly out of the trees and across the street on a direct course for the jail’s front door. The fact that there’s no warning shout or sounds of movement from within at his approach tells him that this group is over-confident in the safety of their hideout to the point where they think posting a guard is unnecessary. All the better for us, he thinks as he squares off in front of the boarded up door and raises his leg to deliver a powerhouse of a kick close to the lock. There’s a shriek of tearing metal and the crash of broken glass as the door bursts open and Rick barrels through. He has a brief snapshot of the scene inside – the cells in back; the cluster of beds in the center of the room; the startled faces of the room’s occupants coming awake – and then he’s hitting the floor in front of the high, solid wood counter. As Carol lands beside him, scooting her way to the opposite end, Rick tosses both a smoke bomb and a stun grenade over the counter and slaps his hands over his ears, watching her do the same. The result is instant, the blinding flash of light and ear-splitting noise from the stun grenade setting off a cacophony of shouts and screams which dissolve into choking coughs as the smoke clouds the room.

“Daryl, down!” Rick yells, hoping his partner has already had the good sense to get himself under cover.
Carol is on her feet just a fraction before him, her eyes narrowed against the billowing smoke and Rick hears her pop off a couple of rounds as he turns to vault the counter in a single fluid move and pitches himself into the confusion on the other side. The second he lands a body slams into him, driving him back to crash painfully into the desk behind him and Rick grunts under the impact. With a growl, he pushes his attacker back enough that he can bring his Colt up between them to take him out, the man’s blood misting out over Rick and fueling the beast even more. He hears a door banging open somewhere and, through the roiling smoke, he catches sight of two of the gang disappearing through to the back area. Dismissing them as already dead the second they exit the building into Michonne’s deadly embrace, Rick turns his attention to the cells at the back of the room trying to pinpoint Daryl’s scent over the acrid stench of the smoke.

He hears another gunshot to his left, followed by the sound of a body hitting the floor and Carol appears through the already thinning haze to give him a curt nod. Rick responds in kind and then crosses the room cautiously, Colt raised high, picking his way among the overturned camp beds fully aware that there’s still two people unaccounted for somewhere in the room.

“Not another step,” comes a voice he recognizes and Rick freezes at the threat it implies.

The smoke is clearing enough that he can now see Sam in the furthest cell, the door standing open, his arm wrapped around Daryl’s throat from behind as he cradles him against his chest and presses a gun barrel against his temple. They’re sprawled on the bunk, Sam obviously having dragged Daryl’s body up into a sitting position to protect himself with and Rick feels his eyes widen in horror as he takes in Daryl’s appearance. He’s naked from the waist up, his torso a mass of welts, cuts and bruises coated with patches of dried blood and Rick can smell a sickly odor coming from him, indicating that something far more serious is wrong with him. His usually bright eyes are cloudy and half-closed, his head lolling back against Sam’s shoulder and there’s a sheen of sweat covering his skin.

“What did you do to him?” Rick demands, yanking the bandana from his face and keeping his gun aimed at Sam’s head.

“Well, it seems your boy here is one tough sonovabitch – didn’t want to give me what I asked for – so we’ve been having a nice, friendly debate about why he should,” Sam says, tapping the gun in his hand against Daryl’s forehead who doesn’t even flinch.

“You’re dead,” Rick tells him coldly.

“Now, now, Rick, let’s not be too hasty here. We can still work this out.”

“Never gonna happen. The only thing I’m working out is how to kill you.”

“I’m sorry to hear you feel that way,” Sam answers, glancing past Rick. “Michael.”

Rick turns his head to see Michael across the room holding Carol tight in his grasp, one hand clasping her throat as the other presses a knife to her jugular and Rick can see the frustration in her eyes at letting herself get caught like this.

“Looks like we have the advantage, Rick, wouldn’t you say? Now, nice and slow, put your gun on the ground and kick it this way.”

Rick pauses, weighing up the situation before he does as he’s told, sliding the gun through the open cell door where Sam bends to pick it up, dropping Daryl’s limp form back onto the bunk in favor of standing to point both guns in Rick’s direction.

“Good, now you’re going to stay right here while Michael and I leave. Your pretty friend over there
is gonna take a little ride with us for extra security just in case there’s any more of your people waiting outside. If you’re real lucky, maybe we’ll send her home in a day or two – if she wants to leave, that is.”

As he’s talking, Sam is slowly inching out of the cell and Rick lets him, backing further away and raising his hands in a non-threatening manner, so that Sam is out of reach of Daryl. When he's satisfied that Daryl is out of immediate danger Rick makes his move, praying that Carol can take care of herself, launching himself across the tangle of upturned camp beds between him and Sam, Shifting the upper part of his body as he moves. Sam flinches, his hands jerking as he fires both guns in Rick’s direction but it’s too little too late and Rick hears the bullets skimming the air above him as he slams into Sam and takes him down. It’s over before it’s even really begun, Sam’s feeble attempts to ward off Rick’s teeth and claws failing miserably as Rick tears into him like he’s a paper bag filled with jelly. The wolf is frenzied in its work, the taste and smell of fresh blood galvanizing it into action and Rick doesn’t stop until Sam is nothing more than a mangled pulp on the floor.

Rick pushes up, struggling at first to pull the wolf back inside and get his blood-lust under control, retrieving his gun from where it had dropped from Sam’s fingers during their struggle.

“Carol?” he yells, her name both a question and a command.

“I’m good,” she answers and he spares the briefest glance in her direction as he races to Daryl’s cell, seeing her kneeling over Michael’s corpse, the hilt of his knife protruding from the ruins of his ruptured eye.

“Go,” Rick instructs her as he reaches Daryl’s side. “Give Michonne the all clear and get the car.”

“Is he..?” Carol asks, climbing to her feet.

“It’s bad,” Rick whispers, dropping to his knees. “Go.”

He doesn’t know if she hears him and it doesn’t matter – all that concerns him is the ashen tone of Daryl’s skin in the dull light that’s filtering in from the ruined front door and the dark circles ringing his eyes.

“It’s alright, baby, I’ve got you,” he says softly, brushing Daryl’s sweaty hair back from his forehead. “I’m going to get you home.”

“Rick?” Daryl mutters weakly, his eyes fluttering open to fix on Rick’s face. “No, you can’t be here… too dangerous, man… they want me to…”

“Shh,” soothes Rick, tucking his arm around Daryl’s waist as he tries to haul himself up from the bunk and Rick can feel the sick heat radiating off him, “they’ve gone, buddy, we took care of all of them.”

Daryl sags a little at his words, the fight to move ebbing out of him and Carol appears in the doorway of the cell.

“Michonne’s bringing the car up. How is he?”

“He’s burning up… I don’t know what they’ve done to him. Help me get him up.”

Between them, they get Daryl into a standing position, taking his weight across both their shoulders as they shuffle him slowly out of the cell. A sudden movement in the corner of his eye has Rick dropping Daryl’s arm and whipping his head and gun in that direction simultaneously as he sees someone crawl out from under the bunk in the cell adjacent to Daryl’s.
“No!” yells Daryl, flailing out with his free hand to knock Rick’s arm as he squeezes the trigger, sending the bullet ricocheting harmlessly off the far wall. “He’s one of us.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Daryl,” Rick curses, holstering his gun and staring at the young man looking back at him through the bars. “Carol.”

Carol lets go of Daryl, Rick taking his full weight against him, and pulls out the keys which are still dangling from the lock on Daryl’s cell to let Noah out.

“Thanks,” he tells her, giving her a sweet smile but any further introductions are cut short by the sound of a car pulling up outside.

Rick and Carol half-walk, half-carry Daryl out of the building where Michonne climbs out of the driver’s seat to meet them.

“Who’s this?” she asks warily, giving Noah an appraising look, one hand resting on her sword.

“Well, according to Daryl, he’s one of us,” Rick informs her and he sees her eyes slide from Noah to take in his own blood-drenched appearance but he doesn’t have time to worry about what she thinks.

“Fair enough,” Michonne responds, opening the back door of the car and helping Rick load Daryl inside to lay on the seat. “We’re not all going to fit. Why don’t you and Carol ride with Daryl and me and the kid here will take one of the other cars.”

Rick looks from Michonne to Noah, his natural instinct not wanting to split them up, especially with an unknown entity involved but a low groan of pain from Daryl forces his hand.

“Okay, but you tie his hands behind him, you hear me?” Rick tells her, making eye contact before he looks in Noah’s direction. “No offence, kid, but we don’t know you, even if Daryl’s vouching for you. He’s not exactly in his right mind at the moment.”

“No problem,” Noah answers without hesitation, turning around and placing his hands at the small of his back.

“I don’t have any rope,” Michonne states, drawing Rick’s attention back to her and indicating the kid’s neck where Rick sees what he thinks is a dog collar fastened around his throat and he understands in an instant. “Maybe we can just work on the trust system – I trust you not to do anything stupid and you can trust that I’ll run you through with my sword if you do.”

“Sounds like a good system,” Noah answers with a solemn nod of his head and Michonne turns him back around, nudging him gently in the direction of the gang’s vehicles parked in front of the jail.

Rick waits just long enough to make sure they have a working ride, seeing Michonne signal him with a flash of the headlights, and then he climbs into the back of their own car, lifting Daryl’s head to cradle it in his lap as Carol puts the car in gear and they drive away.

Rick strokes Daryl’s hair, at a loss as to what to do to help him, feeling his fingers shake as they ghost over the skin at his temples and Daryl stirs slightly under his touch. He can’t understand why Daryl’s body is as marked as it is, why his natural ability hasn’t healed him the way it usually does and why he feels like he’s burning up with a sick fever even though his body is shivering a little. Reaching over the back seat, Rick tugs a blanket free from the box of supplies secured in the hatchback and tucks it around Daryl keeping one hand beneath it to lay against his chest, wanting Daryl to know he's right there.

“Do you think the kid will keep his mouth shut around Michonne?” Carol asks, twisting her head
briefly to look at him over the front seat before turning forward again to where Rick can see the other car setting the pace ahead of them. “I mean, if he didn’t already know about Daryl, he sure as hell saw what you just did.”

“I don’t know,” Rick tells her honestly, adding the thought to his current list of worries.

“Won’t tell…” Daryl mumbles from Rick’s lap without opening his eyes. “He’s a good kid… trust him.”

“Hey, hush now,” Rick says, rubbing his hand gently against Daryl’s chest. “You just need to lay there and rest, we’ll be home soon and the doc will get you all fixed up.”

Daryl nods weakly, drawing in a deep breath and then relaxing against Rick’s thighs, his body deathly still except for the small rise and fall of his chest.

“And Michonne?” Carol continues, meeting his eyes in the rearview mirror. “I saw the way she was looking at you when you told her where we were going, she wasn’t buying it for a second. She knows there was something you weren’t telling her. Did you see her face when you came out of the jail? You look like you took a bath at a slaughterhouse.”

Rick grimaces, glancing down at the sticky shirt that’s plastered to his chest and realizing he has the sour taste of Sam’s blood still coating his tongue.

“Here,” says Carol, tossing a bottle of water at him from the front seat which he deftly catches and drinks down with a grateful sigh.

“Guess I’ll deal with it when I have to,” he tells Carol, hoping that maybe Michonne won’t make it an issue, “but I can’t think about that right now. All that matters is getting home and getting Daryl taken care of.”

Carol nods her agreement, turning her full attention to the road ahead, and Rick sinks back into his seat, his eyes fixed on Daryl’s ashen face and his heart heavy with worry as the car eats up the miles between them and home.

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Back at the prison, they’re greeted by a small crowd of people, everyone concerned as to where they’ve been and why they didn’t say they were leaving but Rick cuts through their incessant questions with a harsh dismissal. Getting Daryl into the infirmary is his first priority and he refuses to leave while Caleb examines him until the doctor finds the gunshot wound on Daryl’s thigh and then he ushers Rick outside, telling him he’s going to need as sterile an environment as they can manage while he gets the bullet out. Rick leaves reluctantly, feeling sick to his stomach from the brief glimpse he caught of the raging infection he could see eating at Daryl’s flesh where the bullet had entered, and he comes out into the office area to find Carol and Noah waiting for him.

“Michonne’s bringing everyone up to speed,” Carol, explains. “I thought it best if Noah stayed with us for now.”

“Noah?” Rick asks, trying to clear the fog that’s clouding his brain through his concern for Daryl.

“Yes sir,” Noah answers, standing tall in front of Rick and he notices that the collar or whatever it was has disappeared from his neck but the reminders of its presence are glaringly evident on his skin. “Can you tell us what happened? You know what Daryl is… what I am, yes?”

Noah nods, swallowing thickly as Rick leans into his personal space just a fraction but he doesn’t
back away and Rick admires him for that, given what he's evidently been through.

“Then tell me how he ended up like that. He – we – heal pretty fast, those wounds on his body
should’ve been gone within hours. Hell even the bullet shouldn’t have done as much damage as it
has. What the fuck went on?”

“He wouldn’t give Sam what he wanted – Sam wanted him to make them all like you and Daryl.
And, when he refused, Sam started torturing him. Knives, hot irons, hammer and nails, you name it,
those assholes tried it. Daryl just took it all like it was nothing and each morning he’d be healed as
good as new, even the bullet wound wasn’t getting any worse. That just pissed Sam off so he started
getting more creative and then, on the third morning, I woke up and Daryl hadn’t healed. He told me
he wasn’t going to let his body do it anymore – he stopped eating and drinking too, no matter how
much I begged him, just kept telling me he couldn’t let them be like him. Sam thought he was
winning at first, thought he was breaking Daryl but then he realized that all Daryl was doing was
slowly killing himself and he went crazy. Started doing anything he could to provoke Daryl into
changing and biting him but Daryl just kept quiet and ignored everything they threw at him.

The wound in his thigh started to get worse, you could practically see the infection eating away at
him, poisoning his blood but he never gave in for a second. He told me that the wolf in him was
fighting him constantly, self-preservation making it try and force him to heal himself but he kept
holding on. Told me he had to protect all of you and that his death was worth it if it stopped Sam
from becoming a monster. If you hadn’t come this morning, I’m not sure he would’ve held on
another night. I tried to take care of him, I really did.”

Rick’s hands are shaking, his throat tight, and he can see Carol behind Noah with her hand clamped
across her mouth and tears streaming down her cheeks. Clapping a hand on Noah’s shoulder, Rick
squeezes tight and reaches out his other arm to gather Carol in against his chest where he holds her
tight as she cries muffled tears against him.

The three of them are still standing close together when Caleb opens the door to the infirmary and
steps out, wiping the sweat from his brow with his sleeve, a grim look on his face.

“The bullet’s out,” he tells Rick, looking him straight in the eye, “but he’s a mess. The infection has
spread. I’m worried about him losing his leg if we can’t get it under control. The rest of his wounds
are pretty nasty too and I’m sure he’s got at least two broken ribs. I’ve pumped him full of what
antibiotics we had and given him something for the pain but that’s all I can do. We just have to wait
and see. I’m sorry.”

“Can I see him?”

“Well, he’s pretty out of it,” Caleb starts to say and then seems to realize that Rick wasn’t actually
asking a question, “but a few minutes shouldn’t hurt.”

Rick gives him a brief nod of thanks before entering the infirmary where he finds Daryl laying back
on one of the hospital beds, his eyes closed, and Rick can see the pristine white bandages wrapped
around his shattered ribs under the thin sheet. His upper torso and arms are a quilt of butterfly strips
and squares of gauze held down with surgical tape. With the dirt and dried blood washed away, Rick
can easily see the numerous bruises and scrapes etching his skin and his lips draw together in an
angry grimace. He's furious with Sam for having inflicted so much pain onto Daryl, wishing for a
moment that he’d made his death last longer as retribution for what he’d done, but he's also angry at
himself for not having found Daryl sooner.

“If only I was a better tracker,” he whispers to himself, coming to stand at Daryl’s bedside and
resting his hands on the raised rail of the bed. “I should’ve found you sooner.”
“Yeah, well you suck,” Daryl croaks, cracking open his eyes which swim for a moment and then focus on Rick. “Keep tellin’ ya that.”

“Hey,” Rick says, unable to stop the tears that are welling in his eyes even though he knows they’ll just embarrass Daryl, “how are you feeling?”

“’bout the same as I did that time Merle ran over me on his hog back in seventh grade.”

“Merle ran you over?” Rick asks in disbelief, distracted for a second from their current situation.

“Yeah,” Daryl answers, giving a small chuckle which immediately turns into a hacking cough that has Rick more than a little concerned. “He was wasted and about to drive off so I thought I could stop him by steppin’ in front of him. Din’t want him to end up in the ER which is exactly where he ended up – carryin’ my sorry ass.”

Rick doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry at this latest insight into the Dixon brothers early years so he settles for busying himself getting Daryl a drink of water instead, holding it steady when Daryl’s hand shakes as he tries to lift it to his lips.

“I told you not to be the damn hero,” Rick tells him softly, hearing the waver in his own voice. “Noah told us what you were doing… how you were going to end it.”

“Couldn’t let them get what they wanted,” Daryl states, looking down at his hands so as not to meet Rick’s eye and letting a silence fall between them for a minute before he continues. “You mad?”

“Mad?!” Rick exclaims loudly, shocked that he’d think that. “No, Daryl, I’m not mad. Not at you, anyway. I’m angry at what they did to you and I’m mad at myself for not being there but, at you? Never.”

Daryl turns his head up to him and Rick can see the weariness in his eyes, their shine still dulled by the pain he’s endured and now he can’t stop the tears that are streaming down his cheeks. Taking Daryl’s face gently between his hands, Rick dips his head to kiss him, trying to be careful but desperate to show him how much he loves him and is grateful that he’s still here with him.

“I don’t know what I’d do if you were gone,” Rick whispers, resting his forehead against Daryl’s and closing his eyes for a moment before releasing him and taking in a deep breath.

Daryl nods, chewing on his bottom lip and Rick can see the glisten of tears in his eyes too but knows he’s doing his best to hold them in. Letting him go with a shuddering sigh, Rick scrubs his hand over his face and does his best to smile for Daryl.

“Caleb’s worried about the infection in your leg, he said it had spread pretty far. The antibiotics he gave you aren’t going to help are they?”

“Nah, probably already out of my system,” Daryl agrees with another cough, his eyes closing again. “I just need to Shift, accelerate the healin’. I’ll be good in a day or two.”

“That’s gonna be hard while you’re here. Caleb’s going to be checking on you constantly, I’m sure. And people will want to visit.”

“No,” Daryl states emphatically, opening one eye to glare at Rick and then closing it again. “I ain’t no zoo animal on display. Everyone can just keep to themselves.”

“You try telling Carol she’s not coming in here,” Rick chuckles and Daryl grunts in response.
“So we move you to a cell or better yet, one of the offices upstairs. Tell everyone you want your privacy while you get better and you can tell Caleb that you want Carol taking care of you. We’ll get you up there and then you can Shift for as long as you need, we’ll run interference, put Noah on guard during the day so he can warn you if somebody’s coming. But for tonight I’m afraid you’re going to have to stay put. Caleb just operated on your leg, he’s not going to let you go anywhere.”

“Yeah, probably not,” Daryl agrees with a sigh. “Guess I’ll just have to stay as I am.”

“Well, how about this - you rest now, let Caleb keep an eye on you and then tonight, I’ll come sit with you when everyone’s gone to bed and keep watch so you can Shift for the night.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Daryl tells him, opening his eyes again. “You look like shit. I think you need to sleep worse than I do.”

“Thanks,” Rick says sarcastically, but he knows Daryl’s right, he’s pushed himself so hard both mentally and physically for the past couple of weeks that now it’s over, he’s exhausted.

“How about you both sleep and I’ll keep watch?” Carol asks and Rick jumps a little, not having heard her come into the room. “Sorry, I wasn’t sure if you two were done making out yet but I couldn’t wait any longer.”

Rick blushes, stepping aside, and Daryl keeps his eyes firmly closed as Carol moves to his bedside and looks down at him, reaching out a slightly trembling hand to rest on his shoulder.

“You scare me like that again,” she tells him, leaning in to whisper in his ear, “and the way you feel right now will be nothing compared to what I’ll do to you, you hear me Dixon?”

Daryl keeps his eyes closed, a wise move Rick thinks, but the merest hint of a smile crosses his lips.

Rick turns as the door opens behind them again and Caleb enters the room.

“Okay, people, it’s time to let Daryl get some rest,” he says, raising an authoritative hand to silence Rick’s half-spoken protest. “You can all see him tomorrow if he’s feeling up to it.”

Carol leaves, laying a hand on Caleb’s arm as she passes and Rick takes one last opportunity to run his fingers along Daryl’s arm as he opens his eyes to meet Rick’s with a whispered, “Don’t go far.”

Rick gives him a nod and then turns to leave, letting Caleb close the door behind him before he lets out a shuddering breath and sags against the wall, covering his eyes with his hand for a moment. He feels Carol’s comforting presence at his side and manages a smile for her as he lets her steer him out of the room, his body suddenly too weary to even stand anymore.

Later, after he’s caught up with his family, carrying Judith on one hip while he makes his rounds of the prison to check that everything is going smoothly and he’s spent some time with Carl out in the yard, Rick meets Carol at the infirmary door once everyone is asleep.

“Thank you,” he whispers, giving her shoulder a squeeze as she settles herself on the floor next to the door, a thick book from the prison library in one hand.

“Not a problem,” she answers, lighting the small hurricane lamp next to her and making herself comfortable. “Go get some rest, both of you, before you pass out.”

Rick nods his thanks once more and opens the door to the infirmary, closing it softly behind him just in case Daryl is actually sleeping but, once inside he can tell by his breathing that he’s still awake.

“Hey you,” he says softly, crossing the room to Daryl’s side, “how are you feeling?”
“Like hell,” Daryl answers and Rick can see the sheen of sweat slicking his skin in the dim light from the barred windows.

“Come on then, let’s get you more comfortable.”

Pulling the blanket from Daryl’s body, Rick lowers the side rail of the hospital bed and helps him up into a sitting position. Carefully he maneuvers him to his feet, hearing Daryl’s sharp intake of breath as he puts his weight on his injured leg. He steadies himself against the bed as Rick gently peels off the dressing in his thigh, trying not to grimace at the mangled flesh beneath it, smelling the sickness lying under the surface. Stepping back, Rick lets him go and, with a groan of pain, Daryl Shifts, dropping to all fours and giving himself a half-hearted shake as he lands in his wolf form. Grabbing the blanket and pillows from Daryl’s bed, Rick spreads them on the floor against the wall on the far side of the room from the door. He watches as Daryl limps across to them and lays down before he follows to sit beside him, propping his back up with one of the pillows, making sure he’s not crowding Daryl. He knows that Daryl hates to be touched in his wolf form when Rick is still human, Daryl having confessed to him that it gives him uncomfortable flashbacks to the night he bit Rick, so he’s surprised when he leans against Rick’s thigh now, turning his enormous head to rest it on Rick’s lap. Tentatively Rick reaches out his fingers to sink them into the thick fur of Daryl’s neck, squeezing and releasing them as he tugs gently, watching Daryl’s eyes close and feeling him huff out a soft breath. Keeping up his slow caress deep in Daryl’s fur, Rick allows his own eyes to slide shut and his body to relax, knowing they have nothing to fear with Carol outside watching over them.
Daryl is running, tearing through the trees as fast as his paws will carry him, leaping fallen branches and hearing the startled noises of the woods’ nocturnal creatures as they flee from his path. The summer night is muggy, the air making him feel like he's running through molasses but he doesn’t care, just races on with his tongue flopping wetly from his jaws and his ears plastered back against
his skull. He's hyper-aware of his surroundings, steering clear of any walkers he senses ahead, not wanting to slow down for anything and knowing that, if he does, the relentless pursuer at his heels will be on him in a heartbeat. For now he just wants to let go, run as hard and as fast as he can so that he can feel the blood pounding through his veins and know that he’s alive. It’s been two weeks since he’s been outside the prison walls – two long drawn-out weeks since the wolf has had any freedom and his body is flooded with an unbridled euphoria.

His recovery had been as fast as he'd predicted once he'd been able to Shift and let the wolf take over, the infection burned from his system by the end of the second day and his wounds healing shortly thereafter. He'd had to keep up the pretense of his sickness though, for appearances sake, following Rick's plan to move him into one of the vacant offices in the administration wing and having him insist that only Carol be the one to nurse him and dress his wounds. Caleb hadn’t argued, he was familiar enough with Daryl’s stubborn streak already that he knew it would be pointless and he trusted Carol’s abilities along with her relationship with Daryl to know that he was in good hands. Noah, Carol and Rick had taken it in turns to run interference outside Daryl’s room while he maintained his wolf form for as long as he could.

The hardest part for Daryl had been staying cooped up in the tiny room although it wasn’t quite as bad as the cell at the jail had been. At least at the prison he’d known freedom was just a few steps away and he could escape anytime he wanted to – at the jail, he’d felt like nothing more than an animal caught in a trap, ready to gnaw off his own leg if it meant he could be free. His friends had done their best to distract him and occupy his time, with Rick even bringing Judith by each day to see him but, after the first few days, Daryl had been going stir crazy. Rick had insisted that Daryl stay put for at least a week though and no amount of yelling, pleading or the offer of sexual favors from Daryl would budge him from that decision. Now though, he was on the loose again, his body rejoicing in his freedom although he was still favoring his leg a little where Caleb had removed the bullet but not enough to really hinder his movement and he felt like the exercise was easing it out a little.

He's not sure how long he's been running, leading a tangled chase through the trees and he really hadn’t been paying that much attention to where he was headed until he breaks from the trees onto a derelict stretch of highway and recognizes his location. He realizes that he's not far from the solar-powered house he and Rick had spent their last night at and the canine equivalent of a grin pulls at his face. With a preternatural grace that seems at odds with a beast of his size, he pivots in mid-step and takes off in the direction of the house, reaching its yard within minutes and leaping the tall back fence like it was nothing more than mere inches high. Landing in the yard on the other side, he finally slows to a halt, sitting back on his haunches with his sides bellowing as he looks up at the darkened roofs of the main house and the smaller pool house. Both have been stripped clean of the solar panels that powered the generators and Daryl remembers Rick telling him that a crew had been out here while he was gone and relocated them back at the prison.

Daryl hears the thud of soft paws landing on the earth behind him as Rick finally catches up with him, his scent filling Daryl’s nostrils as he comes alongside him, nipping playfully at Daryl's shoulder with his teeth before rubbing his head under his jaw.

“Not quite so appealing as last time, is it?” Rick asks, stretching his back as he takes on his human form again.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Daryl replies, Shifting back himself, his urge to cut loose suddenly transforming into something completely different as he takes in the sight of Rick standing naked in the moonlight before him. “Still has a bed, don’t it?”

Rick raises an eyebrow at him as Daryl passes him to push open the door to the pool house,
undeterred by the wave of hot air that rolls out to meet him, and he turns back to shoot Rick a glance over his shoulder.

“You comin’?,” he asks, not waiting for a reply but smiling as he hears the soft click of the door closing behind him and the lock being turned.

Rick’s hands reach for him as soon as they enter the living room, turning him to grab his upper arms and slam him back against the small table by the door, sending a cloud of dust spiraling in the air from the nearby curtains. His eyes search Daryl’s face for a moment as if reassuring himself that Daryl is ready for this and Daryl tilts his head back under his gaze, curling his upper lip into a challenging sneer. That’s all it takes for Rick to growl back at him and press his mouth to Daryl’s in a hungry kiss, his hands cupping his face tightly as he moves against him. Daryl leans back against the table, Rick’s body bending him over it until his head is resting against the wall behind him and he has one arm hooked loosely around the back of Rick’s neck to hold him in place. Rick slides his hands up from Daryl’s face to dig painfully in against his scalp, tugging at his roots and forcing his head back against the wall with a soft thud while he continues to devour his mouth. Daryl lets him hold that position for a few minutes, enjoying the sensation of Rick’s body flush against his and the taste of him flooding his mouth as their tongues roll over one another.

With a grunt, Daryl pushes his hands up between them, laying them flat against the warmth of Rick’s chest and shoving him backwards so that Rick stumbles away from him, stopping as his butt connects with the back of the sofa and staring quizzically back at him. Daryl doesn’t give him the chance to speak though, just steps forward and grabs the back of his neck, pulling him in for another punishing kiss, their teeth and lips clashing together. Rick’s hands clutch at Daryl’s hips as they bang into him, a guttural moan sounding in his throat and vibrating against Daryl’s tongue which only makes him kiss harder and deeper.

Rick thrusts him back again, following through to nip and suck at Daryl’s neck and so begins a dance of sorts between them as each one fights for dominance. They crash around the small room, sending furniture flying as they slam each other into every available surface until they somehow make their way to the bedroom where a final shove from Daryl sends them both rocketing onto the bed in a tangle of limbs.

“Okay, time out,” yells Rick, laughing breathlessly as he ends up with Daryl’s elbow in his ribs.

They disentangle themselves, rearranging their bodies into a more comfortable position on the bed, both of them lying side by side as they catch their breath. Rick rolls to face him, sliding his hand onto Daryl’s stomach to let it rest there, just watching it rise and fall with his breath for a minute and Daryl knows he has something to say, can almost hear the thoughts churning in Rick’s head.

“Is it wrong that I haven’t felt one ounce of guilt for what I did to Sam and the others – that I can’t feel guilt for it?” he asks quietly, his gaze fastened on Daryl’s abdomen. “I tore a man apart in cold blood, shredded him until there was nothing left all because he’d hurt you and I’d do it again in a heartbeat. So, what does that make me, Daryl? Am I the monster you feared I’d become?”

“I never thought that,” Daryl tells him, stretching out an arm to reach behind Rick so that he can stroke his back. “And we’d both be monsters then ‘cos I’d do the same if somebody tried to take you from me. You ain’t got nothin’ to feel guilty about. They were gonna kill us all, ‘cept the woman and maybe the kids. Don’t matter what your reason was, it was the right call – no question.”

Rick falls silent and Daryl can practically feel him retreating into himself like it’s a physical event and it scares him. He’s seen it happen before on a more extreme level when Lori died and it had been a fight to bring Rick back to them, something he’s still not sure he’s really recovered from and Daryl doesn’t want to risk anything that might trigger another downward spiral. He worries constantly that
Rick takes too much upon himself and holds himself personally responsible for any misfortune that befalls the group even if it’s out of his control. After the Governor’s failed attack on the prison and the rebuilding of their community, Daryl was more than happy to see Rick take a step back and concentrate on his family and he didn’t begrudge him that time for a second – Rick had more than earned it. Which is why Daryl hadn’t hesitated to step up and become part of the council and help with the day to day running of the prison even though he still felt out of his depth on a daily basis.

He had, naturally, been worried when he had inadvertently introduced the wolf into Rick’s life but he’d been pleasantly surprised at how well Rick has handled it – taking the new changes in his stride for the most part and adapting faster than Daryl had dared to hope. But now, he didn’t want what had happened to him let Rick backslide and start questioning the decisions he'd made. They were in a good place right now, Daryl thought, certainly he’d never felt this emotionally invested in anyone before and he didn’t want anything to risk that. If that meant keeping Rick’s mind away from the dark thoughts with any distraction he could then Daryl would do whatever he could to make that happen.

“Hey,” he asks, trying to keep his tone light to change the mood, “I know I was pretty much out of it when you found me but did I imagine it or did you call me ‘baby’ when you were hauling me out of there?”

“Maybe,” Rick answers, raising his head to look at Daryl and the guilty look on his face is all the answer Daryl needs.

“Aww, man,” Daryl sighs in exasperation, raising a hand to cover his eyes, “with Noah there?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know – you hate the mushy shit. Well, excuse me for getting a little emotional when I saw my boyfriend laying there at death’s door,” Rick states defensively and Daryl drops his hand from his face to look down at him.

“Boyfriend?” he smirks, loving the flush of color that creeps up Rick's face and reddens his ears.

“Boyfriend, lover, partner – whatever,” he grumbles in embarrassment.

“Mate,” says Daryl simply and Rick stares at him for a moment before resting his head back down against Daryl’s arm, his fingertips tracing swirls against the skin of Daryl’s abdomen.

“Noah probably didn’t hear it anyway – there was too much else going on.”

“Uh huh,” Daryl mutters, unconvinced, moving the arm that he has tucked under Rick’s head so that he can tug gently on his hair.

Rick just grins up at him, edging himself closer into Daryl's side and continuing his soft caresses of Daryl's torso which are lulling him into an almost euphoric state.

“You know…” he starts slowly, tangling his fingers deeper into Rick’s hair, “wolves mate for life.”

“I'd heard that,” Rick answers, meeting his eye. “Guess you're stuck with me then.”

“Guess so,” Daryl agrees, his heart beating a little faster at all that implies. “Well, less’n you call me baby again and then your sorry ass is growin’ old on its own.”

“Is that so?” Rick asks with a laugh, raising himself up on the bed.

Grabbing at Daryl's wrists, Rick pushes them up over his head, moving to straddle Daryl's thighs and press his body down over him.
“You’d miss my ass too much,” he whispers, scraping his teeth along Daryl’s collarbone and Daryl has to bite back the whimper that threatens to escape his lips.

“Pfft… don’t flatter yourself, Sheriff.”

“Just giving you the facts, Dixon,” Rick tells him, lifting his head from licking Daryl's throat for a moment to give him a mischievous smile and Daryl sees the earlier doubt that had been clouding his eyes has lifted and he’s fully present with Daryl once more. “But you know what was really hot?”

“Huh, what’s that?” Daryl's asks, wriggling his arms a little in Rick's grip but not really fighting his hold on him.

“Seeing your ass in that uniform, mm-hmm, you were looking good, baby.”

“Hush,” Daryl scoffs, letting the ‘baby’ slide this time. “You didn’t even have time to notice what I was wearing so don’t give me that horseshit.”

“Well, not in the heat of the moment, that’s true, but thinking on it later once I knew you were okay, it was all I could think about.”

“So, guys in uniform do it for ya, huh?” Daryl asks, still not sure that Rick isn’t pulling his leg.

“No, I never said that,” Rick corrects him, dipping his head again to suck at the skin of Daryl’s throat, “I said that you look hot in a uniform. Makes me wish I still had some of my old ones lying around.”

“You want me to dress up for you?” Daryl chuckles, the sound descending into a moan as Rick pulls on his earlobe with his teeth. “Weirdo.”

“Hey, no weirder than you getting hard every time I strap on my gun belt. Don’t think I haven’t seen the way you look at me and that I don’t know what’s going on in that filthy mind of yours, loverboy.”

Daryl moans louder as Rick works his way down his chest, the rough scratch of his beard leaving a trail of fire in its wake. Straining against Rick’s hand which is still pinning his wrists above his head, Daryl feels the wet heat of his tongue slide across his nipple before Rick presses his lips over it to suck hard. The sensation is too much for Daryl, he can already feel the sticky glide of pre-cum on his lower belly from where his cock is pressed between them, lying rigid against Rick’s and the urgency from before fills him again. Breaking free from the grip Rick has on him, Daryl grabs at his shoulders and flips him on the bed, manhandling him until he's on his back with Daryl’s hands parting his thighs. Sucking his fingers into his mouth, Daryl liberally coats them with spit and then drops his hand to push underneath Rick, slipping his forefinger into his entrance and watching Rick's eyes slide half-closed. He works him quickly, the ache that’s building in his balls making him a little rougher maybe than normal but Rick doesn’t seem to mind judging by the way he clutches at the bed sheets as Daryl inserts two and then three fingers.

Pulling out with a sharp growl, his only desire now is to be buried so deep in Rick that he won’t be able to tell where one of them ends and the other starts. Lifting his hand, Daryl spits hard into his palm and then quickly grabs his cock, mixing his saliva with the pre-cum oozing from his tip and slicking it down his shaft.

“Uh, Daryl, I think we left the lube in the bathr… uhhh,” Rick begins to say, his words disappearing into a strangled cry as Daryl thrusts his cock into his ass.

Rick’s hands flail to grab at him but Daryl’s quicker, snagging Rick’s wrists and pinning him with
one hand in the same way Rick had held him earlier. Pulling out a little to drive back in, Daryl catches sight of Rick's toes curled on either side of him – it's one of his tells, a sure sign that he's letting himself go completely and Daryl's in charge. Grinning ferociously, Daryl slams back into him, sliding his forearm along Rick's shin to clasp at his kneecap for leverage. He leans his body over Rick's, desperate to watch his face as he pounds into him, always amazed by the range of emotions he sees crossing Rick's features when he lets Daryl own him like this. He can feel the sweat breaking out along his spine and at his temples, soaking into his hair as it swings across his face and he can smell his scent rising from Rick's skin beneath him.

He's never been one for a lot of talk while he's fucking, mostly because he'd never really given two shits about any of the guys he'd slept with before and the less of a connection he made with them the better, but also because he'd always thought it sounded kind of dumb when he did try it. He was starting to find that with Rick though, he just didn't care how he sounded and more importantly he'd found that Rick would get on it, the sound of Daryl's voice turning him on often to the point of no return so Daryl had tried to put aside his inhibitions and had started getting more vocal on occasion. Most of the time he was still only capable of a range of guttural sounds – moans, sighs and growls mixed with Rick's name – but, when the mood took him and he really wanted to tease Rick in oblivion, he'd let his mouth run wild.

"Fuuuck… Rick… so fuckin’ tight. Shit, you feel so good… ahh… you like that, huh… like me balls deep inside you, poundin’ your fuckin’ hole? Yeahhh… I know you like it… look at ya, all spread open like a li’l bitch just fuckin’ begging for it."

Rick rolls under him, bucking his hips up to meet Daryl's thrusts and straining to pull his hands loose, his teeth bared in a primal snarl. Daryl keeps his grip tight on Rick's wrists, pumping his hips faster, the sweat flying from his hair as he feels himself unravel, his need to come warring with his yearning to stay connected with Rick for as long as possible. Rick is whining under him as he drives him into the bouncing mattress, a keening sound that travels directly to his cock and he loses it, letting go of Rick’s wrists to plant his hands on either side of him as he jerks his hips hard into him until he's done and his cock slips wetly from Rick's hole. Lowering his head, he tries to calm his breathing, sparks of light dancing on the edges of his vision and he shivers a little as the aftershocks of his orgasm continue to roll through him, feeling Rick's hands slide up to curl around his biceps.

“You okay in there,” Rick whispers hoarsely, giving Daryl's arms a little squeeze and he lifts his head to find Rick's eyes on him with just the smallest furrow of concern lining his brow.

Licking his lips, Daryl lowers his mouth to Rick's, teasing him in a drawn out kiss until Rick is groaning on every exhale.

“Daryl,” he urges, his lips barely leaving Daryl's.

With a smile, Daryl gives him a final kiss and then raises himself up, sitting back to lower Rick’s legs down to the bed and then reposition himself with one leg raised as he pulls Rick to him.

“C’mere,” he instructs, guiding Rick to lean against his leg as Daryl cradles him to his chest.

Sliding his hand under Rick's jaw, burying his fingers in the wiry growth of his beard, Daryl tilts his head back so that he can continue kissing him deeply. He reaches down with his other hand to wrap it around the sticky length of Rick's cock and Rick jerks against him, breaking their kiss with a loud gasp.

“Easy there, Sheriff, I gotcha,” Daryl murmurs against Rick's hair as his head lolls against his shoulder.
Daryl starts a slow stroke up and down Rick's length, relishing the weight and heat of his cock against his palm, knowing how easy it would be to just give a few sharp tugs at the right angle and get him off in an instant. But he wants to make it last as long as he can so he applies just enough friction to Rick's already over-stimulated cock to keep him on the edge without pushing him over. Rick moans in his arms, one hand snaking up under Daryl's arm to dig his fingers painfully into his shoulder, his back arching with pleasure.

“There,” Daryl soothes against Rick's damp skin, his lips brushing his temple as Rick draws in a deep breath. “Feels good, huh? You like me touching you, mmm? Damn, do you have any idea what a fuckin’ turn on you are right now – all breathless and shit and your cock… man, your fuckin’ cock… uhn… makes me want to slip that fuckin’ beast into my mouth and taste every fuckin’ last inch of you. Suck you so fuckin’ good, the way you like it. Make your eyes roll in your head until you’re shootin’ your fuckin’ load in my mouth and I’d get to swallow every fuckin’ salty drop. Shit… I’m gettin’ hard again just thinkin’ ‘bout it.”

All the while Daryl is talking, his voice low and breathy against Rick’s ear, his hand is pumping rhythmically on Rick's cock with his thumb brushing over his dripping slit on every upstroke.


“Oh yeah,” Daryl answers, increasing his pace, “you ready to come for me, baby? Come on… come for me, Rick… I want to watch you explode. Yeah, that’s it…”

Rick's body shakes in his arms as he comes, his pulsing cock jerking hard in Daryl's slippery fist as his hips thrust up from the bed and he's helpless to do anything but moan Daryl's name. Daryl stays wrapped around him, holding him close until he can feel the tremors in Rick’s nerves subsiding and the vice-like grip he'd had on Daryl’s shoulder relaxes as his hand slips down to curl around his upper arm instead.

“Asshole,” Rick grunts as Daryl releases his cock and wipes his sticky fingers across Rick's abdomen.

“Yeah, but you love me,” Daryl chuckles, sliding his hand over Rick's chest to rub at the hair there.

“I do,” Rick whispers, leaning his head back on Daryl's shoulder.

It still surprises him a little when Rick says it, either directly or in answer to something Daryl says – he's never heard the phrase so much in his life and he still hasn’t quite been able to say it back yet although Rick's made it quite clear that he doesn’t need him to. It’s not that he doesn’t want to or that he doesn’t feel it, it’s just hard for him to come out and say it – too many years behind him of being ridiculed for showing any type of emotion have thrown up a protective barrier around him that he's fighting every day to bring down. Some days he feels like he's winning the battle too, days like today where he can run his mouth off while he's making out with Rick without an ounce of self-consciousness and then there are the days where even a simple ‘thank you’ will have him regressing into himself so that he can’t even formulate a response. He hates it, is disgusted by the fact that he can’t even express a simple emotion such as gratitude without all his mental doors slamming shut and his family’s voices echoing in his ears, telling him that he's deluding himself if he thinks these people give two shits about him.

“Hey… earth to Dixon, hello,” Rick says, breaking into his thoughts.

“Huh?”

“I asked what you’re thinking about.”
“Thinkin’ it is time we headed back to the prison, maybe actually catch a little sleep for once before the sun comes up.”

Rick sighs deeply and rolls up off of the bed, standing to stretch his arms to the ceiling, giving Daryl time to admire the taut lines of his body for a moment before Rick catches him looking and Daryl looks quickly away as he stands up. Smiling Rick walks around the end of the bed to pull Daryl to him, kissing him longingly once more, his hands softly brushing over the skin of Daryl's back. Reluctantly parting his lips from Rick's, Daryl leans back knowing that they really should get moving as much as he wants to hide here forever and finds Rick smirking at him.

“What?”

“Baby. Don’t think I didn’t hear that.”

Daryl can feel the heat rising on his cheeks as he avoids Rick's gaze and steps out of his arms.

“Don’t know what you’re talkin’ ‘bout,” he says gruffly, raising his hand to scratch at the back of his head.

“Uh-huh,” Rick nods, smirking even more.

“We messed up your nice sheets,” Daryl tells him to change the subject, nodding his head at the once pristine white linens that are now painted with their sweat, dirt and cum.

“Doesn’t matter,” Rick tells him, leaning in to plant one last kiss against Daryl's lips. “There’s a whole world of linen closets out there just waiting for us to dirty them up. And I, for one, look forward to finding every single one of them.”

With a wink, he turns and heads into the living room, leaving Daryl standing there for a moment with a stupid smile creeping across his face and the image of Rick’s retreating lily-white ass burned on his brain.

“You coming, baby,” Rick calls from the other room in a singsong voice and Daryl drops his head for a moment to sigh deeply before he follows him.

Back at the prison, Rick secures the fence behind them before they take the short walk up the incline, their shoulders bumping together occasionally. Daryl's eyes seek out the top of the guard tower in the moonlight, the night air bringing him Carol’s scent and she acknowledges their return with a raise of her hand. At the base of the tower, Rick stops walking and Daryl just stops short of running into him as he turns to face him. Without a word, Rick reaches out for him, grabbing at his shirtfront to pull him into the shadowed side of the tower and press his lips to Daryl’s in a kiss that has his knees turning to water. Daryl moans softly, curving into Rick's lean body, his hands coming up to claim Rick's face as he sinks into the kiss.

The scuff of Carol's boots on the concrete platform above them as she changes position has them breaking apart, Rick grinning foolishly at Daryl.

“I’m gonna go up and check on Carol,” Daryl says quietly, curling his fingers in the front of Rick’s shirt for a moment and then letting him go.

“Alright,” Rick answers, leaning in to give Daryl one last lip-smacking kiss before he raises his voice a notch. “Night Carol.”
“Night, Officer Grimes,” she whispers back from above and Rick smiles at Daryl again before heading inside.

After watching Rick disappear inside the prison, Daryl climbs the tower, finding Carol leaning over the railing, her rifle at her side and an obvious smirk on her face as she turns to greet him.

“Daryl and Rick sittin’ in a tree…” she chants quietly, her eyes crinkling with mirth.

“Hush,” Daryl warns her, nudging her with his elbow as he props his crossbow against the railing.

“Aww, come on, Pookie, I think I get to have a little fun after watching you two make doe eyes at each other for the past few months.”

“Pfft,” Daryl scoffs, studiously looking out at the perimeter fence and not at her smiling face. “What have you been smokin’, woman, you’re crazy?”

“No, not crazy,” she says softly, “just happy for you both. You deserve this, Daryl, deserve to be loved the way Rick loves you.”

“Well, I don’t know if he…”

“I know,” she interrupts, something in her voice causing him to turn and look at her. “I saw what he did for you when you were lost, how driven he was, and how it was breaking him every second that he couldn’t find you. I saw the way he took out Sam for what he’d done to you and the way he was with you on the way home. The man was out of his mind with worry for you so don’t you ever dare question if he loves you – there’s not a single doubt in my mind that he loves you with everything that he is.”

Daryl just nods, absorbing her words, allowing himself to finally believe in the truth behind them and finding that the thought no longer scares him as it used to.

“You should go in,” Carol tells him, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Aren’t you on first watch?”

“Yeah.”

“Then scoot, mister, you have about two hours left to get some sleep. Go!”

Daryl picks up his crossbow and then, impulsively, leans in to give her a quick kiss on her cheek.

“What was that for?” she asks, her eyes wide as her fingers reach for the spot on her face where his lips had brushed against her.

“You know,” he tells her, suddenly embarrassed at his forwardness and he ducks down out of the tower before she can say anything further.

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Biting back a yawn which he blames on the heat rather than his lack of sleep, Daryl rubs a hand over his face as he walks slowly around the top of the guard tower. The afternoon sun is blazing down on him and he has to shade his eyes in order to get a good look at the fence and the woods beyond. Satisfied that nothing is amiss in the familiar landscape, he walks back around to the shaded side of the tower overlooking the prison farm. He knows that Rick is down there someplace with Carl and Hershel but he can’t quite pinpoint him among the six feet high trellises which are lush with foliage from the peas and beans planted there. A movement in the yard to his left catches his attention and he
sees Noah crossing the burning concrete balancing a plate in one hand and two bottles of water in the other. Daryl’s ears pick up the sound of his now-familiar limping gait as he disappears into the bottom of the tower before climbing up to join Daryl at the top.

“Let me guess,” Daryl says as Noah emerges onto the walkway beside him and holds out the plate he's carrying, “Carol?”

“Maggie actually. She said she knows you won’t eat unless someone brings it to you.”

“Thanks,” Daryl answers, attacking the food with his fingers and ignoring the plastic fork Noah offers him.

“So how’s it going?” Noah asks, looking out across the farm to the horizon.

“Quiet,” Daryl tells him between mouthfuls. “We’ve got a small build up on the south fence again – the geeks like that side for some reason – but Ty’s group is clearin’ them now.”

“Quiet is good,” Noah muses and Daryl catches him rubbing absent-mindedly at the welts that are still present on his neck.

Although they haven’t discussed what happened back at the jail, Daryl knows that Noah had a lucky escape – that it probably would have been just a matter of time before Sam or one of his sadistic goons had killed the kid or worse. He's integrated himself seamlessly into the group at the prison, his good nature and his insistence that he carry his weight regardless of his injury soon winning everyone over. Rick had told Daryl that he believed Noah had some serious hero worship for Daryl after their escape and would do pretty much anything that he asked him to. Daryl had disagreed, told him that they had been equals in their captivity and, if anything, he was the one that owed Noah a debt, not the other way round.

As if he knew that Daryl was thinking about him, Rick steps into view at the edge of the vine-covered trellises, stripped to the waist with his skin glistening from the sweat trickling over him and he stands for a moment, fingers splayed on his cocked hip as he makes eye contact with Daryl. Carl comes up behind him to ask him a question and Rick turns, breaking the moment, but Daryl can feel a fiery heat uncoil in the pit of his stomach as he thinks about how it would taste to lick the sweat from every inch of Rick’s warm skin right now.

“So, you and Rick, huh?” Noah asks, startling Daryl who had pretty much forgotten the boy was there and he had to wonder for a second if he had voiced his desires out loud.

“You got a problem with that?” he growls menacingly, years of ingrained instincts for keeping himself hidden surging forward at the perceived threat of exposure.

“Me? What… no!” Noah answers and the genuine surprise in his voice at Daryl’s question relaxes Daryl down from his aggressive stance.

“Good,” he says, a little less gruffly, “‘cos it ain’t nobody’s business ‘cept mine and his, ya hear me?”

“Sure thing,” Noah nods, bobbing his head rapidly. “Hell, I think I have more to worry about with you two than if you’re bumpin’ uglies or not.”

“Hey, you know we ain’t a threat, right? Me n’ Rick. It ain’t about that. What we are, what we do, it’s all about protecting our family, protecting this…” Daryl says passionately, sweeping his arm out to encompass the whole prison.
“I know,” Noah tells him solemnly, meeting his eyes dead on and not wavering and Daryl can see that he understands.

“You weren’t afraid, back at the jail, not even when they put you in that cage with me. How come?”

“Because what could’ve been scarier than the nightmare I was already living? If what was under that blanket was something that might of ended it – ended me – then I was ready to go.”

“And now?” Daryl asks curiously and Noah ponders a minute before answering.

“Well now, I think I’ve been blessed with a second chance, been given something that’s worth fighting to stay alive for and if that means that my world view now includes benevolent werewolves then who am I to argue with that? Gotta adapt to survive in this world.”

“Yes you do,” Daryl agrees, thinking his respect for this kid has just grown even more.

“Well, I guess I better get back inside,” Noah tells him, taking Daryl's empty plate from him. “Carol asked if I could help her with the kids’ storytime this afternoon.”

“Lucky you,” Daryl chuckles sarcastically.

“Later, baby,” Noah throws back with a smirk as he goes inside the tower and Daryl feels his cheeks blaze with embarrassment.

He's about to let rip at Noah when he catches himself, realizing that this is the first truly lighthearted thing he's heard from the kid since they rescued him. It also occurs to him that Noah never knew him before, doesn’t know the man that Daryl used to be or how hard he's working to escape where he came from. To Noah, Daryl is just somebody that he can share a personal joke with, a friend that he can tease because that’s what friends do together. It’s just another reminder to Daryl of the clean slate that this world has given him, the opportunity to be somebody other than he was and to become the man he's always wanted to be.

“Bite me,” he calls loudly after Noah, hearing his chuckling response floating back up the stairs.

Making another round of the tower to scan the area, Daryl thinks to himself that the family he’s chosen for himself, rather than the one he was born into, is everything to him now and he’d die to protect any one of them. He also thinks that Rick still has some serious payback coming for Noah hearing his term of endearment.
The crisp morning air raises the hair on Rick’s arms as he makes his way out to the field, the sun barely even clearing the tops of the trees as yet. He has a busy day of work planned which is why he’s out here already while most of the prison’s inhabitants are barely wiping the sleep from their eyes. He glances at the fence as he marks out the next plot of land to be tilled ready for planting,
checking the buildup of walkers overnight and feeling a little dismayed at how big the cluster is along the south fence. There’s still no answer as to why they keep congregating there but he makes a mental note to talk to Hershel about getting some people to shore up the fence a little better in that area. Satisfied for now that they won’t pose any immediate threat before the cleanup crew can get out there, Rick turns back to the task at hand. He sets to work breaking the hard earth, knowing that after breakfast he’ll have a handful of people out here to help him including Carl but, for now, he can just immerse himself in the routine of manual labor.

His mind wanders as he digs, turning over other tasks he has planned for both the farm and the prison itself before his thoughts turn to the life he's trying to build here and what the future might hold for all of the people under his care. So much has happened and so much has been lost since the day they first claimed this place as their own but he's really starting to believe that they can make it work here and actually have a new life in these walls if they work together to make it strong. He knows that some of the others, Hershel, Michonne – even Daryl to a certain extent – believe that he's checked out as leader, that he's removed himself from all the hard decisions. And, in a way, it’s true – he has stepped back but only because he finally has breathing room to focus on the bigger picture. If they’re going to continue to live here at the prison and make this their home then a lot of work needs to be done to make it sustainable for their increasing population. He's not naive, he knows that the threat outside the walls from both walkers and humans hasn’t gone away but he also knows that the others can handle it. Right now, he needs his focus to be on providing for his family rather than fighting for it or none of them are going to make it. He also needs, more than anything, to set an example for Carl.

His son has grown up way too fast and, although Rick has always tried to make the best choices for him, he knows that he's failed to always be there when Carl has needed him the most. When they lost Lori, Rick had blamed his own weakness for her death, cursing himself every day for not having finished off Andrew when he'd had the chance. Instead he'd made the wrong call, assuming the walkers would take care of the problem for him – wanting to make the kid’s end as brutal as he’d made it for Rick’s people – but he’d severely underestimated Andrew’s survival instinct, a choice that ultimately ended with Carl having to put his mother down. It was an act so incomprehensible that Rick’s mind had been unable to process it and his descent into madness had been swift and all-consuming. Eventually his children had brought him out of it but he knew that it was never going away – the capacity for such unbridled rage and single-minded focus was always simmering in the back of his mind and coloring all his consequent choices.

Daryl had also played a huge part in his salvation and Rick wasn’t afraid to admit that now. When he’d come out of his fugue state and truly comprehended how Daryl had stepped up, not only to care for the entire group but also Rick's children, he had felt humbled and his respect for Daryl had grown exponentially. The attraction that had always been there, maybe even right from the start in Atlanta if Rick was being honest with himself, just grew in him more each day. There was something so raw and so real about Daryl that Rick was inexorably drawn to him – seeing easily past the gruff façade and quick temper to the sparks of the true man underneath. He could see the potential in Daryl just bursting to be free and he did everything in his power to nurture that, knowing that the payoff would be worth its weight in gold. As the rift between him and Shane grew beyond all saving, Rick had found himself looking more and more to Daryl’s counsel and he'd started to see the changes in Daryl’s behavior as he thrived on the positive reinforcement Rick was giving him. Still, Rick had tried to keep his thoughts of Daryl as potentially something more than his right-hand man under lock and key, buried deep in the back of his mind. He didn’t want his burgeoning attraction to him to start clouding his judgment in any way and, to begin with at least, he was pretty sure that he was just setting himself up for a world of hurt by lusting over someone he was never going to have.

So, he had kept his desires buried deep, concentrating his focus on building the friendship and trust between them, saving his more intimate thoughts of Daryl for when he was alone in his bunk.
Sleepless in the dark hours before dawn, he had felt safe letting his body and mind play out his deepest fantasies about his new best friend until he'd come to the conclusion that he was just making it worse for himself and he'd tried to keep Daryl out of his thoughts altogether in anything other than a platonic way. He had wrongly assumed, just like everyone else, that Carol and Daryl's relationship was more than just friendship and, while he'd never considered himself a jealous man, he had to admit he was envious of the easy intimacy Carol had with him. Ironically, he had finally given up all pretense of denial at his feelings for Daryl the morning after the wolf had bitten him in the woods. He was already half out of his mind, part of it constantly coming back to the fact that he knew beyond any doubt that he'd seen Daryl looking back at him from the monstrous beast's eyes while the rational part was screaming that he was just projecting his desires out there to cope with what had been a surreal experience to say the least. When he had rounded the corner of the yard, lost in his thoughts, and had found Daryl and Carol sharing what was obviously an intimate moment between them judging by the way they'd sprung apart at his arrival, he had just lost it mentally. Seeing them together was a cold slap to his face, his heart clenching painfully in his chest for a moment as his eyes had briefly met with Daryl’s and he had walked away secure in the now undeniable knowledge that he was completely in love with Daryl Dixon and all hope was lost.

When Daryl had asked him to go on the run with him – his poorly disguised attempt at reverse psychology covering up something more urgent that Rick could read in his eyes – he had been tempted at first to decline but the thought of being alone out there, just the two of them, was something that Rick couldn’t deny he wanted even if he knew he was playing with emotional fire. Of course, everything had turned on a dime with that trip and Rick had more life-changing issues to deal with than his unrequited love for Daryl. Once the initial shock had worn off and he'd begun adjusting to his new life, Rick had found that he was thinking about Daryl more and more, especially after Daryl’s declaration that he and Carol were nothing more than good friends. The physical attraction was undeniable and he’d found his gaze lingering on Daryl’s physique whenever he could get away with it, finding it both a blessing and a curse that they now found themselves naked together way more than before. He wasn’t sure if he was deluding himself but he began to imagine that he saw Daryl shooting surreptitious glances in his direction too when he thought Rick wasn’t looking. Those looks caused Rick to start torturing himself with thoughts of new possibilities but he still wasn’t sure if he was really seeing them or if Daryl was just being extra attentive because of the whole wolf thing. And it wasn’t as though he could just come out and ask Daryl if he liked men – he might have progressed a long way from the surly redneck that had come crashing out of the trees on the day they met but Rick was still sure that asking that question might get him a punch to the jaw whether the answer was yes or no.

So he had continued to make himself emotionally crazy until the day it had all come pouring out of him and into the kiss he had laid on Daryl, pouring all his desires into that one act, completely unable to restrain himself. It was a ridiculous move on his part, one that he'd initially thought had torn apart everything they’d built together but, in the end it had paid off and now Rick couldn’t imagine how his life would be if he couldn’t love Daryl. He knows they’re bound to each other now, in it for the long run however long that may be in their world and the knowledge gives him hope. It’s what keeps him plugging away, day after day, to build a better life for his family, to keep them protected from the outside world, even if that means he has to be a farmer instead of a lawman. For now he's content to work the earth and fortify the walls, expending all his energies on creating rather than destroying and nurturing his relationships as well as his crops.

“Dad,” Carl says, appearing beside him in the field and handing him a bottle of water which Rick gratefully takes and starts chugging down, ‘can we talk?’

Rick lowers the bottle from his lips, regarding his son over the top and seeing the dirt smudged on his
face and caking his hands from helping out in the field all day. He nods his assent, wondering what’s on the boy’s mind this time and smoothes a smile as Carl looks around to make sure nobody is in earshot of them.

“I know about you and Daryl,” his son states, giving him such an earnest look that Rick feels the blood rushing from his face. “About what you are.”

“What we are?” Rick asks, swallowing thickly around the boulder-sized lump of anxiety that’s threatening to choke his airway.

“Yeah… you know…” Carl answers, dragging his toe in the dirt and looking anywhere but at Rick, his face flushed a deep red, “together.”

Rick sighs out a huff of relief, clasping one hand to the back of his neck as he tries to collect his thoughts before talking, wanting to handle this new development the right way.

“And how do you feel about that?” he asks, tilting his head a little to be able to see Carl’s face.

“It’s cool, I guess,” Carl shrugs noncommittally in that laid back teenage fashion which Rick thinks he’ll never decipher and he shoots a glance at his father. “I mean, Daryl’s cool… and he was nice to me after… when mom died and he helped take care of Judy when you were…”

Carl trails off and Rick rubs a hand over his beard, his brain racing to keep up with the drama his life seems to be these days. He’d known this day was coming, figured it would only be a matter of time before he’d have to come clean now that his and Daryl’s relationship was such an integral part of his life. It was just one of those things that he’d been avoiding though as he wasn’t even really sure where he would start this conversation. When Lori’s pregnancy had been announced to the group and Carl was suddenly a fountain of questions, Rick had sat him down and had the talk with him. After he’d finished with the whole birds and bees part, he’d made sure to expand their conversation to include love and all the different forms it could take. He’d thoroughly explained that anyone could fall in love with someone else no matter of their gender, race or religion and that every type of love was as valid and as real as the next and nobody was ever to make him feel any differently for the choices he made. Carl had nodded his solemn agreement in the way only an eleven year old could and Rick had hoped that his message had been understood. Now it seemed that what he had been trying to express that day had actually hit home as Carl straightens up and meets his father’s gaze full on.

“Do you love him?”

“Yes,” Rick answers, knowing that if he’s anything less than honest in this moment, Carl will see right through it.

“Then I want you to be happy. You and mom… you fought a lot… even before all this happened.”

“Carl, I loved your mom,” Rick tells him, reaching out a hand to squeeze his shoulder. “I just wasn’t ‘in love’ with her, do you understand the difference?”

“I – I think so,” Carl answers, his eyes fixed on Rick’s.

“And you know that has nothing to do with how much I love you and Judy, right?”

Carl nods his head and Rick squeezes his shoulder again before letting him go.

“I just… I just don’t want you to have to hide it – you and Daryl – because of me. You shouldn’t have to be apart if you want to live together. I’m totally okay with it. I was talking to Beth and she
“Wait,” Rick interrupts, pinching the bridge of his nose and scrunching his eyes shut for a moment before blinking them open to look at Carl again, “Beth knows?”

“Dad,” Carl says in that tone which implies that Rick is being colossally dense about something, “I think pretty much everyone knows.”

“Good grief,” Rick mutters.

“That’s what I’m saying – nobody cares, at least, I don’t think they do, so if you and Daryl were staying quiet because you thought you were protecting me then you don’t need to anymore. I’m fine with it if you’re together. Everyone should get to be happy when they can now, isn’t that what you always tell me? You shouldn’t wait – things move way too fast now.”

“Yes, they do,” Rick agrees, thinking exactly how fast his son has grown up. “I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Cool,” Carl answers, his face lighting up in a wide smile.

“Now why don’t you go wash up before dinner and see if you can find Patrick to hang out with for a while, have some fun with those comics of yours. I’ll be in soon.”

“Yes sir,” Carl responds eagerly, turning to run off then stopping himself. “Hey, Dad?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think Daryl will teach me how to use his crossbow?”

“I don’t know, Carl, you’ll have to ask him,” Rick sighs, realizing how lucky he is if this is his son’s only agenda in approving his father’s new relationship.

“Yesss,” Carl crows, racing off.

“But not tonight,” Rick yells after him, uncertain if he’s been heard and then muttering to himself, “tonight, I have to talk to him.”

He finds Daryl in the basement meat locker, paring the skins from a brace of squirrel carcasses ready for Carol to make into her signature stew. A rather green-looking Patrick is assisting him, his large eyes swimming behind his glasses in the harsh glare from the fluorescent tube Daryl’s using to work by.

“Hey Patrick,” Rick greets him, “I think Carl is looking for you, why don’t you go up and see if you can find him. I’ll help out Daryl.”

“Yes sir, thank you,” Patrick stammers, practically shoving the bucket of dismembered squirrel parts he has in his hand at Rick as he bolts for the door. “Mr. Grimes, Mr. Dixon.”

Daryl snorts as the kid’s retreating footsteps echo down the hall and he shares an amused look with Rick.

“Mr. Dixon,” he grunts. “I always wonder who’n the hell he’s talkin’ to when he says that. Even my old man never went by ‘Mr. Dixon’ less’n it was the law or the town callin’ him it.”
“What was he even doing down here?” Rick asks, setting the bucket down on the floor at Daryl’s feet so he can throw in the last skin.

“So you had him stand there and hold a bucket for no good reason?”

“Hey, I was teachin’ him stuff. Kid needs to toughen up a little.”

Rick chuckles but his mind is still on his conversation with Carl and he's wondering how he’s going to broach the subject with Daryl. They work together in silence for a few minutes, cleaning up the work area and packing away the meat ready to take upstairs to the kitchen.

“Alright, out with it,” Daryl demands and Rick raises an eyebrow at him. “I know you didn’t just come down here to help me skin squirrels. There’s somethin’ on your mind, I can see it all over your face. Less’n you just came lookin’ for me ‘cos you missed me.”

Rick smiles as Daryl bumps his hip, sucking in a deep breath as he wipes the gore from his hands onto a nearby rag before leaning his shoulder against the cool stone wall and fixing Daryl with a neutral look.

“Carl knows about us,” he says calmly, watching as Daryl’s eyes go comically wide.

“Holy shit!” Daryl exclaims, pacing the small room back and forth. “How? We’re always so careful. Did he see us both Shift or just you? What did he say? Fuck!”

“No, no,” Rick says, reaching out a hand to lay on Daryl’s arm and stop his frenetic movements before he gets even more worked up. “Not that part… he knows about us.”

“Ohh,” Daryl answers, realization dawning on his face. “Oh!”

“Yeah.”

“How did he take it?” Daryl asks, biting nervously at his lip in such a way that it makes Rick want to bite it for him.

“He was...” Rick pauses to find the right words, feeling the weight of possibilities rise up as the full impact of Carl’s acceptance sinks in, “not fazed in the slightest. In fact, he told me that you and I should live together if that’s what we want to do.”

“Get the fuck outta here!” Daryl snorts skeptically.

“I’m serious,” Rick smiles, the whole conversation with Carl taking on a slightly surreal slant in his mind. “Oh, and he says everybody else knows too so we don’t have to hide anymore.”

Rick watches as the look on Daryl’s face turns through worry, shock, embarrassment and then finally back to worry once more and he leans his back against the wall next to Rick, his shoulders sagging.

“So what do we do?” he asks, fixing Rick with a pleading look.

“Find a cell big enough for two,” Rick laughs, feeling strangely liberated.

“I’m serious, Rick,” Daryl practically yells, pushing himself off the wall to stand in front of him, his hands balled at his sides.

“So am I,” Rick yells back and he realizes that he truly is.
“Stop.”

“Why? What’s the point in keeping it quiet anymore if everybody already knows? We knew it was gonna come out sooner or later, it was inevitable. Why shouldn’t we live how we want to live? For me, Carl was the only thing holding me back but it seems like I was the one worrying about it, not him.”

“You’re really serious?” Daryl asks in disbelief, shaking his head.

“I am.”

“I don’t know, man, it’s just…”

“What? Wrong? Immoral? Offensive? Let me tell you something, Daryl, all of those prejudices don’t mean shit anymore. And if one of those people out there – one of our family – is still clinging to that crap, well then, I don’t think I want them as part of this group anymore. None of them, not one, has the right to tell me who I can and can’t love and I love you, Daryl Dixon. Now will you fucking move in with me or not?”

He stands, his own fists now tightly clenched and his heart beating faster with the adrenalin that’s spiking from the passion he's feeling, and waits as Daryl eyes him stubbornly for a minute before speaking.

“Well there’s no need to make such a song n’ dance about it,” he smirks, pulling Rick to him by his belt buckle. “Geez, all ya had to do was ask nicely, Sheriff.”

“Fuck you,” Rick mutters as Daryl covers his mouth with his own, licking his way against Rick’s tongue until both of them are fighting to breathe.

“Plan on it,” Daryl growls, sliding his hand down the front of Rick’s jeans to cup him tightly making him hiss between his teeth.

“Not romantic,” Rick laughs, pushing Daryl back and wrinkling up his nose at their surroundings.

“You tellin’ me you don’t like my meat?” Daryl asks, raising his eyebrow suggestively which just makes Rick laugh harder.

“Oh, I like your meat just fine, Dixon, no doubt about that but right now I’m thinking I’d prefer it in my bed tonight instead of in here.”

“ Damn, you’re all about the fancy shit, ain’t ya? Clean sheets, sharin’ a bed. Who’d’ve thought Rick Grimes was gonna be such high maintenance.”

“Get your meat, Squirrel-Boy, let’s go,” he grumbles, pushing Daryl in the direction of the door.

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The logistics of actually moving in together proved nearly impossible and led to a series of heated but hushed arguments as they spent the evening deciding what to do. All of the bunks in both ‘C’ and ‘D’ blocks that could be adapted to fit two people had already been claimed and it went unspoken between them that neither of them felt comfortable being any further away from the core of their family. They’re about to give up and just have Daryl move his belongings into Rick’s cell – a suggestion that had turned his earlier enthusiasm into a state of sullen resignation – when Carol crosses the yard to where they’re sitting and wedges herself between them, looking from one to the other.
“You’re making everyone nervous,” she whispers, leaning in. “What’s going on?”

Rick glances over her shoulder at the rows of tables set up by the barbecue pit and catches a dozen pairs of eyes turned in their direction, all of which suddenly find something else to look at when they see his face.

“Man,” Daryl mutters, pushing his hand back through his hair. “I’m done with it. You tell her what’s goin’ on, I’m goin’ for a walk.”

“Daryl,” Rick urges quietly, wanting him to stay but Daryl just waves a hand in his direction and stalks off across the yard, scowling in the direction of the rest of the group as he passes.

“Should I be worried about something?” Carol asks, sliding closer to Rick and keeping her voice pitched low.

“No,” Rick answers, burying his face in his hands for a second before dragging them down to fold on the table in front of him. “Carl came to me this afternoon and told me he knew Daryl and I are together, said he was fine with it.”

“Oh, Rick, that’s great news,” Carol says, reaching out to squeeze his hand. “No more secret trysts on the roof.”

“Excuse me?” Rick asks, feeling his cheeks flush in embarrassment.

“Oh, come on,” Carol says, leaning back and giving him her most mischievous grin, “you think I haven’t seen you two sneaking back down in the early hours, looking like two cats that definitely got the cream.”

“Carol!” Rick exclaims loudly then lowers his voice again. “And there’s the problem. Now that we can be together, out in the open so to speak, there’s no place to go. Daryl won’t move into my cell because it makes him feel too trapped and we can hardly share the perch unless we want to sell tickets every night, if you know what I mean. And neither of us wants to get too far from the rest of you, that’s a given, plus I have Judith to think of, I need space for her crib. The fact that Daryl even agreed is a damned miracle but, unless I figure something out soon, I’m pretty sure he’s going to get cold feet.”

“You done?” Carol asks when Rick finally stops to take a breath. “You’re such an idiot, I swear… well both of you are. Come with me.”

Rick’s a little too shocked to do anything but get up and follow her as she leads him inside the prison, taking a left turn at the entrance to their cell block and walking down the short length of corridor before turning the corner that leads to the stairs to the second level. There she stops outside of a door nestled snugly into the wall at the bottom of the staircase and turns to look expectantly at Rick who just stares right back at her.

“Keys,” she prompts him, in an exasperated tone like she can’t believe he’s being so dumb and he unhooks the ring from his belt.

Taking them from him, he watches as her slender fingers deftly find the right one and she unlocks the door in front of them, swinging it inwards to reveal a room Rick had obviously pretty much forgotten about. He steps inside, looking around in the dying evening light coming from the barred windows and then turns to smile at Carol.

The room was small, that was for sure, but it was still twice the size of any of the cells and had been used as an office come break room for the guards on duty in ‘C’ and ‘D’ who didn’t want to make it
all the way over to the main block when they needed to take a short break. There was nothing inside now except for a desk and chair along with a small table that had held a coffee-maker which now stood empty - the battered sofa that had been along one wall having been commandeered for additional seating in the common room.

“I think if you ask him real nice, Glenn will help you drag a couple of mattresses in here,” Carol says with a warm smile. “I’ll start packing your boyfriend’s shit.”

Rick laughs as she turns and walks out, shaking his head at her ingenuity and wondering where he'd be without her.

A couple of hours later and with a little help from Carol, Glenn and Maggie – who kept smirking at him constantly – the former prison office had been transformed into a pretty cozy bedroom. Carl had watched the move from one of the tables in the common room, not offering to help but instead whispering with Beth each time Rick passed them by, and although Rick had tried not to eavesdrop, he caught a few words of approval from his son that made him smile to himself. He’d even been pleasantly surprised when Hershel had come inside on his way to bed and, quickly figuring out what was going on, had clapped him on the shoulder with a muttered, “It’s about damn time”, leaving Rick to wonder if there was indeed anybody in their group that hadn’t known what was going on. When he had been about to move Judith’s crib as the final piece to complete his new quarters, Carol had laid a hand on his arm and told him no, that he was to move it into her cell instead. This had led to a fifteen minute argument which she had inevitably won by asking him just how amorous he was going to feel knowing that his baby daughter was just a few feet away from his bed at all times. Reluctantly Rick had given in, knowing that he was within shouting distance and that there was nobody more qualified than Carol that he would entrust his daughter’s safety to.

By the time everything was settled, Rick was quite sure that there wasn’t anyone in their extended family who wasn’t now fully aware of the new living arrangements. Now the only thing missing was the one person who was completely clueless to what had been going on in his absence and Rick sets out to find him. It doesn’t take him more than a few minutes to track him down, up in the guard tower keeping watch with Noah and Rick makes sure he has Daryl’s attention before he turns away and walks slowly back to the prison, knowing perfectly well that it will be easy enough for Daryl to find him when he’s ready. Everybody is starting to bed down for the night as he heads inside, paying one last visit to Carol’s cell to kiss Judith goodnight and then unlocking the door to his new room. Once inside, he leaves the deadbolt unlocked to save Daryl the trouble of finding the right key when he gets there and quickly undresses to lay on the double layer of mattresses Glenn had helped him haul into the room. Rick had laid them out on the floor, securing them together so that there’d be no chance of them moving apart no matter how enthusiastic their users become. Hearing Daryl’s soft tread in the hallway, hesitating for just a second before he pushes open the door, Rick smiles to himself and lays back with his arms folded behind his head.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Daryl mutters, hastily closing the door behind him, avoiding looking at Rick’s body which is lit by the soft glow of a single hurricane lamp on the table.

“It locks,” Rick informs him with a smirk and Daryl fumbles with the deadbolt for a second before turning back to him.

As soon as Rick sees his face, he knows that he’s screwed up somehow as Daryl’s brow is etched with lines and there’s a nervous look in his eyes.

“Hey,” he says, climbing to his feet and stepping into Daryl’s personal space to lay his hands lightly on his hips. “What’s wrong? You don’t like it?”

“’s not that,” Daryl mumbles and Rick can feel the anxiety rolling off of him in waves.
“Then what? It’s just us, same as it always is, nothing to worry about.”

“Yeah, ’cept now we have an audience and everyone knows our business.”

“Daryl, nobody knows anything,” Rick tells him, slipping a hand up to clasp around his neck, tangling his fingers in Daryl’s hair. “It’s no different from Maggie and Glenn or… who’s that couple over in ‘D’… Nicole and..?"

“Mark.”

“Nicole and Mark, it’s no different than them being together. Hell, Glenn and Maggie moved out to the guard tower and everyone knows why but nobody cares, Daryl. It’s a part of life and, like it or not, this is our life so we can either deal with the hand we’ve been dealt or we can fold and move on. I know this is hard for you, being exposed like this and it’s a little weird for me too, I’m not gonna lie, but I have faith that it will work out. In a few days people won’t even think twice about it, they have enough on their plates to worry about without paying attention to where we sleep or thinking about what we do behind closed doors. You just have to trust me on that. Can you do that for me? Can you trust me?”

“Always,” Daryl whispers, letting out a shaky breath and Rick leans his forehead against his, clasping tighter at the back of his neck.

“If you’re not comfortable, if you have doubts, you have to tell me, understood? I can’t do this if you’re not here with me one hundred percent… I don’t want to. I want this to be our life, Daryl, I want you. But if that means we go back to how things were, sleeping separately and keeping our relationship just between us, then that’s what we’ll do, okay? This is your out, if you’re not sure or you don’t want to do this, then now’s your time to speak up. I’m not going to make you do anything you’re not comfortable with – I don’t want you to do this just because you think it will make me happy – I need you to do it because you want to, you get me? So, what do you say?”

Rick leans back, keeping his hand wrapped loosely at the back of Daryl’s neck and trying to read what’s going on in his eyes as Daryl just stares silently back at him and all Rick can hear in the room is the racing beat of both their hearts.
Daryl doesn’t speak, he doesn’t have to as he presses his lips against Rick’s in a heartfelt kiss. He hopes it’s pretty obvious that he’s all in on their relationship – that regardless of any feelings he might be having about revealing themselves to their family, he is fully committed to Rick and to making what they have work. He wraps his arms around Rick’s waist, pulling him in as their tongues meet,
and the heat from Rick's skin has him yearning to feel it against his own. Rick, as always, is one step ahead of him, his fingers working to undress Daryl slowly while they maintain the intensity of their kiss. It doesn't quite work that smoothly though as Rick releases Daryl's pants to drop to his ankles and Daryl practically falls on his ass trying to step out of them without pulling his lips from Rick's. Luckily Rick's super-fast reflexes stop him from taking a tumble and he steadies him with a firm hand as he discards his pants and boots before straightening back up into Rick's embrace. Smiling at him, Rick reaches up to comb his fingers through Daryl's hair which is ruffled from his haste to pull his shirt off without unbuttoning it. Daryl practically purrs under his touch, leaning into his caress and tightening his hands around Rick's waist before he glances around the room.

“You did all this by yourself?” he asks.

“Well, Glenn helped get the mattresses in here and Carol hauled all your stuff down here from the perch, giggling like a damn schoolgirl the whole time. I think she’s more excited about this than we are.”

“Maybe,” Daryl chuckles, leaning in for another kiss then stopping himself. “Hey… where’s Judy?”

“Carol has her.”

“You okay with that?” Daryl asks cautiously.

“Yeah,” Rick sighs, letting go of Daryl just enough to lead him to the bed to lay down. “Well, yes and no. I wasn’t too sure to start with but I guess Carol’s right. She always is.”

“Annoyin’, ain’t it?” Daryl grins, tucking himself into his favorite position at Rick's side and wriggling a little to get the lumps in the mattress evened out.

“Uh-huh,” Rick agrees, stroking his fingers against the curve of Daryl's spine. “So, you’re really okay with this, no bullshit?”

“No bullshit, I ain’t gonna lie, it’s weird but I think I can get used to it – I want to get used to it,” Daryl answers honestly, rubbing his fingertips across Rick's chest, loving the feel of the hair there against his skin.

“Good,” Rick murmurs, pressing his lips to Daryl’s temple.

Daryl leans into his touch for a moment and then rolls out of Rick’s embrace to rise to his knees and stretch out to turn off the lamp.

“Need one o’ them clapper thingys,” he mutters as he settles back down against Rick's side.

“You sleepy,” Rick asks with a smile in his voice as Daryl wriggles against him again, trying to regain his cozy spot.

“Nope.”

“What… you don’t like doing it with the lights on? You suddenly get all shy on me Dixon? Want to get under the covers?”

“I can see you just fine,” Daryl growls, tilting his head back to let Rick see the luminosity of his eyes.

“Damn… that’s seriously hot as fuck, you know that?”

“Yeah?” Daryl mumbles, blushing just a little as he always does when Rick compliments him or tells
“Yeah,” Rick breathes, sliding his hand to grasp Daryl's chin and leaning in to kiss him softly.

Daryl parts his lips slightly, just the tip of his tongue emerging to meet Rick's, their kiss gentle and unhurried. He pushes away the unwanted thoughts that are tickling at the edges of his consciousness, trying to ignore the fact that he and Rick are suddenly an ‘official’ couple and that their entire family is on the other side of the door like a single faceless entity silently judging what they’re doing. Letting himself become immersed in nothing but the taste and touch of Rick that’s filling his world, he inhales deeply, drawing Rick's scent into him and he moans a little on his exhale, feeling his mouth moisten. Rick pushes his tongue a little further, stroking it softly against Daryl's as his thumb rubs along his jawline, brushing through the bristly hair on his chin. Daryl resumes his fingertip exploration of Rick's chest, lingering for a moment on the puckered nubs of his nipples and then tracking his way down across his ribs. Skimming the taut skin of his abdomen, Daryl’s fingers find their way to his favorite spot – the trail of hair leading from Rick's navel down to his groin. He scratches his blunt nails through the sparse hair, working his way lower to where the patch widens and grows denser. He loves the full thatch of jet black hair that surrounds Rick's cock and contrasts starkly against his pale flesh. He loves to bury his nose in it when he has Rick buried deep in his throat, inhaling the rich essence of his scent where it’s at its strongest and he likes nothing more than to tease him about the few streaks of pure silver that he finds nestled in the darkness.

He digs his fingers into the wiry growth, tugging and stroking over and over, ignoring the semi-hard flesh of Rick's cock that he knows his touch is instigating. He can feel his own length hardening as he teases Rick, pressed against Rick's thigh, and he starts a slow rock of his hips to provide the minimum amount of friction.

“Mmm… Daryl…” Rick exhales as they part lips, laying his head back against the pillow while Daryl scrapes his teeth along his jaw.

Sucking at the sensitive skin over Rick’s pulse point, Daryl slips his fingers around the warm flesh of Rick's shaft, just giving a light squeeze. The resulting moan this brings from Rick's lips has Daryl’s arousal kicking into overdrive and he swiftly changes position to kneel beside him and take him more firmly in hand as he licks his way up Rick's cock.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Rick hisses out through clenched teeth as Daryl swirls his tongue over the tip. Grinning to himself, he slides his lips over the head, sucking noisily for a minute before relaxing his jaw to take all of Rick's length. He whines a little under his breath, deep throating Rick who is clutching tightly at Daryl’s hair as he slowly bobs his head.

“Enough,” Rick growls abruptly, yanking Daryl’s mouth away from his slick cock with an audible pop.

Rising up, he grabs at Daryl, tipping him over onto his back and following through to straddle his face, leaning away down Daryl’s body. Daryl just has time to admire the view of Rick's spread cheeks above his eyes and the rite fullness of his balls before Rick guides the tip of his cock against Daryl’s lips once more and Daryl eagerly tilts his head back to accept his length. Rick pushes slowly in and out, adjusting his position until they’re both comfortable, his breathing stuttering as Daryl increases his suction around him.

“Fuck… such a dirty mouth, Dixon… you like that, huh, like me fuckin’ that filthy mouth? Yeah… uhhh… I know you do… well, how about this then…”

He gasps, Rick's cock slipping momentarily from his lips as he feels Rick take a firm grip around the
base of his cock and slide his mouth wetly down his shaft. He bucks his hips up a little into the wet heat of Rick’s mouth, his eyes practically rolling in his head from the sensation but a warning growl from Rick has him concentrating on the task at hand and he reaches up to guide Rick’s dripping shaft back between his lips. With a grunt, Rick starts his slow thrusts back into Daryl’s mouth, controlling his movements enough that Daryl can feel his whole body throbbing with the tension where he has his hands resting on Rick's hips. At odds with his measured movements into Daryl’s mouth, Rick is sucking him off hard and fast, his fist following his lips as he tugs tightly on Daryl’s cock.

Daryl is pinned, Rick owning him completely, but he doesn’t feel trapped, doesn’t have any urge to break free. Instead he gives himself to Rick, letting him fill him and pleasure him all at once while Daryl just loses himself in the multitude of sensations that are assaulting his body. Rick gives a sloppy blowjob, something Daryl's always ribbing him for but right now he doesn’t care as what he’s lacking in finesse, he’s more than making up for in enthusiasm and Daryl can feel himself teetering on the edge. He's pushed over by a deep growl from Rick that reverberates along the length of his cock and makes his balls tingle. He stiffens under Rick, choking just a little on his cock which he slides from Daryl's mouth, before he gives Daryl’s head one last suck and pulls off. The heat of his fist is wrapped tightly around Daryl’s cock as he pumps him fast, Daryl knowing that he likes to watch him come, and he grunts loudly as he shoots his load. His mind stutters as he succumbs to his orgasm, all his synapses firing at once as he feels Rick licking him clean, his tongue lapping at Daryl’s slit until he’s trembling under him.

“Take it,” Rick demands and, in his blissed out state, Daryl has no idea for a second what he's talking about.

Rick reminds him by lowering his cock back to Daryl’s lips and Daryl readily opens his mouth to guide him back in, delighting in the mewl of pleasure he hears from Rick as he hums around him.

“Yesss,” Rick mumbles, ‘that’s it…all of it… fuck… Daryl…”

His formerly slow thrusts are gone as he starts fucking Daryl’s mouth hard. Bringing one hand around from the grip he still has on his hips, Daryl teases at Rick’s entrance for a second before pushing his forefinger inside. Rick falters in his movements, a hiss escaping his lips at the sudden burn and Daryl smirks around his cock as he works his finger deeper into Rick's ass. With a grunt, Rick resumes his thrusting and there’s an undeniable urgency to his movements that Daryl knows means he's close to his release.

“Baby…I…I’m…” Rick moans and, as he fills Daryl’s mouth with his cum, Daryl thinks to himself that he's actually starting to like it when Rick calls him that especially in these moments when Rick is completely his.

He swallows deep, sucking on Rick until he's finished and pulls himself from Daryl’s lips to pitch forward on top of him where Daryl lets him lay for a minute until he regains control of his senses.

“Offa me,” Daryl growls, pushing up a little from the mattress. “I’m tired of lookin’ at your ass.”

Rick answers him with nothing more than a muffled grunt somewhere in the vicinity of Daryl's kneecaps. When he doesn’t give any signs of moving, Daryl raises his head a little and bares his teeth to nip at the tight flesh of Rick's ass which is still spread in front of him. With a yelp, Rick rolls off of him and sits up, one hand rubbing at his sore cheek and Daryl smiles at the mess his partner is in. Rick’s hair is sticking out all over, his pupils are so large and lust blown that there’s hardly any blue visible apart from a tiny glowing ring around the edges and Daryl can see traces of his cum still glistening on Rick's chin and cheeks. Crossing the space between them, Daryl crawls onto Rick's lap, first kissing him roughly on the lips and then cupping his face to swipe his tongue across the sticky patches on Rick's skin before pressing their mouths together once more. Their kiss is deep and
languid, each of them tasting themselves on the other until there’s no telling them apart.

“Missed a bit,” Daryl says when they part, wetting his thumb to swipe at a spot on Rick’s beard. “You’re a goddamn mess, Sheriff.”

“Yeah, and whose fault is that?” Rick chuckles, lifting his hand from where it was resting on Daryl's thigh to scratch thoughtfully at his chin. “Guess it’s about time to shave this thing.”

“Don’t you dare,” Daryl snaps forcefully and Rick raises an eyebrow at him, his mouth quirking into a small smile.

“So you like the beard, huh?” he asks, his fingers teasing at the skin on Daryl’s lower back.

“Like the way it feels when you’re suckin’ on my dick,” Daryl shrugs, trying to follow Rick's request that he tell him what he likes and doesn’t so that the two of them aren’t just blindly fucking each other with no regards for the other’s desires.

“So you like the beard, huh?”

“Then it stays,” Rick whispers, angling his head to capture Daryl's lips in another kiss. Maintaining the soft pressure on Daryl's lips, not losing contact for a second, he gently tips him back on the bed, both of them stretching out with Rick laying half on top of him.

“God, I want to do this all night long,” Rick murmurs against Daryl's lips, pulling back just enough to look into his eyes.

“Somethin’ stoppin’ ya?” Daryl asks, sliding one hand down Rick's back to rest on his ass with a slight squeeze.

“Potatoes,” Rick moans, giving a little shudder as Daryl’s fingertips delve a little deeper to tease his asshole.

“‘scuse me?” Daryl snorts.

“They’re not going to plant themselves,” Rick tells him, brushing the pad of his thumb over Daryl's bottom lip.

“Don’t let me distract ya then, Farmer Grimes. Best you get some sleep,” Daryl smirks, withdrawing his hand to a less tempting location on Rick’s waist.

“Well, I guess, seein’ as it’s our first official night together,” Rick says, bending his head to rub his chin on Daryl's chest, making him chuckle softly, “the potatoes will survive if I get up a little later tomorrow.”

“Or,” Daryl offers, burying his fingers deep in Rick's curls as he licks his way across Daryl's chest, “maybe I could give you a hand and we could do that job in half the time.”

“Maybe,” Rick agrees, working his way down Daryl’s arm to suck at the small demon tattoo etched there.

“Shit,” Daryl growls as Rick works his tongue over the sensitive skin.

“Jesus,” Rick moans, his hand reaching down to wrap around Daryl’s already hardened cock and rocking his own against Daryl’s thigh. “You make me so fucking horny… I don’t think I got it up this often when I was in my twenties and certainly not multiple times in the same night but all I want to do is fuck you over and over.”
“Wolf blood’s got its perks, huh?” Daryl gasps, rolling his hips up a little into Rick's fist.

“Fuck yeah,” Rick laughs, lazily stroking Daryl's length. “Please tell me this doesn’t wear off.”

“Not s’far as I know,” Daryl answers, a soft purr starting in the back of his throat. “Least it ain’t for me.”

“Thank God,” Rick huffs out, lifting himself on top of Daryl to pin him for another kiss and Daryl groans, his eyes half closing, thinking to himself that the whole co-habiting thing might not be so bad after all.

Life settles into somewhat of a routine for Daryl and Rick, if anything can be said to be routine in the middle of an apocalypse. Once the initial awkwardness of their coming out has subsided and Daryl no longer feels that everyone is giving him sidelong glances as he passes, he relaxes into his role as one half of a couple surprisingly well. Daryl finds that he's suddenly become a part of a strange sort of domestic bliss and that fact makes him weirdly happy in ways he never expected while it also terrifies him to his core. While he really feels that he's putting his past behind him with the love and support of Rick and the others, there’s always that little voice in his ear telling him he's bound to screw things up somewhere along the line. After Carol, Carl turns out to be their most avid supporter although Daryl has a sneaking suspicion that his enthusiasm may have more to do with the clandestine crossbow lessons he's been giving him than anything else.

Judith has always been his little princess from the day she was born but now he feels even more connected to her, finding himself on days such as today suddenly being charged with her care whenever Carol can find an opportunity to pass her over to him.

“I have to go help Karen’s group clear the fence,” she tells him, handing him the giggling bundle of sweet-smelling baby. “It’s time for her nap anyway so all you need to do is put her down.”

“Don’t look tired,” he answers skeptically, holding Judy up in both hands to eye level and pulling a face at her.

“Well, you better make her tired or you’ll be the one dealing with little Ms. Cranky-pants for the rest of the day.”

“How’m I s’posed to do that?” Daryl asks, cocking his head at the tiny human in his seemingly enormous hands who is now staring solemnly back at him with eyes that could melt the hardest heart.

“You’re a smart guy, Pookie, you’ll figure it out. Just do what comes naturally. She’s your daughter now too, you know”

And, with that, she’s gone, leaving Daryl alone with Judith and not the first clue as to how to get a baby to take a nap. Sighing, he tucks Judith into one arm and snatches up her favorite stuffed duck before heading to his own room, not wanting to share his lack of parenting skills with anybody else that should happen to wander by. Closing the door firmly behind him, he sits Judith down in the middle of the oversized bed and regards her from a safe distance. She looks warily around for a moment at her new surroundings and then, with a pat of her chubby hand against the bed, she looks back up at him with a seraphic smile. Daryl can’t stop his own smile from spreading in response as he kneels on the bed beside her and scoops her up in his arms to cradle her against him.

“Whaddya say, huh, princess,” he whispers, “you bout ready to take a nap?”

Judith squirms in his arms for a moment and then lays still, her thumb sneaking between her rosebud
lips and Daryl thinks he might just have this baby thing mastered after all. Gently, he lays her back down on the bed, turning to grab a blanket from behind him only to find Judith has rolled over and is crawling rapidly away by the time he looks back.

“Hey,” he exclaims, reaching out to catch her giggling form and pull her back.

The same scenario plays out again and again for the next thirty minutes with Daryl’s growing frustration only being tempered by the sheer adorableness of his little girl every time she makes her escape from the cozy nest he’s built her on the bed. Finally he flops onto his back on the bed, thinking he may just as well give up and let her do whatever the hell she wants and just deal with the consequences. He’s barely down for a second when Judith crawls over to him and tries to haul herself up onto his chest so he lifts her on and, to his surprise, she immediately settles down against him.

“Well?” he asks softly, rolling his eyes to the heavens and then looking back down at the top of her downy head. “Oh, sweetheart, hold on a minute, you don’t want to be layin’ on that nasty shirt.”

Carefully sliding her back off onto the bed, his heart aching a little at the way her face crumples when she looks at him, Daryl quickly yanks off his blood and sweat-stained shirt and lays back down again to pull Judy onto his bare chest.

“Probably don’t smell much better,” he tells her, soothing her grizzles with his voice and a small stroke against her back, “but at least you ain’t gonna inhale no walker crap.”

Judith hiccups a little against him, the soft skin of her cheek rubbing against his chest as she makes herself comfortable and Daryl lets himself relax, concentrating on nothing but the hypnotic sound of her heartbeat against his and the following purr of her snores.

Daryl’s body eases him back into consciousness some time later and, before he can even open his eyes, he’s aware of Rick’s presence in the room.

“See sumthin’ ya like?” he drawls quietly, not wanting to wake the still sleeping form of Judith on his chest.

“You.”

Daryl blinks his eyes open to find Rick at the end of the bed straddling the only chair they keep in the room, his arms folded on its back as he looks intently at Daryl.

“Hey.”


“Nap time,” Daryl rumbles feeling a little prickle of embarrassment over the fact that he’d also fallen asleep along with his charge.

“Yeah, she’ll get you like that,” Rick laughs and Daryl feels Judith stir at the sound of her father’s voice.

“How long you been there?”

“Long enough to have an idea,” Rick tells him.

“Oh yeah… and what would that be?” Daryl asks warily, sitting up to move Judith onto his lap, watching her rub the sleep from her eyes with tiny balled up fists.
“We should Shift while Judy is here,” Rick says and Daryl’s head shoots up in disbelief.

“What the..”

“Now, hold on,” Rick states, holding up a hand to calm Daryl’s words, “before you go telling me I’m crazy, just hear me out.”

Daryl eyes him suspiciously but nods his head, keeping one hand wrapped protectively around Judith’s back.

“What if something happens here, Daryl, to us or the prison? What if there’s another attack or walkers get in, I don’t know, anything that might mean we need to fight and fast? What if our only line of defense is to Shift to keep her safe? Do you want to do that for the first time in the middle of a battle, scare the crap outta her? I think it’s something we should get her used to, seeing us like that, trusting us in the other form.”

Daryl looks down at the baby sprawled on his lap, his mind running over every possible scenario that Rick’s just implanted in his mind and it sickens him to his stomach to think of any harm coming to Judith. But Shifting intentionally around her, just to desensitize her to them, seems a little extreme to him.

“I don’t know, man, I don’t want to scare her,” he says hesitantly.

“I don’t think it will scare her, that’s the point,” Rick explains. “I think she's way too young to be frightened by it. That’s why I think we should start now, get her used to thinking it’s something normal that happens while she’s too young to really know what’s going on.”

“And when she starts talkin’ and tells the others about what her daddy can do?”

“Well, we’re a ways off from that happening but I’m sure we’ll think of something, tell her it’s something only her daddies do for her and it’s a secret. Right now I’d rather be safe than sorry. The last thing we need in an attack is to lose her because she’s more scared of us than the real danger.”

“Yeah,” Daryl agrees, the idea starting to make sense to him the more he considers it. “Alright then, let’s do it.”

“Okay,” Rick smiles, slapping his palms lightly on his thighs. “Go on then.”


“Because you’re already half undressed there, stud, and she’s already comfortable with you.”

“Uh-uh, no way,” Daryl shakes his head. “It should be you the first time.”

Rick eyes him for a moment and then gets up from the chair to quickly discard his clothes and drop to all fours at the end of the bed. He draws Judith’s attention to him before briefly meeting Daryl's eyes and then taking a deep breath to initiate his Shift on the exhale. Holding his own breath, Daryl watches Judith carefully for any signs of distress as she quietly contemplates the monstrous beast that has suddenly appeared in the room and taken her father’s place. Lowering his belly to the floor, Rick shuffles slowly towards them, keeping his eyes fixed on his daughter and Daryl knows that he's ready to change back in an instant if he sees she’s upset in any way. Judith, however, doesn’t seem fazed in the slightest by this new development in her existence and wriggles against Daryl’s hands until he releases her and she promptly crawls over to Rick and reaches for his nose. He lays down on the bed as she explores his face and head, Daryl wincing slightly as she gives an over-enthusiastic tug on one of Rick’s ears, and then she collapses into a fit of shrieking giggles as Rick licks at her
They keep up this routine as often as possible, each one of them Shifting with her until she barely even seems to notice any more what form they take and Daryl has to concede that Rick was right in his decision to make this a part of her life early on. But, as well as things are going, their life together still carries hardships and concerns along with outright tragedies. Death is still constantly knocking on their gate or, more accurately, trying to push down their fences but they’re combating it as best they can. Daryl and Glenn have started making recruiting runs on a regular basis, searching out survivors they think would be good additions to their community, moving from town to town in an ever-widening arc. They work well together, maybe not as well as he does with Rick obviously, but there’s an easy camaraderie between them built on their experiences together and Daryl counts Glenn as his brother now without even thinking about it. He likes the change of pace that comes from them being out together, that slightly more laid back feel even when they’re walking into unknown territory like they are now.

Daryl moves stealthily between the rundown buildings, crossbow raised and every part of him on high alert. The stench of walkers is ripe on the morning air and he can hear their low moans up ahead.

“’m tellin’ ya I heard sumthin’,” he whispers over his shoulder to Glenn who is keeping pace half a step behind and slightly to his left. “Somebody callin’ out.”

Glenn doesn’t reply, he doesn’t need to as they approach the end of the alley they’re in and the object of their search appears in front of them. Across the street from where they are is the overgrown lot of what was once a meticulously landscaped park but now is little more than a jungle of overflowing trees and plants mixed with the waist-high grass which is turning brown after the heat of summer. The perimeter of this former oasis is marked with a solid-looking wrought iron fence set atop a low brick wall, giving the entire structure a height of around 6ft which stretches left and right to either end of the block and Daryl has to assume the park’s entrance is around one of the corners. The twisted bars of the fence, each topped with a carved fleur-de-lis design, are spaced just far enough apart to prevent anyone slipping between them but allow enough of a view between them for Daryl to clearly see the young man that’s barreling towards them at a flat-out run with a ferocious group of walkers close on his heels. He looks to Daryl to be maybe 19 or 20, his shaggy dark hair streaming back from his slightly rounded face as he pelts towards them, leaping tangled clumps of grass and debris, trying to stick to the overgrown gravel path as best he can.

“He ain’t gonna make it,” Daryl yells to Glenn as the pair of them race to the outside of the fence, Glenn yelling encouragement to the fleeing boy.

To Daryl’s surprise, the kid doesn’t even slow as he reaches the fence nor does waste a second to check on his pursuers – he just launches himself onto the stone base and vaults for the top of the fence, tossing his pack ahead of him. He’s almost over when the first of the snarling walkers crash into the bars behind him, their arms stretching through to grab for Glenn and Daryl and the boy panics and loses his footing sending him crashing against the fence where he gets his jacket caught on one of the blunt spikes.

“Pull,” Glenn screams, taking a tight hold on the kid’s arm and Daryl tosses his crossbow aside to do
likewise, ignoring the ravenous faces trying to force their way between the bars.

It doesn’t take much for them to tear him free, Daryl’s strength alone probably doing most of the work to split his jacket open and loosen him from the spike sending the three of them tumbling to the ground. Daryl’s on his feet in a second, scooping up his crossbow and reaching down a hand to haul the kid up after him.

“Move,” Daryl grunts, shoving the kid into motion. “There’s more comin’.”

“How do you know th…” the kid starts to ask.

“Run now, ask questions later,” Glenn tells him, throwing him his pack and nodding his head in the direction of one of the park’s corners where a new mob of the undead is making its way into sight.

The three of them take off, Glenn leading the way, back into the alley they came from with Daryl bringing up the rear moving fast enough to lose the walkers behind them. Clearing the other end, Glenn takes a right and then crosses the street to take another shortcut between two buildings which leads them out into a paved parking lot where Daryl’s bike is parked alongside one of the prison cars, Noah standing guard on the roof.

“About damn time,” he grumbles as the three of them come to a halt in front of him. “Who’s this?”

“New recruit,” Daryl states, taking a proper look at the kid they’ve rescued and liking the vibe he’s getting from him under his obviously shaken exterior. “You gotta name, kid?”

“Zachary. My frien…” the boy starts to say and Daryl can see him visibly check himself before he continues with a slight tremor in his voice. “Zach, for short.”

“Well, Zach, you want to come with us?”

Zach looks slowly at each of them in turn before cautiously nodding his head.

“Alright,” Daryl says, clapping him hard on the shoulder, “we just have a coupla questions for ya and we can get goin’.”

“Maybe we should do this on the move,” Glenn suggests as the unmistakable sounds of walker growls can be heard nearby.

“Yeah, I’m with that plan,” Noah seconds, sliding down from the roof of the car and opening the back door of the car. “New guy gets to ride shotgun.”

As Zach opens the passenger door and climbs in, Noah meets Daryl’s eye and lifts his shirt to reveal the handgun he has secreted there and Daryl gives him a nod back, secure in the knowledge that Noah has control of the situation should his initial assessment of Zach be wrong.

“Let’s move it out then,” he calls, mounting his bike and starting the engine just as the first walkers stagger into the open lot from the mouth of the alley.

They peel out, Daryl taking the lead, setting a cautious pace until they’re out of the small town they’re in and back on the open road where he lets it out a little, enjoying the feel of the bike under him almost as much as he does the feeling he gets from running as the wolf. As they head back to the prison, his thoughts turn naturally to Rick and his family – not only the kids but everyone waiting there for him. With Michonne still out on her endless quest to find the Governor – something that irks Daryl to no end even though he knows she needs to deal with what happened in her own way – and Rick pouring all his concentration into the farm, Daryl is finding more and more people looking to
him when decisions need to be made.

Things between him and Rick are better than he'd ever hoped, their passion never waver ing for a second and he knew that, if he needed him, Rick would step up to the plate in a heartbeat, all guns blazing. Daryl’s faith in that fact has never faltered, even when the unwanted part of his mind is pushing unsolicited thoughts into his head of Rick having taken a step so far back, he was no longer even on the playing field. He’d seen it before, when Lori had died and Rick had all but abandoned them, his mind unable to take that final blow after so many before it and he had retreated into his own world, shutting them all out and teetering dangerously on the edge of complete madness until he’d somehow managed to pull himself out of it. That had been a dark time for Daryl also, Rick was his anchor since he’d lost Merle back in Atlanta, the one constant force that he could count on in this fucked up world and seeing him come so undone had been frightening for Daryl. He sometimes had to wonder what would happen if such an event were to happen again, an act so devastating that Rick would lose his tentative grip on reality and slide full force into the fevered dreams of his imagination.

He’d even stopped discussing changing the rest of the group to be like them, one thing at least that Daryl was thankful for. So, Daryl kept his head down and shouldered his load as he’d always done, his faith and loyalty always firmly in Rick’s corner and he buried any doubts he might have in order to enjoy life while he could. But he couldn’t shake that nagging feeling that the universe was just holding its breath, waiting to drop the next disaster into their laps.
Chapter 18

Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, tmd-dump-station

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DO NOT REPOST

Pushing aside the blanket they’re using as a makeshift curtain across the barred window of their bedroom, Rick smiles to himself as he see the strong sunlight filling the yard. The previous two days had brought unseasonable rain to their area and, while he’d been thankful for it to nourish their crops, it meant he had been pretty much under house arrest for 48 hours and he was itching to be outside.
again. Not that the distractions he’d found inside to occupy his time weren’t worth it, he thinks as he glances back over his shoulder at Daryl’s still sleeping form. Laying half-tangled in the sheets, just a tantalizing glimpse of the dark thatch of hair at his groin peeking over the top, Rick thinks he’s never looked more beautiful and that he’s never been more in love with someone than he is at this moment.

“Too bright,” the object of his desire grumbles, his eyes squeezed tightly shut and Rick chuckles as he lowers the covering back across the window.

Climbing back onto the bed, he works his way up Daryl’s body with a series of noisy kisses until he’s lying flat on top of him, his chin resting on his hands which are folded on Daryl’s chest.

“Good Morning, grouch,” he whispers, leaning up a little to plant a kiss against Daryl’s dry lips.

“Wass good about it?” Daryl mutters, finally cracking open his eyes to meet Rick’s.

“Stopped raining.”

“Hmmph.”

“The birds are singing.”

“Woop-de-doo.”

“I could give you a blow job before breakfast.”

“Ahh… finally, somethin’ worth wakin’ up for,” Daryl smirks and Rick leans up to kiss him again.

“Didn’t say I was gonna… just said I could,” Rick teases.

“Pfft,” Daryl scoffs, tipping Rick onto his side, “get offa me then.”

Rick laughs, tucking himself into Daryl’s side and stroking a finger in lazy circles across Daryl’s abdomen.

“So what are you doing today?” he asks softly, working his fingertip a little lower and hearing Daryl draw in a breath before answering.

“Guess we’ll head over to the Big Spot seein’s the weather’s better – me, Sasha and Michonne, probably Glenn. Maybe take Zach too.”

“Zach?” Rick questions, teasing his way under the sheet to find his prize.

“Sure,” Daryl answers, his body tensing a little as Rick wraps his warm palm around his soft flesh and begins a rhythmic squeeze. “He’s a good kid, really been pullin’ his weight the past few weeks. Did you see that cherry car he came back with last week though, man that thing is fine? I’ve been helpin’ him get her tuned so I’m sure he’ll jump at the chance of goin’ out lookin’ for parts today.”

“Sounds like you have a plan then,” Rick murmurs, sliding back down the bed and looking up at Daryl. “I better give you an incentive to come home later.”

Daryl’s answer is lost as Rick lowers his mouth to the smooth length of his cock and slowly slides him inside, thinking that there really is nothing better to wake up to in the mornings.

When they finally make it to breakfast, both of them with a high color in their cheeks and the inability to stop touching each other, even for a moment, Daryl grabs something to go and Rick reluctantly waves him off. Rick goes in search of Judith, wanting to spend at least a few precious
moments with her before he heads out to check the snares and then get stuck into some serious labor in the farmyard.

Later that afternoon, as he holds his daughter once more, he feels a million miles away from the man he was when he had picked her up that morning. He’s talking with Hershel about his encounter with Clara, a lost and almost feral woman he had encountered when he had gone out to check the snares. Judith, having woken from her nap, demands her father’s undivided attention which he’s more than happy to give while he continues his conversation with the older man. Rick cradles Judith closer, every ounce of his being aching with love for his child, and he tears his eyes from her perfect face to fix them on Hershel.

“If this was gone,” Rick explains, glancing around the sunlit walls of the prison block, “if we lost this... if I lost Judy or Carl or Daryl… I’d be just like her.”

“No, I don’t believe that for a second,” Hershel tells him in his soft, measured tone that always seems to calm Rick’s fears. “What you lost here – what happened to you – that man is gone, Rick.”

“Is he? I don’t think so.”

“I know so. Look at all you’ve gained since then, all you’ve built. You moved on from it, you adapted and you would do it again. Clara couldn’t do that, you can’t compare yourself to her.”

“I know Daryl’s worried,” Rick confesses, kissing Judy’s outstretched fingers as she tries to tug on his beard.

“Then talk to him, Rick, tell him how you feel. You’re both as pig-headed as each other, I swear, but if you don’t start communicating you’re going to find yourselves in trouble. It beats me how you two ever figured out you should be together with the way both of ya bottle things up. Now is not the time to be quiet, Rick, you need to let him in and let him take some of the burden from you. You know he only wants the best for you.”

“I know,” Rick sighs, bouncing Judy slightly in his arms. “Tonight, when he gets back from the Big Spot, I swear.”

“Good,” Hershel states. “He deserves to know what’s going on with you, he’s like a mother hen around you these days.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that,” Rick chuckles softly and Judy giggles in response.

“Pfft, I’m not afraid of your husband,” Hershel scoffs, making his way carefully to the top of the stairs.

“My husband?” Rick asks, a little shocked.

“Yeah, isn’t that what you call him? I’m sorry I’m not up on all the modern terminology.”

“Well, we never made it official,” Rick says, realizing that it’s not something he’s ever given a thought to.

“Does that matter?” Hershel tosses over his shoulder as he begins his cautious yet efficient descent down the stairs.

“I guess not,” Rick mutters to himself, smiling as he wonders what kind of reaction he'd get if he
tried calling Daryl his husband when he gets home.

Unfortunately, he doesn’t get to find out as Daryl's group arrives back at the prison late that afternoon, battered and bruised from their run and missing Zach. The mood was somber as Caleb patched the group up, Daryl standing watch until he was sure every last one of them was going to be okay and waving off the doctor’s offer to check him out, disappearing before Rick could really get a chance to speak to him. Although Zach had come to them alone, he had been a nice kid and people were taking his death hard. Rick knew he'd started a teenage romance with Beth much to Carl’s chagrin, so he assumes that Daryl has gone to break the news to her as Zach had been lost on his watch. With plans being made for a memorial service the next day, Rick slips away to their room to wait for Daryl, his mind even more uneasy now than it had been before. He's sitting on the desk that's pushed against the window, looking out into the night, the thick bars between him and the glass making him feel strangely comforted.

“Hey,” comes Daryl's weary voice as he steps into the room and closes the door behind him.

“You saw Beth?” Rick asks as Daryl unloads his crossbow onto the hook by the door and shrugs out of his leather jacket.

“Uh-huh,” he grunts in confirmation, toeing off his boots and collapsing onto the bed.

“How’d she take it?”

“Better’n I expected,” Daryl mumbles from under the arm he has thrown up over his face.

Rick slips off of the table, padding barefoot over to the bed and kneeling beside Daryl.

“Here,” he says and Daryl moves his arm to see Rick’s hand stretched out to him.

He takes it and Rick pulls him up into a sitting position, maneuvering behind him so that he can rest his hands on Daryl’s shoulders. At the first squeeze of his fingers on the bunched up muscles, Daryl lets loose with a sigh that Rick can feel in his soul.

“Shirt off,” he instructs, lifting his hands from Daryl’s shoulders.

“Too tired,” Daryl answers so Rick reaches down over his front and unbuttons the filthy black shirt before tugging it off and tossing it in the corner.

He brings his hands back to a starting position on either side of Daryl’s neck and begins again, methodically working the knots out of every muscle. He's silent at first and the only sound from Daryl is a symphony of gasps and susurrating moans but, as Rick's hands move lower and his fingers rub against the lines of Daryl’s scars, he feels a lump forming in his throat.

“Went out to check the snares today,” he says quietly.

“Mmm?” Daryl murmurs, his head lolling down to his chest.

“Met a woman – Clara – all alone out there. She was almost feral, about to start eating a sick pig that was lying out there dying. I tried to help her, thought about bringing her back.”

“What happened?”

“She said her husband was nearby, that he was too weak to walk. She wanted to take me to him so’s I could help them both.”
“An’ you went?” Daryl asks and Rick can feel him tense a little under his touch.

“Had my gun,” he says by way of explanation. “Hershel insisted. Doesn’t matter anyway – I didn’t need it.”

“Why not?”

“Because he was already dead, practically nothing of him left ‘cept his head but she couldn’t let him go – she’d been hauling him around in a sack for God knows how long.”

“Jesus,” Daryl says in disbelief, turning to look at Rick over his shoulder but Rick just nudges him back and continues massaging his skin, the repetitive motion calming him.

“She’d lost her mind, Daryl, when she’d lost him. She had nothing left and she just couldn’t give him up. She came at me with a knife – wanted to feed him – and, when I stopped her… she stabbed herself in the stomach.”

There’s a heavy silence in the room for a moment before Rick can continue and he can feel Daryl's nerves twitching under his skin.

“I sat and watched her die and she begged me to let her be like him, not to finish her when she changed. Even then, all she wanted was him, for them to be together forever. So, I left her, just put away my gun and walked away but all I could think about – all I can think about – is what if that was me, Daryl? If I lost you or Carl and Judith, I’d be just like that woman. There’d be nothing left of me.”

“’s’not true, no way, never happen,” Daryl states emphatically, turning to face Rick.

“It is true, Daryl, don’t you see it? What happened before… to me… when Lori died… that’s still there, it’s just simmering under the surface. The thing that I turned into – the man that I became – he's always going to be a part of me, as much as the wolf is now, and I’m scared that without you, he'd be all I am.”

“But you ain’t gonna be without me,” Daryl tells him, taking Rick’s trembling hands in his own and squeezing them tightly. “I ain’t goin’ anywhere.”

“You can’t know that,” Rick argues, pulling his hands free and climbing to his feet to pace back to the window. “You went out today and came back without Zach. What if that had been you, Daryl? What if Michonne had come home and told me you’d been the one we’d lost? Do you have any idea what that would do to me? When Lori died, I couldn’t comprehend what I’d lost – regardless of how I felt about her, she was the mother of my children and that was always going to bind us but you… the way I love you is like nothing I’ve ever felt before and I know I’d never survive it if you were… if you…”

“It was just a stupid freak accident,” Daryl says, getting up to stand in front of Rick and lay a strong hand on his shoulder.

“They always are,” Rick scoffs, shaking off Daryl’s hand and folding his arms across his chest. “And that’s what gets people killed or kidnapped.”

“So, what d’ya want me to do?” Daryl asks and Rick can see the frustration building in his eyes. “You want me to stay in here all the time?”

“Yes,” Rick states simply and Daryl takes a step back from him his eyes widening in disbelief.
“You can’t be serious. You want to keep me trapped in here like some kind of zoo animal?”

“I want to keep you safe.”

“Safe? What about our family, Rick? All those people out there, relyin’ on me to keep ‘em fed n’ clothed, what about them?”

“Somebody else can go. There’s enough of us now,” Rick shrugs.

“It ain’t about numbers, don’t give me that bullshit. It’s about our abilities that they don’t have. It’s about me bein’ out there and makin’ the call on whether we bring somebody back or not. It’s about steppin’ up and doin’ what has to be done,” Daryl spits, raising his voice.

“And you think I’m not stepping up?” Rick asks angrily.

“No, man, that’s not what I’m sayin’. You earned this time. You got us this far, all of us, and if this is how you need it to be right now then we’ve got you. But that ain’t me.”

“You want to be out there?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“Then I guess there’s nothing more to say,” Rick says icily, his worst fears gripping at his heart.

“Guess not,” Daryl huffs but Rick can read the hurt on his face before he turns away. “I’m goin’ out.”

“Daryl wait,” Rick pleads just as he’s grabbing his discarded shirt and reaching for the door handle. “Don’t go. Please.”

Daryl hesitates, his back still to Rick, and Rick realizes that what Hershel had told him earlier was true – if he and Daryl couldn’t communicate, they were going to be in serious trouble. He wants Daryl to understand just how scared he is, not only of losing everything he holds dear but of also losing himself. It frightens him just how much he needs Daryl to stay but he knows, deep down, that he could never expect him to live in a cage, it would be too cruel. He's willing to bet though, that if he really pushed the issue, Daryl would acquiesce and that thought makes Rick loathe himself just a little bit more – makes him question again who he's becoming.

“Come with me,” Daryl says quietly and Rick grasps at the proffered lifeline like a drowning man.

“You sure?” he asks, joining Daryl at the door.

“Offered, din’t I?” Daryl grumbles, still not looking at him.

Unhooking his crossbow, he goes out, pulling on his shirt and not looking back to see if Rick follows him.

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They leave the prison, Rick following Daryl in silence until they reach their usual spot to Shift and Rick has an uncomfortable flashback to the night he came out here alone to find Daryl had been taken. It serves as yet another reminder of why he's desperate for Daryl to stay inside the prison with him.

“They took you,” he says and Daryl hesitates in the act of stowing his weapons to turn and look at him. “Right here. They took you and it didn’t matter what you are and what you can do – they still
took you from me. What if it happens again?"

“Then you’ll find me,” Daryl tells him softly, stepping forward into Rick’s personal space.

“What if I can’t?” Rick asks, feeling the burn of unshed tears pricking at his eyes.

“You will,” Daryl tells him reassuringly. “I have faith in you.”

“Why?”

“’cos I’ve seen you walk through hellfire and come back from it. Don’t matter if you’re a farmer or a lawman, the job’s getting’ done.”

Rick lets out a shuddering sigh, wondering when his life became all about the man in front of him and asking himself if he’d ever be worthy of such unadulterated devotion. A desperation of a different sort steals over him, fighting against the feelings that have weighed him down all day and he grabs for Daryl's shirt, yanking him closer so that he can start to kiss him. He doesn’t want to think anymore, he just wants to lose himself in Daryl, a keening sound of pure need starting in his throat as their kiss escalates into a furious clash of teeth and tongues.

With a roar, Rick breaks away, twisting the fist that he has wrapped in Daryl’s shirt until the worn material tears like paper under his fingers and he rips it from his skin. Lowering his head, Rick lays a brutal trail of licks and bites across Daryl’s torso, feeling the sharp points of his canines break the skin more than once and tasting the heady elixir of Daryl's blood exploding onto his tongue.

“Rick,” Daryl pleads, his voice reedy with desire, his hands delving tightly into Rick’s hair as Rick viciously pulls his pants down just far enough to suck hard at the hollow of his hipbone.

He can smell Daryl’s arousal pouring from him in waves and he drops a hand to palm him through his pants, grinning wildly as he feels his cock swelling under his touch. Straightening up and pushing Daryl slightly away from him, Rick spins him and pushes him forward until he’s bracing his arms against the nearest tree and Rick attacks his back using his lips and teeth with as much gusto as he did the front. Daryl curves his spine under Rick’s touch, his pants slung low enough to reveal the tantalizingly smooth flesh of his ass and Rick curses under his breath. Reaching around, he unhooks the soft leather of Daryl's belt and unbuttons his pants before thrusting his fingers into the Daryl's front pocket in search of the tiny tube he knows is always there. As he digs roughly through the accumulated junk in Daryl's pocket he hears him hiss through his teeth as Rick’s fingers brush against his burgeoning cock through the thin material. He snarls triumphantly as his fingers wrap around the prize and he pulls it out, securing it between his teeth as he uses both hands to tug Daryl’s pants down to his ankles.

Breathing raggedly around the tube in his mouth, Rick unbuttons his own fly and reaches in to free his cock, not even caring to undress.

“Bend over,” he commands, spitting the tube from his mouth into his hand and flipping the lid to squeeze it into his palm.

Daryl repositions himself, bending forward at the waist, spreading his feet as far as he can within the constraints of his fallen pants. Rick has to make every effort not to shoot his load there and then at the sight of Daryl’s ass presented to him, ready for him to take. Stepping up behind him, Rick glides his slick shaft between Daryl’s cheeks for a moment, gasping at the sensation before he grips them tightly and pushes them apart to expose Daryl to him. Taking one hand to guide himself, he pushes slowly into Daryl’s heat, feeling him shudder around him as he opens up, a soft whine escaping his lips. Rick steadies himself for a second and then pulls back to slam forward into Daryl once more,
straining to go as deep as he can, wanting to fill him and own him completely, desperate to be as much a part of him as he can.

“You’re mine,” Rick growls deeply, pistoning into Daryl's hole again and again, leaning forward over his back to scrape his fangs into his flesh.

Daryl bangs back to meet his every thrust and Rick can see the muscles straining in his arms as he braces himself against Rick's onslaught, his fingers curled into claws to anchor himself in the rough bark.

Abruptly, it’s not enough – he wants to see Daryl’s face as he fucks him, wants to watch him unravel as Rick buries himself inside him. Withdrawing his cock from Daryl’s ass, feeling the cool night air caress his sticky length, he pulls Daryl away from the tree and turns him back around, his heart beating faster at the glow of Daryl’s eyes in the moonlight.

“Pants,” Rick grunts breathlessly and Daryl hastens to free himself from the rest of his clothing until he's naked and glorious before Rick, his cock standing hard against his skin, dripping with pre-cum.

“Yes,” Rick moans, bending to lick his tongue over the tip, savoring the salty taste before he straightens back up to slide his tongue into Daryl’s waiting mouth.

Daryl groans, his fingers sliding into Rick’s hair as he kisses him back, sucking hard at Rick’s tongue. Scraping his fingers down Daryl’s thigh, Rick signals for him to raise his leg so that he can get his forearm behind his knee and, with a little maneuvering, hoist Daryl into the air, his back resting against the tree with both knees hooked over Rick’s arms. Reaching down under Daryl’s thigh, Rick grabs his slippery cock and pushes himself back inside Daryl’s tight hole, his head tilting back a little as Daryl clenches around him. Digging his fingers down Daryl’s cheeks to spread him as wide as possible, Rick starts thrusting up into him driving Daryl's spine into the unforgiving bark at his back with every move. Daryl’s fingers are clasped at the back of Rick’s neck as he clings desperately to him, his bottom lip curled between his teeth.

“You like that, baby, huh?” Rick grunts as he pounds into him. “Such a fuckin’ tight hole… you feel so good, baby.”

Daryl whines again in response, a high needy sound that has Rick’s wolf howling to be let loose. He feels his face Shift just a fraction, his brow thickening and his teeth growing, watching Daryl’s pupils dilate at the sight.

“Is that what you want?” he asks, lowering his face to lick the length of his tongue over Daryl’s collarbone and suck at the ‘V’ of his neck. “Is this what turns you on?

“Fuuuck,” Daryl moans, his fingers tugging painfully in Rick's hair. “Yesss.”

Rick nips at his skin with his teeth, biting and sucking wherever he can reach, claiming Daryl as his, marking him in his own blood. Raising his head, he leans back a little, slowing his frantic thrusts into a smooth roll of his hips.

“Touch yourself,” he whispers, meeting Daryl’s eyes – his need for dominance warring with his need to see Daryl come apart for him.

With no hesitation, Daryl drops one hand from Rick’s neck and wraps it around his cock, matching his stroke to the slow pumping motion Rick is making into his ass.

“Faster,” Rick growls and Daryl raises his chin a little in defiance, locking his eyes to Rick’s.
“Is this what you like?” he asks, his tone slightly mocking and Rick knows the tables have turned. “Huh, baby… you want to watch me get off for you. Is that what makes you hard?”

Rick whimpers a little, his cock twitching but still maintaining his rhythmic fucking of Daryl’s ass, as Daryl flips his thumb over his leaking slit and brings the sticky digit up to Rick’s mouth, forcing him to suck it. Rick growls, wrapping his tongue around Daryl’s knuckle and hollowing his cheeks and Daryl bares his teeth at him, his eyes flashing in the dark.

“Better,” he murmurs, pulling his thumb from Rick’s spit-slicked lips and lowering his hand back to his shaft.

He grips tighter this time, jerking his cock in his fist with a rawness that has Rick baring his own teeth and practically drooling at the sight.

“Now, fuck me, Sheriff,” Daryl demands, his claws tightening into the back of Rick’s neck to draw blood.

With a yowl, Rick obeys, his eyes alternating between Daryl’s face and his rigid cock being furiously tugged and stroked between them as he thrusts deep inside Daryl.

“Yeah… that’s it…” Daryl snarls, his voice rising to a howl as he fills the space between them with his cum, clenching down tightly on Rick’s cock.

Rick answers with a howl of his own, pressing Daryl hard against the tree as he ejaculates inside Daryl’s shoulder and cling to him.

“Hey, hey now,” Daryl soothes, his voice rough in the aftermath of their passion but his fingers now smooth against Rick’s back.

Rick raises his head, shaking his sweat-drenched hair from his eyes to find Daryl’s human face regarding him with just a hint of concern in his eyes and Rick pulls the wolf back inside, sliding wetly from Daryl and lowering him to the ground.

“Shit, Daryl… I’m sorry,” Rick says as Daryl straightens up from the tree with a small grimace and Rick can see the blood streaking his skin that his teeth have left behind.

“Huh?” Daryl mutters, following Rick’s eyes. “No, it ain’t that.. think I got a splinter in my ass though. Other stuff ain’t nothin’, you know that. You gotta stop apologizin’ for it every damn time we fuck. It’s just the nature of the beast, s’all. You put two Alphas together, there’s bound to be a little ruckus.”

“A little ruckus,” Rick muses, feeling the warm trickle of blood running down his back from where Daryl had his claws sunk into his neck. “You know we probably scared a few people back at the prison right, howling like that.”

“Yeah,” Daryl chuckles ruefully, shaking his head as he gathers up their discarded clothes and stashes them in between the trees, “and you know who’s gonna know exactly what was goin’ on, right?”

“Carol,” they say in unison and Daryl grins at him.

“Damn, I am not lookin’ forward to breakfast tomorrow.”

Rick manages to smile back at him and then falls silent for a moment as he waits for Daryl to hide the
rest of their gear and turn back to him.

“About earlier…” he starts but Daryl steps up to silence him with a kiss against his lips.

“Forget it,” he tells him, his palm resting over Rick’s heart. “I understand how you’re feelin’, I really do. I can’t stop to think about what I’d be without you n’ the kids either but I promise you this – I am going to do everythin’ in my power to make sure that neither of us has to find out. Deal?”

“Deal,” Rick agrees, resting his forehead against Daryl’s and letting his nearness calm him.

“I can’t say what’s gonna happen down the line but the two of us, together, there’s not much than can take us down.”

“Agreed,” Rick sighs, exhaling slowly and trying to let himself believe in Daryl's words.

“Then, c’mon,” Daryl says, pulling away from Rick, “let’s go make this place a little safer. You smell that?”

Rick scents the air, filtering out the heady aroma still lingering from both of their bodies and catches the unmistakable odor of walkers nearby.

“Yeah,” he answers, gritting his teeth in determination as he watches Daryl Shift and then lets his own body follow suit, thinking that a little mindless violence might be just what he needs to clear his head a little – take back some of the power he’s been feeling spiraling away from him lately.

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The next morning, Rick is awake before first light despite the late night he and Daryl had shared. Slipping from their room so as not to wake his snoring partner, he heads first to check on Judith, ignoring the sly smirk Carol gives him as she hands over the baby and then he looks in to wake up Carl. While his son pulls himself together for a day tending crops, Rick feeds Judith before settling her back in her crib in Carol’s room and grabbing water bottles for him and Carl. Heading outside, he turns his face to the morning sky, stopping to watch the watery sun rising above the treeline and he thinks on what Daryl had said to him the previous night. They might not know what the world was going to throw at them but they were only at their strongest together and he knew that, with Daryl at his back, he was ready to face anything. Lowering his gaze, he catches sight of Michonne leading her horse towards the main gate and he sprints to catch up with her before she leaves.

“Heading out?” he asks, stating the obvious when what he really wants to tell her is “Don’t go, you don’t need to be out there anymore.”

“Yup,” she answers dryly, stopping her horse to face off with Rick. “You got something to say?”

Rick looks into her clear eyes, seeing nothing but a person he trusts with his life, somebody he wouldn’t hesitate to hand his kids over to in an emergency and his mind flashes onto his conversation with Daryl about her being one of the first people they should turn if it ever came to it. He realizes with a start that they’ve barely spoken since Daryl returned, that he never did find out how she felt about what happened at the jail that day even though he knew she’d seen something out of the ordinary in him after it was done.

“When Daryl was taken,” he starts, lowering his voice even though he knows the nearest person is Maggie up in the tower closest the cell blocks, “I wasn’t totally straight with you and I’ve never apologized for that.”

“Don’t sweat it,” Michonne tells him, a half-smile quirking up her lips. “I get it now.”
“But what I did to those men, how I acted… it was more than just saving Daryl…”

“Rick,” she interrupts, laying a hand on his forearm, “seriously, I get it. You had higher priorities than just getting one of us back. It was personal and I understand that. Might’ve been nice to know beforehand though.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, holding her gaze.

“You know you could have told me,” she chides him gently, nudging him with her elbow as she sets off down the gravel path again and he falls into step beside her. “I wouldn’t have judged you for being yourself… well… I might’ve judged you a little for your taste in men.”

She laughs and the sound lifts his spirits, knowing that their friendship hasn’t suffered from his oversight.

“What can I say?” he asks her with a shrug. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“Well sometimes the heart needs its eyes testing,” she chuckles, climbing into the saddle just as Carl arrives beside them.

“Stay safe out there, you hear?” Rick instructs her and she nods her head, giving Carl a jaunty salute as he opens the gate for her.

She’s barely more than a few feet through on the other side, Rick and Carl watching to make sure she gets safely away from the ever-present walkers at the gate, when the familiar sound of gunfire echoes across the field toward them coming from the prison itself.

Rick’s heart stutters in his chest as he turns from the fence, hearing the screams of one of the kids calling for help but he can’t be sure which one from where he is, and his body is in motion before his brain has even caught up.

“Cell blocks?” Maggie yells and he sees her anxious face appearing at the railing of the tower as he races back up the hill with Carl beside him.

“I don’t know,” he yells back, his mind frantic over what might be happening but his first priority being Carl. “Get in the tower with Maggie. Don’t argue. Go!”

He watches just long enough to make sure he’s obeyed and then continues his headlong sprint for the prison yard, a brief surge of relief rushing through him as he spots Daryl coming out of block ‘C’ close on Sasha’s heels.

“Walkers in ‘D’,” Glenn shouts, racing across the yard where Carol joins him, shepherding Lizzie and Mika in front of her.

“What about ‘C’?” Rick asks, his stomach plummeting as he thinks of Judith.

“Clear,” Sasha answers, as she barrels past him “We locked the gates to the tombs, Hershel’s on guard.”

“It ain’t a breach,” Daryl informs him, their eyes locking for a split second and all of Rick’s fears from the night before lodge firmly on his shoulders to wrap their clinging hands around his throat until he feels he can barely breathe.

“We followed the plan,” Sasha tosses over her shoulder but Rick can barely hear her words over the pounding in his ears as he falls into step behind them.
The inside of the cell block is a screaming mass of chaos, bodies both alive, dead and something in between all vying for space in the suddenly-cramped quarters, the walls reverberating with the sounds of battle. What follows is fast and brutal as they work to get the living out to safety as quickly as they can while dispatching the undead before they can do more damage. With the lower level contained, Rick races up the stairs to the upper cells where Glenn and Daryl are already taking care of business to halt the immediate threat. With the last loose walker killed as it tries to make a meal out of Glenn, Rick can feel the adrenalin powering his body start to ebb a little and his hands start to shake almost imperceptibly. Pushing aside the curtain to check the cell beyond, Rick’s dismayed to find the walker they’ve just put down is none other than Patrick, his youthful face looking ravaged by something more than just the hollowness that comes with being a walker.

“Aww, it’s Patrick,” Daryl says despondently, coming up beside him and looking past him into the cell to the other body lying beside that of the young boy.

Rick looks to him, unable to even speak and Daryl nods, stepping forward to put an arrow in the forehead of the young woman sprawled on the floor, someone Rick is ashamed to say he doesn’t even know and he wonders just how far removed he’s become from his family. He moves out of the way, seeing Glenn at the other end of the balcony checking the cells there and Rick walks cautiously to the last cell at the top of the stairs only to find another fresh corpse inside. He glances back to where Daryl has exited the other cell and is reloading his crossbow and his partner looks back at him, his eyes full of the silent encouragement that Rick needs right now. Taking a deep breath, Rick pulls his knife and goes inside to ensure the body stays dead, coming back out with even more of a tremor in his hands – wanting nothing more for there to be dirt on his knife instead of the blood of one of his own. With another quick glance at Daryl, he retreats, suddenly needing to be anywhere but in this tomb, the beast inside him clamoring for him to run as far as he can and never look back.
Chapter 19

Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, tmd-dump-station

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The scenery passing by outside the car is nothing more than a constant blur of varying shades of darkness to Daryl, the occasional emaciated faces of a walker or two sliding into view in the
headlights only to be lost almost instantly in the rearview mirror. He's curled in on himself, a tight ball of anger and misery simmering in the passenger seat as Michonne drives, Tyreese and Bob sitting silent in the back seat. Michonne’s half-hearted attempts to engage him in conversation had been met with nothing more than surly, monosyllabic answers and she had soon given up, leaving him to his own thoughts. He was mentally exhausted, not only from the stress and strain he'd been under since Patrick’s death had wreaked havoc on his family’s lives but also from this mission he'd undertaken to find medicine for his people. He had already been feeling the pressure with the gruesome discovery of Karen and David’s cremated bodies and Rick’s subsequent meltdown towards Ty when the other man hadn’t believed Rick was doing enough to bring his girlfriend’s killer to justice. To add to that, Daryl felt like he’d been betrayed by Bob after he'd discovered him smuggling alcohol away from the veterinary college they had raided in search of medicine. The altercation that had ensued between them had been the final straw – he was disgusted but, more than that, he was hurting, unwanted memories of his life with an alcoholic mother crowding his brain as he had fought every urge he had to rip Bob to shreds on the spot. The only thing that had stopped him was Rick's voice in his head, telling him that it wasn’t Bob’s fault – the man had a sickness – and that he was a good man at heart despite his lack of better judgement.

Daryl had managed to walk away, the urgency to get back to the truly sick people he'd left behind far outweighing his need for retribution against Bob. His only ray of hope on this trip, despite them finding what they had needed, had been Michonne’s confession that her endless quest to find the Governor was in vain and that she wouldn’t be leaving anymore to pursue him. At any other time, her news would have lightened Daryl’s heart but he was too wrapped up in thinking about Bob and his past to give her more than a cursory acknowledgement. He had been content to let her drive while he wallowed in his misery, his concern for what they would find back at the prison increasing with each mile they drove closer to their destination.

He finally raises his head and drops his foot down from the dash to straighten up as they turn onto the familiar roads close to home and he can feel the tenseness radiating from the others as well. He offers up a silent prayer for his loved ones as the prison looms into view – hoping against hope that those he holds closest to him are still alive and kicking. In the car’s headlights, he sees Carl running to open the outer gate at their approach and one of the tendrils of fear gripping his heart loosens its hold. Pulling up to the inner gate, his heart soars even higher when he sees that it’s Rick opening it. Michonne pulls into the yard and Tyreese is out of the door behind Daryl before she’s even stopped moving.

“Sasha?” he questions Rick and Daryl can hear every ounce of his love for his sister in that one word.

“She’s alive,” Rick assures him, raising a calming hand to him.

“Go on, get in there,” Daryl urges him and, with a nod to Rick, Ty races for the building.

Daryl meets Rick’s eyes and everything they need to say to one another is conveyed in that one glance, the relief evident on both their faces but Daryl can see something else, a darkness, clouding Rick’s eyes. There’s no time to talk though, their first priority is securing the medicine and getting it inside for Caleb to administer. Rick helps Bob unload the packs from the car and, together, they disappear inside leaving Daryl suddenly alone under the starlit sky. He sags against the car for a moment, eyes closed, just needing a moment to breathe before he carries on.

“Daryl,” comes Carl’s tentative voice from beside him, “you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Daryl answers, pushing himself off of the car and turning to face the boy. “You? How’s Li’l Asskicker?”
“Judith’s okay – still up in quarantine with the other kids. The… the fence came down… it was just me and dad out here.”

Daryl glances around, seeing for the first time the destruction in the corner of the yard and the mass of walkers lying still on the ground, his mind having been so single-mindedly driven on delivering the medicine that he hadn’t even noticed on the way in.

“You did all that?” he asks, his heart trip-hammering in his chest at the thought of how close his family had come to being overrun.

“Me and dad, yeah,” Carl tells him, following Daryl’s gaze and Daryl can see him straighten a little with pride at their accomplishment.

“Well, shiiii,” Daryl drawls and gives a low whistle before clapping Carl on the shoulder. “Looks like the Grimes boys had themselves a good ol’ fashioned turkey shoot up in here.”

Carl beams beside him as they walk over to survey the damage, Daryl warily toeing the closest bodies as they pass. He narrows his eyes as he looks down along the run to where a few stray walkers are meandering around, not really paying them too much attention.

“We need to get that fence fixed,” he tells Carl, “and get those bodies outta there before more of ‘em figure out the way in.”

“Shall I go get my dad?”

“Nah, let him be, you two did enough already. See if you can get Ty to come, maybe a few of the others if they ain’t too sick.”

Carl nods and turns to leave then hesitates and looks back at Daryl before he steps forward and wraps his arms around Daryl’s waist in a tight hug, his face pressed against Daryl’s chest.

“I’m glad you’re home,” he mumbles into Daryl's shirtfront and Daryl doesn’t hesitate in returning his embrace even though he feels a little startled by it.

“Me too, kid, me too,” he tells him, patting his back and then releasing him. “Now scoot, ‘fore I need ya to do more target practice.”

Carl runs off into the prison while Daryl goes to retrieve the pickup to start loading the bodies into. He's soon joined by Tyreese and a couple of others and together they work on getting most of the walkers moved. They decide to dump them just inside the outer gate for now, not wanting to risk heading outside until day breaks but wanting to get them away from the main yard so that they can shore up the fence.

He and Ty are just driving back up from dropping off the last load when he spots Hershel coming out to meet them and he realizes with a start that at some point during their gruesome work, the night had transitioned into day and he hadn’t even noticed.

“How’s Glenn?” Ty asks, getting out of the truck to greet Hershel and Daryl listens for his reply, having heard from the others what had happened while they were gone and how Glenn had been near to death at one point from the sickness.

“Doin’ fine. He’s breathing on his own now.”

Ty nods, squeezing Hershel’s shoulder as he passes him and Daryl lets out the breath that he was holding, climbing out of the truck to face Hershel himself. He can see the sheer exhaustion etched on
the older man’s face along with an overwhelming sadness but his eyes are still bright as he turns them on Daryl.

“He’s a tough sonofabitch,” Daryl tells him, closing the pickup door behind him and pulling off his gloves to shield his eyes against the morning sun. “You’re a tough sonofabitch!”

“Yes, I am,” Hershel agrees dryly.

“’bout Carol?” Daryl asks, a little surprised that he hasn’t seen her since his return but assuming she’d been busy helping administer the medicine they’d brought back. “She up in ‘A’ block with Lizzie?”

“No. Talk to Rick about her,” Hershel tells him, a strange look crossing his face that has that icy grip of fear wrapping its fingers around Daryl’s heart once more. “She’s okay, just talk to him.”

The older man turns and walks away from him, calling out to Michonne instead, leaving Daryl’s thoughts in turmoil as he lifts his head and instinctively scents the air looking for Rick.

He finds him down among the crops with Carl and signals to him that he needs him to come up, too scared to have the conversation he fears is coming in front of the boy. Rick acknowledges him with a wave, speaks briefly to Carl and then quickly climbs the slope to where Daryl is waiting and Daryl can read in every line of his body that something is wrong.

“Let’s go inside,” Rick says, coming abreast of him and Daryl turns to fall into step with him.

Both of them are silent until they reach the solitude of the cell block - most everyone is out helping with the sick and the cleanup outside but Rick still leads them up the stairs to the upper landing. Before he gives Rick a chance to speak, Daryl pushes against him, clinging to his shirt with both hands and burrowing his face into his neck, desperate to have some kind of contact with him to draw strength from. He feels Rick shudder under his touch and then circle his arms around Daryl’s back, one hand cupping his head as Daryl breathes in the scent of him. Rick holds him tight for a few minutes and Daryl is loath to let him go even when he feels Rick inhale sharply and he knows the moment is over.

“Daryl,” he says softly, his whiskered chin scraping against Daryl’s temple, “we have to talk about Carol.”

“I know,” Daryl mutters into Rick’s collarbone, drawing in a deep breath of his own and stepping out of the protective circle of Rick’s arms. “How’d it happen?”

“Daryl, I’m so sorry,” Rick tells him the pain evident on his face as he forces Daryl to look at him. “You know I love you, more than anything in this world, and I’d never do anything to hurt you. I just… it’s… what happened with Carol… I…”

“Just tell me,” Daryl begs, Rick's anguish torturing him almost as much as the words he knows he's going to hear. “Hershel said she was okay but she's not, is she?”

“She killed Karen and David,” Rick states coolly and, for a second, Daryl can’t comprehend what he means, he had been so convinced he was going to hear the words, ‘She’s dead,’ fall from Rick's lips. “What?” he asks in confusion.

“She killed them Daryl, in cold blood. Didn’t even deny it when I confronted her about it.”

“What did you do?” Daryl whispers, feeling like a knife is twisting in his gut and not knowing if he's
ready to hear Rick’s answer.

“We took a ride,” Rick says quietly, his gaze never faltering from Daryl’s. “Went looking for medicine in case you guys didn’t make it back and we talked, Daryl. I gave her the chance to explain herself, find out why she did it.”

“And?”

“She had no remorse – said she did what needed to be done for the good of all of us. Said there was no other choice and she’d do it again if she had to.”

“What did you do?” Daryl repeats, feeling a lick of fire lighting in his gut to burn away the ice that had formed there when he’d thought she was dead.

“I left her,” Rick says calmly. “Gave her enough gas and supplies and found her a working car. What else could I do, Daryl, tell me that? I couldn’t bring her back here, knowing what she’d done. If Tyreese had found out he would’ve killed her on the spot and I didn’t know if I could trust her around the kids anymore - around Carl and Judith – our kids, Daryl. What if they’d been sick and she’d made that choice for them? I would have killed her myself.”

Daryl is in motion before he’s really even aware of it, Rick’s head snapping back under the force of the blow his fist delivers to his jaw.

“How…?” Daryl keens, unable to even form a question, part of him aching for Rick to fight back so that he can unleash the wolf that’s gnashing at his insides.

“I thought it was the only option,” Rick replies stoically, keeping his voice even despite the bright flare of blue Daryl can see in his eyes that tells him his own wolf is agitated by the situation. “Something told me it was her – I just started putting two and two together. Did you know she’s been teaching the kids how to use weapons at those story times she’s been having? Carl caught her at it and she begged him not to tell me. I had to ask myself what else she was capable of – how far she was willing to go.”

“You know what I think?” Daryl grinds out, channeling every fiber of his rage into his words and pacing the narrow walkway furiously from side to side. “I think you’ve lost your damn mind. Do you even hear yourself?”

“I was wrong,” Rick says softly and Daryl stops in mid stride to whirl on him. “I barely got a mile down the road before it hit me like a ton of bricks – what the hell had I done? I wasn’t thinking straight – I know it’s no excuse but so much has happened recently, the outbreak, that woman in the woods, losing good people again… I just wasn’t myself.”

“No, you weren’t,” Daryl answers, his anger still simmering low in his belly. “It’s Carol, Rick – Carol. How could you even think that she… she's one of our pack… she's my pack and you don’t do somethin’ like this to one of our own. Shit, I thought you were past this, that you were better. When we found the walkers in ‘D’ you stepped up, man, just like old times, like I knew you would but then what you did to Ty and now Carol – I barely recognize you anymore.”

“Ty was hurting you,” Rick states emphatically, raising his palm to Daryl in a placating motion. “I couldn’t let that happen.”

“Bullshit! You knew I could handle him with my eyes closed – you went too far and you know it. And Carol, who did she hurt, Rick, because it looks to me like she mighta saved all of our asses?”

“I tried to go back… to look for her,” Rick says, the pained look on his face intensifying, “but it was
too late. She’d already left and there was no way of knowing which way she’d gone. She’s strong, Daryl, you know that. Stronger than I ever gave her credit for, she’s going to be okay until we find her, and we will, I promise you.”

“Not we – me,” Daryl growls pushing up into Rick's personal space to meet him eye to eye.

“Daryl, I’m sorry... you have no idea,” Rick tells him, reaching out a tentative hand to his arm.

“Don’t,” Daryl warns, shaking him off and walking away. “Don’t even touch me. I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive you for this.”

“Daryl,” Rick calls after him as he heads down the stairs but he doesn’t turn back – he can’t.

He's halfway down the staircase, his mind churning as he tries to understand what Rick's done, when there’s a thunderous explosion which reverberates off the concrete walls loud enough to shake dust from the ceiling and everything else is forgotten as Daryl's world disintegrates into nothing but blood and ashes.

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It was gone – all of it – everything he'd worked so hard to hold together had crumbled in a matter of minutes at the hands of the Governor. Hershel was dead along with countless others, the prison was a smoking ruin of what it had been and any survivors were scattered to the four winds. Three days later and Daryl swears his ears are still ringing from the explosions wreaked by the tank that the Governor had driven up to their front door. A fucking tank! In none of their carefully laid contingency plans in case of an attack had they ever even considered that they'd be facing a tank. It had been an outright slaughter – they hadn't stood a chance. Daryl had stood impotently by and just watched as Rick had faced off against the man who had come with nothing other than their destruction on his mind. He didn’t want the prison – Daryl had known that from the moment he had raced outside and seen the hulk of the tank sitting there – this was all about revenge, pure and simple. Daryl had been nothing more than an observer to the scene that had played out before him because, really, what could he have done that would’ve ended it any other way? Covertly he had armed his friends at the inner fence, keeping Carl close by his side, preparing them for the battle he knew was coming. He had heard every word of Rick’s heartfelt negotiation for peace, knowing in his heart that it wasn’t going to work but still feeling crippled by the shock of how it actually went down.

He could still hear the Greene sisters’ screams echoing in his mind as they’d watched the lunatic outside the fence cut down their father followed by Rick’s roar of anguish and fury. That was the last time he’d seen him clearly, racing for safety behind the overturned bus by the gates and then chaos had erupted and he had lost track of everything apart from staying alive and taking out as many of the Governor’s people as he could. The fight was fast and brutal - the prison becoming simultaneously a battleground and a graveyard - Daryl trying so hard to keep track of his loved ones but it was an impossible task and all he caught were fleeting glimpses through the smoke and carnage that filled their home. Somehow he’d lost Carl, knowing instinctively that the boy would be heading towards Rick but unable to get away to follow him until, eventually, he had managed to disable both the tank and its operator. It was too little too late, he’d realized as he’d stared out over the field to the fences which were now lying flat with walkers streaming in from every direction and, even if he'd Shifted at that point, he was never going to beat them all back on his own. Looking out over the hell in front of him, he'd been lost for a moment, his eyes seeking out his loved ones and coming up empty while the wolf howled in his mind for its mate.

He'd been jerked out of his stupor when Beth had approached him, her tear-streaked face urging him back into motion as she’d told him that the bus had gotten away as planned but she’d been left behind. Determined not to lose another child on his watch, especially when the fates of his own were
unclear, he had ushered her to safety, pushing her to run until she couldn’t take it anymore. His plan had been simple – find someplace safe to leave her while he circled back to the prison to search for the others. What he hadn’t counted on was her being quite so weak and vulnerable outside the protection of the group and the safety of the prison, her emotional distress crippling her to her point where he’d almost resorted to picking her up and carrying her. He knew she was hurting for her daddy and her sister and it had distressed him to see it but there was no time for either of them to give into their grief so he had forced her on even when she’d railed against him, calling him heartless and unfeeling.

Whether it was his own inattention or just her fragile state, he’d never know but, when she’d stopped for a moment behind him, he’d kept going for a few paces before he’d realized she was no longer with him. That split second of time was all it took for two walkers to step out of the overgrown bushes and take her by surprise, both of them latching onto her at once as her startled eyes pinned him in their gaze. Her mercifully short screams had pierced his very soul and all he could see as he’d aimed a bolt at her forehead was Sophia’s face swimming in his mind and the sense of his own failure had hammered another nail into his heart. Sickened, he had dispatched the two walkers and then turned his back on the scene, wishing he had the time to give her a proper burial but needing so desperately to get back to the prison. He’d run at full pace for a while until he’d found a relatively secluded spot where he had stashed his gear so that he could Shift.

With the wolf at his disposal, he’d covered the rest if the distance back to the prison in no time at all, surveying the area from the top of the rise once he was close enough. There truly was nothing left – the buildings were burning, the crops had been trampled and everything now belonged to the walkers, hundreds of them as far as he could see. He’d forced himself to stay put, fighting the urge to just race down there and start hunting for his family, casting his eyes over every inch of his former home until he was satisfied there was nobody still alive down there. With that done, he’d begun a thorough search of the surrounding area, mercilessly ripping apart any walker that strayed too close, desperately trying to pick up any fresh scent that might give him a direction to work from. The more he’d searched, the more despondent he’d become – there was nothing more than the tantalizing hints of the people he’d known, their trails soon becoming lost in the overwhelming stench of the dead that had crossed over them and the acrid sting from the smoke still hanging low across the area. The whole time he was searching the outskirts he had debated with himself over going down onto the field and searching amongst the dead for Rick and the kids but his heart was torn between the need to know and not wanting to give up hope that they’d somehow made it out.

His decision was made for him as another wave of walkers had flooded the area, obviously drawn to the ongoing commotion and pushing him further back into the treeline. It would’ve been suicide even for him to attempt to enter the yard so instead he’d turned his attention to the only sure thing he’d known – the bus had made it out, hopefully packed with as many people as possible including Carl and Judith. Taking off along the road away from the rear of the prison, he’d run as fast as he could, pushing his protesting body harder than ever before until he’d found the vehicle, abandoned on the side of the road with its interior housing only the undead. Falling back to his haunches, he had thrown back his head to the sky and howled, long and hard, lamenting his loss and hoping against hope that he would hear a reply. The unwavering heat of the late summer afternoon had brought nothing back to him except the harrowing growls of the people on the bus he’d once shared his life with and the sound of more walkers approaching through the trees.

Dragging himself to his feet, he’d turned himself around and headed back to where he’d left his clothes and his weapons, Shifting back into his human form before collapsing in on himself in an uncontrollable ball of devastation. He’d let it consume him, giving in to every ounce of pain and grief in his body at the loss of Rick, the kids and everyone he’d known. For him, his very worst fear had come to pass, the one thing he had always dreaded – he was alone, the last man standing and there was nothing he feared more in the world. He wasn’t sure how long he’d lain there, curled naked and
fetal on the unforgiving earth, his face crusted with his tears and an emptiness inside of him he didn’t think would ever be filled again. Pulling himself up, he'd gotten dressed – a fresh bout of crying doubling him over as he’d realized the shirt he’d pulled on that morning had actually been Rick’s, pressing it to his face as he'd inhaled his mate’s scent over and over. With no plan or destination in mid, he’d just started walking, putting as much distance between him and the mass grave behind him as he could.

He walks for miles, methodically placing one foot in front of the other, not stopping to rest or take any kind of sustenance until he’s little more than an automaton, dealing blindly with any curious walkers that stumble onto his path but not really focusing on anything. When he comes to a crossroads along the highway he’s travelling, he falters, something in his mind giving up completely in the face of having to make even the simplest of choices and he sinks to the ground in defeat, bowing his head to chest. He’s done, so defeated by what’s happened that he’s just about ready to sit there until he withers away to nothing and let the beasts and the walkers consume him. Through the miasma of his tormented thoughts he becomes aware of the men surrounding him long before their leader speaks, their attempts at stealth laughable to him even in his current state.

“Well, lookit here,” comes a gravelly voice directly in front of him and Daryl asks himself if its owner is going to be his damnation or his salvation.
Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, tmd-dump-station

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(R&faq)

DO NOT REPOST

The dream is always the same now but, while the stage remains the same, the players have most certainly changed. Rick can feel the rich warmth of the polished dining table beneath his palms and can smell the aroma of the meatloaf that Lori’s mom had made them for dinner but, when he raises his head, his companions at the table are not the ones he'd shared this meal with in another lifetime.
Hershel is seated opposite him in the patriarchal seat at the head of the table, a livid line of red blood circling his throat to drip endlessly down onto the white button up shirt he’s wearing. His lips are moving, forming words that never make it to the air and his judgement-laden eyes never leave Rick’s face.

“Hershel,” Rick whispers, wanting to say so much but not knowing where or how to start.

“You know it ain’t no use, boy,” comes a jeering voice from his left. “Grandpa here ain’t ever gonna say shit again.”

Rick pulls his gaze from his mentor’s face, wishing with all his heart that he could just hear the man’s voice once more even if it’s only in a dream, and turns his attention to the man at his side. With his chair tipped back on two legs and his dusty boots planted firmly up on the pristine table, Merle Dixon grins impudently back at him – his prosthetic arm is gone, his hand whole once more, and he’s tapping the blade of a large hunting knife against his palm.

“Tell me something, Officer Friendly,” Merle drawls, his disdain dripping from every word. “How in the hell did you manage to lose my baby brother, you worthless sack o’ shit?”

“I didn’t… he’s not…” Rick stammers, unable to form an answer.

“He’s deader than Moses over there,” Merle barks, pointing the knife in Hershel’s direction. “You know it and I know it. You had one job – to keep him safe – and you failed.”

“No,” Rick yells, slamming his hands onto the table and standing up, “He’s not dead. He made it out, I know he did.”

“You sure ‘bout that?” Merle asks, nodding his head in Hershel’s direction.

Rick knows what he’ll see even before he turns his head but he's trapped, doomed to replay the same scenario night after night in his mind. He turns away from Merle to find Hershel is gone and standing at the end of the table is Daryl, his expression slack but his eyes so bright and alive that Rick can barely stand to look at them.

“Daryl,” he breathes, the smile that forms on his lips fading as the Governor steps out from the shadows at Daryl’s back, his face contorted with rage.

“You think you can take what’s mine and not pay the price?” he bellows, his lip curled up in a snarl as he draws his arm back behind Daryl.

“Wait!” Rick screams but he knows it’s too late – it’s always too late- and he looks on in horror as the tip of Michonne’s sword erupts from Daryl’s chest, piercing his heart and spraying Rick with his blood from across the table.

In one fluid move he feels himself Shift, his clothes falling away in shreds as he leaps the table in a single bound, teeth bared ready to rip out the Governor’s throat. In the time it takes him to land on the other side, the Governor has gone, fading into nothing until all that’s left is his mocking laughter ringing in the air. Rick watches, mortified, as Daryl drops to his knees, his formerly slack face now contorted into a rictus of agony – the moment seeming to drag out endlessly from Rick’s perspective. Shifting back, he gathers Daryl into his arms, cradling his head as he watches the luminous blue of his eyes fade quickly to a dull grey and then grow darker until they’re completely black. The light around Rick dims in tandem with Daryl’s eyes until he finds himself surrounded by a darkness that is so absolute, he can no longer even tell if his eyes are open or closed. The weight of Daryl’s body in his arms disappears along with any trace of the room he’d been in and Rick finds himself alone in
the nothingness but this time there is nobody to take his hand and lead him safely back to reality. Not knowing what else to do, he drops to his knees, naked and alone in the obsidian void and throws back his head in an anguished howl.

He wakes with tears on his face and Daryl’s name on his lips, sucking in great lungfuls of air as he tries to calm the feeling of utter panic his dream has left him with.

“Dad?” comes Carl’s tentative voice beside him and Rick rolls his head in that direction, finding the frightened eyes of his child staring back at him.

“It’s okay, Carl… I’m okay,” he croaks, reaching out to pat his son’s arm reassuringly as he struggles to pull himself back into reality. “Where’s Michonne?”

“She went to check the mini-mart on the corner, said we should stay put until she gets back.”

Rick rolls over, pushing himself to his feet, his back protesting at having spent the night on the floor. He crosses to the window which overlooks the main street of the small town they’re staying in. Pulling apart the blinds just enough to see through, he surveys the street outside in both directions, seeing nothing moving apart from a lone walker bumping aimlessly against the front window of the barber shop across the way, quite possibly attracted to its own reflection in the mirrors hanging inside. Rick narrows his eyes as he focuses on the small convenience store at the end of the block, the remnants of his dream fading as he looks for some sign of Michonne.

“How long’s she been gone?”

“Not long, maybe 15 minutes.”

“Alright,” Rick says, turning from the window to slide down against the wall into a sitting position, “then we’ll give her 15 more.”

Carl nods, taking a seat on the floor beside him and fixing his eyes on the door.

It only takes another ten before Rick catches a faint sound downstairs and he scents the air to reassure himself that it’s Michonne. As her footsteps sound on the wooden stairs, he feels Carl tense beside him and raise his gun to aim it at the closed door.

“Carl,” Rick warns softly, shaking his head and the boy drops his arm just as she opens the door, a bulging plastic bag hanging from her wrist.

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty,” she says softly, giving Rick a warm smile. “How’re you feeling today?”

“Better,” he answers, reaching up to take the bottled water and bag of chips she hands him from the bag and pushing away the last persistent images from his dream of Daryl’s black, lifeless eyes staring up at him.

“That’s good,” she nods, taking a seat cross-legged on the floor in front of Carl and handing him his breakfast.

Truth be told, Rick is better than okay, physically at least. The internal injuries he’d sustained during his showdown with the Governor and their subsequent escape were completely healed although he was keeping his body from taking care of the visible wounds too fast in order to keep up appearances with Michonne and Carl. He wanted to be strong – had to be – to protect his son out here after what
had happened but he couldn’t risk Carl or Michonne finding out his secret, the shock might be too much at this point and he couldn’t risk losing them by his own volition. He still can’t let his mind concentrate too closely on the events surrounding the prison’s fall because he’s afraid he might slip over the edge of an abyss he may never come back from. Needless to say, he held only himself accountable for every devastating act that had befallen his family – Hershel and Judith’s deaths along with so many others plus the loss of their home – it all fell squarely on his shoulders. With the single slice of Michonne’s blade in the hands of a madman that had taken one of the most important people in his life from him, Rick had descended into his own personal hell – at first raging against what had happened in a furious whirlwind of bullets, determined to protect what was his at any cost. But, when the fences had come down and his people were falling around him, his single-minded purpose had faltered, despair crushing his soul and he’d barely even fought back against the Governor even though it would have been so easy for Rick to finish him in a heartbeat.

He had taken every hit, endured each blow as a punishment for his failure, the world that was crumbling around him providing a fitting soundtrack to the fate that he thought he deserved with the dying screams echoing in his ears of everyone he’d once held dear. When Michonne had ended the Governor’s life, Rick had almost screamed out at her to end him too but the look on her face had abruptly sobered him, bringing him back to the brutal reality around him. He had pulled himself back enough from the brink of his own destruction to realize that there might still be hope that his kids and mate were alive. His elation at finding Carl alive and unscathed was quickly tempered by their gruesome discovery of Judith’s empty, blood-splattered car seat and Rick had felt his world tilt on its axis there for a second. His inability to find any trace of Daryl in all the chaos had also loosened another screw in the tentative grip he had on his sanity and he had made the only decision he could – get Carl to safety and not look back. All that he’d had left as they’d limped away from their ruined life was the hope that Daryl had also made it out – that the wolf had kept him safe in the face of such overwhelming odds.

Now, he was trying so desperately to cling to that hope still even though the rational part of his mind was telling him that, if Daryl was still alive, he would’ve found them by now. As the days had passed and, when the reunion with Michonne hadn’t brought him any news of Daryl's survival, Rick’s mind had let go just that little bit more and he was fighting every day to stay in control for Carl’s sake. The wolf is a constant ball of misery – mourning its pack and, more keenly, the loss of its mate – to the point where Rick is convinced he’ll never be able to silence its distress. He was disturbed but not exactly surprised when his tortured mind started conjuring hallucinations of Daryl at random intervals – at first it had been a slight apparition at the corner of his eye which would disappear when Rick turned his full attention to it but now it was full-on glimpses, always just out of Rick’s reach and always accompanied by Daryl’s scent lying heavily on the air. Rick had confided this phenomenon to Michonne in the still hours of the night once he had caught himself staring mesmerized by an empty car for a full five minutes, convinced that Daryl was behind the wheel. He trusted her explicitly, knowing that she understood to a certain extent what he was going through and needing her to keep him in line if she thought his behavior was in any way jeopardizing their safety.

“So, you ready to hit the road?” Michonne asks, balling up her empty potato chip bag and tossing it at Carl’s head with a grin.

“Yes, ma’am,” Rick answers, shaking the crumbs from his shirt and getting to his feet.

The three of them gather the small amount of provisions they’ve managed to scavenge so far and head out into the still morning air, the day gearing up to be yet another scorcher.

“You still think this is the best way to go?” Michonne questions him quietly as Carl scouts ahead of them.
“Honestly,” Rick replies, shooting her a quick glance, “I don’t know. This Terminus place might be a pipe dream, it could already be gone… or a trap. It’s hard to say but, if it’s not, if it really is a sanctuary built by other survivors, then I don’t think we can pass it up. They were obviously established enough to be out here spreading those signs we saw so hopefully they’re equipped enough to still be alive. Besides, I think – I hope – that if anyone else from the prison made it out and saw the signs too, it’s where they’d head to. This could be our chance to see if any of our people are still alive.”

“Well, okay,” Michonne smiles at him, “I was just making sure we’re on the same page.”

Rick manages a smile back at her, trying not to let his heart pin too much hope on the idea that Daryl might be there too when his head knows the reality of that being true is most likely just wishful thinking.

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They spend a relatively quiet day following the train tracks as best they can, only having two minor skirmishes with small knots of walkers along the way which they easily dispatch. As dusk starts to darken the sky, they find themselves on an empty stretch of highway running parallel to the tracks with no real shelter in sight in either direction. Their journey has them travelling a long stretch of road between towns with nothing but woodland surrounding them so, when they find an abandoned vehicle pulled off of the road into a small clearing, it seems as good a place as any to make camp for the night. The truck is sitting on four flat tires, blankets covering most of its windows and there are the scattered remnants of a small camp set up around it, Michonne quickly dispatching the only walker nearby – a lone, rotting reminder of the people who had once made this their safe place. Rick checks out the truck’s interior first for any surprises and then sets about building a small fire in the ring of stones already in place on the ground nearby. Earlier in the day he had headed off into the woods, leaving Michonne and Carl with strict instructions to stay on the path until he returned while he made a quick hunt for food.

He had Shifted briefly, his body craving the change but it had brought with it a bittersweet melancholy and he had only remained as the wolf long enough to kill a pair of rabbits for their dinner. As he had Shifted back, he had sworn he’d seen a glimpse of a large, black wolf slipping between the trees and had caught Daryl’s scent on the air but, with a blink of his eyes, he was alone again. Skinning the rabbits now and preparing them to cook as Daryl had taught him, his heart feels heavy and he’s unable to dispel the scent of Daryl which seems to be endlessly taunting his senses. They eat in a subdued silence, Rick lost in his thoughts until the meal is over and Carl climbs wordlessly into the back of the truck to go to sleep. Michonne stays with Rick, keeping watch beside the dying fire, quiet until they can both hear the soft sounds of Carl’s snores from the truck.

“How you doing?” she asks him softly and Rick’s heart aches to hear the genuine concern in her voice.

“Not so good,” he replies, knowing she’ll see through any bullshit response that he gives about being okay. “I just… I feel him here, do you know what I mean?”

“I do,” she tells him, her brow creasing as she regards him with solemn eyes. “When Andrea… when we lost her… I would hear her laugh – you remember that chuckle she had when something tickled her? Anyway, for the longest time after she was gone, I would hear it and I would find myself turning around to see what she was finding so damn funny. Felt like I’d been punched in the gut every single time I realized she wasn’t there.”

Rick had always suspected that there had been more to Andrea’s relationship with Michonne than just mere friendship but it was another of those things he’d never asked and he had to wonder now
just how well he'd known the people he'd lived with. Michonne’s relentless narrow-minded pursuit of the Governor for what he'd done to Andrea spoke volumes in itself and Rick felt that it gave him and Michonne a deeper understanding of each other.

“I can smell him,” Rick confesses, his eyes focusing on the fire’s glowing embers until there are nothing but bright spots blurring his vision, “the scent of him. I didn’t get a chance to take… I don’t have anything of his but sometimes it’s as strong as if he's standing next to me.”

The sharp sound of a cracking tree branch to their right has them both shooting to their feet in an instant, hands on weapons and Rick strains his ears but the sound isn’t repeated. He can smell nothing on the air except for Daryl so he relaxes, chalkling it up to the nocturnal wildlife that was teeming around them in the woods. They both sink back down, Michonne giving Rick a wry grin as he holsters his gun and turns his attention back to their conversation.

“Do you still…” he’s starting to say when the cold press of a gun barrel at his temple stops him in his tracks.

“Oh dearie me, you screwed up, asshole,” comes a rough voice behind him and Rick knows exactly who it belongs to even without being able to see its owner. “You hear me? You screwed up.”

Rick can’t help but mentally agree, knowing that if he wasn’t so wrapped up in his grief right now, this guy wouldn’t have got anywhere near him without him knowing about it. A few days before, not long after Michonne had found them, they had taken refuge in a nice house in a small community – Michonne insisting Rick needed to rest some more to recover from his injuries. He had indulged her to keep up his pretense that his body wasn’t already healed, staying in the house while she and Carl had gone scouting for supplies nearby. As luck would have it, while Rick was resting in one of the upstairs bedrooms, a group of men had entered the home, he presumed looking for a place to bed down. Hiding himself until he could get some idea of what he was dealing with, Rick had eavesdropped on their conversations, quickly determining that their group was at least six men strong and that he would definitely rather make a stealthy departure than risk a confrontation with them. Feeling frantic that Michonne and Carl were due back at any moment and would be walking into unknown danger, Rick had done what he deemed necessary to get out of there without being seen – killing one of their group and leaving him to turn into a walker as a distraction while he made his escape.

The voice now attached to the gun being shoved against his temple belonged to the group’s leader, a man Rick had already pegged as dangerous from the conversations he'd overheard in the house. Steadying his breathing and keeping perfectly still while he assesses the situation, Rick knows that he’ll have to handle this with extreme caution if he’s to ensure his son gets out of this alive. To his left, he’s aware of a second man with a gun levelled at Michonne’s head while two more with rifles have taken up a position in front of them. A fifth man, a balding, creepy-looking guy who’s making Rick incredibly nervous, heads over to the truck to bang on the window and Rick sees Carl’s startled face appear over the back seat. The leader, whose name is Joe if Rick remembers correctly, continues to talk but Rick has already tuned him out, his mind analyzing his options and running through every possible scenario just as he’d been trained to at the academy all those years ago. His first instinct, naturally, is to Shift – the wolf already raging inside him to be let loose and protect its pack – but his human mind can see the futility of that approach. Even with the element of surprise and his sheer brute strength and size, he would most likely still only have the opportunity to take down Joe and the guy holding Michonne before the others opened fire, leaving Carl vulnerable to the creep who is now pulling him from the car at knifepoint.

“Joe.”
The man’s self-important crowing stops dead as somebody else steps from the shadows on the far side of the truck and comes to a stop beside the two men with rifles.

Rick’s world stops – his chest constricting painfully as he tries to decipher fantasy from reality and then everything sharpens with crystal clarity as he realizes the truth in what he’s seeing standing before him.

Daryl is alive.

He’s talking softly to Joe, his eyes flicking occasionally to Rick and back as he lowers his crossbow to the ground and raises his hands in submission but Rick misses the entire exchange that follows. He’s too enraptured by Daryl’s appearance, drinking in every nuance of his appearance like a man dying of thirst who has suddenly been led to water. He evens his breathing, quieting the wolf, content in the knowledge that the odds have just slipped dramatically into his favor. When Joe commands the two men in front of him to take down Daryl, Rick grits his teeth, catching the subtle look from his partner before he lets himself become their punching bag.

“This was me, it wasn’t them,” Rick pleads, trying to put the right amount of pathos and subservience in his tone to make Joe think that he’s still in charge.

“See… that’s right,” Joe agrees with him, his voice laced with self-righteousness and an arrogance that sets Rick’s teeth on edge. “First we’re gonna beat Daryl to death, then we’ll have the girl and then the boy, and then I’m gonna shoot you and we’ll be square.”

What happens next, happens fast and, once the events are in motion, Rick is powerless to stop himself. He sees the man clutching Carl toss him bodily to the floor and follow him down, laughing at the kid’s frantic struggles to free himself and he hears the sounds of Daryl being beaten, knowing that he’s just letting it continue until Rick makes his move. With a deafening howl, Rick surges up, unleashing the wolf in his face and his hands, Joe’s gun firing wildly beside his head as Rick turns to capture him in his grasp. He hears a short, startled scream from Michonne followed by the sounds of her overpowering her captor and he curls his lips away from his fangs in the rictus of a smile as he meets Joe’s terrified eyes. Without even a second thought, Rick angles his head and widens his jaw to sink his teeth into the quivering skin of Joe’s throat and tear out his jugular, absently spitting the chunk of warm flesh from his mouth as he lets the dying man’s body sink to the ground. Turning away without another glance, he sees that Daryl has easily turned the tables on his assailants and is finishing them off while Michonne is stepping away from the body of the man she’d just killed and is heading to help Carl.

“He’s mine,” Rick growls, pushing past her with a fire burning in his veins to descend on his son’s captor who is now trying to use his boy as a shield.

He pulls Carl out of the man’s grasp, batting away the knife he brandishes at him as if it was nothing and releasing the boy into Michonne’s waiting embrace. With a savage snarl, he lashes out at the cowering man, the wolf feeding on the fear that’s streaming from his victim’s pores. In seconds he’s shredded him with his claws, watching the life leaving the other man’s eyes until his eviscerated corpse is steaming at his feet and Rick tilts his head back in a short but triumphant howl, the wolf sated by the righteous kill. Licking the still-warm blood from his lips, he turns to check on his family only to freeze as he sees their horrified faces staring back at him, Michonne sheltering Carl behind her body with her sword drawn in his direction. The elation at his victory in keeping them safe curdles in his stomach as he realizes what he’s done and he hurries to snap the wolf back inside.

“Now, now,” he says soothingly, spreading his hands in a non-threatening gesture in Michonne’s direction, “it’s me… just me, I swear. I’m not going to hurt you.”
“What are you?” Michonne whispers, her eyes wide with disbelief and her sword wavering just slightly as she keeps it pointed at his chest.

“I’m your friend,” he tells her softly, needing desperately for her to believe the truth in his words.

Dawn comes creeping through the woods, curling fingers of cool mist around the silent campsite but Rick isn’t even aware of it, the heat from his body burning it away before it even has a chance to soothe his fevered skin. He’s sitting with his back against the side panel of the truck, keeping as close as he can to Carl and Michonne inside but being careful to maintain enough of a distance for them not to feel threatened by him. It had taken every ounce of his and Daryl’s pleading for her not to take Carl and disappear into the night after what had gone down and he still believed that the only thing that had kept her from doing just that was the sheer look of distress on Carl’s face as he’d stared at his father with uncomprehending eyes. Reluctantly, she had agreed to stay, cradling Carl against her as she’d ushered him inside the back seat of the truck and soothed away his tears, keeping one hand close to her sword at all times. Rick had sunk to the ground at that point, the sheer magnitude of what had happened weighing on him so heavily that he couldn’t even hold himself upright anymore. He had been aware of Daryl’s presence, keeping his distance at first as though he didn’t know how to approach him and Rick didn’t even have the strength to acknowledge him as much as his heart was screaming at him to do so.

He’s looking down at his hands, still covered in the blood of the men he’d killed and trembling slightly in the early light when Daryl’s booted feet step into his field of vision and he raises his head.

“Here,” Daryl says softly, pulling his ever-present red rag from his back pocket and soaking it in water from the bottle in his hand before handing it to Rick, “you should clean up some.”

“We should be saving this to drink,” Rick argues but takes the damp cloth anyway and starts wiping at the accumulated gore on his face.

“Ain’t for you,” Daryl tells him, still pitching his voice low even though Rick knows that Michonne and Carl can easily hear every word. “It’s for them. Don’t need to see you like this.”

“Thanks,” Rick nods, understanding that Daryl is just looking out for the well-being of not only him but also the others.

Daryl nods as he gives Rick the remainder of the water before lowering himself to sit beside him, their shoulders almost but not quite touching and Rick feels a comfort steal over him that he’s not sure he deserves.

“Those guys,” Daryl says gruffly and Rick can hear the emotion burning beneath his words, “I knew they were bad, hell I’ve run with guys like them all my life but I never thought that they’d go this far.”

“How’d you find them?”

“Din’t. They found me. After the prison… after I got away, I was with Beth for a while, tryin’ to get her someplace safe, you know, so that I could go back and look for the others.”

“What happened?” Rick asks, already knowing the answer but sensing that Daryl needs to get it out for his own peace of mind.

“I lost her…” Daryl answers, his voice breaking for a second and then he sucks in a breath before continuing. “Just like I lost Sophia… another little girl’s blood on my hands because I wasn’t strong
enough or fast enough to keep her safe. I couldn’t keep any of them safe. What good is this power if I can’t use it to protect my family? I couldn’t even find you… God, I looked so fuckin’ hard… I went back to the prison after Beth was gone, tried to pick up some trails but everythin’ was gone, between the walkers trampin’ all over the damn place and the fires… I couldn’t find a single scent to go on. I tracked the bus but it was too late… they were all dead. I thought Carl… Carl and Judy were…”

“Daryl,” Rick whispers, reaching out to clutch at Daryl’s hand and squeezing it as tight as he can, making sure he has his full attention, “look at me – this wasn’t on you. None of this, do you hear me? There was no way we could’ve known what was coming and no amount of superhuman strength was going to help us with what that bastard did. If anyone is to blame here, it’s me. I had the opportunity to end him before any of this started, I was alone in that damn room with him for Christ’s sake, it was just me and him. A single bullet and it would’ve been over – Hershel, Andrea, Merle, they’d all still be alive – but I had to still think I could be the diplomat, that I could solve things with words and not guns. I brought this down on us – me, not you.”

“No,” Daryl states simply but firmly, returning Rick’s squeeze against his fingers, “it ain’t on you neither. The man was crazier ‘n a shithouse rat, weren’t nothin’ you could’ve said that was gonna change that. He was gonna bring damnation on us no matter what. Blamin’ ourselves with what if’s is just gonna make us both as crazy as he was. We both did what we could and, in the end, that’s what has to matter. Me findin’ you and Carl and Michonne… that’s what means somethin’. I thought I’d lost you. I was lost. Guess that’s why I fell in with Joe n’ those guys – gave me somethin’ to put one foot in front of the other for.”

Rick nods, drawing Daryl’s hand onto his lap still clasped in his own, not sure he’ll ever be ready to let go of it again. He knows Daryl’s right, one way or the other, the Governor had been hell bent on their destruction but he also knew that it was going to take him some time to put his guilt over his choices aside. Having Daryl back beside him was the first step to making that happen though, he was already feeling stronger and more in control despite the impending fallout he knew was coming from his revelation to Carl and Michonne. There was still one thing that was weighing heavily on his mind though, something that he wanted to clear up before they attempted to move on and start anew.

“Before,” he says, his voice barely above a whisper, “at the prison… with Carol… I just…”

“It’s over,” Daryl interrupts, overriding him. “I’m just glad that she didn’t have to see what happened at the prison… to the kids. That would’ve broken her. She’s out there and she’s okay… I know it.”

Daryl meets his eyes and Rick sees the truth of his forgiveness there, one small weight lifting from his heart with his look. Closing the tiny gap between them, Daryl lays his head against Rick’s shoulder with a weary sigh and Rick inhales deeply, the tiniest smile creasing his lips as he takes in the reality of the scent that’s been haunting his days.

“I love you,” Daryl says, the words falling unbidden from his lips and Rick’s breath hitches in his throat with the realization that this is the first time he’s ever heard Daryl make that admission.

“I love you too,” he replies, knowing that whatever else is coming, he won’t be alone anymore.
Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, mnd-dump-station

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(R&faq)

DO NOT REPOST

The following day was overcast as the four of them walked along the tracks, making their way to an unknown point somewhere beyond the horizon. Daryl’s eyes were fixed firmly on Rick’s back where he was walking side-by-side about fifty feet ahead with Michonne. Occasionally, he would throw a glance back over his shoulder, his eyes seeking Daryl's as if to reassure himself that he was
really there and Daryl would shoot him a brief smile of encouragement each time before Rick would nod and turn his gaze forward again. He had been deep in conversation with Michonne all day ever since she had warily emerged from the truck that morning, still making a conscious move to keep herself between Rick and Carl. Daryl had seen that her initial shock had been replaced by something else, an unbridled curiosity that gave him hope that they would be able to convince her that they were not the dangerous monsters portrayed in her first introduction to their other selves. He was sure that, if anyone could persuade her to trust them, it would be Rick – Michonne’s respect for him was as deep-rooted as Daryl’s and he had to believe that she was smart enough not to confuse what they were with who they were.

Carl had been silent ever since they’d set out, his eyes betraying nothing of what was going on in his head as he’d fallen into step beside Daryl. Keeping one ear tuned to Rick and Michonne’s conversation, Daryl cocks his head in Carl’s direction, trying to judge the teenager’s mood.

“You okay?” he asks quietly.

Carl shrugs in response, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the rail ties at his feet.

“Want to talk about what happened last night?”

Another shrug followed by a few minutes of silence and Daryl's deciding not to push it any further when he hears Carl draw in a deep breath.

“Am I going to be a monster like my dad?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper and Daryl has to wonder for a moment if he’s referring to the wolf or the man.

“No, your dad ain’t a natural born so you’re not gonna inherit it,” Daryl tells him, taking the safe answer, and sees a little of the tension leave the boy’s shoulders. “And we’re not monsters, Carl, your dad n’ me. We’re different but we ain’t evil.”

“But what he did…”

“He was protectin’ you – protectin’ all of us – he didn’t have a choice. Those guys were gonna end all of us… or worse, you understand that?”

“Yeah,” Carl nods after a moment’s thought.

“Good. You know your dad would do anythin’ to make sure you’re safe – we both would. There’s no pleasure in killin’ a man, Carl, but sometimes you just gotta do what has to be done to keep those you love safe.”

Carl nods again and they walk on in silence for a few minutes.

“How did it happen, to my dad, I mean?” Carl asks, turning his head now to meet Daryl’s eyes.

“You said he wasn’t born like that so how did it happen?”

It was the question Daryl had been dreading – even now with all that had happened between him and Rick, he still had nightmares occasionally about the night he had bitten him, waking him each time with a renewed feeling of shame and regret.

“It was my fault,” he replies, squaring his jaw and looking Carl straight in the eye. “Your old man was being attacked by walkers and I accidentally bit him when I tried to help. I didn’t mean to do it, I swear, it just happened so fast. I’d take it back if I could.”

“Why? Isn’t it better like this? Aren’t you faster and stronger than normal people?”
“Yeah… but I didn’t give him the choice, you get that? I infected him and there was nothin’ I could do to stop it.”

“So, it’s a disease? Like a walker bite’ll kill you?”

“No… not really… it’s more like a gift,” Daryl tells him and, for the first time, he actually believes that. “It’s a big responsibility and there’s lots of risks involved which is why it should only be given to people who can handle it. Your dad took to it like a natural but it ain’t always gonna be that way for everyone.”

“Is that why you kept it a secret?”

“Uh-huh,” Daryl nods, his eyes slipping to Rick as he senses him turning back to check on them. “Folks don’t always understand what’s different to them. They get scared and that’s how people wind up dead.”

“It must’ve been hard, keeping it to yourself, didn’t you want to tell someone?”

“Every damn day,” Daryl chuckles wryly. “But I couldn’t risk it – if it meant havin’ to leave the group. I knew y’all stood a better chance if I was around.”

“Is that why you’re such a good hunter?”

“Dunno,” Daryl shrugs. “Maybe. It’s a lot easier on four legs, that’s for sure.”

“What’s it like? Do you still think like a person? Can anything hurt you like that or are you, like, invincible or something?”

“Damn kid,” Daryl laughs, “you ask even more questions than your old man did. You really want to know all this shit?”

“Hell yeah,” Carl answers and Daryl is grateful to see that his eyes have lost most of the haunted look he’d had when they started out that day.

“Hey watch your mouth,” he warns, catching sight of Rick turning to throw a stern glance over his shoulder in their direction.

“He can hear us?” Carl whispers, his eyes widening a little at the implications that revelation brings.

“Sure can, even when you whisper,” Daryl grins, slapping Carl on the shoulder. “Smell you too.”

“That’s gross.”

“How d’you think he always knew where you were hidin’ back at the prison when you n’ Patrick’d sneak off?”

Daryl sees a shadow cross Carl’s face, either at his mention of their fallen home or the friend he’d lost and he curses himself for bringing it up.

“Wish we were invincible though,” Daryl continues quickly, trying to pull Carl’s attention away from what’s been lost. “I mean, we can survive a lot of shit but a bullet’s still gonna hurt like a bitch.”

“Language!” Rick yells back over his shoulder and Daryl can see Michonne flinch a little beside him.
“Sorry,” he calls, shooting a grin at Carl who smiles back.

“What about silver?”

“Nah… more bullsh- lies made up to sell movies. Full moon don’t mean nothin’ either. We Shift when we want.”

“Shift,” Carl repeats as though he’s trying the word on for size and, too late, Daryl realizes he might be slipping into dangerous territory here.

“Don’t even think about it,” he warns, pitching his voice low.

“What?”

“Askin’ me or your dad to make you like us. It’s not gonna happen – not anytime soon at least. You ain’t done with growin’ yet – wolf blood’ll rip right through ya if it’s too soon,” Daryl tells him, bending the truth just enough to hopefully dissuade any ideas that might be forming in Carl’s mind.

“But someday?” Carl asks hopefully.

“Well that’s up to you and your dad to discuss when you’re old enough but it’s gonna be a few years yet.”

Carl falls silent again and Daryl turns his full attention to Rick and Michonne’s conversation ahead, finding that she’s asking a lot of similar questions to Carl’s in regards to their abilities and their limitations. Daryl thinks that she seems pretty calm about the whole situation now – her analytical mind digesting all the information that Rick’s feeding her and then responding with her usual mix of relevant questions and insightful comments. The more he listens, the more Daryl’s concerns about her leaving them are alieved and he starts to relax a little more. He lets his mind turn to what’s ahead of them, trying not to pin his hopes too high on finding other members of their family at Terminus even though him and Rick finding each other had seemed impossible to him only a day ago.

“Can I see it?” Carl asks, bringing Daryl back to the here and now. “The wolf – can you show me how you Shift?”

Daryl’s startled by the question – nobody has ever asked him to demonstrate what he can do before – and he’s fumbling for an answer when Rick comes to his rescue.

“Now, Carl,” he says, stopping on the tracks with Michonne while Daryl and Carl catch up to them, “it’s not a trick – it’s a serious business and Daryl’s not a circus dog so don’t be buggin’ him to perform for you. Why don’t you come walk with me for a while so we can talk.”

Carl nods, moving ahead to join his father and Daryl gives Rick a grateful look before he turns to carry on and finds Michonne staring at him.

“What?” he asks, confused by the amused smirk that’s playing across her lips.

“Now I know where the fleas came from,” she informs him with a smile and then turns to follow Rick and Carl along the tracks.

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They walk for a couple more hours, the signs for Terminus becoming more frequent and in better
repair than the ones they'd encountered previously. As it had been early afternoon before they'd even
 gotten moving that day, Rick decides they should find a safe place for the night and approach
 Terminus in the daylight the next day. They find an empty farmhouse a little way off of the tracks
 and, after securing the perimeter, they settle down for the night. Daryl offers to go out and find some
 fresh meat but Michonne tells him not to bother after she finds a stash of canned goods in the
 basement. The adults eat together at the worn kitchen table, Carl having separated himself once he
 had discovered one of the bedrooms upstairs had once obviously belonged to a teenage boy and was
 still packed enough books and comics to keep him occupied for weeks. He had taken a plate of food
 and disappeared, closing the bedroom door behind him and Rick had cautioned the others to just let
 him be for the night – to let him have some time to himself to work things out.

 When they're done eating, Michonne gets up and starts clearing the table, humming lightly under her
 breath as she stacks the dishes in the dishwasher until she catches the men looking at her and realizes
 what she's doing.

 “Old habits,” she smiles ruefully, leaning against the sink.

 “Yeah,” Rick answers quietly and Daryl can see he's obviously thinking of a different kitchen, from
 a different time – probably the one he'd shared with Lori and Carl.

 “I'll take first watch,” Daryl states, getting to his feet, wanting to distance himself from thoughts of a
 happy domesticity that he'd never had.

 “No, I’ll do it,” Michonne counters, stepping forward to gather up her katana from its resting place
 on the table.

 “It’s no problem,” Daryl insists, squaring off in front of her.

 “Seriously, I’ve got it,” she tells him, throwing a look at Rick. “I figure you two lovebirds haven’t
 had a second to yourselves since you got back together so I thought you might appreciate a little
 alone time to… talk… or do whatever it is that you do.”

 She waggles her fingers in his direction and Daryl blushes to the roots of his hair as he hears Rick
 stifle a laugh behind him.

 “Besides, you two hairballs have given me a lot to think about. I’m not sure I could sleep if I tried so,
 thanks for that,” she adds sarcastically, heading for the door. “I’ll wake you in a few hours… if you
 even go to sleep, that is.”

 With a wink at Daryl who feels his skin flush an even deeper crimson, she leaves the room, closing
 the door behind her with a light laugh.

 The atmosphere in the room changes immediately with her departure and Daryl glances almost shyly
 at Rick, realizing that Michonne’s words were true – they had barely even spoken to each other since
 that morning by the truck.

 “Come on,” Rick says, giving him a warm smile that starts a tingle at the base of his spine, “you
 heard the lady – let’s not waste our quiet time.”

 Daryl is still blushing furiously – he’s never going to be used to being in a relationship that the
 people he loves not only approve of but see as nothing out of the ordinary – but he quickly crosses
 the kitchen as Rick gets up from his seat and together they head upstairs. Rick hesitates for a second
 outside the closed door to Carl’s room and Daryl lays a hand against his back, knowing that the
 father and son still have a lot of repairs to do to their relationship. Turning his head, Rick smiles at
him over his shoulder and then takes Daryl’s hand to lead him to the master bedroom at the end of the hall, firmly closing the door behind them.

They stand in the silence for a moment, face to face, the pale light of the moon through the window the only thing illuminating their features but Daryl can see Rick as clear as day. He looks at him - really looks at him - for the first time since they were reunited and his heart aches for the obvious pain and stress from everything that happened that he can see etched in every line of Rick’s face. Slowly, Rick raises a hand to trace the contours of Daryl's cheek and run his fingertips lightly along his jaw before dropping his hand back to his side.

“You’re real,” he murmurs.

“So are you.”

And that’s all they need – every fear, each second of inconsolable loss that both of them had felt while they were apart and every ounce of unmitigated hope that had kept them going – all of it passes in that simple exchange and Daryl feels that he is whole again.

With a gentle touch, he reaches out to start unbuttoning Rick’s shirt, taking his time as he eases it off his shoulders. He winces a little as he sees the vicious welts and fading bruises still covering Rick's skin.

“You can let this heal now,” he tells him gently and he hears Rick sigh as he strokes his fingers over the damaged skin.

Rick lifts his hand to brush Daryl’s hair away from his forehead, his palm slipping comfortably to the back of his neck, its warmth radiating across Daryl’s skin and down his spine.

“God, I missed your face,” Rick breathes, letting his other hand rest on Daryl’s chest.

“Yeah, I missed yours too,” Daryl confesses, stroking his thumbs over the ragged fullness of Rick’s beard. “What I can see of it.”

“Hey, I thought you liked the beard?” Rick asks, letting go of Daryl’s neck to scratch his nails through the thick hair on his chin.

“The beard, yes, this dead woodchuck – not so much,” Daryl smirks, tugging playfully at Rick’s chin until Rick grabs his hand and holds it tightly.

“Well then, I’ll have to see if I can change your mind about that,” he whispers, his eyes locked with Daryl's as he lifts his hand and slides Daryl's middle finger between his lips, curling his tongue around the knuckle.

Daryl whimpers, feeling something unravel inside of him that he hadn’t realized had been wound so tight and he leans into the heat of Rick’s body where he's sucking hard on Daryl’s finger, the tickle of his whiskers sending involuntary shivers across Daryl’s torso until he can’t stand it any longer. He slides his finger from between Rick’s lips to replace it with his tongue, darting tiny licks across Rick’s teeth before pushing it in to roll over his. As they kiss he can feel Rick clinging to him, a slight tremor running through him and Daryl knows that, as hard as it was for him out there alone, it would’ve been even harder for Rick. They don’t need to talk about it for Daryl to know just how close Rick had come to the edge – he can feel it in the urgent way Rick is pulling at his clothes to undress him between their frantic kisses and the way his breath catches in his throat each time their lips part. Daryl knows that he’s Rick’s lifeline and all he wants to do right now is make sure that he has him safe in his embrace where he never has to worry about Daryl being gone again.
“I love you,” he says, voice raw with emotion, finding it the easiest thing in the world to say now, every association of those three little words belonging completely to Rick. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

He repeats the words over and over as he steers Rick back to the bed, punctuating each time with a kiss while he lays Rick down and moves to cover his body with his own. They lay together, bodies aligned, breathing in tandem as they continue to explore each other’s mouths until Daryl can feel his lips getting raw from the repeated contact. He pulls back, just a little, running the tip of his tongue over his swollen lips as he regards Rick underneath him, seeing the evidence of his lust in his wide-blown pupils. They’re both as hard as iron, Daryl can feel the heat from Rick’s cock pressed firmly against his own, only heightening his arousal but he doesn’t care about himself in this moment – his only desire is to take care of Rick.

“Pretty sure we’re not going to find any lube in the bathroom,” Rick says with a breathy chuckle and Daryl follows his gaze around the chintzy traditional bedroom.

“Nah, not unless Farmer Joe was slippin’ it to Mrs. Joe in the back door,” Daryl smirks. “Don’t matter – I’ve got the next best thing.”

Maintaining the languid pace that they’ve already established, Daryl works his way down Rick’s torso, reacquainting himself with every inch of skin that’s laid bare to the touch of his lips and his fingers. Rick’s hand rests lightly against his head, occasionally stroking Daryl's hair back like he can’t bear to lose that contact even for a second. When he finally reaches Rick’s cock, his mouth moistens at the familiar, heavy scent of him and he wastes no time in running the flat of his tongue along his length. The trembling under Rick's skin intensifies with his touch and Daryl lays a soothing hand flat against his abdomen as he wraps his lips over the head. The ripe, salty taste of Rick's pre-cum explodes like nectar against Daryl's tongue and he finds his eyes closing in pleasure as he laps against his slit. Rick’s grip on his hair has tightened noticeably and Daryl flicks his eyes up to take in the sight of Rick’s face – his brow creased in concentration, his eyes heavily-lidded and his bottom lip pulled in between his teeth. To Daryl's eyes he looks like some sort of mythological God, put on the earth to do nothing more than torment mere mortals with his raw beauty.

Abruptly Daryl is done with the kissing and the foreplay, his body craving for Rick to be inside him – for them to be completely joined as one – so he slides Rick's cock from between his lips, leaving behind a generous coating of saliva and pre-cum, and he moves up to straddle him.

“Daryl, you’re not…” Rick starts to warn him but he's too late as Daryl has already taken him in hand and guided him to his entrance.

Rick's shoulders press back into the bed as his back arches up and Daryl grits his teeth a little as he lowers himself fully onto Rick's slick cock, ignoring the burn as he opens up around him. He steadies himself, his body aching with the sheer pleasure of being able to join with Rick like this again, and then he begins a shallow lift and fall movement using his thighs to do all the work. With his fingers splayed against Rick's abdomen, he slowly rides his cock – the initial burn fading to be replaced with a moan-inducing stimulation instead as Rick’s head massages his prostate with each lift of Daryl’s hips. Rick’s hands wrap around his thighs, kneading and stroking Daryl's skin as he keeps up his rhythmic pace. With their bodies locked together and they eyes firmly on each other, Daryl feels no urgency to go faster, wanting to stretch this moment to eternity if he can. He has his mate back, has him buried deep inside him, and Daryl never wants to let him go again. He feels whole again - despite the grievous losses they’ve both suffered, having Rick back makes him feel complete.

“Daryl,” Rick sighs, his head tipping back to expose his throat and his fingers digging into Daryl's flesh.
With the tiniest of growls, Daryl starts moving his body faster, reading every breath and moan that Rick makes as easily as if he was talking aloud, wanting to feel him come inside him. He can feel his own cock leaking hard, his balls aching from the stimulation, but he wants to take care of Rick first – needs to see him come.

“Daryl,” Rick moans, lifting the back of his hand to his lips to stifle the cries Daryl knows he wants to give.

“C’mon, Officer,” Daryl growls softly, grinding back against Rick's groin and squeezing around his shaft.

“Fu… Daryl…” Rick gasps, his eyes widening as he shoots his load, his cock pumping erratically up into Daryl's ass as he holds steady above him.

When Rick slips from him, his body rippling under Daryl's fingers as he catches his breath, Daryl sits back on his thighs, his own legs protesting at the prolonged workout they’ve just had in the same position. He watches as Rick regains control of his senses, a smile playing across Daryl’s lips as his lover’s hazy blue eyes come back to focus on him. Raising himself up from the bed, Rick slides his arms around Daryl's waist, pulling him tightly against him as he nuzzles his face into the crook of his neck. Daryl wraps his arms around Rick's shoulders, slipping one hand up to stroke the back of his head, holding him just as tight and feeling Rick’s breath damp against his collarbone.

“I missed you so much,” Rick mumbles, his beard tickling Daryl's skin. “I was so lost.”

“I know,” Daryl replies, tugging Rick's head up to look at him, wanting him to know that he understands and that he was lost too but also wanting to get them past what happened. “Maybe if you were a better tracker…”

He trails off, giving Rick a teasing grin, hoping he’ll get the response he wants. Rick's brow creases for a second and then a smile breaks across his face, a genuine one that fully reaches his eyes and Daryl feels a tiny weight strip away from the bundle of anxiety he's been carrying in his chest.

“Just for that, I should really let you suffer, Dixon,” Rick growls, pushing Daryl back from his lap where he bounces against the sturdy bed, “but… as I’m such a nice guy, I’ll let that one slide.”

Changing position, he runs his hands up the inside of Daryl's thighs, pushing them apart and Daryl tucks one arm behind his head so that he can watch as Rick wraps his fingers around his turgid cock. Lowering his head, Rick flicks out his tongue to catch the pearlescent drops that are leaking from Daryl’s slit, briefly closing his eyes as he swallows deeply and Daryl whines a little under his breath. Rick presses his lips to the tip, pushing Daryl's cock slowly between them and taking him deep into his throat. Daryl's free hand clutches at the dusty comforter underneath him as Rick rolls his lips to cover his teeth and Daryl can feel the sharp prickle of his beard against his shaft when Rick starts bobbing his head. He knows he's not going to last long and he doesn’t care, all that concerns him is lifting Rick from his despair, seeing him smile and knowing that Daryl's responsible for that smile. Moving his hand to Rick's face, he traces the hollow contour of Rick's cheek where he's sucking hard on Daryl's cock and gives himself over to the pure pleasure his body is experiencing. Rick hums around him, a move guaranteed to have Daryl coming in seconds and he thinks he blacks out for a moment as his orgasm takes him, Rick staying tight around him as he ejaculates into his willing mouth.

Daryl's hips seem to keep involuntarily bucking for the longest time even when he thinks he's done and Rick just keeps him firmly enveloped in the wet heat between his lips, swallowing rapidly around him until Daryl finally stills beneath him. Pulling off, his breath coming in shallow pants, Rick licks his way around Daryl's length once more, gently lapping at his slit until Daryl shudders at
his touch and then he crawls up Daryl's body to lay beside him, keeping one leg hooked over Daryl's.

“Mmmm…” he mumbles, tracing his lips along Daryl's shoulder and up his neck.

“You ready to go again there, Sheriff?” Daryl asks, reaching down to grasp at Rick's cock, making him gasp loudly.

“Maybe after a little nap,” he laughs quietly, pulling Daryl's hand away and keeping it in his own. “See if we can’t get you to take a little longer crossing the finishing line there, Speedy.”

“Hey!” Daryl exclaims indignantly, shrugging Rick's head away from his shoulder.

Rick chuckles as he rolls onto his back, still keeping Daryl's hand clutched against his stomach and throwing his other arm up behind his head.

“We should sleep,” Rick tells him softly, turning to look at him and Daryl can see the tiredness in his eyes now that the euphoria of their love-making is wearing off. “Michonne’ll wake us when it’s time to change watch.”

Daryl nods, feeling his own eyes closing as exhaustion washes over him and the last thing he feels before he drifts off is the soft touch of Rick's fingertips tracing lightly over his face and Daryl smiles as they brush against his lips.

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When he wakes of his own accord, he's surprised to find that the room is bathed in morning light and he raises his head in concern, all traces of sleep burning instantly from his body. During the night he's curled into his usual position at Rick's side, wrapping protectively around him, and his movement now causes Rick to wake up too.

“Morni… what’s up?” comes Rick's gruff voice, his face suddenly alert as he meets Daryl's eyes.

“She didn’t wake us,” Daryl says and his answer is enough to have both of them rising simultaneously from the bed.

Barely stopping to pull on more than pants and boots but each grabbing their weapons, they race from the room. Rick skids to a halt outside of Carl’s door but shakes his head as they both hear the gentle snoring from inside and they wordlessly agree to leave him there until they know what they’re dealing with. Silently they move on down the stairs, Daryl scenting the air but finding nothing amiss as they move through the empty rooms to the kitchen. At a nod from Rick, he yanks open the back door and they burst out to find Michonne sitting comfortably on the back porch, wrapped in an over-sized blanket and nursing a steaming mug in her hands. She throws them an amused glance as they come to a stop in front of the gently rocking porch swing she's seated on and then inclines her head back towards the kitchen.

“I made coffee,” she informs them, “figured you might need it this morning.”

“You were supposed to wake us,” Rick answers accusingly, tucking his gun into the back of his pants.

“Wasn’t sleepy,” Michonne shrugs under the blanket. “I had a lot of thinking to do.”

“’bout what?” Daryl asks, a tendril of concern creeping along his spine.
“About what happens next – with us and what you are.”

“And?” Rick asks, his casual stance doing nothing to mask the tense lines Daryl can see sculpting his physique.

“I want you to show me,” Michonne states simply.

“What?” Daryl says, not expecting that to be her response.

“Show me what it’s like… let me see this little trick of yours,” she repeats, turning her solemn eyes on Daryl so that he knows she’s not kidding.

“Why?” he questions her, shuffling uncomfortably under her scrutiny.

“Because I want to know what I’m dealing with here,” she answers, one of those enigmatic smiles pulling at her lips that always make him feel like she’s the smartest person on the planet.

“You heard the lady,” Rick chimes in and Daryl swivels his head to look his way.

“Why me?” he demands, feeling suddenly self-conscious and shuffling his feet even more.

“Because you’re the alpha male around here,” Rick tells him, a twinkle in his eyes that makes Daryl smile on the inside even though he keeps his outward appearance neutral.

“Bullshit,” he scoffs, crossing his arms defensively over his bare chest, “ain’t no alpha here ‘cept for you, Sheriff.”

“Now, now, boys,” Michonne’s voice cuts across the middle of them, “save it for the bedroom.”

“Fine,” Daryl huffs, feeling the flush of embarrassment creeping over his skin.

He turns and walks down the porch steps, keeping his back to Michonne to save a little of his dignity even though it makes him more uncomfortable to expose his scars to her than it does his naked body. He hears the porch creak behind him as she stands to obviously get a better look and, with a grumbled curse under his breath, he drops to all fours and Shifts before he hits the ground. Stretching and giving himself a shake, he turns back around, noting the stunned and slightly impressed look on Michonne’s face as she comes down the steps to stand in front of him.

“Can I?” she asks, raising her hand in front of Daryl’s face and he answers with the merest rumble of a growl but nods his head anyway.

Moving with a healthy dose of caution, Michonne reaches out to stroke her palms across the contours of his face, her touch light, and a look of wonderment in her eyes.

“You’re bigger than I expected,” she muses, half to herself as she comes around his side and Daryl shoots a warning glance at Rick when he hears him snort out a small laugh.

Daryl holds his position as Michonne runs her hand through his scruff and along his spine, mentally gritting his teeth a little even though he has to admit that her touching him isn’t freaking him out as much as he’d expected it to. He’d never really liked being handled in this form, most likely because the only person before Rick to ever do it had been Merle and naturally there’d been copious amounts of ear tweaking and sly yanks on his tail. But there was something almost soothing about Michonne’s inquisitive exploration of him that puts Daryl at ease and he meets her with a canine grin when she completes her circle of him and ends up standing next to Rick who had stepped down to join them. Daryl walks around behind both of them, aware of Michonne’s eyes on him as he comes
up on Rick’s other side and pushes his head under his hand, needing to be close to him. He huffs out a small sigh as Rick buries his strong fingers into his scruff, tugging lightly at his fur as Daryl leans against him.

“So, what do you think?” Rick asks, turning to Michonne.

“Impressive,” she answers after a moment’s thought, “and you say you’re still completely you in there?”

“Absolutely… see for yourself,” he assures her and then looks down at Daryl. “Okay… one bark for yes and two for no, got it? Daryl, do you hunt with a crossbow?”

Daryl steps away from Rick’s side, pulling himself upright but only barely Shifting his upper half into humanoid shape, distributing his weight on his enormous back paws and towering over both of them.

“’ain’t your circus dog,” he growls, peeling his lips ferociously back from his fangs, impressed to see that Michonne doesn’t even flinch. “Didn’t you just get through tellin’ that to Carl?”

“Nice,” Michonne comments, giving a low whistle as Rick laughs out loud. “How long does it take to get that kind of control?”

“Not too long,” Rick answers as Daryl stalks over to retrieve his discarded pants and boots, Shifting rapidly back to human to redress. “It comes with practice. Watch.”

Daryl turns back as Rick holds out his hand to Michonne, flexing it in and out of its wolf shape while she stares at him, transfixed.

“Does it hurt?” she asks quietly, tentatively taking his clawed hand between hers to run her fingers over its misshapen surface and that’s the exact moment that Daryl knows with crystal clarity exactly where this conversation is headed.

“Initially, yes, like I told you,” Rick tells her and Daryl can see that he's missing the point of this little show and tell – that she’s not just asking so that she’ll feel safer around them. “It’s worse than anything that you can imagine the first time but it fades the more that your body gets used to it until there’s nothing more than a tiny snap each time… like somebody flicking you with a rubber band.”

She nods her head and Daryl can practically see the questions and answers forming in her mind before she finally opens her mouth and asks the one he’s been expecting.

“Will you give it to me?”
Rick sets his half-drunk coffee down on the kitchen table, the bitter, slightly stale liquid scalding his throat as he swallows. He looks from Daryl's neutral expression to the scowl that’s been plastered on Michonne’s face since he'd denied her request to make her like him and Daryl.

“Why did you show me how easy it could make things if you weren’t going to share it with me?” she hisses at him across the table, all of them taking care not to wake Carl who is still fast asleep.
above them.

“Because I wanted you to understand what we are – to know that we’re not a threat to you or Carl… that all we want is to protect you both.”

“Then think how much better it would be,” she tells him passionately, “three wolves to protect one lamb. The odds don’t get much better than that.”

“I know but it’s not worth the risk – not now, when we’ve lost so much already. It could kill you and I… we… can’t lose you too. I won’t.”

“We need every edge we can get in this fucked up world, Rick, you of all people know that. There’s a hundred things out there that could kill me that we know nothing about. I’d rather take a calculated risk at something that could save us all than wander blindly into the unknown, day after day. You don’t think I’m strong enough to handle it, is that it?”

“No… that’s not it. I just… it’s…” he trails off, looking to Daryl for backup, knowing how much Daryl has been against this idea from the start.

“I think we should do it,” Daryl says softly, looking Rick straight in the eye. “We said we would consider it when the time was right – well I don’t think it’s gonna get more right than this. ‘chonne’s right, we need all the help we can get and you said it yourself, she’d be the one we’d offer it to first. I say we give her what she wants.”

“But that was before, Daryl, when we still had four secure walls around us and the luxury of taking the time to do it properly. I know I pushed for this but now it just seems a foolhardy thing to do when we’re out here on our own.”

“Then we wait until we find someplace we can dig in for a few days with no chance of bein’ disturbed and we do it then.”

Rick stares at him, caught off guard for a moment by the reversal of their opinions on the matter and he works Daryl's thoughts into his own analysis of the situation before he makes his final decision.

“Allright,” he says, leaning back in his chair to meet Michonne’s eyes. “If you’re really sure this is what you want.”

“It is,” she replies emphatically. “Look, I’m not stupid or naïve, Rick, I understand the risks and that, once it’s done, there’ll be no turning back but I really think it’s the right choice. For all of us.”

“Okay,” Rick agrees, hearing the strength of her convictions in her voice, “but we wait, like Daryl says, until we find someplace safe. I don’t want to be fighting off herds of walkers while you’re trying to figure out how to stand on four legs. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

“Then I say we stick to our original plan – head on to this Terminus place and, if it’s safe there, then that’s where we’ll do it. Or maybe you’ll change your mind, depending on what we find there but, if it’s no good and we have to move on, then we’ll find someplace else to do it. Deal?”

Michonne nods her assent and Rick sighs, hoping that he’s making the right decision, not only for her but for all of them. A noise from upstairs alerts them to the fact that Carl is now up and about and Daryl pushes his chair back from the table to stand up.

“Why don’t me n’ you take a quick run,” he suggests, inclining his head to the door. “See if we can’t
scare up somethin’ we can cook to take with us when we leave.”

“Good idea,” Rick answers, smiling as Carl’s sleep-filled face appears in the doorway.

“Wass goin’ on?” Carl asks, his mouth pulling wide in an accompanying yawn.

“Your dad n’ me were just goin’ out to get us some breakfast – want us to pick you up an Egg McMuffin?” Daryl answers, bumping Carl with his shoulder as he passes him on the way to the door.

“Haha,” Carl replies sarcastically, shoving Daryl as he goes and then Rick sees his eyes narrow as he catches sight of Daryl’s back and he shakes his head as his son opens his mouth to comment.

“We won’t be long,” Rick tells them, patting Carl’s shoulder as he follows Daryl outside into the fresh morning air.

As it happened, they came back empty-handed, the local wildlife having scattered it seemed the moment they’d Shifted and started prowling through the undergrowth. After numerous unsuccessful attempts at catching anything, Rick had signaled to Daryl that they should head back, hoping that they’d find something along the road and, if not, figuring that they’d reach Terminus before sundown anyway. So, once again, the four of them had set off along the railroad tracks heading to that elusive point just beyond the horizon until, just as the afternoon sun was starting its descent, they closed in on their destination.

Things had gone south quickly, despite the precautions they had taken on their approach – stashing the majority of their weapons outside the fence and approaching stealthily from the side instead of walking through the all-too-inviting open front gate. Daryl had expressed his unease the second they had set foot inside the compound and Rick had been quick to agree with him – something in the air had just smelled wrong to both of them. Having surprised a group of people by entering one of the buildings at the rear, the warm welcome that their charismatic leader, Gareth, had given them had quickly turned sour when Rick had discovered one of the residents wearing the watch he knew Hershel had given to Glenn. A quick glance around at the other people in the deceptively cheerful welcome area had revealed a plethora of other treasure that Rick had recognized as having come from his people at the prison. The situation had escalated quickly until the four of them had tried to make a break for freedom and had found themselves herded like sheep in a hail of bullets which ended with them surrounded and out of options.

They were standing in a small courtyard at the edge of the railway terminal, the fence they had been heading for now blocked by a line of well-armed residents with more of them at their backs and on the surrounding roofs. Gareth had them drop their weapons and move, one at a time, to a closed up train car sitting alone on the rails. Rick had hesitated at first, weighing his options and realizing that, if they were all to get through this alive, then they had no other choice but to comply with Gareth’s directions. As he had walked to the train car’s steps, praying briefly that Daryl didn’t try to do anything heroic behind him, his entire focus was on Carl, seeing the paralyzing fear on his son’s face. He’d had a gut-wrenching moment where he’d thought for a second that they were going to be separated and he was ready to go into a beserker rage if that happened, regardless of the consequences, but then Gareth had given the go ahead for Carl to join them.

With Carl closing in on their position, Rick slides open the heavy door on the side of the train car and they file in, Carl bringing up the rear and Rick reaching for him as soon as somebody slams the door closed from the outside. It’s not until the darkness claims them with its illusion of safety that Rick is hit by the mixed scents of other people that are sharing the space with them. He thinks his mind is
once more playing tricks on him as he hears a voice he recognizes saying his name and Glenn steps from the deeper shadows at the far end of the car.

“You’re here?” Rick asks hesitantly, questioning both his own mind as well as the man in front of him and then, as more familiar faces appear from the dark space behind Glenn, he repeats it with more surety. “You’re here.”

His heart lifts as he takes in the tired and worried faces of those he thought he'd lost – Maggie, Sasha, Bob, Noah and four newcomers he doesn’t know apart from a small, dark-haired girl who is studiously avoiding his eyes. Her, he recognizes with ease but he keeps quiet, knowing that there are more pressing matters at hand than the last time he saw her face.

“They’re our friends,” Maggie explains. “They helped save us.”

“Well now they’re friends of ours,” Daryl says from behind him and Rick relaxes a notch, knowing that his partner has already assessed the group and found nothing of concern.

“For however long that will be,” answers the gruff-looking red-haired man standing at the back of the group before starting to turn away.

“No,” answers Rick, feeling a confidence surging through him despite the dire circumstances they’re in, his hope rekindled by the discovery of his family, and the man turns back to look at him. “They’re gonna feel pretty stupid when they find out.”

“Find out what?” the man asks, his brow furrowing.

“They’re fucking with the wrong people,” Rick states grimly, looking at each of his companions in the silence that follows.

“Well, that’s pretty big talk for a man who just walked into a meat locker,” the red-head drawls, squaring his pretty impressive shoulders to look Rick in the eye and Rick smiles inwardly knowing already that he's found a valuable ally in this man.

“Meat locker?” Michonne asks in a puzzled voice, walking over to stand closer to Maggie who reaches out to grasp her hand tightly in greeting.

“Rick, they’re eating people,” Glenn interrupts, his face a mixture of anguish and unbridled disgust. “Those that won’t join them – won’t be a part of what they do – they end up on that grill out there.”

“I know,” Rick answers and he feels every eye turn to him. “Outside… when they were herding us into this place, I saw the bodies – what was left of them anyway. They were butchered.”

He stretches out a hand to draw Carl closer to him, feeling the boy tremble against his side.

“Sick fucks,” hisses Daryl, letting out a low whistle and pacing away.

“Daryl,” Michonne chides him almost absent-mindedly but Rick can see the tremor in her hand as she rests it against Maggie’s arm.

“That’s why we’re getting out of here as soon as possible,” Rick tells them calmly and there isn’t a part of him that doubts it, not even in the face of their disbelieving stares.

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In the darkest part of the night, the only ones fully awake are him and Daryl, sitting side-by-side with
their backs against the wall of the train car, Carl curled up at Rick’s side with his head pillowed on his father’s lap. Rick has one hand resting on the boy’s shoulder and his other locked firmly with Daryl’s, their fingers intertwined, pulling strength from that contact. He allows himself a small smile, remembering how adamantly Daryl had once dismissed any display of affection at the start of their relationship but now, more often than not, was the one that initiates it. Rick listens to the sounds of the others in the car, knowing that none of them are really doing more than dozing, each of them running on too much adrenalin to really sleep even though he had insisted that they should try.

The group had talked quietly well into the night, first covering introductions to the new members of their family and then catching up with what had happened since they’d been forced apart. Daryl had broken the news to Maggie of her sister’s death and Rick knew it had been as hard for him to tell as it had been for her to hear it. Maggie had gathered him to her, whispering to him that it wasn’t his fault and that she knew in her heart that he would’ve done everything possible to make sure her baby sister was protected. Rick could see that her words had gone some way to alleviating the burden of her death that Daryl had been carrying inside and Rick was grateful to Maggie for that.

They had kept watch until the sun had completely dropped from the sky, taking turns to press their faces to the cracks around the door, but there had been no further sign of their captors. Feeling relatively sure that they weren’t being monitored, the talk had turned to what they should do next and that was when the red-haired leader of the other group, Abraham, had dropped something akin to an atom bomb into play. With a matter-of-fact delivery that reflected his military roots, he informed Rick that the other man they were travelling with, Eugene – a skittish oddball guy that Rick didn’t quite yet know what to make of – was evidently holding the key to a cure for what had started the whole epidemic in the first place, locked away in his brain. Abraham went on to explain that his group were on a mission to deliver Eugene to Washington where there was supposedly still enough remnants of society left that they would be able to piece the world back together with the knowledge he carried. Rick had been skeptical at first but, the more they’d talked, the more he found himself becoming open to the idea and the added incentive only fueled his desire to escape even more but he knew they had to be smarter than the people holding them.

“You think it’ll work?” Daryl whispers, leaning his face in close to Rick's ear so that Rick can feel the warmth of his breath on his cheek.

“Got to,” he replies, turning slightly so that their faces are mere inches apart. “We all leave, Daryl.”

“What if they ain’t strong enough? What if we need to..?”

“Then we do it – no hesitation. If that’s what it takes to get out, then we use that advantage. Carl is the priority, no matter what.”

“Uh-huh,” Daryl agrees and Rick knows that either of them will be prepared to lay down their lives if it means their son will get safely away.

“Promised I weren’t gonna leave you again,” Daryl sighs after a moment’s silence.

“Then don’t,” Rick tells him, leaning in to press his lips against Daryl’s, giving them this moment together to pour everything into what may very well be their final kiss.

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Nobody sleeps past the first grey fingers of dawn that slip through the cracks in the old car. With an efficiency that makes Rick proud, everyone starts creating makeshift weapons from whatever they can pull from their surroundings. They have no idea when their captors will come for them but he wants to be ready and, when Daryl finally confirms that there are four men approaching, a look
around at everyone tells Rick that they are. The plan is simple because there’s no other option – when the door is opened, they’ll rush out and overpower whoever’s there then make a break for the fence. Without proper weapons, the only choice they have is to flee as fast and far as they can. He can feel the tension in the small space ratcheting up as the men draw nearer and can taste the fear and adrenalin pouring from his companions as everyone readies themselves.

Too late, he hears a sound on the roof and, as one, the group tilts their heads back, blinking in the sudden glare of blinding light as a hatch is opened and something is tossed inside.

“Move!” Abraham yells as the hatch is slammed closed above them again but there’s no time and everyone succumbs to the choking gas that erupts from the grenade at their feet.

Rick grabs for Carl, trying to hold his breath against the noxious fumes that are stinging his nose and making his eyes stream but, before he can take hold of him, the outside door is ripped open and he gets a brief glimpse of men in breathing apparatus before he’s cold-cocked and finds himself crumpling to the floor.

His consciousness swims in and out as he’s half-carried, half-walked from the train car, flashes of his surroundings coming to him in grisly detail as he’s led into a series of rooms that obviously serve as a slaughterhouse. Forced to his knees in front of a galvanized steel trough, his ankles are zip-tied as, he realizes, are his wrists and somewhere along the way he’s been gagged. Quelling the beast inside that’s raging at being constrained in such a manner, he shakes his head to clear it and take stock of his surroundings just as Daryl is thrust to the ground beside him. Their eyes lock for the briefest second and he can see his mate struggling to contain the outright panic that’s threatening to overwhelm him. To Rick’s right, he finds Bob, breathing heavily against the gag in his mouth but with a strange look of calm in his eyes. Further to his left, past Daryl’s jittering body, he sees Glenn also now on his knees and then four strangers completing the line, he guesses from another holding place.

Their captors waste no time once they have all their victims bound and submissive, killing the guy furthest from Rick, the resounding crack of a baseball bat against his skull being quickly followed by the slashing of his throat releasing the scent of fresh blood onto the air which has Rick drooling into his gag. With that first death the line erupts, the remaining men struggling futilely against their bonds as their executioners move on to the next in line. Rick can hear Daryl whining low in his throat and he knows, without a doubt, that he’s thinking of Shifting before Glenn is the next sacrifice. Bound as they are, Rick knows that all it will do is create a distraction – one that’s maybe big enough to give him a chance to make a move – but he doesn’t think that, even with their extra strength, they’d be capable of snapping the zip ties. He knows that Daryl’s Shifting will end in his death as a certainty once the element of surprise is lost just as surely as he knows Daryl will do anything to protect the man at his side that he considers his brother and Rick needs another option – fast.

His salvation comes in the unlikely form of Gareth, entering the room just as Rick can sense Daryl readying himself to Shift and the bloodbath comes to a temporary halt. While Gareth confers with his crew over their heads, Rick signals to Daryl to stand down and slowly eases out the sharpened wooden stake he’d hidden in his boot back in the train car, ready to do whatever he can to tip the odds back in their favor. As Gareth turns to leave, Bob catches his attention pleading to talk to him, and Rick watches as Gareth gets closer – talking first to Bob to dismiss his requests that they can work it out and then crouching to meet Rick’s eyes. Removing Rick’s gag, he questions him on what was in the bag his men had seen them hide in the woods before their arrival in Terminus and Rick answers him truthfully, all the time willing him to lean just that little bit closer. Focusing the power of the wolf, drawing in his breath to let loose the beast before he launches himself at Gareth across the blood-filled trough, Rick’s hasty plan is cut short by the sound of rapid gunfire coming from outside. While Gareth gets onto his radio to find out what’s going on, his guys get into position behind Glenn
ready to continue their work and Rick knows he has to make his move now.

Gripping tight to the hunk of wood in his fist, he starts to rise to his feet only to be knocked sideways along with everyone else as a concussive blast rocks the building to its foundations. He lays there stunned for a second – an unwanted flashback to the tank at the prison flitting across his mind – and then he's back in the here and now, sawing at his bonds with the sharp wood as Gareth leaves the room, ordering the slaughter crew to stay put and keep working. While the two men are arguing amongst themselves over what they should do, Rick finally gets enough of the way through the zip tie that he can easily snap it and release his feet. Surging up, he takes out the first man, stabbing him in the neck and then advancing on the second guy before he even has a chance to react, ending him brutally and efficiently. Quickly freeing the others, turning a blind eye to the fresh corpses hanging over the other end of the trough, they grab what weapons they can and barrel outside, stopping short for a moment as they’re greeted by absolute chaos. It seems like the whole world is on fire, there are walkers everywhere they look between the clouds of rolling smoke, and there are sporadic bursts of gunfire coming from every direction punctuated by the screams of the living and the groans of the dead.

They fight through as best they can taking out walkers and humans alike, Rick wondering if there’s any difference between them given what these people had chosen to do, and his only goal is to reach the train car and find Carl. Daryl is at his back the whole time and they work as one to clear a path, each of them watching for the other as well as providing protection for Glenn and Bob. They find the train car still sealed although surrounded by hungry walkers and it’s a tough fight to get through but seeing Carl jump down from the open doorway renews Rick’s spirits. A sudden attack from Gareth and his men – shooting down at them from the nearby rooftop – slows them until Rick returns fire, clipping Gareth in the shoulder and scattering the others enough that the whole group can get over the fence and into the woods.

The abrupt silence that surrounds them is both welcoming and yet somehow disconcerting after the chaos behind them but Rick keeps everyone moving forward, letting Daryl take the lead swiftly through the trees back to where they’d buried their weapons.

“Here,” Daryl's says, tossing Rick the small shovel they'd stashed nearby and then stepping back as Rick starts to dig furiously into the soft earth at his feet.

“What are we still doing here?” Abraham asks and Rick can hear the tension in his voice as he glances up and finds him scanning the woods around them.

“Weapons,” Rick answers, resuming his digging. “Some supplies. Stuff we’ll need to go back.”

“Go back?” Glenn asks incredulously. “Why would we go back?”

“Because some of them were still alive. People like that – what they’d done, what they were going to do to us – they can’t be allowed to live. We’ll pick them off from the fence.”

“Rick, the place is burning to the ground, there are walkers everywhere – none of them are getting out alive,” Maggie pleads, stepping toward him as he rises from the ground.

“You’re shitting me, right?” Abraham asks loudly and Rick looks past Maggie to him instead, wondering why nobody else seems to be feeling the same way he does.

“We barely got out of there as it is,” Sasha intercedes and Rick flicks his gaze over to her concerned face. “There’s no way we should be going back.”

“You all feel like this?” Rick asks, his eyes sliding from one face to the next, each of their
expressions telling him the same thing – none of them are with him.

He looks to Daryl to gauge his opinion only to find him staring off in the opposite direction, his whole body on alert and Rick steps forward to see what has his attention just as Daryl takes off at a dead run away from the group. Rick is following before he even knows why, his every instinct just pushing him to follow Daryl no matter what, but a single glance past Daryl has him skidding to a rapid halt. He has to blink twice before he can even comprehend what he's seeing and even then he's not sure he'd believe it if Daryl wasn’t obviously seeing it too. Stepping out from among the trees ahead, her pale features smeared with a mixture of mud and blood, is Carol, a tentative look on her face which is soon wiped away as Daryl scoops her into his arms and lifts her off her feet in a bone-crushing hug. In an instant Rick knows that it was her that they owe their freedom to, that he owes her for Carl’s life as well as Daryl’s, and he is overcome with gratitude and a deep sense of shame for his previous actions. When Daryl finally releases her, neither of them holding back their tears despite the audience that’s watching their reunion, Rick steps in hesitantly.

“Did you do that?” he asks tremulously even though he already knows the answer and he can see Carol’s face break as she nods her head before he gathers her into his embrace. “Thank you.”

He cradles her a moment, all the things he wants and needs to say failing to arrive on his lips, until she pulls back, keeping a tight grip on his hand and looks up at him with brightly shining eyes.

“You have to come with me,” she tells him, nothing more, nothing less but he knows in that moment that he would follow this woman to the ends of the earth if she demanded it of him – all thoughts of retribution against the cannibals behind them retreating from his mind completely.

The group walks in silence, none of them questioning this decision, and Rick’s heart is warmed by the way Daryl sticks close by Carol’s side, barely taking his eyes from her as they walk. Rick knows that he’s going to have a lot of serious work ahead of him if he’s going to repair his relationship with Carol but he's willing to do whatever it takes as long as she’ll let him. More than anything, he's grateful that Daryl gets to have her back in his life, he thinks as he follows her from the trees onto a wide path that opens up onto a small plot of land with a wooden cabin at its center. As they get closer, the door to the cabin opens and Rick does his second double-take of the day as he sees Tyreese emerge carrying Judith cradled against his chest. Rick’s heart is pounding so hard, he's frightened it might break his breastbone as he drops his weapons to the ground and runs full out towards Ty, knowing that Carl is close behind him. He lifts his daughter from his friend’s arms, sinking almost to his knees as her familiar scent washes over him and he presses his face to her soft head. Carl is right beside him, reaching out a disbelieving hand to stroke his sister’s hair and Rick pulls him in against his side. Giving a heartfelt nod of gratitude to Ty, Rick’s eyes automatically seek out Daryl, finding him standing hesitantly a few feet away, a look of absolute wonder on his face.

“Daryl,” Rick croaks, needing him to be a part of this – their family reunion.

Daryl steps over to join them and Rick hands him Judy, watching as the tears roll down his cheeks before he closes his eyes and brushes his lips against her forehead. Rick wraps an arm around his back, his hand coming up to cradle Daryl’s head as he draws his whole family in closer.

He’s not sure how long they stand like that, the four of them making an impenetrable unit against the world, but he's dimly aware of the others talking around them – can hear the reunion of Sasha with her brother and he’s happy for them too, he's happy for everyone he has with him, that they’ve all come together again. Eventually he steps back, breaking the moment and looks around seeing that everyone is still within safe distance but that they had stepped away to give his family the reunion time they needed alone.

“So what now?” he asks in general but his eyes are fixed firmly on Carol.
“Same as always,” Daryl answers, tucking Judy into the baby carrier Tyreese had handed him and that Carl now has strapped to his chest. “Find shelter for the night n’ figure out where to go next.”

“We’re still headin’ to DC,” Abraham offers up, his tone brooking no argument.

“And, if that’s a viable option for everyone, we’ll be right there with you,” Rick answers calmly, “but, for now, Daryl’s right. We need shelter and food – all of us.”

Abraham stares him down for a moment but then gives a curt nod and everyone gathers up their belongings, setting off along the trail leading away from the cabin and the pall of black smoke still darkening the sky above the treeline where Terminus had stood.

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It takes two days of hard walking before they can find anything secure enough to house all of them – two days of pushing on through the late summer heat and two nights of huddling together around a hastily built fire, taking turns at watching each other’s backs while they sleep. By the third morning everyone’s spirits are flagging, the euphoria at being reunited and the thrill of their escape from Terminus now being replaced with a mind-numbing weariness that puts Rick in mind of the days they’d spent on the road after the loss of Hershel’s farm before they’d found the prison. What little dry food they had is dwindling although Daryl has no trouble scaring up enough squirrels and rabbits to keep them going but suitable food for Judy is becoming a problem. Rick also has another concern, one that he'd sent Daryl to investigate that morning before they left their makeshift campsite. When Daryl had been on watch with Carol the previous night, he thought he’d heard somebody out in the woods but hadn’t been able to catch a scent and the sound never repeated itself. While Rick had been ready to dismiss it as just a walker or maybe some other night creature, he'd seen the concern in Daryl’s eyes and had nodded his agreement when Daryl had said he wanted to take a quick look around.

He rejoins the group not long after they’ve started out on the road again, foregoing his usual position at the rear to slip into step beside Rick, a brace of freshly-killed squirrels swinging from his shoulder.

“Well?” Rick asks, keeping his voice low so the others won’t hear.

“Nothin’. Not a track or a scent,” Daryl grunts and Rick can see that he's not satisfied with that answer.

“Then it probably was just a walker.”

“I don’t know, man, I felt somethin’ out there, I swear it.”

“Then we’ll be alert – maybe take a run when everyone beds down, okay?”

“’kay,” agrees Daryl with a nod.

“You got any ideas where in the hell we are?”

“Not much… not since we got turned around leavin’ the rail yard.”

“There must be some kind of town up ahead somewhere, right? It can’t all just be like this.”

“Yeah, there’ll be somethin’, always is. Gotta have a little faith, Sheriff,” Daryl tells him with a tiny smirk, pointing through the trees up ahead.

Rick looks in the direction he's pointing, squinting a little against the unforgiving sun, and then sees
what Daryl has already spotted. Coming into view beside the trail they’re following is the stark white siding of a small church with a road leading up to it from the other side. As they get closer, Rick can see the welcome sign outside and what was once a well-tended plot of land surrounding the main building and a small shed out back. It looks untouched, the front doors closed and all the windows still intact but Rick exhibits the same caution he would when they approach any unfamiliar place. Splitting the group, he directs Abraham and Rosita to check out the rear while he takes Carol and Bob along with him and Daryl to approach the front.

“It’s locked,” Daryl says, trying the front door handle and then banging the hilt of his knife against the frame a few times.

They wait silently but there's no noise from within, either from the dead or the living, so Daryl pushes the tip of his knife into the keyhole to force the lock. After a couple of minutes of grunting and muttered cursing, Rick hears something pop inside the lock’s mechanism and Daryl tosses him a brief triumphant grin before he places his hand back on the handle and opens the door.

Raising his Colt, Rick inhales a lungful of the stagnant air that the church breathes out, tasting the months of accumulated dust in the back of his throat but smelling nothing other than old books and the faintest hint of wax that must have been used to polish the gleaming wooden pews he can see just inside. With a nod to Daryl, he enters first, turning left and right as he scans the interior and makes his way down the aisle. At the altar he picks up the faint smell of decay prevalent in almost every place that they visit but there’s no sign of the undead inside and he breathes a little easier.

“Daryl,” he calls, letting out a low whistle as he spots a stack of canned food lined up neatly behind the lectern. “Looks like we hit the jackpot.”

Daryl and Carol both join him, flanking him on either side as they peruse the hoard of treasure that’s more precious to them than any amount of gold ever will be again.

“Must’ve been a food drive or maybe just one very smart pastor,” Carol says, moving behind the lectern to take a closer look before turning back to them and suddenly giving them a sly smile.

“What?” Rick asks.

“Nothing… just you two look really good standing there,” she answers before moving to try the closed door to the left of the altar.

Rick shoots a look at Daryl and finds him looking back with his brow creased and his mouth slightly open in surprise and he can’t resist giving him a wink and a shrug of his shoulders just to see the flush rise in his cheeks.

“She’s not wrong,” he whispers as he passes Daryl to join Carol at the locked door.

“Locked,” she tells him, jiggling the handle. “How about the other one?”

Rick looks to the matching door on the other side as Daryl jostles Carol aside to get at the lock in front of them with his knife.

“I’ve got it,” Bob says, coming up from the opposite side of the altar after having made a more thorough sweep of the pews down below.

Rick watches as he turns the handle with ease on that side, raising the machete he has in his hand before he steps inside. Rick can see that the room beyond was obviously once the pastor’s office with bookcases lining the far wall and a large wooden desk dominating the small space.
“Got a dead one,” Bob shouts, disappearing from Rick’s sight and Rick is already stepping in his direction when he yells again. “Shit!”

Rick’s across the space in a heartbeat but it’s not quick enough for him to stop the walker that’s surging at Bob from slamming him painfully back into the oversized desk, hard enough to make him lose his grip on his weapon. The space is too small for Rick to do much more than watch as Bob shoves the walker off him, driving it back into the wall.

“Shoot it,” he yells and Rick is about to do just that when there’s a loud cracking sound from under Bob’s feet and the floorboards supporting him and the walker give way.

His yell of pain rings in Rick's ears as his leg plunges through the jagged wood opening into the shallow crawlspace below and he loses his balance, twisting awkwardly to avoid the clacking jaws of the walker which is similarly trapped. Rick leaps forward, drawing his knife and throws himself onto the walker, using his weight to force it away from Bob while he drives his blade into its head and severs its connection to the world. Pushing up off of the putrid corpse, he turns to Bob, finding him propped up on his elbows, a sheen of sweat painting his dark skin and a grimace of pain turning down his lips.

“Let’s get you up,” Rick says, keeping his voice neutral even though he can see the copious amount of blood that’s soaking through Bob’s pants.

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Bob agrees, a little breathlessly, and Rick reaches out to slide a hand under his arm finding that Daryl has appeared on Bob’s other side to do the same.

“On three,” Rick states and Daryl nods. “But be careful, I can’t see if there’s anything caught in his leg.”

They raise Bob slowly up, Rick suddenly aware of everyone else crowding outside the doorway to see and, as his leg emerges from the jagged hole in the floor, Rick can see a shard of wood embedded firmly in his calf.

“Okay,” he soothes as they lift Bob over to the nearby sofa and lay him down. “Carol, get in here. Daryl, see if you can find any kind of first aid kit in the bathroom.”

“Found a well out back,” Tyreese says from the doorway. “I’ll go pump some water and set it to boil.”

“Good,” nods Rick, “we’ll need to clean this wound thoroughly. How you doin’, buddy?”

“Oh, you know… another day at the office,” Bob laughs then hisses through his teeth as Carol starts cutting away the material around the wood jutting from his flesh.

“Here,” Daryl says, coming out of the small ensuite with a white box in his hand, “it ain’t much but it’ll help.”

“Carol, you got this?” Rick asks, taking the derisive snort she gives as an affirmative. “Okay, then everybody out. Let’s let the lady work. We don’t all need to be hanging over her shoulder.”

He ushers everyone away from the door, Daryl close on his heels, except for Sasha who pushes determinedly past him into the room to be at Bob’s side. Shaking his head as he closes the door, Rick wonders when the two of them had become an item and thinks that, as a former cop, he really should be ashamed of his observational skills these days. He knows that Bob is in the best hands but he can’t help but have a tiny flash of memory back to the day that Hershel lost his leg even though he hopes that this won’t end up anywhere near as severe as that. Although, even without the lethalness
of a walker bite, he knows all too well that the risk of infection is still high with the type of wound that Bob sustained and he feels a twinge of loss for all the medicine that had been lost along with the prison. Shaking his head as he walks away from the door, he just has to pray that Carol can clean out the wound well enough to prevent any further complications but one thing that he knows for sure is that none of them are going anywhere for the next few days.
The group sets up camp in the empty church, taking inventory of the food and other supplies they find and securing the perimeter. Abraham and Michonne take first watch outside and Daryl feels the others start to relax around him as everyone settles in. Rick is sitting in one of the pews with Judith cradled on his lap and Daryl crashes down next to him, stretching out with his head pillowed on his folded jacket so that he can reach out and play with Judith’s fingers much to her delight.
“You okay?” he asks lightly, keeping his concentration on Judith but trying to read Rick all the same.

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“How’s Bob?” Rick asks, standing up and sliding out of the pew to walk over to her, with Daryl close behind him.

“He’ll be fine,” Carol tells him and Daryl feels a sense of relief washing over him. “Long as we keep the wound clean and dry, maybe try to make a run and see if we can find any medicine nearby anywhere. The bad news is he twisted his foot pretty hard when he fell. It’s swelling up like a balloon. I don’t think he broke anything but he's not going anywhere on that for at least a week.”

Rick scrubs one hand over his face and Daryl knows that he’s happy that the news wasn’t worse but, at the same time, he’s obviously worried about being stuck in one place for longer than they normally would be. Although, Daryl has to admit, there are worse places they could be – at least the church has a fresh water supply and there’s only one entrance to defend, his mind already making a plan for setting up spikes around the front steps. All in all it could’ve been a lot worse.

“Now, if you two could stop making out for five minutes, perhaps you could go get that body out of there and see if you can’t get some of those windows open to clear out the smell,” Carol instructs them, giving Rick a wink as she plucks Judith from his arms to balance her on her hip.

“Yes, ma’am,” Rick answers, giving her a grin before Daryl nudges him in the back and they set to work picking up the walker in the office.

“Hey man, you doin’ okay?” Daryl tosses over his shoulder to Bob who is resting on the sofa with his head pillowed on Sasha’s lap. “Don’t get up now… we’ve got this.”

“Haha,” Bob answers without opening his eyes and Daryl can hear the tiredness in his voice now that the adrenalin spike from his attack is wearing off.

“Hey, this guy’s wearing a dog collar,” Daryl remarks as they haul the body out together, even though the weight would’ve been nothing for either of them alone but it’s all about keeping up appearances.

“Must’ve been the pastor,” Rick answers. “Wonder what happened to him?”

“Oh, I can tell you exactly what happened to him,” Carol informs them, a cold tone to her voice as she follows them outside into the bright sunshine while they dispose of the body inside the treeline. “Father Gabriel here left quite the suicide note on the desk in the office. Seems that when everything went to hell in a handbasket, instead of welcoming his flock with open arms and giving them the love and support he was supposed to, the good Father here decided to barricade his doors and watch as his congregation became walker chow right outside his door. Once the last man, woman and child were lying dead on his lawn, he saw the error of his ways and decided to kill himself, therefore denying his soul access to heaven and claiming his rightful place in the fires of hell where he hoped to atone for his sins. Of course, it didn’t quite work out that way, but you get the point.”

“Selfish prick,” Daryl mutters as he wipes his hands on his pants and turns away. “Ain’t wastin’ time diggin’ for that one then.”

“Amen,” Carol says behind him as he walks back to the church.

“Can we talk?” he hears Rick ask in a low voice behind him followed by Carol’s murmur of assent.

“Gonna go check out the shed out back,” Daryl informs them, pretending not to have heard and he doesn’t turn back as he walks towards the small path leading around the corner of the building.

Once out of sight, he stops, listening as Rick and Carol take a seat on the old bench that’s sitting in the shade at the side of the church. He doesn’t give a second thought to eavesdropping on them –
both of them are an integral part of his life and he needs to know that things are going to be okay between them.

“I’m sorry,” Rick starts, hesitantly at first and then seeming to find the words that he needs to say. “I’m not going to lie to you and say that I agree with your methods but you weren’t wrong in what you did, I see that now. I was the one who was wrong, for the things I said and for what I did to you. I knew it as soon as I left… I came back for you but it was too late… not that that excuses what I did in any way but I wanted you to know.”

“Thank you,” Carol replies, her voice carefully neutral and Daryl wishes he could see her face to gauge what she’s thinking, “but I don’t blame you, Rick, not anymore anyways. It’s easy to look back in hindsight and see what we could’ve or should’ve done differently but I don’t think either of us would change the decisions we made – that’s just not us. You were right when you said I was strong – that I’d survive.”

“What happened out there? How on earth did you and Ty end up together?”

“It’s a long story, Rick, and I don’t think I can tell it yet,” she sighs and Daryl can hear the anguish pouring from her words. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to tell it, not even to Daryl. But Ty and I made our peace out there, that’s the important thing.”

There’s silence between them for a moment, the only noise coming from Judith as she gives one of her gurgling laughs.

“She’s grown,” Rick comments, “even in that short time.”

“Like a weed,” Carol answers and Daryl can hear the way her voice evens back out now that she’s back on a safe topic.

“I’ll never be able to thank you,” Rick tells her solemnly, “for what you did for me and my family, for all of us – for what you gave me back.”

“And you never have to,” Carol answers and Daryl can hear the bench creak as she gets to her feet. “It’s what we do, right?”

Daryl doesn’t wait for Rick’s reply, he just slips away towards the rear of the church, content that his loved ones have taken the first step towards reconciliation and he no longer has the added worry of there being any tension between them.

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Their first night in the church passes without further incident, everyone talking softly in the warm glow of the candles they’d found stored in the locked room on the other side of the altar along with another stash of canned goods. The mood in the room is light – one of family and camaraderie – with even the ever alert Abraham being persuaded to take a break from his mission and join them, wrapping himself around a smiling Rosita and letting her spoon-feed him peaches much to everyone’s amusement. When the others are ready to bed down for the night, Rick and Daryl head outside to patrol, giving Michonne instructions to barricade the door behind them and not to let anyone follow them out. They stay on watch until dawn, finding nothing more than a solitary walker anywhere near the vicinity of the church and each of them feels a little easier as they Shift back and head inside for a well-earned rest.

The next day passes quietly too, Michonne, Rick, Daryl and Carl heading out after lunch to scout the area, a move that finds them in a small town nearby which yields a few extra supplies including some
much needed antibiotics for Bob. Abraham had discovered a small bus parked out back of the church and, with the help of Glenn, had spent the day tinkering with the engine in the hopes of getting it roadworthy again. By the time Rick’s group returns from their run, he is more than ready to talk Rick’s ear off over dinner about his plans to get them to DC – even pulling out a handful of maps he’d found in the front of the bus and going over them in great detail. Rick had listened to all that he had to say, occasionally throwing a glance in Daryl’s direction to seek his opinion, and eventually had admitted that he couldn’t find a flaw in the other man’s plan. With no other destination for them in mind, he agreed that they should try to continue with Abe’s mission once that Bob is back on his feet.

With Abe happily poring over his maps, Daryl tugs on Rick’s sleeve and the two of them slip away, heading outside. Stepping out into the cool night air, he whistles softly twice from the steps of the church and waits until Ty and Noah come into view.

“All quiet?” Rick asks as they all come together on the steps.

“Yup,” Noah answers. “Nothin’ to see but trees and fat, juicy bunnies hoppin’ around. Maybe you could try catching us a couple of those tonight. Man cannot live by squirrel alone.”

“’n maybe you should be grateful I’m catchin’ anythin’ for your whiny ass,” Daryl snorts, shoving Noah lightly in the shoulder as he follows Tyreese inside. “Now make sure you lock the damn door properly.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Dixon, sir,” Noah salutes before flipping him the bird. “Now, mind you don’t get too distracted out there, baby.”

Daryl’s comeback falls against an already closed door and Rick chuckles as he mutters under his breath before stomping down off the steps and into the darkening woods.

As they walk just far enough away from the church to strip and Shift, Daryl thinks to himself that maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea for them to be distracted for a little while. It seems too long since their night alone at the farmhouse while Michonne had kept watch even though it had only been a matter of days and he was thinking that it was past time for him to remind Rick just how much he loves him. For now he pushes the thought aside – not too far but just enough for him to be able to concentrate on the task at hand without visions of Rick’s naked body spread out before him to take as he pleases, serving to distract him. He Shifts easily, welcoming his other form like an old friend, shaking himself and stretching his realigned muscles. Following the same pattern they had established the previous night, he and Rick set off in opposite directions making a wide sweep of the surrounding area and gradually working their way back in to meet each other from where they’ll set off again.

The first two circuits go without a hitch, Daryl effortlessly dispatching two walkers that cross his path but finding nothing else amiss. That is until he arrives back at their rendezvous point to find that Rick isn’t there. He sits back on his haunches for a minute or two, tongue lolling as he scents the air, his ears swiveling as they try to catch anything out of the ordinary and then he gets up and sets off in the direction Rick would have taken. Rick’s scent is as fresh to him as if he was standing next to him and Daryl moves rapidly through the undergrowth, his large paws making barely a sound. He sees Rick at the same time the breeze brings him the scents of other humans in the woods just beyond where Rick is hiding, his belly low to the ground as he focuses on the trees ahead of him. Holding a breath, Daryl moves swiftly and silently to Rick’s side, sliding under the thick cover of a low bush to peer out into the darkness. Rick doesn’t even bother to acknowledge his arrival, Daryl can feel every fiber of his being is on high alert and he feels his own adrenalin spike through his nervous system as he sees the approaching group is led by Gareth.
He's growling low in his throat before he's even aware that he's doing it but a quick nudge from Rick’s nose soon silences him and they watch silently as Gareth leads his people through the trees. There’s five of them in total – four men and a woman – and Daryl can see they’re heavily armed although at least three of them, including Gareth, are wounded in some way – he can smell three distinct blood scents coming from their group. They stay silent in the undergrowth as the small group passes, knowing that their dark pelts are more than adequately camouflaged by the night’s shadows and the foliage. Once the last man has passed their hiding spot, they rise as one and surge out onto the path – each of them knowing exactly what has to be done – both of them reacting as if of one mind and body to address the danger threatening their pack. They each pick off one of the last two in line, ending them with an efficiency that’s so fast and brutal that it takes the others a moment to even realize that they’re under attack. Gareth is the first to retaliate, raising the gun in his hand and popping off a quick succession of rounds, one of which catches Daryl’s flank as it passes, tearing out a stinging chunk of flesh and fur. He opens his mouth in a roar, ready to advance on Gareth when the other remaining male suddenly sprints off into the darkness and a growl from Rick lets him know that he has a handle on Gareth and the woman so Daryl plunges into the trees in pursuit.

There’s no finesse in the man’s headlong flight through the woods, he is literally running for his life and Daryl can taste the fear coming off of him in waves as he quickly closes the gap between them. He doesn’t feel a second’s remorse as he takes the guy down, just a sense of disgust at what the man had been a part of and a brief surge of justice at being the one to end that horror. He snaps the guy’s neck as easily as snapping a twig then Shifts back to human to cave his head in with a rock before he resumes his wolf form and heads back to where he left Rick. By the time he arrives back on the path, the woman of the group is no more than a pile of severed limbs and a dark stain on a nearby tree trunk. He slows his approach as he spots Rick towering over Gareth who is backed up against a huge boulder, one arm hanging limply at his side obviously broken. Rick has half-Shifted, taking his form to its most intimidating state and Daryl can see the untapped rage present in his every sinew and muscle as he bares his fangs in Gareth’s face, blood dripping from his maw.

“You thought you could fuck with my family?” he roars, his voice distorted by his misshapen vocal chords but still clear enough for Gareth to understand and flinch away from.

“I’m sorry,” Gareth pleads, raising his unbroken hand in front of him in a futile attempt to placate the beast. “You don’t understand… what we did… what we were forced into… it was… I…”

“You’re sorry?” Rick snarls incredulously, tilting his head in a gesture that’s both achingly familiar and yet alien to Daryl because of his current form. “You have no fucking clue who you messed with, boy, and now you’re gonna pay for what you did, you sick fuck.”

Before Gareth can utter another word, Rick whips out his hand and clasps it around his throat, lifting the smaller man high into the air and slamming him hard into the rock at his back before tossing him to the ground. Daryl can hear a multitude of bones snapping in Gareth’s body from the force of the blows but he stays silent, watching Rick from a short distance away. Crouching over Gareth’s prone form, Rick uses his claws to tear away the shirt from his body, the man writhing under him as he rips into his flesh as well as the material. With a blood-curdling snarl, Rick lowers himself until his eye to eye with Gareth, staring at him for the longest moment before jerking his head down to sink his teeth into his quivering abdomen. He ruptures the flesh, tearing out great chunks while Gareth screams in agony beneath him and Daryl watches with a sick fascination as Rick lowers his muzzle into the wound to lap at the fountaining blood.

“No!” Daryl screams, the sound translating into a wailing howl and Rick freezes.

Daryl watches as he raises his head, gore slipping from his jaws, and his eyes meet Daryl's for an instant before flicking back to the now still corpse on the ground and he gives an anguished howl of
his own before Shifting into his full wolf form and taking off into the trees.

Huffing out a sigh, Daryl pulls himself upright into his human form and takes care of finishing off Gareth’s body as well as the others they had killed, a sick feeling pulling at his insides as he thinks of the look on Rick’s face just before he’d fled. Quickly completing his task, he Shifts back and sets off after Rick at a breakneck speed, dodging trees until he finds him in a small clearing not too far away. He’s in human form, his skin gleaming in the broken moonlight, as he kneels with his head bowed over the steaming carcass of a small deer, its fresh scent filling Daryl’s nostrils as he approaches. Rick raises his head as Daryl comes alongside him, an instinctive snarl tripping from his lips that dies as quickly as it starts and Daryl can see there are tears streaming from his eyes, mixing with the blood that’s streaking his face and torso.

“I had to get rid of the taste… of his blood,” he moans, lifting his trembling fingers to his lips. “What did I do Daryl, what did I do? I was… I’m no less of a monster than he was. Do you see that?”

“No,” Daryl answers, Shifting and reaching out to lay a hand on Rick’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” he barks, flinching away from Daryl’s hand and then, more softly, “just don’t.”

“Rick,” Daryl says, trying to calm his obviously agitated state, “it wasn’t you, man, you know that. It was just instinct… the wolf doin’ what it does.”

“I don’t buy that – it was me, Daryl, I wanted it… wanted to devour him. Isn’t this your biggest fear – that I’ll get a taste for human flesh and won’t be able to stop?”

“But you did stop,” Daryl answers quietly. “You knew it was wrong and you backed off.”

“Because you stopped me. If you hadn’t been there…”

“But I was,” Daryl tells him, moving closer to him again. “I’ll always be there.”

“I wish I could believe that, Daryl… I want to believe it.”

“Then do,” Daryl tells him, stepping forward to pull Rick to him, ignoring the initial resistance he gets until Rick sags against him and Daryl holds him tight.

He keeps him tucked in against his shoulder, Rick’s chin resting heavily on his skin, and just holds on for as long as Rick needs – he’s prepared to stand there the whole damn night if he has to.

“Sometimes I don’t know who I am anymore,” Rick breathes against his neck, the words ghosting over Daryl’s skin.

“You’re Officer Rick Grimes and that’s never gonna change no matter what you think,” Daryl whispers, reaching up to bury his fingers in the thick curls at the back of Rick’s head and tug them gently.

“How in the hell did I get so lucky?” Rick murmurs eventually, letting out a shuddering sigh and pulling back to scan Daryl’s face. “Seriously… with all that’s fucked up in this world… with as screwed up as I am, I’m still the luckiest sonovabitch there is because I have you.”

“Pfft.” Daryl snorts, feeling the heat rise on his face with Rick’s words and the intense look in his eyes. “Luck ain’t got nothin’ to do with it. S’not like you got a choice… I mean, who could resist all this?”

He steps back from Rick, striking a typical bodybuilder pose that he knows just makes him look
absolutely ridiculous but the momentary flash of embarrassment is worth it for the smile that breaks out on Rick’s face.

“Dumbass,” he says affectionately and Daryl sees some of the tension leaving his body.

“Yeah but I’m your dumbass so what does that make you?” Daryl replies, turning away to shake his ass in Rick’s direction.

“I never knew,” Rick laughs quietly, shaking his head as Daryl turns back to him.

“Never knew what?”

“That it would be like this with you – that you’d make me smile as much as you do. If somebody had told me that the same redneck asshole that stumbled out of the woods that day, pissing and moaning over a damn deer, was going to be the one person in my life that I can’t live without, well, I’d have told them that they were batshit crazy.”

“You?” Daryl snorts. “What about me? If they’d told me I was gonna be mated to Officer Friendly for the rest of my life, I’d’ve put a bolt between their eyes, thinkin’ they’d gone insane.”

“True,” Rick agrees, smiling at him and Daryl can see that he’s slowly coming back from the darkness that had gripped him earlier.

“Okay,” Daryl says, glancing around as if he’s suddenly afraid that somebody might be listening in on their little love-fest, “whaddya say we find some water and get you cleaned up a bit, then you n’ me take a proper hunt?”

“Sounds good,” Rick agrees, scratching at the drying blood that’s caking his chin. “I think I hear a stream or something over that away.”

Daryl nods his agreement and they both make their way, treading carefully in their human forms, in the direction of the sound of running water. They soon find themselves on the bank of a shallow stream, the water barely coming to their knees when they wade in but it’s fresh and cool, soothing their heated skin as they bend to splash it over themselves. Hissing slightly through his teeth, Daryl’s fingers encounter the wound left my Gareth’s bullet – feeling the skin already starting to heal as he washes away the blood from around it. Daryl watches as Rick lowers his face to scoop up handfuls of the clear water and wash all traces of the blood from his skin, fascinated by the glimmering trickles that chase their way down his pale skin.

“I see you lookin’, Dixon,” Rick says quietly, not turning to look at him but continuing to scrub at his face.

Daryl feels the flush in his cheeks at having been caught once more in his appreciation of his mate but his embarrassment is tempered by the sudden change in Rick’s scent that comes to him across the water and he feels his own body respond in kind.

“That’s cos you missed a bit,” Daryl tells him, bending to scoop up a double handful of water and fling it in Rick’s face, feeling the subtle changes growing in the air around them.

Rick growls low in his throat, the sound turning Daryl’s insides to a molten liquid and he feels his cock twitching to attention as Rick slowly turns to look at him, the water clinging in drops to his beard and hair.

“Oh… you’re paying for that,” Rick rumbles and Daryl just has time to take note of the way his hands are flexing at his sides and the stiff line of his cock against his thigh before Rick launches
himself at him.

With a huge splash, they both hit the water, Daryl going under the chilly surface for a second as Rick lands on him and then hauls him back upright into the cool night air where he splutters for breath. Rick may be fast but Daryl knows how to fight dirty and he sags against Rick, coughing hard as though he can’t catch his breath and, when Rick takes his full weight, Daryl shoves as hard as he can, pitching him over into the soft mud at the water’s edge. He grins down at Rick as he flails in the gooey mess, his hands sinking into the muck each time he tries to leverage himself up until he gives up and flops dramatically back, raising his arm to Daryl for help. Smirking, Daryl reaches down to haul him up only to find himself being yanked down into the dirt beside Rick and he realizes he really should’ve seen that one coming.

“Good work, Sheriff,” Daryl grumbles as he tries to right himself in the slippery mud. “What’re you gonna do if a herd of walkers wanders past and finds us lyin’ here like two pigs in shit?”

“I’m gonna tell them what a juicy piece of ass you are and ask them to eat you first,” Rick laughs, slapping his hand against Daryl’s mud-covered rear.

“Oh… real nice, Grimes… real nice,” Daryl huffs, finally extricating himself from his sticky prison and managing to get to his feet on firmer ground.

When Rick raises a hand again for help, Daryl snorts through his nose at him, folding his arms across his chest.

“Daryl…” Rick pleads, looking up at him.

With an exaggerated sigh, Daryl grabs his hand and pulls him to his feet, the momentum bringing Rick’s body flush with his and Rick snakes out his arm to circle Daryl’s waist.

“Although…” Rick says softly, reaching up to push Daryl’s mud-splattered hair back from his face, “I think I’d rather eat you all myself.”

Daryl groans as Rick dips his head to graze his teeth across his collarbone then nips at the flesh of his neck, the sharp points of his fangs just piercing the skin. Rick sucks hard at the mark, a growl building in his throat and Daryl clings to him, his body craving every touch that Rick bestows on it.

“Tell me what you want,” Rick murmurs, licking his way up Daryl’s throat and biting at his jaw.

“Fuck me,” Daryl answers without hesitation, tipping his head back to allow Rick better access to suck at his pulse point.

Rick grunts against his skin, the heat of his mouth working lower until his teeth are scraping over Daryl’s nipples and Daryl has to steady himself against Rick’s shoulders in order to stop himself from sagging to his knees. When Rick guides him to the ground, he goes willingly, letting Rick take the lead as he pushes Daryl to his knees and takes up a position behind him. Almost instantly he feels a wet finger pressed against his entrance and he moans deeply, curling his fingers into the soft earth as Rick pushes the digit into him. Rick’s other hand works at his back, stroking the skin along Daryl’s spine as he fingers him for a minute and then he withdraws, leaving Daryl wanting more but aching in anticipation of what’s coming next. To his surprise, he feels Rick’s hands on his back again, rubbing at his skin from shoulder to ass and over and over until they grip at his buttocks to part them and Daryl braces himself against the damp ground. But, instead of the familiar weight of Rick’s cock opening him up, he feels the brush of Rick’s beard against his skin and the wet press of his tongue against his hole as he licks at the sensitive spot. This is something new for them and Daryl mewls, his brain a jumble of random thoughts as Rick pushes his cheeks even further apart and
wiggles the tip of his tongue against him, licking him in a circular motion.

Daryl can feel the pendulous weight of his cock hanging heavily beneath him and he takes the
weight off of one arm to grab it and begin stroking himself slowly, his eyes closed as he revels in the
sensations Rick is creating behind him. He suffers a moment of unwelcome disorientation as Rick
suddenly pulls off and manhandles Daryl onto his back, sliding his legs apart and getting between
them. Daryl blinks his eyes open to find Rick kneeling over him, his eyes glowing a radiant blue in
the darkness and his mouth open in a feral grin.

“You liked that, huh?” Rick asks, his voice gruff with his lust and Daryl can do no more than nod at
him as his eyes drop to the dripping head of Rick’s thick cock he has grasped in his fist.

Daryl watches, his stomach tightening with desire, as Rick tugs his length a few times before rubbing
his palm over the head and pulling off to offer his sticky skin up to Daryl’s mouth.

“Lick it,” he demands and Daryl complies, sucking noisily on the salty pre-cum coating Rick’s skin
and moaning as the taste explodes on his tongue. “Ahh… yes… now spit.”

He does as he’s told, coating Rick's waiting palm with a generous wad of salvia which he then uses
to smear around his shaft, groaning a little under his breath as he does so.

“So fucking gorgeous,” he breathes, taking a moment to stare down at Daryl, his eyes lingering on
his weeping cock. “I’m going to fuck you so hard, Dixon.”

Daryl’s whole body ignites as Rick thrusts into him, his cock filling him to the hilt and he bites back
a howl as the sharp burn subsides into a pleasurable ache when Rick starts slowly rocking his hips
against him. Lifting his legs to wrap them around Rick’s lower back, Daryl reaches up to slide his
fingers around the back of Rick’s neck as he lowers his torso on top of him. Tightening his fingers in
Rick’s hair, he moans loudly as his lover scrapes his teeth over the firm flesh of Daryl’s chest to tease
at his nipples, his cock pumping rhythmically into his ass. The coarse hair below Rick’s navel is
providing a rough friction on Daryl’s own cock which is sandwiched between them but he wants
more, needs to find his release along with Rick’s.

“That all you got?” he pants, tugging hard on Rick's hair. “Thought you were gonna fuck me hard,
yo pussy.”

Rick whips his head up, a snarl on his lips that has Daryl practically drooling at the wild beauty of
him in that instant, and he raises his body a little to adjust his position before he starts pounding
forcefully into Daryl.

“Yeah!” Daryl whoops, tightening his thighs around Rick and pushing a hand between them to start
pumping at his own shaft. “That’s it, Officer… right there… you got it…”

“Fuck!” Rick yells, sweat dripping from his face to land in sizzling drops against Daryl’s skin as he
grunts and pants while he fucks him hard.

“C’mon,” Daryl shouts, oblivious to anything but the feel of Rick buried deep inside him and the
sight of his eyes locked with his own.

With a muttered curse, Rick comes, his body juddering against Daryl’s as his thrusts abruptly
increase and then taper off to a slow roll as Daryl feels his cum slicking them both.

“Stay in,” he grunts, digging his heels into Rick’s ass to keep him in place as he tugs furiously on his
own cock, his eyes never leaving Rick’s.
Gasping, he feels his body build and then tense for a split second before he's spilling his seed across his still-pumping fist and feeling it splash hotly onto his stomach. He’s trembling, his thighs aching and his mind reeling, but he keeps his grip on Rick and the other man lowers himself back down until their bodies are flush and his lips seek Daryl’s in a deep languid kiss. Daryl sighs against Rick’s mouth, his tongue seeking entrance to roll slowly over the other’s as he runs his fingertips up and down Rick’s spine, keeping him as close as possible. Gradually they part, ending their union with repeated small kisses as though neither one wants to let the other go but finally Daryl feels Rick’s softening cock slip from him and he unhooks his aching legs with a small grunt.

“Feeling your age?” Rick chuckles as he lifts himself up and sits back, pulling Daryl with him.

“Feelin’ yours?” Daryl retorts as they both hear the resounding pop of bones as Rick gets to his feet.

“Well, you know what they say,” Rick tells him, reaching down to help Daryl to his feet and pull him into another embrace, “you’re only as young as the man you feel so I guess we’re about even.”

“Guess so,” Daryl grins, stretching forward to plant a lingering kiss on Rick’s lips, curving his body forward to leave no space between them.

“Mmm,” Rick murmurs when they part, resting his forehead against Daryl’s.

“You ready to go again?” Daryl asks, only half-joking as he nudges his groin against Rick’s.

“Yes,” Rick laughs, pulling his head back, “or… we could take another wash and head back to the church before the sun comes up.”

“I like my idea better,” Daryl grumbles but he steps away from Rick anyway, knowing that their time for distractions is over.

They wade back into the water, allowing themselves the time to wash each other – something that Daryl finds surprisingly sensual to the point of him barely being able to control the urge to make love to Rick again right there and then. He’d never thought he cared much for showers or bathing, had never really seen the need when he was just going to get dirty again and had thought it was even less of a priority once the world ended. Once they’d arrived at the prison and had tried to recreate some semblance of a normal life, it was something he had reluctantly participated in, mostly at Carol’s insistence. But now, there was something about the slip and glide of his hands on Rick’s skin and Rick’s on his that turned him on like crazy. Rick’s surprise for him back at the pool house that time had opened his eyes to a newfound appreciation for bath time no matter what the circumstances.

“Daryl…” Rick says over his shoulder with a smile in his voice.

“Hmm?”

“We are not getting back any time soon if you keep that up.”

With a start Daryl realizes his hand is gripped loosely around Rick’s cock, his intention to just wash away the accumulated dirt having transgressed into something else as his mind had wandered and his body had acted purely on its desires. He’s glad that he’s standing behind him so that Rick can’t see the blush on his cheeks as he drops his forehead to Rick’s shoulder.

“Well… seems a shame to stop now I’ve started,” he whispers, sliding his other hand around Rick’s torso to tease his nails through the hair on his chest.

“Uhh… what am I going to do with you, huh?” Rick answers softly, leaning back into Daryl’s touch with a moaning sigh as he quickens his pace.
“Love me?” Daryl suggests, rocking his hips into Rick’s ass to give his own hard on some relief.

“Already d… uhhh… Daryl…” Rick gasps as Daryl teases his slit with his thumb on the upstroke. “Not… gonna… last…”

“Me neither,” Daryl grunts, bucking his hips faster against Rick’s skin and biting his lip between his teeth.

He comes first, shooting his load against Rick’s ass who lasts all of twenty seconds more before his cock is jerking in Daryl’s grip and Daryl has to tighten the hold he has on Rick’s torso to stop him from sliding bonelessly into the water still lapping around their knees.

“Jesus… Daryl,” Rick pants, turning to look back at him with a wide-eyed grin.

“You’re welcome, Sheriff,” Daryl answers, catching his own breath and then stepping back to scoop up a handful of water that he trickles over the sticky mess he’s left on Rick’s skin.

“I’ve got it,” Rick laughs, batting Daryl’s hands away and splashing water on himself. “You take care of yourself or we’re never getting out of here.”

Daryl chuckles under his breath but quickly washes up and this time the two of them make it out of the water together without any further distractions. They Shift and head back to where they stashed their clothes, running fast between the trees to shake the chill of the water from their bones. Once dressed and re-armed, they walk back to the church as the first grey light of dawn is creeping its way across the landscape, their shoulders bumping as they stay side by side on the narrow path.

“Let’s not go in,” Rick says quietly, reaching out to steer Daryl away from the door and around to the bench outside. “Everyone will be up soon… I’d like you all to myself for just a little longer.”

He takes a seat, laying his gun beside him on the worn wood and Daryl shrugs before taking off his crossbow and moving to straddle Rick’s lap, a bold move for him but one that just feels right. He catches Rick’s look of pleased surprise before he takes his face between his hands and lowers his head to kiss him softly on the lips, his fingers stroking at Rick’s beard. It’s a light-hearted kiss, putting the night behind them to rest, and Daryl smiles as Rick’s hand slides up under his shirt to tease circles against his warm skin. Climbing off of Rick’s lap minutes later, Daryl slips in to lean against his side, resting his head on Rick’s shoulder and the two of them quietly watch the sun rise through the trees until the sound of the church door opening accompanied by two soft whistles intrudes on their alone time.

With a sigh, Rick gets to his feet, squeezing Daryl’s knee as he goes and Daryl reluctantly follows him around to the front of the building where Michonne and Carol are waiting for them on the steps, both harboring worried looks on their faces.

“Is everything okay?” Michonne asks quietly as the women step down to greet them. “We heard gunfire last night.”

“Not to mention the howling,” Carol butts in, giving them both a disapproving look.

“It was all we could do to keep Abe from heading out after you. What the hell went down out there?”

“Gareth,” Daryl says simply and he sees the frown deepen on Michonne’s face. “Don’t worry, we took care of it. They ain’t gonna be botherin’ us no more. It’s over.”

“And you two are okay?” Carol asks, reaching out to start tugging on Daryl’s shirt as if she’s about
to strip him and look for any signs of trauma.

“Fine,” he grumbles, pushing her hands away and catching the smirk on Michonne’s face.

“Wait,” Rick says, looking from one woman to the other, “you both know about… you know… but how did you know each other knew?”

Carol and Michonne share a look that makes Daryl feel instantly nervous.

“Let’s just call it women’s intuition, should we,” Carol grins and then turns back to the church. “Come on, we should let the others know what happened, might help them rest a little easier while we’re stuck here.”

Daryl looks to Rick as Michonne leads the way back inside but his partner just shrugs and Daryl knows that there are some things that the two of them are never going to understand when it comes to the women in their lives.
Rick pushes the food around his plate, keeping only a fraction of his attention on the meal that he was eating and the rest of it divided between his surroundings and his family. Most of the group was outside, enjoying the late summer sun, Judith playing happily on a blanket spread at the bottom of the church’s steps with Carol and Tara beside her keeping a watchful eye over her. Everyone was silent
for once, it wasn’t often that they got to breathe like this and it seemed that each of them wanted to savor the moment. The last couple of days had been uneventful save for one skirmish with a group of walkers that had strayed too close to the church grounds and were soon taken care of, Abraham seeming to take particular delight in the chance to flex his muscles after their enforced break. Bob’s leg was healing nicely thanks to both Carol and Sasha’s care and he had started taking short walks around the church’s interior – Rick not being comfortable with him coming outside as yet in case they needed to move in a hurry. Glenn and Abe had gotten the decrepit-looking church bus working – not that Rick thought it would get far with all of them on board – and the talk each night was still centered on them making the trip to D.C.

For now though, Rick was actually content to be where he was, the relative safety of the church providing a welcome respite from being on the road even though he knew it would never hold up as a permanent base. He looks across to where Daryl is sitting cross-legged on the porch opposite him, smiling as he sees him shoveling in his food with his fingers like it’s the last meal he’ll ever have, and Daryl lifts his head in that instinctual way he has whenever he knows Rick’s eyes are on him. He raises an eyebrow at Rick, the ‘You okay?’ question sounding as loud as if he’d said the words, and Rick just gives him a nod, watching Daryl’s mouth quirk up at the corner in response. Daryl turns his attention back to his food but Rick’s gaze lingers on his face, thinking he could spend entire lifetimes just staring at his mate and never tire of the view. More than anything, Rick wants a place where they can be safe, someplace they can learn from their mistakes and put the past behind them to build a new life – all of them – a home where he and Daryl can grow old together, watching their kids flourish without the harshness of the world as it is now to taint them forever. He can’t help but wonder if Eugene’s claim of a cure might not be the answer to what he’s looking for and if getting him to D.C. should become his mission too. As if he knows Rick’s thought are turned in his direction, Eugene raises his gaze from his plate at that moment and his solemn eyes meet Rick’s, an unfathomable look on his face.

“We should go back,” he says timidly, his voice barely carrying on the still afternoon air but it garners everyone’s attention as they all turn to look at him.

“Say what now?” Abe drawls, swallowing a mouthful of food and Rick notes the deer-caught-in-the-headlights look that flits across Eugene’s face almost as though he hadn’t realized he’d spoken out loud.

“Back where?” Rick asks softly, setting his fork down on the plate resting on his thighs and watching as Eugene swallows thickly before speaking again.

“To Terminus.”

His words hang in the air for a moment like they’ve been painted on the sky with a violent splash of red paint that Rick can almost see in his mind’s eye.

“What?” snaps Tara, her dark eyes widening beneath her bangs and Rick has an uncomfortable moment of deja-vu.

Although he's made his peace with the girl – had readily welcomed her into his family when he’d seen the bond she’d made with Glenn – there were still times when she caught him off guard, his mind flashing back to the first time he’d seen her, cowering at the Governor’s side. He'd known she hadn’t wanted to be there that day, that she’d been brainwashed along with the rest of the Governor’s little army but he’d seen the realization dawn on her face a lot faster than it had on any of the others which is why he'd reached out to her. He'd tried to reason with her when he'd known all other hope was lost but he still didn’t know if his words had made a difference to her back then. What he did know is that she had suffered as grievous a loss as anyone on his side of the fence and she’d worked
selflessly to atone for her part in what had happened. When she had confessed her involvement in the Governor’s attack to Maggie – not seeking her forgiveness but not wanting that knowledge to be a secret between them – Rick’s admiration of her had grown and he’d known she was as much a part of his family as if she’d been there from the start. Somewhere along their journey she had become fast friends with Eugene - an unlikely pairing Rick had to admit – and now she had no qualms about calling him out on what seemed like a ridiculous statement to make.

“Did you hit your head?” she asks, holding up a hand to Eugene. “How many fingers am I holding up, smart guy?”

“I did not suffer a cranial injury, no, and I am quite aware that what I am saying may sound like I have the proverbial screw loose but let me assure you, all my mental faculties are exactly where they’re supposed to be and are performing within their optimum parameters.”

“Then why, on God’s good green earth do you want to go back to that pit of fire and brimstone?” Abe asks, gesturing wildly in Eugene’s direction with his fork.

“Because they have trains there,” Eugene states in his most matter-of-fact voice and everybody waits for him to elaborate but he remains silent, having seemingly given all the information he thinks is necessary.

“And why does that interest us?” Rick asks, raising a hand towards Daryl to quiet the inevitably harsh retort he can see forming on his lips.

He’s coming to learn that, while Eugene might be an oddball sort of character by everyone else’s standards, when he has a point to make everyone better damn well shut up and listen no matter what convoluted route the man takes to get to his point. Rick knows that Abe is well aware of the situation but his nature also dictates that he has to rag on the guy just a little before he can agree with what he’s suggesting.

“Because, Sheriff, it’s my guess that when the world order started breaking down and our unenlightened government agencies were trying to contain this like an outbreak, they shut down all major modes of public transportation – planes, trains and buses – all of it was sidelined to prevent the spread of the infection. And there it has sat, primed and ready to go, just waiting for someone to set it back in motion.”

“Is that even possible at this point?” Rick asks, his curiosity piqued by the fact that Eugene wouldn’t even be bringing the idea up if he hadn’t already given it some serious thought.

“I believe so, yes, given the right amount of preparation and providing your good lady there didn’t destroy more than one or two of the fuel tanks on her one-woman rescue mission,” Eugene answers, throwing a nod in Carol’s direction who acknowledges it with an enigmatic smile. “For which, let me say on the record, I will be eternally grateful. You are, without a doubt, a true warrior Queen, ma’am, and I will be forever in your debt.”

“Eugene… the trains,” Tara prompts as he lapses into silence once more and Rick can see that everyone is now obviously intrigued by Eugene’s idea.

“When we arrived at Terminus, before we were incarcerated in that train car and they were still trying to butter us up, so to speak, I saw an overview of the train yards. We barely saw any of it past the part we travelled to get in. there are miles and miles of tracks leading from every direction into that place – a hub as large as that one would have its own refueling station and would have been a prime location for them to sideline all the out of service trains. I expect that there are numerous engines parked on the far side of the buildings we were in, just waiting to be brought back to life.”
“But won’t the fuel be gone by now?” Carol asks, fixing Eugene with a penetrating look that lets Rick know she thinks the man is full of shit.

“Not necessarily. Gareth said his people had been in there pretty much from the start and it didn’t seem like they’d ventured far from the walls in that time – just waited for their food source to come to them. I don’t think there’s much chance that they would have siphoned off and used all of the fuel I would expect to find at a yard that large. I am fairly certain that there will be an adequate reserve for what I have in mind.”

“Wait a minute,” Abraham interjects, raising his hands to silence the other voices which are all starting to speak at once. “Even if there’s a lagoon of fuel and a dozen engines to put it in, how in the hell does that help us? Do any of you know how to drive a train? Anybody?”

“Well, I think I’d have a pretty good handle on it once I get a look at the controls, maybe find a manual or two,” Eugene states, looking a little affronted.

“A manual?” Abe repeats, scrubbing a weary hand over the fiery red beard on his chin and drawing in a deep breath. “And what are you going to do when you’re racing along the tracks and there’s a tree down or a cow is taking a constitutional straight towards you, huh? Tell me that, Einstein. It’d be a pretty damn short trip. In case you ain’t noticed, nobody’d been out there maintaining those miles and miles of tracks in a good long while. You come up on something blockin’ those lines too fast and you’re gonna be kissin’ your ass goodbye faster’n you can spit.”

“I am well aware of the perils of locomotive travel, thank you, but I believe that by maintaining a constant speed that’s both fuel-efficient and will provide adequate stopping time in case of an emergency, we would be able to handle almost anything in our path. I do not believe that, given the current state of affairs, cows will be an issue.”

“I’m still not buying it,” Abe says, shaking his head and resuming his lunch. “Seems like a whole lot of ifs and maybes, you ask me. I say we stick to the original plan and leave on the bus.”

“I don’t know,” Michonne throws in from where she’s perched on the steps by Rick’s knees, “I think Eugene might be onto something. Just think how much time we’d save getting to D.C. and a train seems pretty defensible, if you ask me. I say we should at least go over and take a look, see if it’s even possible.”

“Now?” Rick asks as she stands up and wipes her hands against her thighs.

“Sure. Why not? It’s not like we’re doing anything else – at least for a couple of days until Bob is mobile again. I’ll take Daryl. Of course, Eugene will have to come so I guess that means you’re tagging along too, Sergeant?”

“Ain’t chasin’ after some foolish idea that’s never gonna work,” Abraham states, scowling a little in Michonne’s direction.

“You sure about that?” she asks, squaring off in front of him with her hands on her hips. “Because, from what I can see, Eugene here is the brains of your operation and I don’t believed he’s steered you wrong yet.”

“That is categorically and unequivocally true,” Eugene answers, standing up next to Michonne, “and I assure you that I am right about this too. You have to understand that I do not wish to go back to that place and all of the associated perils we may encounter but I am 100% positive that my thinking is correct on this matter and, by going back, we may be able to move forward at a much more expeditious pace that will only benefit us all in the long run.”
“Sonovabitch,” Abraham sighs under his breath, looking to Rick for obvious support.

“You really want to do this right now?” Rick asks, locking eyes with Michonne.

“Good a time as any,” she tells him with a shrug but he can see something deeper behind her eyes that prompts him to follow her lead.

“Well then… I can’t see why not. At least do a little recon – see if anything that Eugene is suggesting is possible – for all we know, the whole damn place burned to the ground,” he says, turning to Abe whose scowl deepens. “Look at it this way – even if the whole train thing is a bust, you might be able to find more weapons, maybe some other things we can use.”

“And we could be walking into a world of hurt,” Abe grumbles but Rick can tell by his face that he’s already resigned himself to going.

“So, you’ll check it out from a distance and if it looks overrun, you don’t go in. Daryl’ll go with you, maybe Glenn and Maggie if they want.”

“I’m in but Maggie stays here,” Glenn replies and she starts to protest but a pointed look from Glenn silences her and Rick has to wonder if there’s something else going on he should know about.

“I’m going too,” Rosita adds, moving to stand next to Eugene despite the scowl Abe aims her way.

“Then it’s settled,” Rick states firmly. “The rest of us will stay here. You can take the bus – shouldn’t take you more than a couple of hours – you’ll be back by nightfall.”

Still grumbling under his breath, Abraham climbs to his feet and everyone breaks away to grab what they need for their impromptu scouting mission. Tara picks up Judith and takes her inside out of the way while the others get ready and Carol throws Rick a quizzical glance as she passes him to which he gives just a small shrug of his shoulders in reply.

“You sure about this?” Daryl asks quietly when it’s just the two of them left outside. ‘I don’t like leavin’ you n’ the kids here alone.”

“We’ll be fine,” Rick reassures him, leaning in to wrap a hand around Daryl’s upper arm and give it a light squeeze. “There’s more than enough of us here to stay safe.”

“You really think Einstein there is onto somethin’?”

“Possibly,” Rick shrugs, “I don’t know, to be honest, but there’s definitely something going on with Michonne. The way she was so eager to go – I think she’s working on an idea of her own and I’d rather you were there to back her up.”

“’Course,” Daryl nods, shouldering his crossbow as the others file back outside. “You stay safe, you hear.”

“And you don’t be the damn hero,” Rick counters, feeling a sudden rush of nervousness at Daryl heading out without him.

“Yes, officer,” Daryl says softly before nudging Rick’s shoulder with his own and then heading across the grass to where Abe has pulled up in the ancient bus.

Rick watches him go, not taking his eyes off him until the bus has disappeared from sight, and Carol and Carl join him to stand silently until the sound of the engine fades into the distance.
He spends the afternoon in a distracted state, second-guessing his decision to let everyone go until he's making himself crazy with the worry.

“Stop,” Carol tells him as he paces to the church’s white picket fence and back again for the umpteenth time. “Can’t you go find something productive to do?”

“Like what?” he asks, standing with his hands splayed on his hips as he looks down at where she’s resumed her position with Judith on the blanket.

“Oh, I don’t know… go chop some wood or something… check your snares. I don’t care. Just get out of my sight for five minutes before I nail your feet to the floor. You’re making me nervous.”

“Fine,” he grumbles, knowing that she’s right and shooting a scowl at Tara and Noah who are playing cards together on the steps and trying, unsuccessfully, to hide their grins.

He goes into the church to look for Carl, finding him playing chess with Bob in the pastor’s office while Sasha reads nearby and Rick has to take a moment to marvel at the normalcy of it all.

“Carl, you want to come check the snares with me?” he asks, shooting a smile at Bob over his son’s head.

“Yes, please take him,” Bob says quickly, “he’s kickin’ my butt from here to Christmas.”

Carl laughs and blushes slightly, turning to look at his dad with a hint of pride in his eyes.

“Really?” Rick asks, laying a hand on Carl’s shoulder. “Well it looks like I arrived at just the right time then. Come on, champ.”

“Maybe we can play again later, Bob?” Carl says eagerly, getting up from his seat.

“Oh sure, torture me some more,” Bob agrees amiably, laying back on the sofa and waving his hand at Carl.

“So, when did you learn to play chess?” Rick asks as they walk outside together, remembering that his own game nights with his son had never evolved past the checkers stage.

“Hershel taught me,” Carl answers softly and Rick feels the familiar weight of loss settle around his heart at hearing his mentor’s name.

“Well, maybe we can play sometime,” he offers, giving Carl a small smile which his son eagerly returns with a nod.

They head across the small churchyard and into the treeline, both of them moving silently as they scan the area for any potential threats. Daryl and Rick had set up a series of snares in the thickest part of the woods, finding the most used animal trails and, so far, they had been rewarded each time they’d reset them. They had kept them to the trees in the opposite direction from where they’d had their encounter with Gareth and his people, not wanting to give anyone a reason to stumble across that scene by accident.

“Do we really need to do this?” Carl asks as he helps Rick collect a rabbit from the third snare they check. “Can’t you and Daryl hunt when we need fresh meat? Isn’t that one of the best parts about
“Because we have to make things look normal, Carl, you know that?”

“Why? Why can’t you just tell everyone what you are now? Michonne was cool when she found out and Carol already knows. And soon it’ll be my turn too.”

“Because not everyone will be as understanding as they are, Carl,” Rick tells him, purposefully ignoring Carl’s declaration at wanting to become a wolf himself. “People get scared easy, especially now. What do you think would happen if they don’t understand – if they can’t see that it’s a good thing, not a bad? What if they turned us out, Daryl and I? Or worse, what if they tried to kill us?”

“Could they?” Carl whispers, a morbid curiosity in his tone.

“Not without a fight. But I don’t want it to come to that – to have to fight with our own people. This is our family, Carl, all of them and staying together is the only way that all of us survive. We can’t do anything to jeopardize that. You have to promise me you’re not going to tell anyone – just let Daryl and I handle it, okay?”

“Yes sir,” Carl agrees but Rick can see he still thinks his father is wrong.

“Good. Now let me see you reset the snares again. Then we can get ba-” he pauses as his ears pick up the sound of the church bus in the distance.

“What is it?” Carl hisses, looking around fearfully.

“They’re back,” Rick tells him as he hears the sputtering engine drawing closer.

“Then let’s go,” Carl answers eagerly.

’Snare first,” Rick instructs.

Sighing, Carl drops to his knees and quickly resets the simple snare, looking up when he’s done to make sure Rick’s satisfied. Giving him a nod, Rick hauls him to his feet and they head back through the trees to the church at a brisk pace.

They arrive just as Abraham pulls the bus in, the old vehicle shuddering to a halt on the weed-grown gravel, and jerks open the door from the inside.

“How’d it go?” Rick asks as the group starts piling off the bus, noting that they all look as though they’ve been in a skirmish and there’s a grim air about them.

“See for yourself,” comes Abraham’s authoritative voice from inside the bus now that everyone else is off.

Everyone except Daryl that is and Rick’s heart trips into overdrive as he mounts the vehicle’s steps.

“What happened?” he demands, his voice steely – betraying none of the fear he’s feeling inside.

“We met a little resistance,” Abraham explains, his body blocking Rick’s view of Daryl who is in the back seat of the bus and it’s all Rick can do not to throw the man aside, “so your boy here decided he wanted to be fuckin’ John Wayne and didn’t wait on the rest of us.”

Abraham side-steps into the seat in front so that Rick can see past him to where Daryl is sitting propped up against the window, his eyes blazing and his upper lip pulled back in a slight snarl that he drops as his gaze meets Rick’s. A quick once-over reassures Rick that he’s okay although he can
see from the way he's holding himself that something’s causing him pain and he's obviously fighting to maintain his composure.

“Buncha geeks pinned him down ‘fore we could get to him,” Abe continues. “Still not sure how he got out from under them or how he lifted the damn rail tie he took ‘em out with but there he is, larger than life and twice as ornery.”

“You hurt?” Rick asks, locking eyes with Daryl and keeping his voice even.

“Popped his damn shoulder clean outta the socket,” Abe interrupts before Daryl can speak and Rick has to resist the urge to reach out and silence the man himself. “He let Michonne fix it and he keeps tryna tell me he’s fine but, if that’s what fine looks like, then I’m the goddamn Queen of Sheba. If he’s bit, we gotta know – for all of us – and, no offence, but I’m not just taking your girl’s word for it.”

“Ain’t bit,” Daryl grumbles from his seat, his lip curling just ever so slightly again.

“Then why won’t you let me take a look?” Abe retorts, his exasperated tone telling Rick that this argument must have raged the whole trip back.

“He’s not bit,” Rick states simply.

“Yeah? And how in the hell would you know?” Abe barks, turning his frustration in Rick’s direction.

“Because he wouldn’t have let you bring him back,” Rick says quietly and he sees Abe’s understanding of that answer.

“Fine!” Abe mutters, throwing his hands in the air and pushing past Rick to exit the bus. “But if you wake up in the middle of the night and find your boyfriend chowing down on your leg, don’t expect me to save your ass.”

“Daryl?” Rick asks, concern etching his features as he reaches out a hand to help him up.

“I’m fine,” he answers, ignoring Rick’s hand to pull himself up but Rick can see the way he winces as he puts pressure on his left arm.

“Uh-huh… sure,” Rick chides him as they exit the bus. “C’mon.”

He steers Daryl into the church, heading to the office at the back and closing the door behind them before anyone can ask what’s going on.

“Well are ya just gonna stand there and watch or are you gonna help me?” Daryl snaps, struggling to slip his crossbow off over his head and Rick steps forward to help him ease it off.

“Thought you were fine,” he teases gently as he helps Daryl remove his jacket and shirt.

“Well I din’t say it doesn’t still hurt like a bitch,” Daryl hisses and Rick draws in a breath as he gets a good look at the new roadmap of bruising that’s covering Daryl’s torso.

“Don’t move,” Rick instructs, moving to the desk to rifle through the small stack of medical supplies they’d gathered to treat Bob.

“I don’t need that,” Daryl tells him, his tone laced with a mixture of annoyance and embarrassment as Rick approaches him with a roll of bandage. “I just need to rest it – it’ll be fine by mornin’.”
“Yeah, well, I say you do – if only to not raise any suspicions,” Rick counters, keeping his voice low.

Daryl grunts but allows Rick to bind his arm in a makeshift sling, still cringing a little despite Rick's tender touch.

“What in the hell happened?” he asks when he’s done and Daryl takes a seat on the sofa.

“Just like Abe said, buncha uglies got on top of me. Couldn’t exactly claw my way out so I took a swing at them. Damn rail tie was heavier than I thought. ’chonne fixed me up but course Abe couldn’t let it go.”

Rick nods, knowing exactly why Daryl wouldn’t want Abe checking him for bites, and grabs Daryl’s shirt to sit beside him and help him back into it, buttoning it over his immobile arm.

“That’s gonna be a big help if we get attacked,” Daryl growls, looking down at himself but Rick ignores his complaints in favor of brushing his hair back from his face instead.

“I’m sorry,” Rick whispers, meeting Daryl’s eyes and he knows that Daryl understands that he means he’s not only sorry that Daryl got hurt but that he's also sorry for the ghosts of Daryl’s past that are still clinging to him.

Daryl seems to deflate a little, the hurt and embarrassment that’s been fueling him ebbing away as he leans into Rick’s caress.

“My hero,” Rick says with a smile, brushing his lips against Daryl’s forehead. “I would’ve liked to have seen Abe’s face when you came up swingin’.

“Nobody wanted to sit next to me on the bus,” Daryl answers with a wry chuckle.

“I’m not surprised – you weren’t exactly Mr. Sunshine, I’m sure.”

“Hey! Want me to pop your shoulder out, huh? See how happy that makes you?”

“Nah, I’m good, thanks,” Rick smirks, tilting his head down to capture Daryl’s lips in a real kiss, breathing in the scent of him.

“Mmm,” Daryl murmurs as they part, “maybe I should get injured more often.”

“Don’t even joke about it,” Rick answers, tugging on Daryl’s shirtfront and then releasing him.

“Guess we should tell the others you’re gonna live.”

“Hmph, you can if you want, I’m stayin’ right here.”

“Oh, is that how this is going?” Rick asks, getting up as Daryl stretches his legs out on the sofa and settles back.

“Yup.”

“Fine but if they want to come in here and check on you, I’m not gonna stop them.”

Daryl doesn’t answer, just waves his good hand in Rick's direction and Rick shakes his head with a smile as he leaves the room, closing the door behind him.

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Rick steps back to admire their handiwork, still amazed at what they’ve accomplished in such a short amount of time. Despite their encounter with the remainder of the ravenous walkers still hanging around Terminus, the recon group had returned with promising news – not only was there a wide array of engines parked in the yards that the fire hadn’t even touched but there was more than sufficient fuel to get at least one of them mobile again. Over the next few days, Rick had taken a small group back to Terminus and they had worked first on securing the perimeter around the engines and then on bringing one back to life. His reservations on whether they were just wasting their time on a fool’s errand were gradually swayed as Eugene had thrown himself into the work at hand, barely even complaining about the danger from the walkers still lurking nearby. He had locked himself away in the train yard’s offices while the others took care of the physical preparations, researching everything he needed to know about the functions and operation of the engine they’d chosen from the myriad of manuals and safety logs he’d found there. He reassured Rick daily that he was confident that he would not only be able to get the train moving but that he would be able to operate it as easily as driving a car and Rick found that he didn’t doubt him for a second. The group had worked under Eugene’s instruction – prepping the train for its journey and scouting supplies from among the empty buildings despite their obvious distaste for using anything belonging to the previous occupants.

Now, Rick thinks as he looks up at Abraham working atop the engine in front of him, they’re pretty much ready to go, one more day at most. It had been the former sergeant’s idea to add a lookout platform to the roof of the engine – with their plan to maintain an even cruising speed because of potential threats on the tracks, he had decided that it would be best to have an elevated vantage point from which they would have a better view of what might be coming at them. Rick couldn’t fault his logic so the two of them had constructed a pretty effective crow’s nest using welding equipment they had found in one of the tool sheds and scavenging metal parts from the other engines nearby. At Rick’s insistence they had also reinforced both the doors and windows of the passenger car until it had started to look more like a futuristic hybrid tank than a commuter train. Rick wasn’t taking any chances though – he knew that the noise they’d be making as they travelled would make them a prime target for both the undead and humans alike and he wanted the train to be as defensible as possible.

“Done,” Abraham yells above him, switching off the welding torch in his hand and tipping up the protective visor that’s covering his flushed face.

“Not a moment too soon,” Rick tells him, inclining his head in the direction of the nearby fence where an increasing knot of walkers is pushing against the links. “Guess the distractions we set aren’t working anymore.”

“Guess not,” Abe agrees, climbing down from the top of the cab and stowing the welding gear away. “Best we get moving then – see if we can pull them away when we leave before they bust that bitch down.”

He heads off towards the church bus parked just inside the gates and Rick walks back to call to Carol and Glenn who are inside the passenger car working on securing the last of the supplies.

“Time to go,” he informs them, waiting until they’re both out and headed to the bus before he bolts and locks the train’s door with the heavy duty padlock they’ve attached to the outside.

Abe already has the bus running, the sound pulling some of the walkers which were clustered at the fence, and Glenn and Carol climb aboard while Rick opens the gate to let the bus through. Quickly slamming it shut and securing it once the bus is out, he gets on just as the first of the shambling walkers catches up to them, turning to kick it away so that he can close the door. Abe puts the bus into gear and they set off with a jerk, pulling out onto the dirt road where he pauses for a moment to
rev the engine loudly, pulling more of the walkers to their location and away from the straining fence.

“Abe,” Rick warns as the bus starts to get surrounded.

“One minute,” Abraham replies slowly, his eyes flicking from the driver’s mirror to the walkers amassing in front of them.

“Abe!” Rick urges, more forcefully this time and he’s rewarded by Abraham abruptly flooring it and shooting forward to mow down most of the walkers in their path, whooping as he does so.

Rick sinks into the nearest seat, shaking his head as he listens to the thud of bodies hitting the ground or bouncing off the sides of the bus as they pull away, drawing most of the walkers after them. He relaxes a little as they pull away, slowly at first to keep the walkers attention and then speeding up once they hit the open road and Rick can barely keep the smile off of his face as he thinks about getting back to Daryl.

They arrive back at the church just as the sun is starting to fade from the sky, Daryl waiting for them on the front steps with Judy in his arms and Carl by his side and this time Rick doesn’t even attempt to hide his smile. A mutual look reassures each of them that the other is okay as Daryl passes Judith off into her father’s willing hands and everyone heads inside.

“I think we’ll be ready to leave tomorrow,” Rick announces as the others greet the returning group and all eyes turn to him.

“You sure?” Michonne asks, giving him an intense look that catches him off guard for a moment.

“Everything’s in place – the supplies are loaded, we’re fully fueled and Eugene got the engine running yesterday so I can’t see why not. Besides, I don’t want to leave what we’ve done unattended for any longer than we have to – we have no idea who could be out there watching us.”

“Then we go in the morning,” Abraham states, grinning as he wraps an arm around Rosita’s shoulders and squeezes her to him. “D.C. here we come.”

“Can I talk to you,” Michonne asks quietly, laying her hand on Rick’s arm and drawing him away from the enthusiastic round of conversation that’s sprung up in the wake of Abraham’s announcement.

Rick follows her towards the exit, handing Judith to Carol as he passes and wondering what’s going on as Michonne ushers Daryl along with them as well. Outside of the church, they walk out to the treeline, Michonne turning to talk to them once she’s sure nobody else has come after them.

“What’s going on?” Rick asks cautiously. “Something’s been bothering you for days.”

“I think D.C. is a mistake,” she tells them, drawing in a breath and meeting each of their gazes. “I think Abraham is deluding himself if he thinks there’s anything left there and I’m not exactly convinced that Eugene is the answer to all our prayers.”

“Why’s that?” Daryl asks.

“Because you saw what they did to Atlanta and probably to all the major cities… are you telling me you think we’re just going to pull up to the White House and find business as usual? I think that’s a very nice dream but that’s all it is. Everything is gone… there’s no government or scientists just
waiting on Eugene to arrive with whatever answers he has stuffed in his head. In all this time, for how long we’ve been out here, we would have heard something even if it was just a rumor or a whisper. Nobody’s coming to save us and, if Eugene does have a cure in his head, then there’s nobody left that can use it anymore. We’re on our own and heading into a major metropolitan area is probably the last thing we should be doing.”

“So what’s our alternative?” asks Rick after a moment’s silence has fallen between them as they digest Michonne’s words.

“When Andrea and I were in Woodbury, before we knew what was going on there and we were only using it as a stop along the way, we had a plan to head for the coast. We had mapped a route using the train tracks that would take us all the way out there – we thought the coast might be safer, you know, keep the ocean at your back, maybe find a boat and head offshore. I don’t know. It wasn’t really more than an idea before it was shot down but I’ve been looking at the maps at Terminus and I think it’s still a viable option. It’s pretty much a straight shot from here to there. I just think we’ll be making a big mistake if we follow through with Abraham’s mission as much as I’d love for it to be real.”

Rick paces a few steps away from the others, needing to work through Michonne’s suggestion for a minute before he speaks. He’s not afraid to admit to himself that she’s voiced a lot of the concerns that he’s been privately having too but that he’s been pushing aside in favor of having a tangible goal to believe in for once. He just hadn’t been able to come up with a viable alternative but now she was laying one at his feet and he had to decide if it was worth possibly splintering the group for, not to mention the hell that would be raised once they presented their new idea to Abraham.

“Daryl?” Rick asks softly, turning to seek his mate’s counsel and seeing the answer on his face before he even opens his lips.

“Michonne’s right, the city is a bad idea, cure or not. I say we head for the coast and look for someplace new.”

“You know Abraham’s not giving up that train without a fight. Is that an argument you really want to start?” Rick questions, looking from Daryl to Michonne.

“I think it’s the right thing to do,” Michonne answers, drawing herself up to meet his gaze. “If he’s smart, he’ll come with us and, if not, then he’s not going to stop us.”

“Then we’re decided,” Rick states and both of them nod their agreement. “Let’s hope he’s smart.”

Rick hits the ground with a bone-jarring thud, the large chunks of gravel underneath him biting into his flesh through the worn denim of his jeans as the air whooshes out of his lungs. He’s only down for a second but that’s all it takes for Abraham to be on him, straddling his torso and landing a haymaker punch to Rick’s jaw that makes his ears ring. With a roar, he pushes up under the larger man, unseating him and throwing him to the ground beside him before he jumps to his feet again. Both of them are bloody and bruised from their altercation and Rick is crucially aware of the snarling walkers piling up at the fence behind them as Abraham clambers to his feet and spits a bloody wad onto the dusty earth. They had arrived at Terminus just after dawn, the air charged with a sense of excited anticipation that Rick hadn’t felt from his family in far too long and he had made sure that everyone was safely onboard before he had approached Abraham with their change in destination. Needless to say, Rick’s suggestion had not been met with an open mind and the heated argument that followed had soon degenerated into the knock-down, drag-out fight he was now involved in. While he was trying hard not to cause serious injury to his opponent, he also knew that he couldn’t let his
victory appear too easy so he was allowing Abe to land a few blows for appearances sake but he was getting tired of the façade.

“You’re not taking the fucking train,” Abe bellows and Rick hears the walker snarls increase in volume behind him.

“Come with us,” Rick pleads for what feels like the thousandth time even though he knows his request is falling on deaf ears.

“You’re not hearing me, boy… I said you’re not taking the goddamn train,” Abe yells, launching himself at Rick once more and ploughing him back into the side of the idling engine with a crack of bones.

“Stop!” Rick hears Eugene shout from the steps above him as Abe doubles him over with a follow-up punch to his mid-section.

To Rick’s surprise, the other man pushes past Daryl who has been blocking the entrance to the engine’s cab during the fight and rushes over to grab ineffectually at Abe’s arm.

“Stop,” he repeats, clinging to Abe’s wrist. “You’ll kill him.”

“Plan on it,” Abe snarls, shaking his arm loose from Eugene’s meager grip but taking a step back from Rick all the same.

“But…he’s right,” Eugene whispers, casting his eyes down to the ground at his feet.

“Excuse me?” Abe asks, whirling to face Eugene who cowers slightly under his gaze but holds his position. “Come again?”

“I said he’s right,” Eugene repeats, flashing a glance at Abe but obviously unable to hold it. “There is no cure… I made it up. I didn’t think you’d help me without a solid reason. I neve-”

His words are cut off by the crack of Abe’s fist across his jaw, a move so fast that even Rick had no hope of preventing it. Blood sprays from Eugene’s lip and the pitiful cry he makes cuts Rick to the bone as Abraham grabs him by the front of his jacket and throws him to the ground, whaling on him like he’s a punching bag at the local gym. This time Rick doesn’t hold back, taking Abe down with a blow to the head that sends him crashing onto Eugene’s already unconscious form. Sides heaving, Rick stares down at the pair of them wondering what in the hell he’s going to do now when his question is answered for him in the worst possible way. With the screech of tearing metal filling his ears, he turns to see the already over-burdened fence pulling free from its posts under the weight of dozens of walkers which have been drawn to the sound of the train’s engine and the ensuing fight. Rick’s heart sinks as the first walkers stumble over the downed fence and into the yard heading straight for them.

“Daryl,” he yells, bending to haul Abe’s unconscious form up and shove it into Daryl’s waiting arms just as Carol and Sasha come up beside him to help lift Eugene. “Go!”

He hesitates just long enough to make sure that both of them are being taken care of and then he swings to meet the first walkers, pulling out his machete to start hacking at them until he knows everyone is safely aboard.

“Glenn,” he shouts, pushing back a trio of walkers so that they fall at his feet and he can sprint to the door of the passenger car, “get in the cab… you’re driving.”

Glenn’s face appears in the doorway, a protest already forming on his lips but Rick hauls him out,
slamming the door shut behind him and they fight their way to the cab, climbing up out of the reach of the snapping jaws below.

“Rick… I can’t,” Glenn tells him, his eyes wide with panic, “I have no idea.”

“Yes you do,” Rick insists, clapping a steadying hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You were in here with Eugene when he ran the test start the other day and you’ve been guarding him most of the time we’ve been here. You’re all we’ve got.”

Glenn sucks in a deep breath, the reality of Rick’s words sinking in and he nods, moving to the engine’s controls and looking them hesitantly over for a moment before he adjusts a lever and the already-idling engine edges up a notch. Rick turns away, confident that Glenn’s knowledge is better than he gives himself credit for, and finds Daryl securely binding Abraham’s wrists together behind his back, having laid the man on his side.

“Shit… Daryl, the gate,” Rick says as the train lurches forward under Glenn’s control.

“Got it,” Daryl answers, getting to his feet and grabbing his crossbow.

He doesn’t hesitate, just leaps from the steps of the train which is starting to pick up speed and races ahead to rip open the makeshift barrier they had erected over the tracks to keep the walkers at bay. Rick sees the look of surprise on Glenn’s face at the ease with which Daryl snaps the chain holding the gate closed but he doesn’t mention it, his concentration drawn back to the job at hand. Daryl is ready and waiting as they approach and boards the train again with ease, this time standing on the walkway outside of the door to the cab as they head out of Terminus and onto the tracks beyond.

“We need somebody up top,” Daryl states, moving to the ladder leading to the roof. “Or else this trip is likely to be short n’ sweet.”

Rick nods his agreement and, for a second, their eyes meet before Daryl disappears out of sight and Rick could swear that his mate is enjoying himself in spite of the fact that they’re heading into unknown territory with one of their own almost beaten to death and another likely to kill them all when he wakes. Shaking his head, Rick steps up beside Glenn to look through the front window, fishing a walkie-talkie out of the bag of supplies at his feet so that he can check on the situation in the rear. While he’s waiting for somebody to answer him he takes a second to examine their situation, rubbing ruefully at the bruises along his jaw, and he has to admit that he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t a little bit excited himself at their new endeavor.
Chapter 25

Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, tmd-dump-station

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(R&faq)

DO NOT REPOST

The breeze from the train’s forward momentum lifts Daryl’s hair from his face and he can’t help but close his eyes for just a second as he scents the fresh air. He inhales deeply, opening his eyes as his brain filters the plethora of smells coming from his surroundings – the deep, familiar scent of the woods and all they hold, the faint but ever-present odor of decay that underlies everything in the world now and, somewhere ahead, the greasy, metallic scent of heavy machinery. Lifting the binoculars that are hanging on the railing beside him, Daryl focuses them on the horizon where the
straight stretch of track disappears around a curve in the trees. He can just make out the roof of a building a little past the bend in the tracks sitting in a clearing among the trees.

“We’re almost there,” he calls into the walkie he has in his other hand. “You’re gonna want to slow it down into the curve – the station’s pretty close after that.”

“Got it,” Glenn answers him curtly and Daryl can hear the strain in his voice.

With Eugene out of commission, maybe permanently from what Daryl can make out, it’s fallen to Glenn to control the engine and it’s been a steep learning curve for him. Daryl thinks he’s done a good job though, despite his protests, and they’ve managed to find a safe cruising speed after performing a few trial stops and starts to give them an idea of safe stopping distances in case of an emergency. Daryl had volunteered to stay up top all day knowing that Glenn would do better with Rick by his side in the cab to provide encouragement. Plus, he had to admit, being outside like this with the world rushing past him, appealed to his wolfen side and made him yearn to ride a bike again although he was having a hard time shaking the mental image that kept popping into his mind of a large black wolf with its head hanging firmly out of a car window while its long pink tongue flopped in the slipstream.

As Glenn slows the engine into the curve, Daryl stows the walkie and binoculars then climbs down to open the door of the cab.

“You think we should stop here… take a quick look on foot first?” he asks, looking at Rick.

“Yeah, that was my thought too,” Rick replies. “Glenn.”

Glenn applies the brakes and the train rolls to a halt, the engine idling gently.

“Stay up front,” Rick instructs him. “If you need to move – do it. Daryl ‘n I will catch you up. And keep an eye on him.”

Rick nods towards Abraham who is still sitting on the floor where Daryl had left him when they made their escape from Terminus. After an initial burst of rage when he had come to and found himself restrained, he had lapsed into an almost catatonic state, refusing to speak to anyone and just staring blindly into space for the duration of their journey.

Climbing down to the ground, Daryl follows Rick to the passenger car where Carol already has the door open to greet them.

“The station’s just around this bend,” Rick tells her. “I’m going to take Daryl and check the place out before we go any further. I need you to keep everyone inside until we get back. Have Ty get up top and keep watch. Stay alert, okay?”

“Always,” Carol reassures him, shouldering her gun and giving Daryl a grim smile. “You two be careful too – if you’re not back in an hour, I’m coming after you.”

Rick nods, not even bothering to disagree with her declaration, and Daryl leads the way off of the tracks and into the woods so that they can approach the station without being seen by any potential enemies.

As soon as the cool stillness of the trees envelopes them, Daryl’s skin begins to prickle and he feels the wolf stir within him. Throwing a glance at Rick, he notes the widening of his eyes and the way his nostrils are flaring as he scents the air and he knows the wolf is calling to him too. Wordlessly, Daryl leads them further into the woods, the silence deepening around them, until he finds a good spot for them to Shift. Rick grins at him as they undress and hide their gear under some loose brush.
and Daryl finds himself momentarily hypnotized by the goosebumps raised on Rick’s torso and arms by the stiff breeze.

“Hey,” Rick says softly, moving into Daryl's personal space, “you have any idea what I want to do to you right now?”

“Gotta pretty good idea,” Daryl replies, feeling his mouth go dry as Rick's hands skim his torso.

“Shame we ain’t got time.”

Rick sighs, dropping his hands to his sides and giving a small growl of frustration that shoots sparks of lust across Daryl’s nerve-endings.

“C’mon,” he murmurs, tearing his gaze from Rick's face and trying to ignore the fire igniting in his belly. “Let’s go check this place out then maybe tonight…”

He leaves the thought hanging as he turns and drops into his wolf shape, shaking himself vigorously to dispel the desires coursing through him. As much as he wants to give into his baser needs every time he’s around Rick, he knows he has to control his urges – that there are people depending on them, on him, to keep them safe and the last thing he should be thinking about is coupling with his mate like a bitch in heat. Rick drops beside him, leaning in to nip at Daryl's neck with a playful growl before the pair of them set off through the woods.

Daryl takes the lead as they get close to the rundown station, all of his concentration now centered on the task at hand. They’re on the outskirts of a small town with the station consisting of no more than a single platform with a two-story building beside it, the red brick façade overrun with tendrils of dark green foliage. There’s a single broken window on the upper level but all the doors downstairs are shut tight and Daryl can smell the ripe stench of the dead even before he hears the low groans and shuffling of feet coming from inside. They circle the perimeter first, working their way inwards towards the building, checking for other walkers in the immediate vicinity and, maybe more importantly, for any recent human activity that might pose a threat to the group. There are a few older tracks leading to and from the building in various directions but Daryl is satisfied that there hasn’t been anyone around recently. Stopping outside the main door into the station, he scratches noisily at the wood frame with his claws, trying to stir up the walkers inside so that he can gauge how many of them there are.

“No more than half dozen,” Rick says beside him, stretching up into his hybrid form. “You ready?”

Daryl nods his agreement, steadying his feet and feeling the familiar burst of adrenalin spiking his nerves as it always does before a fight. He watches as Rick reaches out for the door handle, finds it locked, and then centers his weight to wrench it open anyway. The first three walkers exposed to the daylight create a bottleneck as they all focus as one on Daryl’s waiting face and he growls loudly to get them moving. Squeezing through the doorframe almost as one and leaving copious amounts of putrid flesh behind in their wake, the first of the undead aim straight for Daryl who takes them down with ease – severing each of their heads before they can get barely more than a passing grip on his fur. He turns to find Rick surrounded by walker parts, a corpse held struggling in his grasp before he splits it in two with his huge hands and discards it with a contemptuous snarl. Daryl intercepts the last walker that’s heading Rick’s way, coming up behind it to push it to the ground and remove its head with a single snap of his jaws.

“Hey, that one was mine,” Rick growls in protest, stalking over to stand in front of Daryl.

“Looks like you made enough mess already,” Daryl jeers, Shifting back to human and spitting the foul taste from his mouth as he surveys the scattered limbs and twitching heads at his feet. “Least all of mine are only in two pieces. We have to clean this shit up before the others get here.”
“Nag, nag, nag,” Rick jokes but he starts gathering up the remains and hauling them off towards the trees to dump them out of sight.

“I’m gonna check inside,” Daryl calls, stopping to pick up a nearby rock on the way and finish off the disembodied heads that are still trying furiously to eat him despite their lack of mobility.

The building’s interior is refreshingly cool and dark thanks to the boards covering all of the lower windows although the overwhelming stink of the dead that had occupied the space is making Daryl’s stomach churn. Making his way to the opposite side of the building, he unbolts the doors leading out onto the tracks and throws them wide to let in the fresh air, figuring they can secure them again later once everyone is settled. The lower floor consists of an old-fashioned waiting room with hard wooden benches, the walls covered in peeling posters, and a small ticket booth alongside a tiny restroom. Checking out the upstairs, Daryl finds four identical offices that look like they had been rented by local businesses, another bathroom and an, unfortunately, empty vending machine. He cracks the windows in each office to let the air circulate, guessing that the upper level will be the best location for everyone to bed down for the night. Heading back downstairs, he finds Rick coming in after having disposed of their collective kills.

“Place is secure,” Daryl tells him.

“Good, let’s get back to the others then ‘fore Carol comes looking for us.”

Daryl shoots him a grin and the pair of them Shift, jostling each other a little as they head outside and then Rick takes the lead, racing off into the trees, his ears flattening back against his skull and Daryl has to scramble to catch up with him.

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By the time dusk owns the sky, the group is settled at the station for the night. Rosita had finally managed to coax Abraham out of the cab although he was still keeping himself separated from the group. Tara and Noah had opted to stay in the train car for the night to take care of Eugene who was still unconscious after his run-in with Abe and Rick had insisted there was a constant guard on top of the engine until morning. Carol had taken first watch, eager to be doing something after having been cooped up inside the passenger car all day. Rick and Daryl had settled the others inside, closing and securing the doors now that most of the smell had dissipated, and now they were seated alongside Michonne while Bob and Sasha prepared a meal for everyone.

“How long to reach the coast, do you think?” Rick asks, indicating the map that Michonne has unfolded on her lap and is studying intently.

“Well… if we can keep the speed we had today and if we don’t run into any obstacles on the tracks and if we can manage to change the points each time to keep us heading in the right direction… I’d say maybe five days, give or take.”

“That’s a lot of ‘ifs,’” Daryl grumbles, bouncing Judy on his knee and trying to keep her fingers out of his hair.

“We were lucky today,” Rick agrees with a sigh. “Given what happened this morning, things could’ve been a whole lot worse.”

“Maybe someone’s finally smiling down on us,” Michonne suggests as she stands up to fold the map and slip it into her backpack.

“Yeah? Try tellin’ that to Eugene,” Daryl counters as she walks away. “Don’t think he’s feelin’ very
Michonne tosses him a brief scowl over her shoulder then joins the others gathered around the small propane stove Bob has set up in the middle of the room.

“Think he’ll be okay?” Rick asks quietly, leaning in so that only Daryl can hear.

“Dunno… he took a pretty good beatin’ – hit the ground like a ton of bricks. If he ain’t awake by mornin’ we might have a problem. What about Abe, you think he’s gonna try somethin’ stupid?”

“No,” Rick answers thoughtfully, glancing over to where the former sergeant is currently sitting with Rosita at his side. “I just think it took the wind out of his sails for a moment. Man like that, focused on his mission the way he was, it hit him hard. I think he’ll find his way again… at least I hope he will.”

“How about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah… you seemed convinced by the whole D.C. thing there for a while.”

“I guess I wanted it to be true, I think we all did to some extent but, when it came down to following it through or taking Michonne’s way instead… heading for the coast just seemed the right choice, you know? I can’t explain why but, even thinking there might be a cure in D.C., my gut was telling me that we should go the other way.”

“Yup,” Daryl sighs, shifting Judy’s weight in his arms, “that was what I thought too.”

“But you would’ve gone to D.C. if I’d decided to back Abraham?” Rick asks, catching Daryl’s eye.

“Course,” Daryl shrugs, getting up from his seat on the bench. “Not letting you outta my sight again, Sheriff.”

He leaves Rick on the seat knowing that his eyes are following Daryl’s every move as he joins the others, looking for something to feed Judith.

“Here,” Michonne says, trying to hand him a bowl of food.

“Nah, I’m good. Me n’ Rick are now goin’ out to hunt. Save that for the others.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?” she asks, her brow furrowing as she takes Judy from him. “We already have a guard on the train.”

“Better safe than sorry,” he tells her, feeling Rick’s presence at his side as he joins them. “We won’t go far.”

“Uh-huh, well see that you don’t,” Michonne instructs, giving them both a knowing look. “I know how easily you two can get distracted when you’re hunting.”

Daryl flushes a little at her words, wondering if the women in his life will ever stop teasing him about his relationship with Rick but he just gives her a tiny snort in reply.

“Make sure you keep all the doors locked,” Rick adds, handing Daryl his crossbow and checking his gun is fully loaded. “You have the walkies – use them. Keep in contact with the train, make sure Noah and Tara are okay out there. Daryl and I won’t be long. We’ll just do a quick perimeter sweep and see if we can scare up some fresh meat.”
“Got it,” Michonne answers with a look that tells Daryl she finds Rick’s words redundant – she knows perfectly well how to take care of their people.

With a brief kiss goodbye on Judith’s forehead, Rick straightens up and they leave the building, waiting while Michonne secures the door behind them.

Outside the night air is still around them, both Daryl and Rick stopping for a moment to inhale deeply before they set off into the woods. They move silently through the trees together, their bodies perfectly synchronized as they scout the area for any signs of danger.

“We should Shift and split up,” Rick tells Daryl, halting on the faint trail they’ve been following.

“Cover more ground,” Daryl nods, easing his bow from his shoulder.

“And,” Rick continues, unbuttoning his shirt and slipping it off, “the quicker we patrol, the quicker we can get back to the conversation we started earlier. Don’t think I’ve forgotten.”

“Oh yeah? And what conversation was that?” Daryl teases, toeing off his boots and letting his unbuckled pants slide to the ground.

He hears Rick’s sharp intake of breath and sees his pupils dilate as his eyes roam Daryl’s naked body, lingering on his cock for a moment before flicking back up to fix him with a hard stare.

“You’re a fuckin’ prick-tease, Dixon,” he growls, crossing the gap between them in two long strides and pushing himself against Daryl’s flesh.

“Me?” Daryl huffs indignantly. “You started it.”

“Yeah and I’m gonna finish it,” Rick murmurs, lowering his lips to Daryl’s collarbone as his rough hand finds Daryl’s cock and squeezes it gently, eliciting a small mewl from his lips.

“Uhh,” Daryl moans, tilting his head to allow Rick better access to the sweet spot at the base of his throat.

Rick suckles at his skin, his breath damp on Daryl’s neck sending shivers across his torso as his fingers stroke lazily at his stiffening cock.

“Rick,” Daryl sighs, trying to bring his focus back to the real reason they’re out here. “Rick!”

He pushes gently against Rick’s torso, ignoring the way the feel of his warm, firm flesh sends pangs of desire to his already overloaded senses and Rick backs off with a grunt.

“Spoilsport,” he mutters, licking his lips and giving Daryl a wicked smile.

“Just Shift into the damn wolf already,” Daryl says, aiming a small shove at Rick’s shoulder.

He initiates his own Shift, whimpering a little as the change re-shapes the hard muscle of his cock but does nothing to dampen the hormones firing his body. If anything, his new form only exacerbates his urges, taking them deeper and more primal and he bares his teeth at Rick when he takes his other form. Growling hard, he nips at Rick's flank, sinking his teeth a little deeper than he normally would during their play fights and Rick whips around to snarl back at him, his eyes blazing a brilliant blue. Daryl turns and races off into the trees, trying his hardest to clear his mind of the crystal clear image that had just come to him of him mounting Rick in this form and fucking him hard until he howled. There’s a fine line between the beast and the man and often it blurs during the height of their passion but Daryl has never entertained the thought before of coupling with Rick as the wolf and he blames
the elevated state of arousal Rick’s worked him up into for even thinking of it now.

He shakes his head as he runs, knowing that Rick has set off in the opposite direction as is their usual routine, and hopes that his mate is feeling just as frustrated as he is right now. He makes a quick sweep of the area, focusing his senses on the surroundings until he’s satisfied that there’s nothing out there lurking in the shadows that poses any sort of threat to his family. Making his way back to where they stashed their clothes, he can sense Rick approaching from the other direction – his presence calling to something inside Daryl in a way that just keeps strengthening the longer they’re together – and they arrive at the same time. Rick is carrying two plump rabbits between his jaws which he lays carefully on the ground at his feet, licking his long tongue around his muzzle before he Shifts back, and Daryl feels another surge of lust running through his body.

“Let’s go,” he says, Shifting effortlessly and moving past Rick to grab his clothes and start dressing.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothin’,” Daryl answers gruffly, tossing Rick’s shirt at him. “We should just get back.”

“Daryl?” Rick questions, his voice low and rich on the night air and Daryl thinks his insides might just liquefy if Rick says his name that way again.

“I want you,” Daryl tells him, his own voice barely above a murmur and his eyes fixed firmly on his feet. “So can we go already?”

“You’re adorable,” Rick chuckles, stepping up to slide his palms under Daryl’s chin and tilt his head up so that Daryl has to meet his eyes.

“Fuck you,” Daryl rumbles, feeling the heat in his cheeks and pretending that his body isn’t responding in all kinds of ways to Rick’s nearness.

“Soon,” Rick whispers, brushing his lips teasingly over Daryl’s who inhales the breath that accompanies Rick’s words, tasting the coppery tang of the rabbit blood mixed with Rick’s own scent.

He lets Rick torture him for a minute more – their lips barely touching with promises of kisses to come and the heat of their skin rubbing together as Rick leans his body into Daryl’s. With a superhuman effort, Daryl somehow manages to disentangle himself from Rick’s wandering hands and resolutely turn his back to finish getting dressed. He doesn’t turn back until he’s fully clothed, tucking his aching cock into his pants and hoping his hard-on will subside a bit before they get back to the others. He looks around to find Rick buckling his gun belt low on his hips and he has to swallow hard around the sudden lump that appears in his throat, averting his eyes and setting off down the trail before he loses the last vestiges of his willpower. He hears Rick chuckling softly behind him as he follows Daryl’s lead and he curses softly under his breath knowing that his partner can read exactly what’s running through his mind at that moment.

After briefly checking in with Ty who is still manning the lookout on top of the train, they head inside, Michonne locking the door behind them and taking the rabbits that Rick hands her.

“Everythin’ okay?” Daryl asks, looking around to find the main floor is empty.

“Everything’s good,” Michonne says reassuringly. “Everyone went upstairs to sleep. You two should go get some rest too – I don’t think I saw either one of you get more than five minutes sleep the whole time we were at the church. You must be running on fumes. Maggie and Glenn are going to take second watch in a couple of hours, relieve Tyrese and I so why don’t you go up now. Carol
is with Carl and Judith so you have nothing to worry about.”

“Alright, we’re going,” Rick laughs as she takes them both by the arm and steers them in the direction of the stairs, “but I want to be moving by first light, understood.”

“Crystal clear,” Michonne tells him, turning back to her seat by the door. 

As they head up the stairs from the waiting room, Daryl can already feel Rick’s hands on him, hot and urgent, and he takes the final few steps in a single bound. He tries to stay silent in the darkened hallway even though Rick is crowding his personal space, his breath hot on Daryl's neck as he guides him forward with his hands firmly on his hips. Three of the four offices are already occupied with their doors firmly closed and, judging from the sounds emanating from within which Daryl has no difficulty in hearing, it seems that every other couple in the group has the same idea as them. Privacy and the time to just be alone has become almost as coveted as finding supplies or shelter – those moments of comfort and reconnecting with loved ones providing a much needed boost to carry on with the day to day struggle life throws at them. Daryl can feel Rick chuckling against his shoulder as they hear a particularly juicy moan coming from the end of the hallway and he quickly moves on to the only open doorway. They stop for a moment as they catch sight of Carl and Judith sleeping peacefully by the window with Carol positioned between them and the door, one hand resting on the rifle at her side even in sleep. They move quietly away, coming to a halt back at the top of the stairs and Daryl is practically growling in frustration.

“Back to the woods, I guess,” he whispers, leaning in close to Rick's ear, “less’n you want to forget all about it.”

“Never,” Rick hisses and Daryl knows he's equally as frustrated. “Come on.”

Daryl watches as Rick walks over to the large window at the end of the hall and flips the catches holding it closed. Leveraging his fingers under the bottom edge, he slides it upwards - Daryl holding his breath in case it makes a noise – and then hooks his leg over the sill, turning back to shoot Daryl a grin before he slips through into the darkness outside. Curious, Daryl follows, realizing as he gets closer that the window actually leads out onto a fire escape which zig-zags its way from the ground to the roof. He joins Rick on the metal landing, waiting while he closes the window behind them, leaving just a small gap at the bottom, and then leads the way up to the roof. He’s barely climbed over the waist-high wall at the top before Rick has his hands on him once more, pulling him to him and laughing as Daryl stumbles into his embrace.

“Shh,” Daryl hisses, walking Rick backwards towards the front of the building away from the tracks. “Ty’s on watch down there… ain’t no reason to give him a show.”

“Oh… you want us to be quiet, do you?” Rick asks, leaning in to brush his lips against Daryl’s ear. “You think you can do that, Dixon?”

Daryl moans involuntarily as Rick's teeth nip at his earlobe and he feels a firm hand sliding down between them to grasp at his rapidly stiffening cock.

“Didn’t think so,” Rick chuckles throatily and Daryl can feel his heart rate increase as the sound reverberates over his skin, his whole body flushing with his desire.

“Jerk,” he grunts, battering away Rick's hand and going on the offensive instead, deftly unbuttoning Rick's shirt and pushing it back down from his shoulders to effectively trap his arms at his sides.

Lowering his head, Daryl licks and sucks his way across Rick’s chest, tasting the saltiness of his sweat combined with his own natural musk, paying special attention to the puckered skin of his
nipples. He can feel Rick's arms straining against the material of his shirt that Daryl has tightened around his fists and he huffs an amused breath against Rick's abdomen as he works his lips lower. Above him, Rick gives a primal whine low in his throat and Daryl stops his exploration of his flesh to raise his head.

“No wolves tonight,” he says quietly, straightening up to look Rick in the eye. “I want… I want it to be just… us.”

He blushes, feeling self-conscious, but Rick nods and Daryl sees the understanding in his eyes which immediately puts him at ease once more. Loosening his grip on Rick’s shirt, he pulls it the rest of the way off and lets it drop to the ground. Rick's hands come up, one sliding comfortably around the back of Daryl's neck and the other working at the buttons on his shirt as Rick leans in to kiss him. Eagerly parting his lips, Daryl rolls his tongue slowly against Rick's, their breathing evening out as they relax into the languid kiss. Daryl is only partially aware of his surroundings, feeling the night air caress his heated flesh as Rick removes his shirt and discards it. The nocturnal sounds of the nearby woods are no more than a soothing white noise to him as he focuses solely on Rick, listening to the beat of his heart beneath Daryl's hands and drinking in the ripe taste of him against his mouth.

“Mmm,” Rick murmurs, pulling slightly back from Daryl’s lips, leaving him a little breathless, “you taste so good.”

During their kiss, they’ve managed to back themselves up against the low brick wall surrounding the roof and now Rick lowers himself to the floor, leaning against the rough brick and tugging Daryl down after him to sit between his legs. Leaning his back against Rick's chest, Daryl sighs as his arms come around him, a sense of safety and belonging washing over him.

“I love you,” Rick whispers, his lips brushing against Daryl's temple and Daryl turns slightly in his embrace to look at him.

“I love you too,” he smiles, sliding a hand up to cup Rick's face and draw him forward for another kiss.

Daryl lets himself get lost in the moment, feeling the heat build in the pit of his stomach as Rick's hands tease their way down his torso to undo his pants. He gasps, breaking their kiss, as Rick's fingers wrap around his rigid cock and begin a slow, sensual stroke along his length.

“Easy baby, let me take care of you,” Rick soothes, bringing his other hand up to grasp tightly at Daryl's neck and angle his head back to recapture his lips.

Daryl moans against Rick's lips, closing his eyes as Rick teases his cock knowing just where and when to apply the right pressure to have Daryl turning to liquid in his grip. He loves that Rick knows him so intimately, that he has no agenda other than to make Daryl feel good and that he's taken the time to learn just how to do that. Daryl has never been this close with anyone in his life before – has certainly never trusted anyone enough to be this open and vulnerable in front of them – and he never knew he could feel so intensely about someone else to the point where all the agonies of his life so far can be dispelled with a simple look or touch from his mate. He trusts Rick with his body, his heart and his soul and the fact that Rick feels the same way is something Daryl vows never to take for granted. For the first time in his life he feels completely free to be himself without his family or his circumstances to hold him back any longer and he’ll fight to protect that feeling with his last breath if necessary.

He deepens their kiss, trying to convey even an ounce of how he's feeling to Rick and Rick responds by gently increasing his pace on Daryl's cock, his thumb flicking over his leaking slit on each upstroke. Reaching up, Daryl tangles his fingers into Rick's hair, clinging to him as he feels his
release building, his heels digging into the unyielding concrete of the roof beneath him. Their mouths part, Daryl panting hard as Rick whispers soft words of encouragement in his ear until it's all too much and he thrusts his hips up, shooting his load to the sky. Rick strokes him until he's done, squeezing gently until Daryl's body relaxes against him. Releasing him, Rick draws his hand away, lifting it to his lips to lick away the dribbles of Daryl's cum from it and Daryl watches him, mesmerized, his body sparking still from his orgasm.

Sighing, he leans into the warmth of Rick's skin while his lover ghosts his palms over Daryl's flesh making him feel so blissed out that he wishes they could spend the rest of their lives just like this, never leaving this rooftop. Moving slightly under Rick's caresses, he feels the hard heat of Rick's cock pressing through his jeans and a new rush of desire fills him. Moving off of Rick to stand up, he flashes him a grin as he wriggles the rest of the way out of his pants until he's wearing nothing but his boots and Rick is giving him an amused but appreciative look. Stretching out a hand, Daryl pulls Rick to his feet and sets about lifting his gun belt to unbuckle his pants, pushing them down along with his briefs. He supports him as Rick toes off his boots and steps out of his pants but reaches out a hand to stop him as he moves to unbuckle his gun belt.

"Leave it on," Daryl instructs and Rick raises an eyebrow at him but drops his hands to his sides nonetheless.

Daryl licks his lips, his mouth suddenly dry at the sight of Rick standing naked before him, his cock standing out hard from his body, the wide leather of the gun belt angled across his narrow hips.

"If only you hadn’t given Carl the hat," Daryl muses and Rick rubs at the side of his nose in embarrassment, not meeting Daryl's stare.

Stepping forward, Daryl slides his hands around Rick's waist, letting them rest against the worn leather belt, pushing their bodies together as he presses his lips to Rick's. The slow teasing of his release is gone and now there's an urgency driving his moves that has him grinding his hips against Rick's.

"Daryl…" Rick grunts, breathlessly breaking their kiss and Daryl doesn’t need any further invitation. Turning from Rick, he leans his palms on the brick wall in front of him, bending forward over it and slightly spreading his legs.

"Wait!" he says suddenly just as Rick is moving into position behind him, forcing him to step back. Daryl quickly retrieves his pants, fishing in the front pocket until he finds the small bottle of lube he'd tucked away in there and he tosses it to Rick.

"Where’d you get this?" Rick chuckles, turning the bottle in his hands.

"You ain’t the only boy scout around here, Sheriff," Daryl smirks, reaching out to hook his fingers in Rick's gun belt and pull their bodies together again. "Now, you need some help with that or are you just going to stare at it all night?"

"I've got it, smartass," Rick grumbles, manhandling Daryl back around to face the wall again. "You just assume the position."

"Yes sir, officer sir," Daryl grins but braces himself against the wall once more, the cool brick biting into his palms as he feels Rick move up behind him.

There's the familiar click/snap of the lube being opened and then Daryl hears the small bottle drop to the floor as Rick's hands take a hold of his ass to part his cheeks. He bites his bottom lip as he feels
the slick heat of Rick’s cock rubbing against his crack only to have it withdrawn and replaced with his sticky fingers. He circles the digits over Daryl's hole and Daryl's body arches in anticipation, pushing back as Rick slips his middle finger inside him. Working gently to open Daryl up, he soon follows with a second finger and Daryl can barely hold still any longer.

“Quit messin’,” he grunts, squeezing tightly around Rick's fingers. “I’m ready.”

“Sheesh… you try and romance a guy,” Rick mutters behind him sarcastically but he slips his fingers from Daryl and replaces them with the dripping head of his cock.

Daryl's grip on the wall ahead tightens as Rick enters him and he feels himself stretching to accommodate his girth until he's buried deep inside and Daryl can feel the cool leather of his gun belt pressing into his flesh.

“Jesuuuss… so fucking tight, Daryl… just… uhhh… don’t move."

With an effort Daryl holds his position even though he's desperate to move, to create the delicious friction that's waiting just out of his reach. After an endless moment, Rick rolls his hips back, pulling out almost all the way before sliding back in with a shuddering sigh. Daryl clenches around him, moving his body in tandem as Rick starts to fuck him, slowly at first but then more vigorously, his fingers tight in the flesh of Daryl's hips. He leans over Daryl's back, his breath coming in rasping gasps and Daryl can feel the tiny spatters of sweat dropping to sizzle against him as Rick pounds into him. Bringing his hand up from Daryl's hip, Rick grabs tight onto his shoulder, fingers curling into Daryl's neck and Daryl holds his breath, knowing that Rick is close to coming. Pressing his face against Daryl's back with a muffled yell, Rick's orgasm takes him, his hips jerking reflexively into Daryl over and over until he's spent and he slides wetly from him. Daryl takes the brunt of his weight as Rick shakes against him, supporting him until he regains his senses and straightens up off of him, turning Daryl so that their lips meet in a deep kiss. Daryl runs his hands up Rick's sweat-drenched spine, tugging gently on his damp hair as he listens to Rick's racing heart return to normal. With a soft exhale, Rick parts his lips from Daryl's, leaning back a little so that they can see each other properly.

“I want to do that every day for the rest of our lives,” he whispers, brushing Daryl's hair back from his brow.

“Me too,” Daryl agrees quickly with a grin and a nudge of his hips into Rick's.

“I’m serious,” Rick answers and Daryl can see that he is. “This… us together… this is everything to me. I want us to find someplace where we can live in peace – all of us – and just have this. I want to grow old with the man I love – is that too much to ask? I want to see our family safe and our kids grow and their kids after that. I want to take you to our bed every night and make love to you before we sleep.”

“I know,” Daryl says softly, tightening the hold he has on Rick. “I want that too and maybe we’ll find it where we’re headed.”

“I hope so,” Rick sighs, leaning into Daryl’s embrace. “I don’t know what it is – I can’t put it into words – but I think we’re finally headed in the right direction. Call it a hunch or whatever but I have a feeling we might find what we’re looking for when we reach the coast.”

Daryl nods, not sure that he's feeling quite as confident as Rick but willing to put all his trust into his mate and follow him wherever the road takes them as long as they're together. Curling up together on the smooth concrete of the roof, bodies sated and relaxed, to catch just a little sleep before the dawn, Daryl throws a prayer out into the ether as he drifts off, for Rick to be right and for the
universe to finally give them a break.
Michonne’s original estimate for their arrival at the coast seemed nothing more than a pipe dream now as the group prepared for their fifth day on the move, all of them considerably less enthusiastic than when they had set out on this journey. A number of unforeseen events had served to slow their progress – from a sudden herd of walkers stumbling from the woods on the third day when they had
been making camp for the night to a freak storm which had washed a ton of debris down onto the tracks and lost them a whole day while they cleared it.

On a positive note, Eugene had woken from his involuntary slumber with nothing more serious than a bad headache and a tentative truce between him and Abraham had taken place with a little help from Tara and Rosita. Rick had kept a close eye on Abe but was convinced that the rage that had fueled his attack on Eugene had burnt away and he was now surviving in a state of apathy, not really participating with the group but not hindering their journey either.

Today the group had halted their travelling early, Rick knowing it would be too far to reach the next station before nightfall and sensing that his people were starting to go a little stir crazy being cooped up in the passenger car day in and day out. Although it was arguably safer than travelling by foot or even by car, there was no escaping the fact that it was basically just a tin box on wheels, its plush interior and comfy seats just a constant reminder of the way things used to be. So, they had found a clear stretch of tracks where the trees were set a little further back from the line behind a low wooden fence, suggesting there might be a homestead nearby and giving them a clear line of sight in every direction. Wanting to give everybody the opportunity to stretch their legs and knowing that it never hurt to scout for more supplies, Rick had split them off into groups, instructing them not to stray too far and to keep in touch using the walkies. Sasha, Bob and Tyreese had elected to stay with the train along with Eugene who claimed that his heading into the woods spelled certain doom not only for himself but probably the others too.

Michonne and Carl had teamed up with Rick and Daryl and now the four of them were making their way cautiously through the woods in search of the house they hoped was nearby.

“Maybe we’ll find a boat,” Carl tells Michonne, his tone hushed in the quiet woods but Rick can still hear his enthusiasm bubbling through.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure of it,” she answers, pushing aside a low hanging branch and holding it back for Daryl to pass behind her.

“And we can fish?” Carl asks and Rick has to smile as he brings up the rear behind Daryl. “Dad was teaching me how to river fish but sea fishing’s different, right?”

“Some,” Rick agrees, coming alongside his son once the path opens up a little, “but the basics are the same.”

“I can’t believe you never took him to the ocean,” Michonne says, nudging Rick with her elbow.

“I was getting to it,” Rick answers, raising a hand to ward off her accusations.

“Ain’t never been either,” Daryl mutters quietly from behind them and all three stop to turn and look at him.

“You’ve never seen the ocean?” Michonne asks incredulously and Rick can see the uncomfortable look that flits across Daryl’s face.

“Oh man, you’re gonna love it,” he says, stepping in before Daryl has to answer. “Swimming in the ocean beats every waterhole you’ve ever visited.”

“Great,” Michonne huffs, turning back to the path, “now you’re both gonna stink like wet dog 24-7.”

“Hey! That’s no-” Rick starts to say but his words are cut off by a shrill scream echoing through the woods to their left.
“That’s Tara,” Daryl yells already taking off in that direction just as another shriek cuts through the stillness.

“Stay here,” Rick commands as he races after Daryl and he can hear Michonne calling desperately into the walkie behind him.

He's barely aware of the trees whipping past his face as he focuses on pulling every ounce of speed from his enhanced muscles, his eyes trained on Daryl's back fleeing before him, but what he can’t ignore is the cacophony of screams that are ringing out up ahead. As the sounds get louder, Rick becomes aware of a new scent on the air – something old and earthy and most definitely not human – and, when Daryl stops unexpectedly in front of him, Rick nearly bowls him over. With his heart pounding and the blood rushing in his ears, Rick skids to a halt, the wolf stirring angrily inside of him as he assesses the scene ahead.

The woods open up to the banks of a narrow, fast-flowing stream and Rick can see the scattered water bottles at its edge that Tara along with Noah had been filling. Eyes widening, he takes in the sight of a large black bear, reared up on its hind legs and thumping its massive paws against the trunk of a quivering tree and his nostrils are flooded with its pungent aroma. In one glance he can see that it has both Noah and Tara trapped in the lower branches – the young woman dangling precariously by her fingers, her kicking feet dangerously close to the beast’s head as she struggles to maintain her grip. Noah has fared slightly better, managing to get astride a narrow branch and brace himself against the tree’s trunk but, unfortunately, he's on the opposite side to Tara and unable to help her. He's yelling loudly, doing his best to distract the animal so that Tara might have a chance of pulling herself up but it’s obviously not working – the bear being far more interested in the easier target. To make matters worse, a quick glance past the tree shows Rick approaching walkers, drawn by the commotion, and he also catches the scent of his family making their way to the scene.

All of this, he processes in a matter of seconds, his mind already working on solutions and it doesn’t take him any time to realize there’s only one way they can help. With a preternatural speed he tears off his boots and pants, gratified to see that Daryl has come to the same conclusion as him and is doing the same. They Shift on the run, Rick’s shirt falling from him in tatters, and leap forward to cross the stream and close the gap between them and the bear but it’s too late. In the blink of an eye, Rick sees the bear change its tactic, moving to swipe at Tara’s kicking feet instead and, by some fluke of bad luck, it manages to snag its claws in her boot laces on its downward swing and dislodge her grip on the branch as it tugs her down after it. Rick’s world spins as she falls, her petrified scream cut short as she hits the ground with a sickening thud and then lays motionless as the bear looms over her. In a flash, Daryl is nipping at the bear’s hindquarters, snarling and snapping at it until it lumbers around to face him. Rick lunges in as it aims its huge paw at Daryl’s head, its mouth open in a roar as Daryl darts easily out of the way. Sinking his teeth into its shoulder, Rick shakes his head as he feels its hot blood flow over his tongue but he's forced to let go as his nose is filled with the stench of the undead and he feels walker hands pulling at his fur on either side.

He whips around, using his considerable weight to force back the two walkers that are reaching mindlessly for his flesh and then takes down the first one with a growl, severing its head from its flailing body. As he's taking care of the other walker, he can see Daryl facing off against the bear, planting himself firmly between its menacing jaws and Tara’s inert body. Rick efficiently dispatches the walker he has pinned to the ground and then surges forward to help Daryl ward off the bear, the pair of them driving it back until, finally, it turns tail and thunders off into the woods, voicing its pain and anger as it goes. Rick barely has time to draw a breath when at least a dozen walkers appear from the treeline just as Tara starts to stir, pulling herself groggily up into a sitting position. Chaos erupts as Rick leaps to Tara’s side only to have her scream in fear and shy away from him even though he can hear Noah yelling for her to just stay still as he climbs down from the tree beside them.
Daryl, meanwhile, is already surrounded by walkers but Rick doesn’t dare leave Tara to help him because he can hear more approaching through the trees and he has no idea how badly injured she was in the fall. With an angry howl, he sees Daryl rise up above the walkers, assuming his hybrid form, and start tearing their bodies limb from limb, neutralizing them in a roaring whirlwind of blood and gore. Tara screams again at the sight and Rick can hear her heart hammering in her chest and her breath coming in erratic gasps just before he sees her eyes roll up and she passes out at his feet. He steps away from her to tackle a walker which is rapidly approaching her position and then watches as Daryl finishes the last of the group that was attacking him with Noah darting in to stab any survivors in the head. Satisfied that the immediate danger has passed, Rick walks back to check on Tara, lowering his muzzle to nudge at her cheek and listening to the slow and steady beat of her heart.

“Nooo!” Abraham’s voice bellows across the clearing, making Rick jump and swing reflexively in that direction, his lips peeling back from his fangs in a startled snarl.

In the heat of the moment, Rick hadn’t heard their approach but now he’s horrified to find that the entire group is there, staring back at him – Michonne and Carl standing side by side on one side and the others crowded together on the other. To Rick’s dismay, he can see that Judith is strapped into the baby carrier on Ty’s chest and he’s not surprised to find that there are a number of guns leveled at both him and Daryl.

“Get the fuck away from them,” Abraham shouts and a quick glance to the side shows Rick that Daryl has moved in front of Noah, his bipedal form dwarfing the younger man.

Rick stands his ground, desperately weighing his options, but it seems that Abe isn’t willing to give him even a second as he takes aim in Rick’s direction and squeezes the trigger without hesitation. Rick flinches but the shot goes wild as Carol bodyslams Abe at the same time, jerking his arm back and then ducking as he swings in her direction with a furious look on his face.

“Dad!” Carl yells, tearing himself free from Michonne who is trying to restrain him and sprinting across the clearing.

Rick’s heart sinks as, in that instant, he knows it’s over, everything they’ve worked so hard to maintain, it’s all about to come crashing down around their ears. Carl flings himself at Rick, his slender arms reaching as far around his father’s neck as they can and he clings tightly to his fur.

“Carl,” Maggie gasps in disbelief, her voice barely above a horrified whisper but as clear as a bell to Rick.

“What in the actual fuck?” Abraham mutters and Rick can see him struggling to comprehend what’s going on, lowering his gun when Carol lays an insistent hand on the barrel with a shake of her head.

Rick relaxes his posture, leaning slightly into Carl’s embrace and lowering his head as Michonne approaches them.

“Well… you might as well show them,” she whispers, coming to stand on his other side and face the rest of the group.

He hesitates, momentarily clinging to the ridiculous notion that there still might be a way to salvage this situation, but then he meets Daryl’s eyes and sees the unbridled fear there. Every concern that Daryl’s ever had over exposing their secret to the people they love is written all over his face but Rick sees something else there as well – his unadulterated trust that Rick will do the right thing for both of them, whether that means revealing who they are or turning tail to run away.

Drawing in a deep breath, he makes the only decision he can and Shifts rapidly into his human form,
gratefully taking his discarded pants and boots from Michonne’s outstretched hands. He pulls them on as the air around him is filled with expressions of stunned disbelief pouring forth from the rest of the group.

“Daryl,” he says evenly, trying to keep his voice calm as he beckons to his mate.

Daryl moves towards him, his sheer size and intimidating appearance eliciting more gasps from their family before he initiates his own Shift and snatches his clothes from Michonne to get dressed. Nobody speaks until he’s done, a heavy silence lowering itself over the whole gathering and Rick looks at each of them in turn, a mixture of emotions warring for position on their faces.

“It’s just us,” he tells them, opening his hands to them to show that he’s not a threat and abruptly the silence is broken as everyone starts talking at once.

“What are you?”

“How did you do that?”

“How long...?”

“Are they safe?”

“What the hell?”

“Look, I know you have a lot of questions and you’re probably scared but we’re not going to hurt you, I promise,” Rick says and then turns to where Tara is still unconscious on the ground nearby. “Let’s just take care of Tara first and then we can answer anything you want. We’re not dangerous.”

“Says you,” Tyreese spits back and Rick’s jaw clenches at the way the other man is clutching tightly at the baby in front of him.

“We need to move,” Daryl hisses urgently. “We don’t have time for this – there’s more of ‘em comin’ and I don’t think the bear went too far neither.”

Rick glances around, scenting the air, and he knows that Daryl is right, they need to move and move now. Without addressing the group again, Rick turns to kneel at Tara’s side, scooping her effortlessly up into his arms and setting off with her cradled against his chest, hoping that the others will follow his lead. He’s aware of Daryl, Carl, Michonne and Noah falling in behind him and, after another minute, he hears the sounds of the rest of the group joining them and he grits his teeth as he leads them back to the train.

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Two hours later and the group is spread out around a small fire they’ve set close to the side of the train, everyone appearing outwardly calm but Rick can feel the tense undercurrent of emotions running through all of them. Tara is seated with Noah, a little bruised and shaken, but none the worse for her adventure save for a small tremor in her hand where she has it tucked around his arm. Rick had explained everything, taking his time and leaving nothing out, pleading their case and answering each and every question that had been thrown at them. Daryl had remained painfully silent throughout the whole exchange, only speaking if addressed directly, his whole demeanor seeming bowed with the weight of what was happening. Tyreese had kept his hold on Judith the entire time, placing himself as far from Rick as he could and, while it was almost like a physical thorn in Rick’s side, he’d let it go, not wanting to push anything when there was so much at stake but keeping a watchful eye on the man nonetheless.
Now, he and Daryl were atop the train, keeping watch while the others discussed the situation privately, everything Rick could have said in their defense having been laid out before them. With only a few of the group having any knowledge about their enhanced hearing, Rick and Daryl were listening intently to the conversation at the other end of the train while they scanned the area for any signs of trouble.

“They’re not dangerous,” Michonne is explaining, her tone quiet but firm.

“Not to you, maybe,” Abraham scoffs.

“Not to any of us,” Carol chimes in coolly.

“How long have you know?” Sasha asks accusingly. “You seem pretty comfortable with this whole thing.”

“That’s irrelevant,” Carol tells her dismissively.

“No,” Carol replies, somewhat harshly. “It wasn’t my secret to tell. And monsters? Really? Let me ask you something – all of you… how many times have those monsters kept you safe at night? Saved your lives, found you shelter, put food in your bellies and tried to make a home for you? Tell me that, Sasha. Bob? Abraham?”

There’s a silence after her last words and Rick finds himself holding his breath as he waits for a response.

“Look, I was scared too at first,” Michonne chimes in quietly. “A person would have to be a fool not to be. But Carol’s right, they’re the same men they’ve always been, they-”

“Men,” Ty spits out, raising his voice, “they aren’t men, they’re abominations… evil creatures put on this earth to corrupt us with their power, seduce us with their strength until we’re weak and then they’ll destroy us. We need to leave this place… leave them and their devil spawn behind.”

Rick feels Daryl tense beside him as the group erupts over Ty’s words and he reaches out a hand to lay it on Daryl’s shoulder, wanting to calm the storm he knows will be raging in his mate’s mind.

“Enough!” comes Abraham’s authoritative voice, silencing all the others in an instant. “Way I see it, everyone has an opinion and airin’ them ain’t getting’ us nowhere. I say we vote – either we find a way to accept what we’ve learned and deal with it, no matter how weird it is, or we turn them out and move on. The choice is yours, people.”

“I vote you all get your heads out of your asses and look around you,” Carl says defiantly and Rick can’t stop the grin that tugs at his lips despite the severity of their situation. “My dad… my dads have saved every one of you more times than I can count and if you think you’re going to force them to leave like they’ve done something wrong then you’ve got another thing coming.”

“And that’s why you don’t get a vote,” Abe says drily. “Carol, Michonne… I think we’re pretty clear on where you two stand… who else?”

“Me,” Noah answers which comes as no surprise to Rick but it stills warms him to hear it out loud. “I would’ve been dead, or worse, a long time ago if Daryl hadn’t saved me and Rick hadn’t taken me in. I’ve known all along what they could do and I’ve been grateful for it every single day. They’re not monsters, they’re my family. If they go, I’m going with them.”
“Glenn? Maggie?” Abe asks once Noah is done. “How about you guys, you’ve been with them the longest – what do you say? You think we’re in danger?”

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t scared,” comes Maggie’s clear voice, steady on the night air, “but Carol’s right – it’s Rick and Daryl – they’ve kept us alive for as long as I can remember, why should that change now?”

“Because they’re not human,” Sasha says emphatically.

“Are any of us anymore?” Maggie replies. “Maybe this is just the next step in our evolution.”

“Never,” Sasha says in disgust.

“Do you really think they’ve been keeping us alive all this time, risking their own lives time and time again, just to… what? Eat us? Do you realize how ridiculous that sounds?”

“Okay – so that’s a stay vote and a go vote,” interrupts Abraham before Sasha can counter Maggie’s point. “Glenn, I assume you’re with your good lady on this one?”

“They’re my family,” Glenn says simply and Rick feels the hot burn of tears in the back of his throat.

“I think they should leave,” Bob says after a moment’s silence. “I know that they’ve helped us in the past but that was when we had the security of the prison around us. What if things get too hard out here, huh? Who’s to say how they’d act then.”

“Because they’re not animals,” Carol snaps in disgust. “I can’t believe you, of all people would even think that. How many times have they saved your ass? And they were keeping the rest of us safe long before you came along and in far worse circumstances than these, trust me.”

“Okay… another go vote,” cuts in Abraham. “Eugene?”

“While I am, as always, mildly petrified at this precise moment in time, I have to conclude that the only wise option would be for us all to stick together. Although I can’t profess to know anything about the mythology of shape-shifting creatures such as these, what I do know is that they have proven themselves over and over to have no malicious intent towards us and have dragged my own ass out of the proverbial fire on more than one occasion. Therefore I feel we would be remiss if we parted ways at this particular juncture in our journey.”

“Stay,” says Abraham impatiently once Eugene has finished. “Tara?”

“Are you kidding me? They saved me from a motherfuckin’ bear today – did you all forget that already because I sure as shit didn’t. Don’t even talk to me if you think they should go.”

“Alright then… Rosita?”

“What she said,” Rosita says strongly, “but what about you?”

“Me?” Abraham asks in surprise as though his opinion has been apparent all along. “Oh darlin’, I’m a soldier, you know that and any military man worth his salt will tell you that you back whatever horse – or wolf in this case – is going to give you your best shot at surviving whatever fucked up situation you may find yourselves in. You saw them earlier… we’d be grade ‘A’ insane to let a tactical advantage like them walk off and leave us sittin’ here with our thumbs up our asses. With their abilities and their strength alone we should be the ones begging them to stick around.”

“So, it’s decided then,” Carol says, her tone indicating that there will be no further discussion on the
“subject, “we carry on as before with Rick and Daryl leading us.”

Daryl lets out a shaky breath and Rick squeezes his shoulder, still anxious for what’s to come but feeling relieved by the support of most of their family.

“Did you hear Ty?” Daryl asks, keeping his voice pitched low even though the others are too far away to hear. “Think we’re gonna have a problem there?”

“We might,” Rick agrees thoughtfully. “Sasha and Bob too.”

“You think they’ll stick around?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. I hope so. Maybe Abraham can talk them around.”

“Abraham,” Daryl snorts. “That’s gonna be a whole nother problem.”

“How so?”

“C’mon, Rick, you didn’t hear him? Goin’ on ’bout how strong we are. You know he’s gonna want it.”

“You think so?” Rick asks, turning over the idea in his own mind and realizing that this is the most animated he’s heard the man since the whole incident with Eugene.

“Guarantee it,” Daryl nods.

“Well I guess we’ll just deal with that too, if it happens.”

“Guess so,” Daryl agrees, staring off into the treeline.

“Hey… you okay?” Rick questions him, moving a little closer to slide his hand around the back of Daryl’s neck, stroking his thumb gently against his skin.

“Gotta be,” Daryl answers, mustering up a ghost of a smile but Rick can see he’s worried. “Least none of ‘em came after us with pitchforks.”

“Daryl, it’ll be okay… I feel it. They’re scared right now, nervous, and they have every right to be. They just need time to adjust – let it sink in – like Michonne and Carol did. It’s a lot for them to understand in one go.”

Daryl nods his agreement, leaning slightly into Rick’s touch with a sigh, and Rick draws him to him, circling his waist with his arm until their bodies are aligned and their foreheads touch. They stand together like that, taking comfort and strength from one another until they hear the soft tread of footsteps below and Rick releases Daryl with a rueful smile.

“I’m pretty sure you heard every word of that,” Carol says as she climbs the ladder on the side of the engine, stopping halfway to look up at them. “Looks like you’re stuck with us.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Rick tells her, giving her a quick smile.

“You should get down there – spend some time with everybody – let them know you’re not going to swallow them whole in the middle of the night. I’ll take watch.”

“Rick…” Daryl says hesitantly and it’s written all over his face just how uncomfortable he feels about being around the others just yet.
“It’s okay,” Rick murmurs, squeezing his arm lightly, “I’ll go. You stay here and keep Carol out of mischief.”

“Not possible,” Daryl snorts as Carol and Rick swap places and Rick sees the shoulder bump she gives him and knows he’s leaving his mate in capable hands while he goes to face the music alone.

He rejoins the group around the fire, noting that Tyreese, Sasha and Bob have positioned themselves a little way off from the others. Every eye turns to him as he approaches and he feels the wolf stir under their scrutiny, knowing exactly why Daryl didn’t want to join him. He takes a seat between Carl and Michonne, lifting Judith from her brother’s hands to place her on his lap, her smiling face soothing his nerves. Nobody speaks, an uncomfortable silence dropping over the group which is only broken by the pops and crackles of the fire burning between them and, for once, Rick has no idea how to talk to his people.

“Can you fly?” Tara suddenly blurts out after the silence has seemed to stretch out for an eternity and Rick looks at her in amusement.

“No,” he answers gently, shaking his head.

“What?” Tara asks, elbowing Noah who is cracking up beside her. “It was a legitimate question. They’re shapeshifters aren’t they? Who knows what other forms they can take. They could’ve had wings… you don’t know.”

“Sadly, no,” Rick tells her, trying to keep a straight face. “It’s not like that – just man or wolf.”

“Or somethin’ in between,” Abraham adds, “the way Daryl was earlier. Man, that was some impressive shit right there. What was he… seven, eight feet tall?”

“About that,” Rick agrees, seeing the gleam in the other man’s eyes and knowing that Daryl was right in his earlier assumption.

“Are there others?” Maggie asks quietly and Rick can see that she’s still unsure about the whole situation but that she’s trying to understand.

“Honestly… I don’t know. I’m guessing there must’ve been, before all of this. Daryl’s a hereditary – it was passed on through his bloodline – and his father had told him of others like them but I don’t think Daryl had ever met any himself.”

“It stands to reason they’d have higher odds of survival against the walkers, don’t you think?” Glenn asks, warming his hands over the fire. “You said their bites don’t affect you, right?”

“That’s true,” Rick agrees, “although a big enough group of them could still take one of us down, tear us apart.”

The silence falls again as his words sink in and Rick can almost hear each of them coming to the same conclusion he had when Daryl had first turned him and he’d learned of their natural immunity to whatever the walkers were infected with. To his surprise, none of them voice their thoughts out loud but the conversation continues around his and Daryl’s abilities and how it feels to be the wolf – many of the questions Rick unable to answer because he either hasn’t experienced it himself or because it’s a part of the many varied myths surrounding his kind that he can neither prove nor debunk.

By the end of the evening, he’s feeling mentally exhausted and more than ready to curl up somewhere with Daryl to rest. Sending Abe and Glenn up to relieve Carol and Daryl, Rick ushers everyone inside the passenger car and secures it for the night.
“We all good?” Daryl asks, shaking out a bedroll to lay beside the dying fire.

“Mmm-hmm, everything’s fine,” Rick answers, laying his own sleeping bag at an angle to Daryl’s and flopping on it to pillow his head on Daryl’s stomach.

“Fucked up day, huh?” Daryl says quietly, lazily stroking Rick’s hair back from his face.

“Not quite the way I saw it going,” Rick agrees with a sigh, closing his eyes and relaxing under Daryl’s caress.

“Go to sleep, Sheriff,” Daryl whispers but Rick is already drifting and only barely hears him.

They strike camp just before dawn the next morning, Eugene and Glenn manning the engine’s controls with Rick and Daryl in their usual position on the roof. There’s a thick ground fog weaving between the trees and rolling across the tracks that keeps their speed to a minimum and makes Rick’s eyes ache the longer he stares at it. He’s continually aware of the presence of walkers in the surrounding woods, their susurrating moans seemingly amplified on the still air but none of them present any real problems as the train crawls along the tracks. Fortunately the fog burns off as the morning progresses and they’re able to increase their speed substantially which eases a little of the nervous tension that’s been knotting the back of Rick’s neck since they set out.

“We’ve got a pretty decent-sized town coming up,” he tells Daryl, checking the map he has folded in his hand. “We could do with making a supply run but what do you think… stop before and we’ll go ahead or blow through the town and make camp on the other side so we can double back?”

“Keep goin’,” Daryl answers without hesitation. “Better we get through with no trouble then head back. If things go south when we’re there, I’d rather be runnin’ away from it than still have to get the train through.”

“See… this is why I keep you around,” Rick says with a smirk, “you’re not just a pretty face.”

“Fuck you,” Daryl grunts, aiming a shove at Rick’s shoulder. “Go tell Glenn to park this beast so we can talk to the others.”

After explaining the situation to the group, Rick has Eugene swap his position in the cab with Michonne and places the others along the window slots on either side of the car – armed and ready. With the train moving forward again, Rick takes his position up top with Daryl, hoping that their elevated lookout will give them an advantage as they roll through the outskirts of the large town. It made Rick uncomfortable to be in such an urban setting once again – flashbacks to his time in Atlanta weighing on his mind – but he knew they had no choice but to push through. As the sprawl of suburban housing segued seamlessly into the density of commercial buildings, the number of walkers Rick could see in the streets also increased. The train was moving just fast enough to keep ahead of them but Rick knew that the sight and sound of them passing would draw them after it and, should the tracks be blocked ahead for any reason, they were going to be in a world of hurt.

“Glenn – push it up a little,” he calls into the walkie. “You’ve got a clear run coming up.”

He doesn’t get an acknowledgment but the train’s speed increases once they pass through the station and back out onto the open tracks. Ahead of them, he sees more walkers stumbling out into their path, attracted by the train only to be vaporized as it slams into them, their decaying bodies no match for the speeding hulk of steel.

“We need a distraction,” Rick muses, narrowing his eyes as more walkers approach the tracks in
their wake and start following them.

“Then let’s go make one,” Daryl answers, his eyes flashing with a wolfly glow and his lips curling up in a grin.

“Michonne… get up here,” Rick says into the walkie, smiling back at Daryl and feeling the wolf stirring under his skin at the prospect of some action.

“What’s going on?” she asks, climbing up onto the narrow platform.

“Hold on,” Rick says, first making sure that both Glenn and Carol in the passenger car are listening in. “We need to create a distraction or else, when we stop for the night, it’s not going to take long for all the walkers we’re pulling in to catch up with us. Daryl and I are going to go back and find something we can use – something to draw them off the tracks. The map shows a high school just past the edge of town, you should be able to see it from the train when you get close enough. If it looks safe, stop there until we catch you up. If not, keep going until you find someplace better to wait.”

“This would be a much better plan if I was going with you,” Michonne tells them, giving Rick a hard stare.

“We’ll be back before you know it,” he reassures her.

“If you’d only changed me when I asked you to… but oh no… no time for that…” she mumbles under her breath but Rick chooses to ignore her, following Daryl as he climbs down to the cab.

Grabbing their packs, they disembark from the train, their bodies easily compensating for the difference in speed so that they barely break stride as they turn and head back the way they just came.

“C’mon,” says Daryl, taking the lead, “I saw a gas station about three blocks back. Doubt there’s any gas left but it should still burn pretty good.”

Rick follows him, turning the walkie off before stowing it in his pocket just in case it draws attention at the wrong time. They slip silently between the buildings, avoiding any walkers they see, to quickly arrive at the gas station which is sitting about a block from the tracks.

“What do you have?” Rick asks as Daryl unshoulders his pack and opens it, knowing that he was carrying some of the arsenal they’d acquired back at Terminus.

He comes out with three grenades and two smoke bombs and Rick gives a low whistle of approval before glancing around.

“There,” he says, pointing to the repair bay at the side of the main building where a dusty SUV is up on a ramp above the maintenance pit. “Then one inside the store should do it – that should give us a decent amount of noise and hopefully get the place blazing.”

“You good with these?” Daryl asks, handing Rick all three grenades.

“Yeah… why?”

“I’m gonna head back to the tracks – set off one of the smoke bombs – give ‘em somethin’ to stop for until this place goes up.”

“Good idea,” Rick nods, hefting one of the grenades against his palm. “I’ll meet you back at that
coffee shop we passed on the way in – you remember?”

“Got it,” Daryl answers, grabbing the smoke bombs and slipping his pack on again. “Try not to blow yourself up, officer.”

Grinning at Rick, he turns and races off up the street to where the road crosses the tracks and there’s a large break in the chain-link fence that borders the rail line on and off throughout the town. He’s barely set off the first smoke bomb when Rick sees walkers approaching him from all directions.

“Daryl!” he roars, balancing on the balls of his feet ready to run to his aide.

“Blow it!” Daryl yells back, taking out the walkers closest to him with his crossbow.

Rick doesn’t hesitate another second, pulling the pin on the first grenade and tossing it through the broken window of the small convenience store behind the pumps before crossing the forecourt and rolling the second one into the pit below the SUV. He sprints away as the first explosion rocks the ground behind him, what’s left of the store’s windows blowing out with the concussive blast to shower the ground with glass. Ducking for cover around the corner of a building across the street, Rick hears the second blast and, to his surprise, feels a rush of heated air rolling past him. Taking a look back, he sees that their choice of target had proven even more effective than they’d anticipated. The store is ablaze, thick black smoke already creating a pall in the sky above the area with bright orange flames licking hungrily at the dry interior of the low building. The force of the second grenade which had been concentrated within the confines of the concrete pit had shot the SUV up and out, its fiery body smashing hard into the rusty pumps and igniting the remnants of the gasoline left behind. Rick’s lips turn up in a grim smile of satisfaction as he sees the first of the walkers arriving at the inferno, drawn like rotting moths to the proverbial flame with more of them following behind.

Clutching his machete tight in his fist, he sets off for the coffee shop, decimating any walkers which cross his path and finding Daryl already leaning casually in the shadowed doorway.

“What took you so long?” he grins but Rick can see the relief evident in his eyes.

“You’re bleeding,” Rick tells him, reaching up to swipe his thumb over a small gash on Daryl’s cheek.

“Ah, it’s nothin’” Daryl shrugs, pushing away Rick’s hand. “We should stay off the tracks for now – the smoke was bringin’ ‘em from every direction even before you raised hell.”

“Good, that was the idea. It should buy us enough time to get some of the others back here and see if we can’t find anything useful,” he says, pulling the walkie from his pocket and switching it back on. “Michonne, you there? Come back.”

“Rick?” comes Michonne’s voice from the small speaker, distorted slightly over the airwaves but familiar enough to Rick that he immediately hears something worrying in her tone.

“What’s wrong?” he demands, visions of the train having been overrun in their absence.

“It’s Tyreese,” she answers, her voice suddenly coming through crystal clear and Rick’s skin feels like it’s been abruptly doused with ice water. “He’s taken Judith.”
Daryl is running, heart pounding and lungs burning, but still he can’t keep up with Rick as he hurtles along the side of the train tracks. Michonne’s words over the radio had been like a knife to Daryl’s guts and, as one, he and Rick had taken off, not even wanting to waste the time it would take for them to Shift. Instead they had pushed their human bodies to the limit, their surroundings becoming nothing more than a dull blur around them as they headed back to the train. Glenn had stopped outside of the high school as planned so it takes them barely any time to catch up and, when they
arrive to find the group all standing anxiously around the passenger car, Rick makes a beeline directly for Sasha.

“Where is he?” he snarls, spittle flying from his lips as he wraps his fist around her throat without pause and slams her back against the train car, ignoring the startled shouts from the others.

“I don’t know,” she answers, raising her chin defiantly and Daryl can hear the truth in her words despite the look of abject terror on her face.

“Rick…” Daryl says quietly, laying a hand on his mate’s forearm.

Rick’s brow furrows for a second but then he lets her go, growling in frustration as he rounds on the others.

“How did this happen?” he asks angrily, seeking out his son and placing a hand on his shoulder.

“I took a few of the others to scout out the school - Carl came with us,” Carol tells him, raising her hand in a placating gesture and Daryl can hear the anguish and guilt lacing her words, knowing all too well that she thinks she’s failed another child under her watch. “When we got back, we realized he was gone. Nobody saw him slip away. You know he won’t hurt her, Rick. He’s just confused – he probably thinks he's doing the right thing.”

“Where’s Michonne?” Daryl asks as Rick snorts in disgust and begins pacing to and fro, every line of his body taut with anger and frustration.

“She went after him.”

“Okay… everyone else just stay here. Rick ‘n me’ll go after them. There’s no point in all of us runnin’ off. Which way was she headin’?”

“South. Into the woods across from the school – she found some tracks she thought might be his.”

“C’mon,” Daryl says, tugging at Rick’s sleeve, “it’s as good a place to start as any.”

This time they do take a minute to Shift, stepping into the shadows at the edge of the woods to discard their human trappings before they start their hunt. Daryl can feel his urgency shaping his bones, desperate to be on the move and his paws have barely touched the earth before his muzzle is down and he's scenting the area Carol had indicated. He instantly picks up Michonne’s rich scent and knows that her instincts were right when he finds Ty’s alongside hers. With Rick fast on his heels, he leads the way, easily following both trails and moving swiftly along the worn pathway between the trees.

They’re running full out when a new scent assails Daryl’s nose and Rick whines low in his throat as it reaches him too. As they move forward, slowing now to a cautious walk, the air around them is filled with the cloying, sickly-sweet aroma of human blood and plenty of it has been spilled judging by how strong the odor is. Stepping around a bend in the path, the hair raised on the back of his neck, they’re met with a sight that has Daryl’s stomach lurching up into his throat with a swell of nausea. Sitting with her back against the trunk of a thick tree is Michonne with Judith cradled protectively on her lap and one hand resting on the hilt of her bloodied katana. On the ground at the tip of her sword lies a human arm, severed just above the elbow and, just beyond that, the rest of Tyreese’s partially-eaten body with four walkers lying dead around him. Rick whines loudly and Michonne’s head rockets up at the sound along with the wavering point of her blade. When she sees it’s just them, her hand thumps back to the earth and her face crumples as she dissolves into tears, her whole body shaking.
“I couldn’t…” she sobs, hugging Judith tighter to her chest and Daryl is relieved to see that his daughter looks unscathed. “There were too many… I tried to help him, I really did. When the first one bit him, I was quick… so quick I don’t think he even knew what I’d done but… but… I couldn’t save him and protect her… they just kept coming so I had to choose.”

She looks down at the child in her arms, stroking her trembling fingers against Judith’s cheek and Daryl watches as Rick moves in. He stands over them, lowering his head first to nose at his daughter causing her to laugh softly and pat his snout with her chubby fingers and then he leans into Michonne, nuzzling at her face while she weeps and clings to his fur.

Daryl stands silently, giving them the time that they need, but he’s acutely aware of the fact that there are other walkers nearby and it’ll only be a matter of time before they stumble onto their location. He gives a warning growl and Rick steps back from Michonne to look around, his nostrils quivering as he catches the same scents as Daryl does. Cocking his head at Michonne, he gives an inquisitive whine and Daryl sees her eyes widen slightly as if she’s suddenly become aware of her surroundings again.

“It’s okay… I’m okay,” she tells them, scrubbing her hand over her face and drawing in a shaky breath as she gets to her feet, balancing Judith on her hip. “We should get moving.”

Stepping forward, Daryl leads the way with Michonne walking between him and Rick, one hand keeping her weapon high and ready while the other keeps a tight grip on her precious cargo. They travel swiftly and silently back out of the woods, encountering only one walker on their path which Daryl takes down and Michonne finishes with a jab to the skull. She stands by as they Shift back into human form at the edge of the woods, Daryl and Rick both taking turns to hold Judith in their arms and reassure themselves that she’s truly fine before they all cross the field back to the train.

Maggie is up on the engine keeping watch as they return and she calls out to the others as soon as she spots them, the whole group gathering to greet them.

“Thank God,” Carol says in relief as she catches sight of Judith in Rick's arms.

“What happened?” Abraham asks, eyeing Michonne up and down.

“Where’s my brother?” Sasha demands, cutting across Abraham to stand toe to toe with Rick but it’s Michonne’s quiet voice that answers.

“I couldn’t save him… I tried, Sasha, you know that I did but I couldn’t help him. It’s my fault he’s gone.”

“I’m sorry,” Rick says softly, maintaining eye contact with the woman in front of him and Daryl tenses, ready to make a move if she lashes out.

“You,” she hisses after a moment where her face cycles through disbelief to pain and finally to rage. “You’re responsible for this.”

“He took my child,” Rick states simply.

“Because he believed you were a monster,” she spits, crowding into Rick's personal space and Daryl can feel the wolf bristling at her actions but he holds himself in check.

“I’m sorry,” Rick repeats quietly and Sasha seems to deflate a little, letting Bob pull her away and into his embrace.

“Did you at least lay him to rest?” Sasha asks, her eyes bright with unshed tears as she clings to
Bob’s jacket.

“Couldn’t,” Daryl answers and her anguished eyes turn on him in disgust. “The place was teemin’ with walkers but we can go back though, take more of us to clear the area.”

“I don’t need your help,” she tells him icily, pulling away from Bob. “You’ve done enough already.”

“We’ll go,” Glenn offers, stepping forward with Maggie at his side.

“Us too,” Rosita says, nudging Abraham forward.

“We’ll all go,” Carol states firmly. “Ty was a part of this family and it’s only right that we’re all a part of this.”

“Not them,” Sasha informs her, jabbing her finger in Rick and Daryl’s direction.

“It’s okay,” Daryl tells Carol, seeing her about to add something more. “We’ll stay here with Judy and watch the train – we shouldn’t leave it empty anyways.”

“Let’s go,” Sasha demands, checking her gun as the others gather their weapons and Abraham retrieves two shovels from inside the train.

“Make sure she’s not the first one there,” Daryl whispers to Carol before she leaves. “He was a mess and there’s probably been more geeks there since we left. She don’t need to see that.”

Carol nods grimly and sets off after the others, leaving Daryl and Rick suddenly alone with Judith and the weight of what had happened.

“One of us should get up top,” Daryl says. “You stay here with L’il Asskicker, I’ve got it.”

“Hey,” Rick says softly, reaching out to snag Daryl’s arm as he passes. “This isn’t on us – you know that.”

“Sure feels like it.”

“Well, it’s not. Ty took Judy – if something had happened to her… I would’ve killed him myself without hesitation.”

“But he wouldn’t have taken her if we weren’t what we are.”

“That still doesn’t make what happened our fault, Daryl. He was a troubled man who didn’t want to give us a chance to prove ourselves to him. He was never going to believe we were anything other than the devil’s handiwork.”

Daryl takes in Rick’s words, knowing that he’s right but still unable to shake the guilt that’s creeping around his soul. Rick slides his hand up to cup Daryl’s face, drawing him in for a warm kiss before releasing him and stepping back. Without another word, Daryl turns and climbs the engine, his heart heavy and concern for their future settling over him like a dark cloud.

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They make their base where they are for the next couple of days – the school turning out to be an easily defensible location that gives them all the opportunity to spread out and breathe for a moment. Rick is content to let everyone take their time, telling Daryl that it will probably do them good to stop moving for a short while. The distraction they had set at the edge of town had worked well enough to draw most of the walkers to it, allowing the group to explore the nearby buildings without meeting
too much resistance. The mood of the group is subdued, Sasha and Bob barely interacting with the others anymore and Daryl can tell that Michonne is hurting over the whole incident, becoming withdrawn and non-communicative even with Carol who tries her hardest to pull her out of it. Daryl knows that she blames herself for losing Tyreese and he knows there’s nothing they can do to assuage the guilt she’s feeling – he’s been there himself, more times than he can count, and he knows that she just has to come to terms with it in her own way. His own guilt over Ty’s death had dwindled to almost nothing as he had come to realize that Rick was right, Ty had never intended on giving them a chance and, while they couldn’t blame him for thinking he was doing the right thing, he had made the choice to kidnap Judith and there was never going to be anything but tragedy resulting from that act.

Once they had started exploring the immediate area surrounding the school, they had found themselves in the more affluent area of the small town, the grandiose houses set on what had been well-tended plots of land. Although most of them had been raided before at some point, Rick and Daryl had still found enough things of use that they had appropriated four large wheeled suitcases which were bumping along behind them as they made their way to the final house at the end of the street. With the late afternoon sun heading for the horizon, they had decided to just finish up at this last place and then head back to the others before night fell. Walking up the circular drive to the imposing front door flanked by two ornate stone columns, Rick starts to laugh and Daryl jumps a little at the sound.

“What?” he asks, stopping at the door and thumping his fist against the solid wood. “We look like we’re coming home from the world’s roughest vacation,” Rick chuckles.

Daryl stares at him for a moment and then really looks at him, taking in the tangled mess of his dark curls and beard, flecked now with even more grey, and the filthy, threadbare clothes that he’s wearing that are now held together by more dirt than anything else. Without even glancing down at himself, he knows he’s pretty much a mirror image of Rick, he can practically feel the grime covering his body, and he starts to laugh too. Their merriment is cut short by the unmistakable sound of a walker crashing against the inside of the door and Daryl gives Rick a nod as he readies himself to open the door. Unsurprisingly, it’s locked, so they conceal the suitcases behind the overgrown shrubs on either side of the front porch and make their way around to the side of the house. Peering through the cloudy window, Daryl can see a spacious living room beyond leading to the front door where there are actually two walkers scratching ineffectually against the wood, their almost pristine clothing suggesting that they died inside the house and have never been outside. Hooking his fingers under the bottom edge of the window, Daryl tries to lift it, blinking stupidly as it suddenly shoots up under his strong grip.

The walkers turn at the sound, their decaying lips peeled back from their gnashing teeth as they stumble across the room towards the open window, arms outstretched. Daryl steps back from the window, letting their own momentum carry them out as they crash into the thigh-high sill and tip over. When they hit the ground, he and Rick step easily in to finish them both off, Daryl kicking away the bodies so that they can climb through the window into the house. They stand silently for a moment, side by side, heads cocked as they listen for the sound of any further walkers inside but the house is peacefully silent and they relax a little as they move forward into the room.

“You got this?” Rick asks, bumping Daryl’s elbow with his. “I’m gonna head upstairs.”

Daryl grunts in response, picking his way among the expensive furniture that’s now layered with a powdery dust and heading into the kitchen. As he rummages through the cupboards, sneering his nose at the ridiculous amount of, to him at least, useless gadgets he finds, he keeps one ear focused on the muffled sounds of Rick moving through the rooms upstairs. Stacking his finds on the kitchen
table, Daryl moves on to the dining room, pulling open the drawers of the large china cabinet that’s dominating one wall but finding nothing more than neatly-folded linen napkins and an array of silverware that has him shaking his head in confusion. Opening the adjacent liquor cabinet, he roots quickly through the open bottles, most of them with contents that have either spoiled or partially evaporated at this point until his eyes land on a full bottle at the back and he reaches in to pull it out. It’s an Irish whiskey, the name one that he doesn’t recognize but that he’s willing to bet cost more than all the other bottles that the cabinet contained, and he turns the bottle over thoughtfully in his hands. Memories flit across his mind unbidden as he stares at the amber liquid through the glass, first of his father who he didn’t think he’d ever seen without a bottle or flask somewhere on his person - fighting every day to drown the guilt of what he’d done and what he was – and then to Bob, reliving the acute sense of betrayal he’d felt when he’d caught Bob risking his life over a half-drunk bottle of booze when he should’ve been focused on saving their people.

“Daryl!”

He’s startled out of his reverie by Rick’s urgent call from upstairs and he races to the stairs, taking them three at a time, the bottle still clutched tight in his fist. He has a momentary panic at the top as he can’t tell where Rick is, his scent fresh on the air as he had crisscrossed between the rooms lining the upstairs hallway but then he hears a noise coming from the master bedroom at the far end and he sprints that way. His feet make no sound on the plush carpet as he bounds into the bedroom and then skids to a halt as he takes in the sight in front of him. Rick has opened the bedroom windows, letting in the late summer air, the warm breeze lifting the curtains to shoot sparkling dust motes into the air and bringing the heady aroma of honeysuckle with it from where it’s twining its way up the wall outside. Daryl’s eyes roam over the king-sized bed, its solid oak frame gleaming in the afternoon sun and, with a smile quirking the corner of his mouth up, he can see that it’s been re-dressed with crisp, fresh linen.

“In here,” Rick calls and Daryl follows the sound of his voice, pushing open the half-closed door that leads to the master bathroom.

He stops dead as he sees Rick reclining back in the overflowing bathtub, curls of steam rising up from the water’s surface which is awash with a mountain of frothy white bubbles. His freshly-washed hair is slicked back from his face with just a few errant curls springing free and his blue eyes are sparkling as he meets Daryl’s gaze.

“How in the fuck...?”

“No idea,” Rick answers, his face split by a wide smile. “Tried the taps like I always do and there it was… hot and cold. Maybe a generator still hooked up someplace or solar on the roof… I don’t know and really, I don’t care. Maybe fate decided to give us a break for once, who knows? All I know is that I’m sitting here, naked and wet, while you’re standing there like we have all the time in the world. Now strip and get your sexy ass in here with me.”

Daryl huffs out a small laugh, setting down the whiskey on the edge of the bath while he pulls off his clothes, his mind still marveling at the odds of finding not only running water but hot running water at that.

“What’s this?” Rick asks, lifting the bottle to look at it and then raising an eyebrow at Daryl over the top. “Were you planning on getting me drunk, Mr. Dixon?”

“Pfft,” Daryl snorts, tossing aside his pants and climbing carefully into the tub in front of Rick, the water sloshing over the side as he sits down between Rick's thighs.

He can’t stop the sigh that escapes his lips as he leans back, letting the warm, sweet-smelling water
wash up over his skin, soothing his tired body. He settles back against Rick's chest, closing his eyes and exhaling slowly, letting himself enjoy the moment.

“Are you purring?” Rick whispers softly against his ear, sending goosebumps rippling over his skin despite the heat of the water.

“No,” Daryl answers sharply, feeling his face flash red and he feels Rick’s laughter vibrate through his chest against Daryl’s back.

“Do you remember me telling you there were a lot of linen closets out there just waiting for us to open them? Well, I figured it’s been awhile since the last one so I thought it was time to do it again,” Rick tells him quietly, running his hand down Daryl’s arm.

“Mmm,” Daryl mumbles, losing himself to the desires that are awakening in his body as he recalls the last bed they shared.

“Will this even do anything if we drink it? Rick asks, tilting the bottle in his hand back and forth against the side of the tub.

“Nope,” Daryl answers, a flash of his earlier memories causing his eyes to flick open and his body to tense a little.

His discomfort obviously translates to Rick and his mate leans over to set the bottle on the floor before sliding back to wrap his arms around Daryl's shoulders and nuzzle his face against his cheek. Daryl relaxes against him, rubbing his face against the scratchiness of Rick’s beard, the urge to mark him with his own scent and claim him as his own suddenly overwhelming to Daryl.

“Here,” Rick says, nudging Daryl gently forward, “let’s get you cleaned up a little, shall we?”

Reaching past Daryl, he unhooks the shower attachment from the side of the bath and switches it on, guiding Daryl’s head back so that he can wash the dirt from his hair. Daryl's eyes close once more as he lets Rick take care of him without an ounce of self-consciousness or even an echo of the ghostly voices of his family that had plagued him for so long with regards to his sexuality and the choices he had made. As his bond with Rick had strengthened so his doubts had gradually faded into nothing until there was no question in his mind or his heart that he had found his place in this life and he’d been able to fully give himself to the man who he now knew loved him unconditionally. He doesn’t even give it a second thought as Rick hangs up the showerhead and takes a washcloth to rub over the skin of Daryl’s back, pausing occasionally to press his lips to either the scarred or whole skin laid bare before him, knowing that Rick doesn’t see anything but Daryl and he loves him regardless of what came before. He hopes one day to have that same level of comfort around all the people he loves but for now he’s content enough that he has it with Rick and that’s what matters most to him. His fingers cling to the edges of the tub as Rick dunks the washcloth back into the soapy water and then slides it up under Daryl’s arm to rub its warmth across his chest.

“Purring again,” Rick murmurs with a smile in his voice but Daryl doesn’t care anymore what noises are coming from him – as long as Rick doesn’t stop.

He doesn’t. Dropping the washcloth into the water, Rick replaces it with his hands, gliding them through the slippery water to caress every part of Daryl he can reach until, eventually, his water-softened fingers slip deliciously around Daryl’s hardened cock making him gasp loudly before biting at his lip.

“Ri-ckk,” he manages to stutter, his brain misfiring on too many levels. “Uhhh… you gotta stop, less’n you want this over real quick.”
Rick laughs gruffly behind him but he stops the slow stroke he's been performing on Daryl's cock and releases him with a final twist of his wrist that has Daryl groaning hard.

“Damn… do you have any idea how much you turn me on when you moan like that?”

“Got a pretty good idea, yeah,” Daryl answers smugly, rocking his body gently into Rick's where he can feel his hard cock pressed against his flesh and hearing a moan back in response.

“Up,” Rick instructs, pushing Daryl away from him and Daryl pulls himself up out of the water, feeling suddenly bereft as its warmth cascades off of him.

He steps out of the tub, his toes sinking into the luxurious bath mat on the floor at its side and he glances around as Rick climbs out to join him.

“Towels?” he asks, eyeing the ones hanging nearby which are thick with dust.

“Do we need them? I kind of like you all wet,” Rick responds with a sly look on his face that has Daryl's cock straining even harder.

“Is that so?” Daryl says, seeing the lust in Rick’s eyes and feeling his body respond to his desires but unable to stop himself teasing Rick just a little bit first.

With a sudden, vigorous shake of his head he douses Rick with splatters of cooling water from his hair, hearing his indignant yelp as Daryl turns on his heel and sprints for the bedroom. Rick catches him just in time to bodyslam him into the bed, its solid frame giving a loud creak as their combined weight crashes onto it and Daryl laughs loudly as Rick tries to get the upper hand and pin him to the mattress. They wrestle half-heartedly, neither of them really putting an effort into it, each of them just enjoying the friction of their damp skin sliding across the other’s body until Rick finally gives up and flops down onto the bed. Daryl moves to straddle him, grinding his hips into him as he slides up his body, loving the way Rick gasps as Daryl’s cock rubs hard against his own length, his head tilting back into the pillow. Daryl takes the opportunity to dip his head and run his tongue up the exposed flesh of Rick’s throat, nipping at his jawline with his teeth, his hands splayed across Rick's chest.

“I miss your face,” he muses, pulling back slightly to meet Rick’s eyes with a smile.

“You’re just jealous that that peach fuzz shit you call a beard is a pale imitation,” Rick tells him as reaches up a hand to rub thoughtfully over the thick beard that’s now covering his face.

“Pfft, says you,” Daryl snorts. “I could do better than that dead woodchuck any day of the week… I just don’t wanna embarrass you.”

“Oh is that right, pretty boy?” Rick chuckles, sliding his hand up to cup around the back of Daryl's neck and push his fingers into his wet hair. “I’d like to see that.”

Daryl's retort is lost as Rick pulls his head down to press his lips to his, kissing him softly but with an underlying urgency that has Daryl's heartbeat spiking in his chest. He parts Rick's lips with his tongue, exploring his mouth fully with deep, languid strokes, breathing in every exhale that Rick makes until he's starting to see stars behind his eyelids. Parting slowly, he can feel the small puffs of Rick’s breath panting against his lips but Daryl can’t open his eyes at first, lost in the intensity of their pairing. Rick’s hands are on him, rubbing gently over his bare skin until it’s tingling in his wake and, when Daryl can finally open his eyes again, he finds Rick’s gaze locked on him, his face flushed with arousal, his kiss-swollen lips parted slightly. Daryl whimpers quietly at the sight, his tongue darting out to moisten his own lips and he lifts his body from Rick's, cock twitching at the sound Rick makes as they part. Backing up, he stops when he’s level with Rick's cock, fascinated for a
second by the small dribbles of pearlescent pre-cum that are leaking from its swollen tip.

“Daryl…” Rick urges and Daryl can hear the want in his voice making it hoarse as he speaks.

Ignoring his lover’s unspoken pleas, he runs his hands up Rick's thighs instead, elongating his nails just a little to scratch through the hair there, eliciting tiny gasps from Rick's lips. He dips his head, letting his tongue lap at Rick’s skin, sucking and kissing his way across his abdomen, burying his nose into the thatch of thick hair at Rick’s groin to inhale the heady scent of his sex mixed now with the delicate scent of the soap from their bath. Rick groans above him, his hands coming to Daryl's head obviously wanting to guide him but holding himself in check and Daryl bares his teeth in a feral grin – what he wants more than anything right now is to see Rick strung out, sweating beneath him as Daryl teases him into oblivion. With a small growl, he lowers his face again, tasting Rick's skin but leaving his cock untouched, a move that he knows is making Rick crazy from the way he's fisting his hands into the sheets at his sides. Changing position, he forces Rick's legs apart with his knee, climbing between them and pushing them up and back where Rick wraps his hands around them and holds them, his knuckles white against his own skin. Pushing his hands under Rick's ass, Daryl lifts him easily, rolling him up until his weight is resting mainly on his shoulders and Daryl can support him against his knees, giving him easy access to every part of him. It’s a vulnerable position for Rick, one that gives Daryl total control, and Daryl knows it’s hard for him to let that go sometimes – his natural urge is always to be in charge, something Daryl understands must have intensified with the coming of the wolf – so the fact that he gives himself so readily to Daryl’s lead, that he wants him to take charge, means so much to Daryl.

Maintaining eye contact, Daryl parts his lips and dips his head to flick his tongue over the tip of Rick's cock, moaning as the salty fluid there bursts against his tastebuds and he can barely control himself from taking Rick's length deep into his throat. Rick is tense under him, trying to leverage himself up to meet Daryl’s lips but restricted by the position he’s in and Daryl isn’t ready to give him what he wants just yet. Running his tongue down the length of Rick's shaft, curling it around every bump and vein along the way, he licks the flat of his tongue across Rick's balls, sucking each one into his mouth and rolling them over his tongue. Digging his fingers into Rick's ass he parts his cheeks to expose his hole to him, letting his tongue travel down until he's licking around it and teasing it with small pushes to open him up. Rick is shuddering under him, his breath coming in panting gasps between the drawn out moans he's giving that only intensify as Daryl pushes his tongue further into him and then replaces it with the blunt tip of his thumb. He works the thick digit into him, feeling Rick tighten around it and he watches his face for a moment before he slides his tongue back up the length of Rick’s cock and wraps his lips over the slippery head. This time he does take him fully in, hollowing his cheeks around Rick’s length as he bobs his head in time with the finger he's pushing in and out of Rick's ass.

Rick is sputtering a stream of gibberish from his lips, Daryl's name being repeated over and over among a litany of curse words and things that just make no sense but fall from his mouth anyway among a rising chorus of groans and whimpers. With a final keening sound that has Daryl’s hips bucking in response, Rick comes, filling Daryl’s mouth with a stream of thick cum that he eagerly swallows, sucking until the last drop is gone. He lowers Rick's hips back to the bed, crawling up him to share the taste of him that’s strong on Daryl’s tongue, kissing him until he feels the tremors across Rick's skin subside.

“Dammit, Daryl,” Rick croaks as Daryl sits back on his heels between Rick's thighs, smiling down at the satisfied look on Rick's face. “I think your mouth is gonna kill me long before any walker could ever take me down.”

“Yeah… but what a way to go,” Daryl chuckles, licking his lips.
“So… you gonna fuck me with that beast or just sit there and bask in your own glory all night?”

“Thinking ‘bout it,” Daryl answers, reaching down a hand to curl around the heavy weight of his cock and give it a few quick strokes. “Ain’t got no lube left though… think you can handle it, Sheriff?”

Rick raises his legs back up, spreading his buttock cheeks with both hands to expose his puckered hole to Daryl, throwing him a challenging look as he does so.

“Deep as you like, Fuckboy,” he nods but Daryl doesn’t answer.

Shuffling forward on his knees, he takes barely a second to spit loudly in his palm and coat the sticky fluid over his cock mixing it with the pre-cum oozing from his slit, before he presses the head to Rick’s hole and pushes in hard and fast. Rick gives a yell of both pleasure and pain but Daryl knows that any hurt he’s causing him will be fleeting as the wolf seeks to heal itself and he pulls back to thrust in again.

“That all you got?” Rick goads him, his words being forced out as Daryl pounds into him.

Daryl snarls, letting the wolf loose just enough that he can feel his face change and the ridges of his spine pop against his skin, lowering his muzzle to scrape his teeth over the flesh of Rick’s throat.

“Yeah… that’s it,” Rick pants under Daryl. “Let it go… fuck me harder…”

Throwing his head back, Daryl howls, his hips rocking furiously into Rick’s tight hole over and over as Rick yells for him not to stop and he can feel sweat breaking out along his spine when he knows he’s about to come. Dipping his head, he can’t resist the primal urge that’s calling to him and he sinks his teeth into the crook of Rick’s shoulder, letting his ripe blood flow across his tongue as he comes, pushing deep into Rick and holding there until he’s spent. He relinquishes his hold on Rick’s shoulder, wiping the wolf back into line and catching his breath while his body rides out the euphoria his orgasm has brought.

“You okay?” he mutters, not raising his head and he feels Rick's hands come up to bury themselves in his hair.

“Oh yeah,” Rick tells him, grinning down at him as he lifts Daryl's face to look at him. “In fact… give me a coupla minutes and I’ll show you just how good I am.”

“Sure,” Daryl snorts, sliding off of Rick to stretch languorously on the bed beside him, stretching out his hand to take Rick's, playing idly with his fingers.

“I’m serious,” Rick tells him, turning on his side to face Daryl.

“Well… we’ve got a little while till it gets dark,” Daryl shrugs, looking past Rick's shoulder to where the afternoon sun is still making its trip across the sky.

Daryl shifts his position, rolling over so that he can wriggle his way back against Rick, letting him spoon around him and sighing contentedly as Rick's arm snakes its way around his middle, holding him tight.

“I’m worried about Michonne,” Rick says quietly after a few minutes, his breath hot against the back of Daryl's neck. “I feel like we’re losing her… I’ve never seen her like this, she’s so withdrawn from everything. Even when the Governor killed Andrea and tried to take the prison, she wasn’t like this –
she was driven and angry but she was still a part of us, she just needed to figure that out. But this…
this feels different – we’ve lost people before but I’ve never seen her take it on herself so much.”

“She’s hurtin’,” Daryl answers, placing his hand over Rick’s. “She couldn’t save them both and
that’s eatin’ at her.”

“Was she right, Daryl? Should we have changed her before? What if even more walkers had come
after Ty that day and she hadn’t been able to take them all down… we would’ve lost Judy.”

“Stop it,” Daryl says sternly, turning in Rick's embrace to meet his gaze. “Don’t start lettin’ yourself
get lost in the ‘what ifs’, you know that ain’t how it works. Done is done – can’t be undone and no
amount of wishin’ n’ hopin’ is gonna change that. All you’re gonna do is make yourself crazy.
‘chonne will be fine… we all will, you’ll see.”

“Happily ever after?” Rick asks, smiling softly at Daryl.

“White fuckin’ picket fence,” Daryl answers him, returning his smile.

“I’m holding you to that,” Rick laughs, leaning in to plant a heartfelt kiss against Daryl's lips.

“What… you don’t think I can deliver?” Daryl asks in mock indignation, pressing a hand against
Rick's chest to halt his kisses. “A nice little house on the beach for us ‘n the kids… get us a dog,
station wagon in the drive… his and his towels in the bathroom.”

“God, I adore you,” Rick tells him, throwing his head back in a deep laugh.

“Well, you should… I’m a catch.”

“You certainly are,” Rick whispers, leaning back in to kiss him again and this time Daryl doesn’t
push him away but curves his body forward instead, knowing that their afternoon is far from over.

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They arrive back at the school long after the sun has gone down, each carrying two of the
overstuffed suitcases like they weigh nothing at all, both unable to keep the smiles from their faces as
they share small glances at each other along the way. That is, until the dark shape of the school
buildings looms into view and they’re met by a worried-looking Carol at the door.

“What happened?” Daryl asks, setting down the cases at his feet and instinctively swinging his
crossbow around into his hands.

“Where have you been?” she demands, ignoring Daryl's question. “I’ve been trying to get you on the
walkie for an hour.”

“We didn’t take one… we were scouting the houses down by the lake,” Rick answers. “Carol, what
happened?”

“Michonne’s gone. Looking for you two. When you didn’t come back by dark and you weren’t
answering the walkie, she got it into her damn head that she should go find you. I swear to god, if
you two horndogs were out there banging in the woods while we’ve been sitting here worried sick
about you, I’ll-”

“Which way did she go?” Daryl interrupts, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Along the tracks, towards town.”
“I’ve got this,” Daryl tells them, heading back to the door.

“You sure?” Rick calls after him.

“Mm-hmm, ain’t no point in all of us wandrin’ round out there. I’ll bring her back.”

“Be careful,” Rick adds but Daryl just waves him off.

Back outside, he quickly sheds his clothing and drops to all fours to Shift, taking off towards the tracks as soon as his paws touch the earth. He easily picks up Michonne’s trail and follows it to where it veers off the tracks and into the surrounding buildings. The concrete sidewalk feels almost alien under his pads, his claws clicking softly against the rough surface as he makes his way between the shells of former offices and stores. He hears the unmistakable sound of walkers coming from ahead as he closes in on what was once a local post office, Michonne’s scent strong in his nose, and he follows the noise around to the loading dock at the back.

There he finds a good-sized crowd of walkers, all of them pressed in a heaving, snarling mass against the chest high concrete walkway of the loading dock, each of them trying to grab at Michonne who is dancing back just out of their reach on the narrow ledge. Quickly assessing the situation, Daryl rears up into his hybrid form and wades into the glut of walkers, tearing into them and tossing their lifeless corpses aside as he finishes with each one. Michonne works from above, slashing down at the walkers within her reach and Daryl has to move fast a couple of times to stay out of the reach of her blade. He’s trying to get a grip on a particularly large walker but its flesh keeps tearing under his hands and his patience is already stretched thin when a second walker careens into him from the other side and manages to sink its teeth into the soft underside of his upper arm, pulling out a chunk of fur and flesh as he knocks it away. With a roar, he throws himself onto the walker ahead of him, using his weight to take it to the ground where he can more easily tear its snapping head from its rancid body and he hears the weight of the other walker hit the ground behind him. He turns, a blessed silence falling around them now that the last walker is gone, and rests his palms on the cool concrete in front of him, tilting his head to look up at Michonne who is sagging back against the roll up door behind her.

“Why didn’t you run?” he asks her, indicating his head towards the end of the loading dock where she could have easily jumped the fence there and been on her way with the walkers trapped on the other side of it but she doesn’t answer him. “What are you doing? Do you want to kill yourself, is that it? Because I can leave you right here, right now.”

“Maybe you should… I’m certainly no good to anyone anymore. I couldn’t even protect one man.”

“You have to stop this,” Daryl snaps angrily, frustrated by the way she just appears to be giving up.

“Why, what's the point anymore? No matter what we do, they always win. We just keep fighting and fighting and still we keep losing people. I'm tired, Daryl.”

“We all are,” he tells her, softening a little as he hears the hurt in her voice, “but we've come so far and I ain't ready to give up yet. Long as there's one of you standin’, I'm gonna keep fightin’.”

“But this can't be all there is, Daryl… fighting and running. When do we get to live?”

“I don't know… maybe this is all we got now or maybe we'll turn the next corner and find our damn salvation. I can't tell you that but I can tell you I'm not givin’ up.”

“I don't know if I can do it anymore,” she whispers and he can see the defeat etched into every line of her body.
“Then don't do it for yourself. We need you… Judy wouldn't be here without you and Carl, did you think how that boy would feel if he knew you just gave up?”

He sees her hesitation at his words, sees the impact that Carl’s name has on her and he watches silently as she struggles to pull herself together. Wiping the blood from her blade against the leg of her pants, she straightens up to re-sheath it at her back, giving him a nod before she jumps down beside him but he can see that she’s clearly still troubled. Reverting back to his wolf form, he takes the lead as she falls into step behind him, knowing that he’s just put a temporary fix on the situation and that she’s going to need to deal with what’s eating at her sooner rather than later.
When Rick hears Daryl and Michonne approaching and catches their distinctive scents on the air, he lets his body relax from the state of agitation and concern it’s been in since Daryl left. He narrows his eyes, focusing on the distant tracks until they both appear and he huffs out a sigh of relief as he sees they’re both walking normally and neither of them appears to be hurt. As they get closer he can see that Michonne is walking with one hand resting on Daryl’s back as if she’s anchoring herself to him and, as they draw level with the train, she looks up to Rick and gives him a tight nod before heading
inside. Rick climbs down from the top of the engine to greet Daryl who shifts back into his human form.

“She okay?” Rick asks, staring after Michonne’s retreating back.

“Getting’ there,” Daryl answers and Rick can hear the weariness in his voice.

“Why don’t you head inside, keep the kids company. I’ve got this.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, go on.”

“Alright… I’ll come back in a coupla hours then, swap watch with you,” Daryl tells him, turning to go.

“Daryl…”

“Huh?” he says, looking back over his shoulder.

“Clothes,” Rick chuckles and he can see the embarrassed realization spread across Daryl’s face.

“Shit,” he mutters, stomping off down the tracks the way he’d come.

Rick smiles to himself, shaking his head as he climbs back up the side of the train and resumes his position as lookout. A few minutes later, Daryl reappears, fully clothed, and makes his way back to the school ignoring the soft whistle Rick gives him as he passes.

Once his mate is safely inside the building, Rick turns his full attention back to his surroundings, letting the night sounds wash over him. He’d always thought of himself as a morning person before the wolf took him, not only during their time at the prison when he liked to be up before dawn to tend the small farm plots but long before that. When Carl had been small, Rick had liked to be the first one up, even if he’d pulled a night shift at the station the previous night. He liked to make himself a coffee and just sit at the kitchen table or out on the back porch in the pre-dawn light while the world woke up around him. It was the only time he ever felt truly at peace in his hectic life between the responsibilities of his job and his family and he would just let the silence consume him, those precious moments alone recharging him for the day ahead. Now, he was all about the night – he loved the way it almost seemed like a living entity, protecting a secret world he had barely known existed before. The woods around him seem to breathe as one with the life they contain and his nose twitches as he catches the scent of fresh prey on the wind. The wolf stirs within him, unfurling just a little, and he yearns for a moment to just jump down from the train, shed his human skin and go hunting but he holds himself in check and maintains his watch.

Time passes as he loses himself in the ebb and flow of the nighttime world around him until he becomes aware of the sound of soft footsteps coming his way. A quick sniff of the air tells him that it’s not Daryl as he was expecting but, instead, Sasha and Bob who appear from the darkened recess of the building’s doorway. With a heavy heart, Rick watches as they walk silently towards the train, seeing he loaded packs each of them are carrying along with their weapons. There’s no doubt that they’re leaving but neither one acknowledges his presence even though they know he’s there and he’s torn between his natural instinct to stop them and the very obvious fact that they don’t want him to – they’re sending him a very clear message by leaving the way they are, coming out the front of the school and walking right past him when they could’ve just as easily left another way. He stands silently as they pass the train, noting the determined set of Sasha’s shoulders as she leads the way and, for the briefest instant, Bob glances up at him. Rick sees everything he needs to know in that
look – that there’s no point in even trying to stop them, their minds are already made up. He gives a slight nod which Bob returns and then stands watching them until they disappear along the tracks.

He knows in his heart that it’s for the best – no matter how deep his instinct is to protect his people, he’s painfully aware that Sasha will always hold him responsible for her brother’s death and that she and Bob would probably never be able to accept his and Daryl’s dual natures. So he lets them go, quietly wishing them Godspeed for their journey and hoping that they’ll be safe wherever they end up. Hearing another set of footsteps approaching, the tread so soft that only he would be able to distinguish them from the nocturnal noises around him, Rick turns to find Daryl almost to the train and he climbs down to meet him.

“Saw them leavin’,” Daryl states, moving in close to Rick and keeping his voice low. “Think we should go after them?”

“No,” Rick answers with a shake of his head. “They don’t want us to. If they needed to be talked out of it, they wouldn’t be sneaking out in the middle of the night. No, they’ve made their choice and it’s out of our hands.”

Daryl nods solemnly, drawing Rick into his arms and Rick sags into his warm embrace, wrapping his arms about Daryl’s waist and resting his head on his broad shoulder.

“You should go get some sleep,” Daryl murmurs after a few minutes of standing together, his breath warm on Rick’s neck. “Sun’ll be up soon.”

Rick sighs, pulling slowly out of Daryl’s arms, knowing that he’s right but reluctant to let him go and then leans in to give him a parting kiss before he heads inside. Treading carefully so as not to wake the others, he sinks into the empty bedroll beside Carl’s that is still warm with the heat from Daryl’s body where he had recently vacated it. Tired as he is, sleep still eludes him and he spends the remaining few hours of darkness watching his children as they slumber, praying silently for something more than this to be their lives.

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After a subdued breakfast the next morning where Sasha and Bob’s disappearance comes to light and Rick makes it quite clear that the decision was theirs and nobody will be going after them, the group packs up their belongings and re-boards the train. With Eugene and Glenn in the cab and Daryl up top, Rick takes the opportunity to spend some time with Carl and Judith as they continue their journey ever eastwards. After his son’s passionate outburst to the group regarding his father’s place in the group, Rick feels that there is a renewed trust between them, an understanding of things that had passed and the reasons behind them and he feels closer to Carl than he has since Lori’s death. His eagerness to arrive at the coast was becoming infectious and everyone seemed lighter for it despite the recent turn of events, giving Rick even more confidence that this was the right direction for them. Stepping back from his position at one of the half-covered windows where he has been watching the countryside pass them by for a few minutes, Rick takes a seat opposite Carl and Michonne who are sitting with their heads bent over one of the many maps Michonne has been collecting along their journey.

“So,” Rick says, stretching his legs out in front of him and kicking gently at Carl’s foot, “you two decided where we’re going yet?”

“Yes,” Carl answers eagerly, his eyes shining as he raises his head to look at Rick and then turns his gaze to Michonne. “Tell him.”

She looks from Carl to Rick, a small smile creasing her lips but he can see that it still doesn’t reach
her eyes, the haunted look that’s been living there since Tyreese’s death still present as she takes the map from Carl’s hands and turns it for Rick to see.

“Here,” she tells him, pointing at a spot on the coastline and Rick takes the map from her hands to see it properly. “When Andrea and I were planning this trip before, she told me about a place she’d been once on vacation with her parents that she thought would be worth a look. It’s a nature reserve… lots of untouched beaches, a few tourist spots… nearest town’s a few miles away. She told me there was a lighthouse and wild deer everywhere… she kept going on and on about the deer...”

Rick’s heart aches for the look on her face as she trails off, her recollections re-opening wounds that are still too close to the surface for them to have healed yet, if they ever would.

“Sounds like a good starting place,” Rick tells her softly, handing her back the map which she carefully smooths and folds before tucking it back into her bag.

“I hope so,” she replies, giving him another of those half smiles that don’t quite reach her eyes. “Andrea said that the lighthouse has a pretty big house attached to it… used to be a bed and breakfast place.”

“There’s also a pier where we can fish and-”

“Carl… don’t give away all our surprises,” Michonne tells the boy, nudging him with her elbow and he immediately clams up, giving her a shy smile.

Smiling to himself, Rick settles back into his seat, confident that with Carl to occupy her and give her something ahead to focus on, Michonne will be able to find a way past the hopelessness he knows she’s been feeling. He raises his eyes to look around the rest of the car, checking on each of his family members and his gaze comes to rest on Noah who is trying to keep Judith amused while Rosita and Tara look on. Turning his head, Rick can see Abraham leaning against the back of one of the seats, maintaining a lookout through the window beside him and Rick’s thoughts come back to the matter of making the others like him and Daryl. He’s still torn on the whole idea – he had been so adamant about it in the start but now he was having doubts – could they really do something to their family knowing that it might kill them or did the benefits outweigh the risk? Sighing, he tips his head back against the plush seat and closes his eyes, deciding that now is not the time to be worrying about it, he’d make that decision if and when they were settled at the coast.

The rest of the day passes peacefully as does the night, with the group bedding down in a large barn close to the tracks. There’s a small skirmish with walkers when they get moving the following morning but, with an overly-enthusiastic workout from Abraham, they soon deal with them and get underway. Around mid-morning a fierce storm blows up minimizing their visibility, the lashing rain driving Rick down from his lookout atop the train and he’s just debating whether they should stop for a while when the decision is taken out of his hands by a group of vehicles which suddenly looms into view, blocking the tracks ahead of them.

“Glenn!” Rick shouts but his friend is already slamming on the brakes and they grind to a halt, just clipping the first of the cars in front of them and shunting it aside.

“Shit!” Glenn curses, slapping his hand on the console ahead of him and Rick can hear the concerned voices coming from the car behind.

“Eugene, get on the radio and tell everyone to stay put for now. Get Daryl to meet me outside,” Rick instructs, pulling his gun and opening the door to the cab.

Daryl is beside him as soon as his feet hit the ground, his hair already plastered to his head by the
torrential rain and a grim look on his face as he catches sight of what’s stopped them. Moving swiftly, they approach the knot of cars and trucks that are blocking the tracks where the road crosses over them. The crossing provides the only break in the trees for miles in either direction and the back of Rick’s neck prickles as he realizes this would be the perfect location for an ambush.

“You think this is for us?” he whispers urgently to Daryl, his eyes flicking between the treeline and the seemingly abandoned vehicles.

“Nah,” Daryl answers quietly, lifting his hand to point through the blinding rain, “look at the wheels – grass is growin’ right up through ‘em. These’ve been here a while. Gonna be a bitch to move ‘em though.”

“Okay… let’s take a quick look around then we can make a start once the rain eases off a bit.”

Pulling the walkie from his pocket to give the others a brief update on what’s happening, Rick and Daryl split up, moving off between the rusting hulks of metal with the hard patter of rain beating a staccato accompaniment to their every move. After methodically checking each of the vehicles and finding no signs of either the dead or the living, Rick signals to Daryl and the pair of them split off into the woods on opposite sides of the tracks to make sure the immediate area is clear. Under the dense canopy of the tree branches overhead, the rainfall is slowed considerably and Rick pushes his wet hair back from his face with an annoyed swipe of his hand only to have it drip uncomfortably down the back of his neck instead. He moves cautiously but quickly through the trees, the rain causing the earth around him to burst forth with a fresh selection of smells that has his nose on overload.

He’s about to turn back, having found nothing of concern, when a movement up ahead catches his eye and the malodorous scent of a walker comes his way. Drawing his knife he heads after it, following its ramshackle path for a few yards before he catches it and easily dispatches it with one swift blow to its softened skull. Wiping his knife against his pants, Rick realizes he can smell more of its kind close by and he walks forward until he reaches a place where the trees give way to a tall fence surrounding an abandoned lumber yard. Peering through the slats in the wooden fence, he grits his teeth as he sees a large crowd of walkers inside milling aimlessly about and his eyes travel over their heads to find that the main gate to the yard is wide open, giving free access to the dirt track leading away on the other side. Backing slowly into the treeline again, he walks a little way off before pulling the walkie from his pocket and calling for Daryl.

“’m here,” comes Daryl’s faint voice from the almost-muted speaker. “All clear on this side, how ‘bout you?”

“We have a problem,” Rick tells him, keeping his voice as low as he can. “There’s a lumber yard on this side, not too far from the tracks. The place is teeming with walkers, maybe fifty-head or more, and there’s nothing holding them in. I’m afraid we start moving those cars and the noise is going to bring them straight to us. I’m surprised the train stopping didn’t move them already… guess the rain deadened the noise.”

“So, what’s the plan?”

“You head back – get the others clearing the cars as fast as you can. I’m going to distract these guys, give them something to chase in the other direction.”

“Then I’m comin’ to help ya.”

“No – you’re more use to me back there, using your strength to move those wrecks. I’ve got this. I’ll be fine.”
“Rick…” Daryl's voice is insistent but Rick doesn’t have time to argue.

“Just go… I’ll meet you back at the train,” he hisses and then turns off the radio.

Confident that Daryl will take care of things on his end, Rick quickly discards his clothes, pushing them under a nearby bush to at least try and keep them a little dry and then he Shifts, the damp air cooling his skin for a moment before he unleashes the wolf. He stretches, taking pleasure in his other form, feeling the power surging through him as he evaluates his situation. Treading softly, he makes a wide circle around the yard, not yet ready to get the walkers’ attention until he finds himself on the hard-packed dirt road facing the open entrance. He’s not sure what drew the walkers into the yard in the first place but, now that he can see around the central building, he realizes that his initial estimate on their numbers was way off and there’s at least twice as many as he first thought. He's looking at the gates, wondering if there’s any way for him to get them closed without too many of them getting out, when the first walker spots him and begins shambling in his direction, its mouth open in an endless growl. As it draws the attention of the others and more of them catch sight of him, Rick knows that all he can do now is stick to his original plan and lead them away. If a group this size turns its attention in his family’s direction, they’re going to be in a world of hurt.

Moving forward a little, he paces in place, keeping an eye on the approaching walkers and making as much noise as he can with a series of yips and howls until he can see more and more of them coming his way. When the first ones are almost upon him, their decaying fingers stretching greedily in his direction, he dances back out of their reach, avoiding their touch but teasing them forward. Running a little way ahead, he rears up for a moment into his hybrid form, his additional height giving him the chance to look back over the crowd. He's satisfied to see that he’s pulling all the walkers from the yard after him bar for a few stragglers but he still gives a loud roar over their heads to keep their attention before he drops back down and bounds further along the road.

It’s slow-going and the rain seems endless, soaking into his fur, making him frustrated and irritable but, eventually, Rick thinks he’s gone far enough and set them on a steady course that he can leave them to just keep going – their herd mentality driving them on even when the stimulus is gone. He increases his speed until they’re out of sight and then veers off into the trees, making a wide berth away from the road, and heads back the way he came. He lets the wolf take the reins, feeling its euphoria at being free as he races among the water-logged trees, culling any stray walkers that cross his path in a heartbeat. Something in his gut tells him not to stop at the lumber yard to retrieve his belongings but to continue on to the train and he puts his trust in that feeling, pushing himself just a little harder to close the gap between him and his family.

Water flies from his paws as he skids into view of the tracks, coming out of the trees further down, past where the vehicles had been blocking their way. Through the beating rain he can see that the tracks are now clear but his family is locked in battle with at least two-dozen walkers. As he leaps into the fray to help Carol who is taking on two walkers at once, he can hear Judith wailing from inside the passenger car along with Carl’s frantic attempts to silence her. Quickly pulling one of the walkers away from Carol with his teeth, he kills it while she finishes the other one. With a quick glance to make sure she's okay, he scans the area for the others, finding Rosita and Abraham efficiently dispatching walkers at the front of the train while Tara and Noah have their backs to the door of the passenger car, defending it together. Glenn and Maggie are on top of two cars, finishing off a knot of walkers which had made their way between the vehicles they had moved and were effectively bottle-necked between them making them easy targets. Moving forward, Rick searches for Daryl, finding him and Michonne standing back to back close to the treeline as they take on another small group of walkers coming from the woods.

As he watches them working in tandem to neutralize the threat, a particularly loud wail from Judith splits the air and he sees both of their heads whip around in that direction. Seeing nothing amiss,
Daryl resumes his hand to hand fight with the snarling walker in front of him but that moment of distraction is all that’s needed for Michonne to lose her ground against the walker she’s fighting. With his heart pounding in horror and his feet already on the move, Rick sees her stumble under the walker’s assault and go down, calling Daryl’s name as the flailing corpse lands on top of her. Whirling, Daryl yanks the body off of her, viciously stabbing it in the head with his knife before he drops to his knees just as Rick arrives beside them. His vision swims as he sees the blood cascading down Michonne’s chest and there’s a loud buzzing in his ears that makes him want to run and hide but Daryl’s anguished voice slaps him back to reality fast.

“Rick!” he cries, pulling Michonne onto his lap and cradling her in his arms, her frightened eyes locking onto him as her mouth forms soundless words.

“I don’t know what to do,” Rick wants to scream, seeing the ragged tear in her shoulder, his mind racing with preposterous scenarios of carving out the infected flesh, all of which he knows will kill her instantly.

The rain is pouring over her, mixing with her blood until everything is covered in a faint pink hue and Rick can see the life washing out of her with every drop, her skin turning ashen under his eyes and he knows her time is almost up. The wolf is howling in his head, raging against his impotence at losing one of his pack and something sparks in his brain – an idea born of nothing but sheer desperation and an instinct that comes from deep within him. Trying not to think too hard about what he’s doing and the possible consequences of his actions, Rick lowers his muzzle to her wound, the scooped neck of her shirt offering him unhindered access to her flesh. There’s the briefest flash of hesitation as the scent of her blood overwhelms his senses but he pushes past it, knowing there’s nothing left to lose, and peels his lips back from his teeth to sink them into her shoulder. Biting deep, feeling her flesh part around the sharpened points of his fangs, he presses his tongue against her torn skin and hears her give a soft mewl in his ear before she becomes limp in Daryl’s embrace. Rick withdraws his teeth, pulling back just enough to lick at the wound with his tongue, over and over, as though the very act of it can reverse what’s befallen her.

“Rick…” comes Daryl's soft tone and he’s jerked out of his stupor, lifting his head to look at his mate. “We need to get her inside.”

Rick looks around, seeing that the others have joined them, all of them staring down at Michonne with similar looks of stunned horror and disbelief. He raises himself up, Shifting enough to be able to talk to them, knowing that they need to get a handle on the situation before it gets any worse, if that’s even possible.

“Daryl, get Michonne to the train,” he growls, looking down at everyone. “Abe, you and Carol come with me – there’s more walkers coming and we need to head them off while the others get on board. Move!”

Everyone starts at his final yell, pulling themselves out of whatever contemplative fog Michonne’s situation has put them in and they scramble away towards the train leaving Carol and Abraham to ready their weapons as they head into the trees. Rick fleetingly catches Daryl's eye as he scoops up Michonne’s lifeless body but neither of them have time to speak so he drops back into his wolf form and races after the others. The three of them work to stop the walkers which are approaching through the woods and Rick guesses that his distraction earlier hadn’t been quite enough to pull them all after him. He keeps going until he reaches the lumber yard fence once more, keeping Carol and Abraham in earshot at all times, and then he Shifts back to retrieve his belongings before gathering the other two and heading back to the train, leaving nothing more than a handful of walkers in their wake.
Rick's mind and emotions are in turmoil as they approach the idling train and he signals at Glenn who is atop the engine to get them moving, sensing that there are even more walkers converging on their position from the other side of the tracks. Glenn doesn't hesitate, yelling instructions to Eugene beneath him at the controls and Abraham sprints forward to join him in the cab while Rick and Carol climb aboard the passenger car. As the train starts rolling along the tracks, picking up speed, Rick catches sight of a fresh wave of walkers stumbling from among the trees and heading after the retreating locomotive.

“Carol… flares,” Rick yells into the train car and she reappears in the doorway to hand him the loaded flare gun.

Hanging out of the side door as far as he can, he takes aim and launches a flare into the last of the cars beside the track, watching grimly as it lights up the insides of the vehicle. Reloading to fire a second one directly into the midst of the approaching walkers, Rick lucks out as it hits one of the dead squarely in the stomach and erupts into a ball of fizzing flame. The surrounding walkers are drawn to both lights, their attention pulled away from the train by the more immediate stimuli and Rick drops his head in relief as they round a bend in the tracks and vanish from the walkers' line of sight. His relief is short-lived though as he hears Daryl calling for him from inside and he pulls the door closed behind him as he moves from one problem onto the next.

Daryl has laid Michonne out on the floor at the front end of the car and Rick swiftly passes the anxious-looking faces of his family as he moves to kneel at her side across from his mate.

“Maggie – take Carl and Judy out of the way,” he instructs and hears her ushering Carl to the rear of the car before he lowers his voice to address Daryl. “How’s she doing?”

“She's burnin’ up,” Daryl answers him, his eyes frantic as they meet Rick's. “Don’t know if it’s the walker bite or the wolf blood but the wolf’s definitely got her… look…”

He pushes aside Michonne’s hair and gently turns her head to reveal the site of her wound and Rick is astonished to see that the mangled skin from both the walker’s bite and his own teeth has already healed over, leaving not even a small blemish on her flesh.

“You ever seen anything like this before?” Rick whispers, laying a hand on Michonne’s arm as tremors run through her body and she moans low in her throat.

“No,” Daryl answers sharply. “Hell, I ain’t never seen anyone turn 'cept for you, you know that.”

“Okay, okay,” Rick says quietly, hearing the rising panic in Daryl's voice, “we need to find someplace we can take care of her properly.”

“There’s a station coming up,” Carol tells him, appearing at his side with a map clutched in her fist, “about five miles out – small town - so hopefully we can find a secure place without too many walkers.”

“Good,” nods Rick, feeling the heat from Michonne’s skin raging against his palm and wondering if she's even going to make it the next five miles. “Get on the radio, tell Glenn to bring it in slow then you, Abe and Rosita can go check it out before we move her.”

Carol moves away to relay his message and Rick sits back, watching Michonne’s eyelids flutter as her head rolls back and forth, her lips moving soundlessly and her brow deeply furrowed. He wonders if Daryl had felt this same kind of sheer helplessness when he had watched Rick go through this, the urge to do something overwhelming him but the knowledge that there was nothing he could do crushing his soul. He can hear the erratic beat of her heart and the labored way her breath is
pushing in and out of her lungs and he has to ask himself if he’s done the right thing. Although he would do anything in his power to keep his loved ones safe, he had acted purely on instinct and he wonders now if his impulsiveness was going to kill Michonne in a far more horrendous way than the walker would have done. He knew that she had wanted this – to have their gift – but knowing that and actually watching it happen to her without having had the chance to reconfirm that this was still her choice after all that had happened was eating at his brain. He knew that he’d never be able to forgive himself if she hated him for making such a monumental decision on her behalf but all he can do is hope and pray that he’s done what she would want him to.

Feeling the train start to slow as they approach the station, he buries his thoughts in the back of his mind as a wet-sounding cough tears from Michonne’s chest and he’s startled to see blood flecking her dry lips when it subsides. There’s an anxious wait while the others check out the station and then Abraham opens the outer door and beckons Rick out.

“It’s not much,” he states as they step away from the train and Rick glances at the tiny single-story building that serves as the station’s waiting room and ticket office, “but there’s an office in the back. You might want to move her back there – give her a little more privacy for whatever’s gonna happen.”

Rick nods, checking out the surrounding area and sensing no immediate danger but also not seeing anywhere else that could be used as a secure location for the others to stay overnight.

“There’s nothing else nearby,” Abe tells him as though reading his mind.

“Okay… then I want one person on top of the engine all night and one on guard by the passenger car,” Rick instructs him. “Once it gets dark, everyone stays on the train, you hear me? I don’t know what’s going to happen or how long it’s going to take – this is new territory for all of us – but, if something goes wrong, I don’t want to be worrying about anyone out here getting caught up in it.”

“You think she might be dangerous?” Abe asks, his heavy brow creasing in concern and his fingers tightening around the butt of his gun.

“No,” Rick answers emphatically but then he hesitates for a moment before continuing, knowing that he has to be completely truthful in this moment if he wants to keep the group’s faith in him and Daryl. “Honestly… I don’t know. Daryl only knows what his father passed onto him and that was unreliable at best. From what I understand, everyone reacts differently to being bit, some of them just can’t handle it and it makes them crazy but Michonne is one of the strongest people I know and she wanted this from the start. If anyone can get through it, it’s going to be her.”

“And the walker bite?”

“Well, that’s the unknown factor… the wound has healed but she’s definitely infected with more than just the wolf blood. We all carry the infection, we know that, and a walker bite will just accelerate the process but we have to hope the wolf blood is fighting back against it. We just have to wait and see which is stronger, I guess.”

“I guess so,” Abraham agrees, a determined look crossing his face, “but just so we’re clear, she presents one ounce of danger to this group and I will put her down like a rabid dog without a second thought.”

“Understood,” Rick nods, stepping back towards the train. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

He moves fast, striding to the back of the passenger car to lift Michonne into his arms and carry her out, trying to ignore the sickly-sweet smell that’s emanating from her pores and the way her body
feels like nothing more than bones against his hands. Daryl leads the way into the station’s waiting room and through to the office in the rear of the building where Rick lays Michonne on a small couch that’s wedged between two overburdened filing cabinets. He’s dismayed but not surprised to find that Carol has followed them in, her arms laden with blankets and a jug of water.

“Carol, no,” he tells her, stepping forward to block her way to Michonne, “you can’t be in here. It’s not safe.”

Carol raises her chin at him, her blue eyes filled with a challenge that he knows he’ll never win, and then steps deftly around him to set the water down on the floor by Michonne’s head.

“Daryl, go see if you can find any more water around here,” she orders, her tone just daring him to argue with her but he just shoots Rick a quick glance and then wisely slips from the room and heads outside. “Rick, help me undress her – she’s burning up.”

He moves to help, unlacing Michonne’s boots and slipping them off and the two of them get her undressed, covering her sweat-slicked skin with a thin blanket. Carol soaks a rag with some of the tepid water and uses it to press against Michonne’s brow, making soothing noises as the unconscious woman’s head rocks from side to side and then settles again. Rick drops to the floor, sitting propped against the desk that’s opposite the couch, resting his hands on his drawn up knees and knowing that everything now is just a waiting game.

The hours pass, Daryl returning with two more jugs of fresh water, and the three of them maintain a silent vigil that’s only broken by the irregular wheezes of breath issuing from Michonne’s lips as her body wages a war inside itself. Just before dawn, with Carol dozing on his shoulder and Daryl’s fingers wrapped snugly around his, a silence falls over the room and it takes Rick a few seconds to realize why.

“Daryl!” he yells, startling Carol awake who reaches automatically for the knife on her belt as he clambers to his feet and crosses the narrow space to Michonne’s side. “She’s not breathing.”

Even though he can hear perfectly fine from anywhere in the room, Rick still drops his head to her chest in the dire hope that he’s mistaken but her body remains inert – not a single breath stirring in her lungs or a heartbeat sounding in his ear.

“Do something,” Daryl urges, his voice cracking in despair but Rick is already one step ahead of him.

“Get her on the floor,” he instructs, grabbing her shoulders as Daryl takes her legs and they lay her on the worn, dusty carpet.

Kneeling beside her, he links his hands and places them on her chest, calling on every memory he has of the mandatory first-aid training he undertook at the academy and had to re-certify for each year after. Counting out the number of chest compressions, he follows through by tilting Michonne’s head back and checking her airway before he attempts to breath for her. He repeats the process over and over, counting the compressions like a mantra, working with a single-minded purpose until Carol eventually stops him.

“Rick… it’s enough,” she says quietly, laying a hand across his and he turns his head to see the unshed tears brimming in her eyes, “she’s gone.”

Rick’s hands drop to his sides as his eyes search Michonne’s slack face for any sign of life and, finding none, his heart thuds heavily in his chest as he begins to shake his head from side to side.
“No,” he yells, pushing aside Carol’s hands and furiously resuming chest compressions, “not like this… not like this, dammit, come on.”

He’s about to cover her lips with his once more when Michonne’s eyes fly open, a great sucking breath lifting her chest and then dissolving into a wracking cough that has her shooting up into a sitting position. Instinctively, Rick reaches out to clap her on the back but, just as his palm makes contact with her skin, he feels the familiar ripple beneath his fingertips as her first Shift takes her. He reels back as her body contorts into its new shape, the changes happening far more rapidly than he was expecting until, in mere seconds, an enormous russet-colored wolf is staring back at him with Michonne’s soulful eyes. She writhes on her back for a second before flipping over to right herself, her sides heaving as her eyes dart to each of them in turn.

“How are you feeling?” Carol asks and Michonne’s head swings to her, a soft chuffing sound coming from her mouth which seems to take her by surprise so she stiffly shakes her head from side to side instead.

“Shouldn’t she be Shifting back already?” Rick asks Daryl, watching as most of the water spills to the floor and he patiently refills the bowl until Michonne is satisfied.

“Yeah… maybe… with me n’ you it was pretty instant the first time – we snapped in and out just like that,” Daryl answers with a snap of his fingers which has Michonne’s head rearing back from him and then steadying again. “Could be the walker bite, the wolf might be holdin’ on to fight the infection. I just don’t know.”

“What should we do?”

“Nothin’ to do… when she's ready, she'll Shift – not like we can force it. Probably best if she just rests like this and heals whatever’s goin’ on inside.”

Rick nods, knowing that Daryl’s right but still hating the uncertainty of not knowing that’s gnawing at his insides. For her part, Michonne settles down on the floor, laying her head down between her front paws and closing her eyes and Rick resigns himself to playing more of the wait-and-see game – something he’s never been that good at.
Chapter 29

Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, tmd-dump-station

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(R&faq)

DO NOT REPOST

Daryl's breath mists out into the early morning air, hanging like a smoky cloud for a minute before dissipating and he thinks to himself that summer is definitely making its way into fall now. He adjusts his position astride the smooth wood of the fence he’s sitting on, using his added height to watch both the scene in front of him and also keep a watchful eye on the surrounding area. At his back is a small motel with two floors – just four rooms on each – which in a weird way reminds him of being back at the prison with its concrete and steel balconies out front. Beyond that are the train tracks
where he knows Rosita is keeping watch atop the silent engine. The fence he's sitting on surrounds a rectangular paddock, overgrown now with high grass and a mixture of wildflowers and weeds, a small stable standing open and empty on the other side, its equine occupants long since gone. Rick is standing in the center of the space, the unruly grass coming almost to his thighs, shading his eyes against the sun’s morning glare and Daryl can see the tense lines of his shoulders even under his heavy jacket. As Daryl watches, he sees Michonne in her full wolf form with the sun glinting off the rich reddish-gold of her coat crawling on her belly through the grass behind Rick and then bolting out to almost bowl him off his feet as she flies past him, her tail straight out behind her.

“Slow down!” Rick yells in her wake, shaking his head as he makes his way back to Daryl’s position, leaning on the fence beside him. “She's out of control.”

Daryl laughs, his eyes still tracking the blur of Michonne’s distinctive pelt as she zig-zags around the interior of the paddock, her ears flattened to her skull and her tongue streaming back from her open jaws. To say he's amazed is an understatement – he's still not sure there are words to describe how he's feeling right now. Michonne had awoken from her first Shift the following morning and had slipped effortlessly back into her human form, her eyes blazing with a passion Daryl hadn’t seen in her for a long time. She had assured them all that she felt fine – better than that, she felt reborn – and Daryl had to agree that the change in her from the previous night was nothing short of miraculous. There had been no learning curve for her as she had Shifted seamlessly from one form to the other, displaying none of the disorientation or concerns that both Rick and Daryl had experienced and claiming that she felt no pain as her body flowed into its new shapes.

They had vacated the station rather abruptly after walkers had started coming out of the nearby woods and surrounded the train and had travelled for almost half a day until Abraham had spotted the motel ahead in the distance and they had stopped to check it out. After securing the place, Rick has insisted that they stay put for at least a couple of days to allow Michonne additional time to adjust to her situation, expressing his concern that her abilities might be temporary given the near-death state she had been in when she was turned. She had fought with him, telling him that it was unnecessary especially now that they were only about twenty miles from their destination but he had stood firm and the group had taken up residence in the empty motel. Now, two days later, Rick is supposedly putting her though her paces when, in reality, she's running rings around him – already naturally adept in each of the tasks he throws at her from hunting to tracking to identifying the different members of their family by their scent alone. Her transformation has brought a renewed vigor to the entire group after their recent losses and Daryl knows that everyone is eager to move on to the coast once that Rick gives the go ahead.

“I'd say she's got you beat,” Daryl agrees, reaching down to clap Rick on the shoulder.

“Please tell me I wasn’t this annoying when you were trying to teach me.”

“Nah,” Daryl answers, throwing his leg over the top of the fence to jump down to the ground on the other side, “you were worse.”

He smiles at Rick's indignant face and then turns to make his way back to the motel as the smell of freshly-cooked rabbit wafts his way and he idly wonders what the odds are of them finding any wild pigs when they reach the coast. He really misses bacon.

The others are sitting or standing outside one of the rooms on the lower level, a small fire blazing in a makeshift ring of stones and Tara is stirring the fat pot that’s hanging over it while Maggie hands out bowls to everyone. Daryl gets his filled, his mouth watering at the enticing smell of the rabbits he’d caught with Rick and Michonne the previous night, and then takes a seat on the ground next to Noah with his back against the motel wall. Rick and Michonne join them a few minutes later, her face lit
up with a glorious smile as she jostles Rick aside to beat him to the food. They eat silently, the morning chill waning as the sun rises higher to start warming the day and then Rick clears his throat, all eyes turning to him.

“We should get moving this morning,” he states and Daryl hears the ripple of relief spread through the group. “Once we’ve eaten, we need to get the water re-filled from the well, get our gear back on the train and have everything ready to go. Daryl and I will take another run and see if we can scare up some more fresh meat in case it’s not safe to stop later.”

“About damn time,” Abraham mutters under his breath, wiping the grease from his fingers onto the leg of his pants and standing up.

“I’ll go hunting too,” Michonne offers up as the others scatter to take care of their belongings.

“No,” Rick tells her gently but firmly, “I’d rather you were here to oversee things, keep an eye on the kids. We won’t be long – an hour tops. Make sure everyone’s ready to go when we get back.”

She nods her agreement although Daryl can practically feel the wolf in her straining to run free again and he knows it will do her good to learn how to curb those urges.

“Come on,” Rick beckons to him and Daryl gets up to follow him.

Rather than worry about finding a safe place for their belongings out in the woods, they stop in the room they’re occupying on the ground floor and undress there before they Shift. As he tugs off his boots and unbuckets his pants to pull them off, Daryl’s eyes can’t help but be drawn to the rumpled bed sheets – flashes of the night before spent tangled in them with Rick warming his skin with remembered touches.

“Thinking about me?” Rick breathes in his ear, coming up behind him to press his naked body against Daryl’s, sliding his hand around his torso to tease at the sparse hair on Daryl’s chest.

“Pfft… don’t flatter yourself, Sheriff,” Daryl snorts but he leans back into Rick’s embrace all the same, biting at his lip as Rick’s fingers work their way down his abdomen. “I was just thinkin’ what a good night’s sleep I had.”

“Oh really?” Rick whispers and Daryl groans a little as his fingers brush against the sensitive skin of his semi-hard cock. “Something tells me you’re lying, Dixon, and you better be ready to run because the only thing I’m hunting out there is you.”

With a small shove, Rick releases him and Daryl turns to find him dropping to the floor of the motel room as he Shifts into the wolf. For a moment Daryl stands mesmerized, drinking in the sight of Rick’s sheer size and strength, his eyes roaming the multi-hued thickness of his silver pelt, but then Rick peels his lips back in a warning snarl and Daryl shakes himself, dropping to initiate his own Shift. They leave the room together, running side by side until they reach the woods and the Rick drop backs, letting Daryl take the lead and Daryl realizes that he was serious about the whole hunting thing. As he slips deeper into the depths of the dark woods, moving swiftly and silently among the undergrowth, he has to admit that he’s a little surprised that Rick is willing to take time out just for them but he’s more than ready to roll with it. He crosses back and forth among the trees, aware of Rick’s presence behind him, leaving his mate a convoluted and confusing trail to follow while he looks for a place to hide himself.

Finding a spot where two downed trees have come together to form a natural hollow underneath, Daryl wriggles himself into the spot, stilling his breathing and moving nothing except his eyes as he waits for Rick to come into view. He knows that Rick can sense he’s nearby as easily as he can smell
him but he's hoping his hiding place will give him enough of an advantage while Rick pinpoints his location. Sure enough, when Rick comes into view, stalking cautiously through the trees with his nose to the ground, he passes by Daryl’s location and Daryl prepares to move. Too late, Rick realizes his error and turns but Daryl is already in motion, bolting from his hiding place and surging forward to take Rick down. They roll together, a ball of furiously snapping jaws and flailing limbs as each of them tries to get the upper hand until, eventually, Daryl manages to get Rick under him, pinning him on his side. Rick Shifts, twisting onto his back and looking up at Daryl, his chest heaving and Daryl can’t resist leaning down to wetly lick his face before Shifting himself.

“That’s disgusting,” Rick tells him, raising a hand to scrub at his face.

“How’s that hunting trip going for you now?” Daryl grins, rolling his hips against Rick’s.

“Well I caught ya, didn’t I” Rick answers, sliding his hands up Daryl's thighs and then gripping them to flip him over onto his back and follow through to straddle him instead.

“Uh-huh,” Daryl agrees, reaching out to tangle his fingers in Rick's unruly curls as he lowers his head and starts kissing his way down Daryl’s chest. “Better make it quick, Sheriff, we got people waiting on us.”

“Quick, huh? Well that shouldn’t be too difficult with you, now should it?” Rick goads him, scraping his teeth across Daryl’s nipple.

Daryl hisses as Rick’s touches light him up, tugging hard on his mate’s hair as he tries to ignore the carpet of broken twigs and damp leaves he's lying on and focus on the way Rick’s licking his lips before he presses them to the tip of Daryl's cock in a great sucking kiss. Daryl hips rock up, his cock slipping just into Rick's hot mouth and he gasps as Rick follows him back down to glide his length all the way in, hollowing his cheeks to suction around him.

“Shiiitttt,” he murmurs, his shoulders pressing back into the harsh ground as Rick's hand finds its way between his thighs and he starts palming Daryl's balls. “Yesss… c’mon…”

Rick increases his pace, spit flying from his lips as he wraps his free hand around Daryl's shaft and starts following every bob of his head with a stroke of his fist, the sensation of his smooth, wet mouth coupled with the rough dryness of his palm sending Daryl into a frenzy. He tries to gather any type of coherent thought in his mind but it’s impossible – all he wants to do is fuck Rick’s perfect mouth until he comes, letting himself go to the baser side of his nature that’s all about his own gratification. He loses himself, feeling every slip and slide of Rick's mouth pushing him into oblivion until he's clawing at the ground and arching his hips skyward as he comes, a primal shout tearing from his lips. Rick pulls off, his hand still wrapped tightly around Daryl's spurting cock and he strokes him hard until Daryl is whimpering beneath him, his eyes trying to focus on Rick’s face.

“Piece of cake,” Rick murmurs, releasing him to work his way up Daryl’s torso, licking the splatters of sticky cum from his trembling skin.

“Jerk!” Daryl manages to rasp out, pushing Rick's grinning head away and flopping his arm back down on the uncomfortable ground while he regains his equilibrium.

“Time’s a wastin’, Dixon,” Rick teases, getting to his feet and standing over Daryl with his hands on his hips and a shit-eating grin on his face. “It ain’t gonna suck itself.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Daryl mutters but he's laughing as he hauls his quivering limbs up until he's kneeling in front of Rick. “Liked ya better with your mouth full.”
Any retort Rick is about to give dies on his lips as Daryl grabs his swinging cock in his fist and steadies it to lick a broad stripe up the underside, swiping his tongue around the tip and paying special attention to the small bundle of nerves just below the head. He tilts his head back just enough to see Rick grasping at the trunk of a nearby tree and then pushes forward, taking Rick’s thickness into the back of his throat and sucking tightly around him. Massaging his length with his tongue, Daryl releases him just a little, alternating a slow suck with furious bobbing until Rick anchors his head between his strong hands and Daryl knows he’s no longer in control. With his hands wrapped tightly around the back of Rick’s knees, Daryl relaxes his throat as Rick pumps into his mouth, looking up at his lover from under his swinging bangs and humming around his length.

“Fuck you,” Rick stutters, giving a final jerk of his hips as the taste of his cum fills Daryl’s mouth, slipping slickly down his throat and he swallows over and over until Rick slips wetly from his lips and falls to his knees beside him.

Daryl doesn’t let him catch his breath, pressing himself against him like an eager puppy, his body still high from his own release and kissing him wildly, biting and sucking at Rick’s lips and tongue until both of them are whining deep in their chests.

“Sonovabitch,” Rick exhales when Daryl finally lets up on kissing him and breaks away, his lips puffy and glistening with a mixture of Daryl’s spit and his own cum.

“That fast enough for ya, Officer?” Daryl grins, wiping the back of his hand across his own lips.

“Asshole,” he counters but Daryl can see the satisfied gleam in his eyes and the smile he’s trying to hide.

“C’mon,” Daryl tells him, the urge to be moving forward again filling him now that they’ve indulged themselves in each other, “let’s do this.”

Rick gives a little groan of protest but he follows Daryl's lead and Shifts alongside him, both of them shaking themselves from nose to tail before they set off back towards the motel, taking just enough time to scare up a few rabbits between them.

Everyone is aboard the train when they get back, Michonne standing impatiently by the engine with her arms crossed as Daryl trots up to her and drops the rabbits at her feet along with Rick.

“Gee, thanks,” she says with a sarcastic roll of her eyes but bends to take care of them while Rick and Daryl head back to their room to Shift and redress.

They quickly gather their belongings together, stuffing items into their packs while they hear Eugene starting the train out front.

“You ready?” Daryl asks, standing in the open doorway and throwing a quick glance around the room for anything he might have missed.

“No,” Rick answers, leaning past him to push the door to the room closed and the frown on Daryl's face melts as Rick pushes him against the door to lay another kiss on him.

He clings to Rick’s shirt, feeling the comforting heat of his skin beneath as Rick's tongue flicks lightly against his lips and the scratch of his beard catches on his. He parts his lips, pressing his tongue eagerly against Rick’s, running it along his teeth and breathing his scent deep until Rick pulls gently away and looks at him with glowing eyes.

“Now, I’m ready,” he breathes, blinking to extinguish the unearthly light in his eyes and pulling open the door again to stride out into the watery sunlight, leaving Daryl to catch up.
Daryl rests his feet up on the seat beside him, his back against the cool glass of the train’s window, his gaze firmly on Rick across the aisle where he is playing chess with Carl. Michonne had insisted on taking the lookout on top of the train and Daryl was happy to let her to, his body still feeling relaxed and sated from his run with Rick earlier. Rick had also acquiesced, choosing to spend his time with his son once more and they had been locked in a battle of the minds ever since, Daryl waving off Carl’s offer of a game – chess had never been something that had interested him, he was more suited to making his move instantly rather than all the forward strategizing that the game entailed. Hershel had also tried to teach him a time or two but he'd found the pace much too slow for his impulsive nature and their lessons had fallen by the wayside but he was happy to see that it was something Rick had rekindled with Carl. Occasionally Rick's head will lift from the board and his eyes will seek out Daryl’s, a knowing smile passing between them, and Daryl will find himself feeling the heat of their passion resurfacing on his skin.

“Sometimes you two are just so cute, I want to throw myself from the top of the train,” Carol says, stepping into his line of sight and pushing his legs down from the seat so that she can sit beside him.

“Stop,” Daryl tells her, dipping his head as he feels a blush creeping across his cheeks.

“Seriously,” she continues and he raises his eyes back up to meet hers, “I’m happy for you, Daryl. You deserve this – you’ve earned it – no matter what else happens in this world, you found each other and that’s all there needs to be. Anything else is just the icing on the cake.”

“You know there's gotta be someone out there for you too,” he tells her quietly, suddenly realizing that he’d spent so long concentrating on his relationship with Rick and all the complications that had come with it, that he’d forgotten that Carol was alone.

“Ha,” she laughs, the sound caressing his ears as she pats his thigh. “Oh, Daryl, that’s sweet but I think any chance of that happening is long gone. Hell, there wasn’t that much of a chance before the world went to hell.”

“Bullshit,” he answers, earning himself a stern glance from Rick. “You don’t know that. We might find a new world at the coast, everythin’ just runnin’ along as it used too, with a whole list of eligible bachelors just waiting to romance a pretty lady like you.”

“Okay, now you’re just being ridiculous,” Carol says with another laugh that crinkles the corners of her eyes.

“Pfft, says who? I’m sure they’ll be linin’ up to take you out.”

“Is that so?”

“Hell yeah… who wouldn’t want a woman who can make the best rabbit stew in the world and strip an assault rifle in under two minutes?”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Carol smiles, nudging his arm with hers and then falling silent for a moment. “You know what I really want?”

“Hmm?”

“Someplace we don’t have to run anymore… somewhere we can finally put down roots without living in fear… a place we can let the kids just be kids again.”

“I know,” he says softly, stretching up an arm and wrapping it around her shoulder to draw her too
him in a move that would’ve been unthought-of to him just months before. “We all do.”

She tenses for a moment, old barriers still present, but then she sighs and leans into his embrace and the two of them quietly watch Rick and Carl making each move slowly across the chessboard as the train rolls on through the afternoon.

They make camp for the night early on the outskirts of North Charleston, Rick apprehensive about going any further in the fading light and he and Daryl sit with Michonne, Carol and Abraham to go over their route for the following day. Once everyone is clear on just where they’re going, they turn in for the night, wanting to be on the move again at first light. Daryl, however finds himself unable to settle, slipping away from Rick’s lightly snoring form in the front of the passenger car and stepping outside to take in the night air. Unsurprisingly, he finds Michonne not too far away and, giving a nod to Glenn who’s on watch atop the engine, he strolls over to join her.

“Couldn’t sleep either, huh?” he asks, coming to stand beside her where she's looking through the links of the high fence that’s bordering the railway line and he has a momentary flashback to the fence surrounding the prison.

“Could you?” she replies, hooking her fingers through the links and leaning her weight back a little to look at him, her lips pulled back from the sharpened points of her teeth and her eyes glowing a deep amber.

“Nah,” Daryl chuckles, leaning his back against one of the fence’s support posts. “When I first Shifted, all I wanted to do was keep runnin’;”

“The night is so bright… I just want to see everything – to let her go, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah… and you will. You have more freedom than I ever did.”

“How come?” she asks, drawing the wolf back inside to look at him with her earnest eyes and, when he speaks to answer her, he does it without any of the self-consciousness about his past that used to cripple him.

“My old man hated what he was… he took every opportunity to tell me what an abomination I was. He refused to Shift… not until the wolf forced it on him and then he’d take off into the woods for a coupla days and god help me if I got in his way when he got back.”

“Why didn’t he want it?” Michonne questions and Daryl can hear the utter disbelief in her voice that somebody wouldn’t want what they have.

“He did at first… Merle told me later. When he first inherited the gift from my granpappy, he was already a cocky sumbitch and the wolf just made that worse. He was always throwin’ his weight around, tryin’ to prove he was somethin’ more than he was – guess he thought the world owed him now that he was special n’all. One night he was flirtin’ with some girl at a bar – way outta his league – showin’ off as usual only, at the end of the night, she left with some other guy and my old man completely lost it. He confronted them out in the parkin’ lot and got into a fight with the guy when he shoulda just walked away. Instead he gets all riled up so naturally the wolf comes out and he winds up snappin’ the guy’s neck.”

“Jesus, Daryl,” Michonne exclaims, her brow furrowing as she stares at him. “They didn’t put him away?”

“Nah… the girl had seen what he was but he threatened her with an even worse end if she ever said anythin’ so she told the cops the other guy had started it and my old man was just actin’ in self-
defense. There was nothin’ they could do – no evidence to prove it wasn’t true, so they let him go. But it changed him… he blamed the wolf for what he’d done and for what he thought it had made him. He never forgave himself for what happened. He was already drinkin’ when he met my momma n’ she was happy enough to join him. When Merle came of age and didn’t turn, my Pa thought he was being rewarded for his repentance and then I showed up. He said he knew I was gonna be evil from the moment I was born – he could smell it on me.”

“Daryl…” Michonne says softly, reaching out to take his hand in hers and he neither flinches away from her touch or her empathy. “But Merle took care of you?”

“In his own way, I guess,” Daryl answers with a sigh, the loss of his brother still keen in his mind despite their complicated past. “But he always resented the fact that his runt of a baby brother got the gift he thought should’ve been his. That was always between us. He even had me bite him once or twice but nothing happened which I think made him even more mad.”

“I’m sorry,” she tells him sincerely, squeezing his fingers.

“Don’t be – it is what it is. Things are different now… with Rick and now you. I just wish I had more answers to give ya.”

“It’s okay, we’ll figure it out together – all of us.”

“I hope so,” he answers, returning the pressure on her fingers and then dropping her hand to straighten up and readjust his crossbow on his shoulder. “C’mon, whaddya say me n’ you take a quick run?”

Michonne’s face lights up in response and Daryl can’t help but smile back at her before leading them back to the train to find a private place to undress and Shift, his heart happy that everything has been so easy for her after the scare she gave them.

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They get underway just after dawn the next morning, waking up to a light fog which soon burns off as the morning progresses and is replaced with a scorching heat instead as though summer suddenly decided to throw one last log on the fire and go out in a blaze of glory. The inside of the passenger car is almost unbearable and everyone arguing over who gets to ride up top makes Daryl crazy enough to the point where he opens the rear door to the car and hauls himself up onto the roof at the back just to get away from them. Just as the sun hits its apex in the sky and Daryl is wondering whether he would feel cooler if he just hung his tongue out and panted, the train grinds to a halt and he’s on his feet in an instant, making his way to the crow’s nest on the engine where Abraham and Maggie are on watch.

“Why we stoppin’?” he calls out, scanning the area and seeing nothing out of the ordinary apart from the fact that they’ve stopped where a road intersects with the tracks just off of the highway.

“This is as far as we go,” Michonne answers from below, stepping down from the train’s cab with an unfolded map in her hand. “This is the road we need… we’re walking from here.”

Shading his eyes against the blazing sun, Daryl looks in the direction she’s pointing, down along the expanse of the two-lane state road seeing nothing on the horizon but more trees and a few abandoned cars.

“You sure?” he calls down to her.

“Yes, Daryl, I’m sure,” she answers, her tone just erring on the edge of sarcasm. “I know how to
read a map. What do you want – a sign saying, ‘This way to the beach’?”

“It’d be nice,” he tosses back at her as he swings down from the roof of the train, closely followed by Abe who leaves Maggie on watch, and meets up with the others who are disembarking from the passenger car.

“Okay people,” Rick says as they all come together in the shade of the train, “let’s get together as much as we can carry and get moving. We’ve got about twenty miles ahead of us – let’s see how far we can get before it gets dark.”

Everybody heads back onto the train to pack their belongings while Daryl keeps watch outside with Maggie still up top until they all gradually congregate outside once more, Rick handing Daryl his bulging pack. Daryl slips it onto his back, watching while Rick makes sure that Judith is securely settled in the carrier on Carl’s chest, her pink face shaded by a wide-brimmed white sunhat. When he’s satisfied that everyone is ready, Rick leads the way out onto the road, Daryl letting everyone pass him by until he takes up his position at the rear of the line and they begin on the long trek ahead of them.

They’re less than ten minutes down the tree-lined road when they come across a fire station, the engines missing and the front door hanging from its hinges but Abraham still insists they check it out. He takes Carol along with him and they quickly scour the interior of the building, coming back out to report nothing but a lone walker inside and anything they could possibly use having been long gone. Rick gets everybody moving again but Daryl can see his annoyance at them having stopped in the first place – he knows that he just agreed to avoid any conflict with Abraham rather than the thought that they might actually find anything. The woods lining the way thicken the further they go, providing at least a little shade where they overhang the cracked and blistered surface of the road but they do nothing to reduce the stifling heat that’s searing at everyone’s lungs and drenching them all in sweat. The moss-covered trees are interspersed every so often with different homesteads – either sprawling white houses with porticoed entrances or smaller, more weather-beaten residences that Daryl knows he would feel completely at home in. When they pass the hulking shadow of an electricity pylon standing close to the road, Daryl is struck by the absence of man-made sounds that had once seemed so commonplace to all of them – no hum in the wires, no planes in the sky, no distant cars on the highway – nothing but the natural sounds of the woods around them. It was something he had never give much thought to but, now that he was really listening, the loss of those sounds wasn’t a thing he missed and he had to wonder if he really was more at home in this new world than he ever had been in his old life, despite all the hardships that came along with it.

The afternoon sun is relentless as they push on through the shimmering haze that’s rising from the hardtop, dealing with the occasional walker that wanders into their line of sight, the sweat crawling down Daryl's spine beneath the weight of his pack. They evaluate each new structure as they pass them, looking for both potential sources of food and water, which they’re going through at an alarming rate, and also shelter for the coming night. Although Rick, Daryl and now Michonne can provide an almost endless supply of fresh game for the adults, food for Judith is getting woefully low but, so far, none of the buildings they’ve passed have offered up anything even remotely resembling a baby-friendly environment. A sagging antique store with its once precious wares still displayed outside, now rusting and rotting in the elements, is followed a few miles later by a white-clad Baptist church with a cluster or walkers in the yard which Michonne, Abraham and Rosita make short work of as the others hurry past. Further along they come across a gaudily-painted convenience store, its multi-colored flags which are strung from the roof to the telephone pole out front hanging limply in the still air. As they pass it by, its caved-in roof dissuading them from even looking inside, Daryl glances back and sees that the entire side is painted with a faded mural depicting a cartoon beach scene and he feels a shiver run down his back at the thought that they might actually be within reach of what they’re searching for.
With the sun on its downwards descent behind them and the woods only seeming to go for longer stretches between buildings, Daryl is starting to get concerned that they might not find anywhere safe to bed down for the night when they abruptly come to an intersection and everyone grinds to a halt. Taking a look around as he walks up beside Rick, Daryl can see a wood-paneled store on one corner, its enormous sign pronouncing it as ‘Loretta’s Deli & Grocery’, another starkly-white Baptist church across the street – this one with signs of fire damage creeping up from its doors and windows – and a sorry-looking gas station with a line of about six cars stretching away from the pumps.

“Whaddya think?” Daryl asks, his parched voice sounding scratchy in the quiet surrounding them.

“Store looks pretty intact,” Rick answers, squinting as he turns to check out every direction. “Could work.”

“Alright,” Daryl agrees with a nod, his attention drawn to the lone traffic signal hanging above them as it starts a slow, creaking swing on its wire and he feels a blessed puff of cool air against his face. “You go check it out with Michonne… the rest of us should see if any of those cars will still run and make sure the other buildin’s are safe.”

“Yes, boss,” Rick murmurs, tilting his head to give Daryl the merest hint of a wink before relaying his instructions to the others and they fan out like a well-oiled machine.

Daryl moves swiftly to give the surrounding buildings the once over, Carol shadowing him as they find and kill two walkers and then make their way back to the intersection where Rick and Michonne are then walking back from the deli.

“Anything?” Rick asks as they come together along with the rest of the group.

“Couple of walkers,” Carol answers, re-sheathing her knife. “Nothing to worry about. The church is burnt out and the gas station’s been picked clean.”

“How about you?”

“Yes, boss.”

“A couple of walkers,” Carol answers, re-sheathing her knife. “Nothing to worry about. The church is burnt out and the gas station’s been picked clean.”

“Any of those cars working?”

“Nope, all dead,” Rosita reports and Daryl can’t say he’s too disappointed – sometimes driving is more trouble than it’s worth and he wasn’t looking forward to spending another hot day cooped up in a tin box with no air conditioning.

“How about you?” Carol asks and Daryl is surprised to see Rick’s face break open in a wide smile.

“Well, we found Loretta,” he says with a small laugh. “The store is pretty much empty but it seems that Loretta thought it was a good idea to lock herself in the storeroom out back and have herself a cocktail of whiskey and sleeping pills. It took a little work to get the door open and she was all riled up by the time we did but we hit the jackpot. She had a whole stash of goods back there.”

“Food for Judy?” Daryl asks.

“Food for everyone,” Rick smiles, resting his hand on Daryl’s shoulder and giving it a tight squeeze. “Come on.”

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As soon as the sun is up the next morning, the group gets back on the road, each of them with far heavier packs than the day before but each of them feeling sated and well-rested after their night in the store. Daryl’s heart is certainly lighter now that they’re carrying enough food to keep Judith going for quite some time and they had even managed to find some diapers that had been left behind when the store had been raided. The day is shaping up to be another scorcher but nobody complains as
they follow the twists and turns of the road ahead of them, the scenery still consisting of long stretches of woodland with the occasional dwelling tucked away among the trees. They start to see more and more bodies of water as they move eastward, crossing over rivers and creeks, the surrounding land starting to give way to more marshy areas until Daryl can smell salt on the air and he knows they must be close to the ocean. It still takes him by surprise, however, when they top a small rise in the road and suddenly it’s there in front of them, its glittering expanse spread out as far as he can see in either direction. Everyone stops moving and he comes to a halt beside Rick, shading his eyes as he tries to take everything in, feeling so completely overwhelmed that he has no words. Rick takes his hand, linking their fingers tightly as they stare in wonder at the sight before them, and Daryl can feel both their hearts pounding faster with the anticipation of what’s to come.
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Just a quick thank you to everyone who reads this and a special thanks to everyone who takes the time to comment, it really means a lot. I'm sorry I can't update as often as I like but I appreciate you all bearing with me. ♥

A few people have asked me when our heroic duo are going to get a break, so here you go! A totally fluffy chapter to give everyone time to take a breath. I hope you enjoy it. :)

Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, tmd-dump-station

Please show your appreciation for her amazing talent and like/reblog the original here.
As he steps out of the almost tropical heat of the greenhouse, carefully closing the door behind him, Rick thinks to himself that it hasn’t taken them long to adapt to a new routine and a new way of life – it’s one of the qualities about his family that he admires the most and they never cease to amaze him with their tenacity and their resilience. The last two months had been anything but easy but they had kept it together and worked as a team to get to where they are now. He takes a moment to look out to sea, the chill wind that’s buffeting against him cooling the flushed heat of his skin and prompting him to flip up the collar of his jacket as he turns and sets off in the direction of the main house.

Once they had arrived on the coast road, it had been easy enough to find their way to the lighthouse Michonne had talked about. Although it was only a short distance from where they’d arrived, the route took them through what had once been a fairly densely populated area – the road crowded on either side with expensive-looking beachfront properties and every type of surfside business they could imagine. They’d encountered numerous walkers and, with no other route to take, they’d had no choice but to fight their way through. By the time they’d come into sight of the lighthouse itself, everyone was on edge and feeling both mentally and physically exhausted but there was still an underlying air of anxious excitement running through the group as they had surveyed their goal.

From a safety standpoint, Rick couldn’t have dreamed up a better location in a million years and he found himself staring in disbelief as they’d cautiously approached their destination. They had stood huddled together under cover of the trees that led up almost to the edge of the cliff, keeping well off of the single lane road that wound among the woods and out onto the small clearing ahead. The land sloped down from where they had stood ending in a sheer drop to the crashing ocean below, the small headland bordered by the ocean on one side and the mouth of a wide estuary on the other. The cliffs tapered out from the mainland to form a natural bridge, no more than thirty feet across at its widest point, which then opened out again onto a wide island with the towering, solid stone structure of the lighthouse at its center. The same stone had been used to construct the sprawling house adjacent to its base along with a handful of other outbuildings. From their elevated position they had also been able to make out the roof of a large greenhouse in the rear and Rick had wondered how much of it was still intact.

Checking the place out with the binoculars from his pack, he was concerned but not surprised to see that they place was, or had recently been, occupied. Although there was nobody in sight when they had arrived, the road connecting the island to the mainland was blocked by a sturdy rock wall and a pair of heavy wooden gates which stood at least nine feet tall and were covered with sharpened spikes. Its construction and positioning at the island end of the road had obviously been carefully thought out and Rick had no doubt it had been set in place after the walkers had come into existence. He doubted very much that the bed and breakfast had warranted such strict security measures in the pre-apocalypse world so it stood to reason that someone had fortified the location once the world had moved on. What Rick had to determine was if that someone was still around and, if so, what type of reception would they give the band of travelers looking for access to their sanctuary.

After watching the place for a while and seeing no signs of movement beyond the wall, Rick had made the decision to take Daryl and Michonne with him and make an attempt to get in. He had figured that the worst that could happen would be them getting chased away by the island’s occupants if they were still in residence or, best case scenario, they might be able to negotiate with them to let them in. The one option that he didn’t give more than a fleeting thought to because it seemed the most unlikely, given the prime piece of real estate they were trying to occupy, was that
the place had been abandoned and was theirs for the taking. The three of them had walked brazenly up to the gates, weapons drawn but with arms wide open just in case they were being watched. When nobody had appeared to challenge them, Rick had called out a loud greeting, banging on the wooden gate with the butt of his gun and then waiting for a response. When none was forthcoming, he had looked at each of his companions and, with a nod, had boosted himself up and over the gates with ease, using the sharpened spikes as hand and footholds.

Dropping to the ground on the other side, he had braced himself for a possible assault but none had come so he had signaled to Michonne and Daryl to follow him and the three of them had separated to make short work of checking the exterior of the house and the outbuildings. Daryl had headed into the lighthouse itself to check it out, leaving Rick and Michonne to tackle the large house which boasted ten bedrooms each with their own bathroom along with a spacious kitchen and dining room. Entering through the front door, stepping carefully over the cheery welcome mat outside, they had found themselves in a generous-sized living room, the area just inside the door having been furnished with a small reception desk that was tucked away beside the staircase leading to the upper level. The rest of the bright room was taken up with a trio of comfy-looking sofas as well as a pair of overstuffed armchairs and a large coffee table sitting in the center of the room before the rough-hewn stone of a huge fireplace. Rick had caught the scent of decay the second he had stepped through the door as had Michonne, her sword raised in front of her as she crept stealthily from the living room, past the dining room and into the kitchen. There they had discovered the corpse of a man seated at the kitchen table, a handgun beside him on the floor that he had used to end his life and a note wedged under his fingertips that told the all too familiar tale of the death of his wife from a once simple sickness that had not only taken her life but had forced him to put her down once she had arisen again. That act had been the final straw for him and, after burying her in the woods on the mainland, he had locked himself back behind their wall and made the decision to end his own life. After a quick scan of the rooms upstairs and with Daryl coming back to give the all clear on the lighthouse, Rick had opened the front gates to signal the others in while Daryl and Michonne removed the previous occupant’s body and found the place where his wife was buried to lay him to rest alongside her. The group had explored their new home, fighting good-naturedly over sleeping arrangements, and Rick had tried so hard to suppress the feeling that was trying to overwhelm him that they might just have found what they were looking for. With the gates secured behind them, they had quickly settled into their new home, working hard to make it their own as fall had drifted into a mild winter – the bed and breakfast providing everyone with more than enough room and the lighthouse giving them the ultimate strategic advantage as a lookout post. To everyone’s delight they found that the solar panels which had been used to power the lighthouse’s beacon also provided ample power to the house, in tandem with another array on the building’s roof, along with heating the greenhouse as well. Beyond the greenhouse they had found a freshly-turned plot of land surrounded by a high wooden fence to protect it from the sea winds that gusted across the island and Daryl had amused himself by teasing Rick about putting on his farmer’s hat once more. When they felt settled enough, they had begun organizing runs into the surrounding neighborhoods, systematically clearing out as many walkers as they could and scouring through every residence and business they came across to gather whatever supplies they could. Andrea’s promise of wild deer had also come to fruition with dozens of them running loose in the nearby woods and they had even managed to acquire a healthy number of chickens, although they had yet to find Daryl’s elusive wild pigs.

Rick finds himself humming as he heads back to the house, the lyrics to a favorite song teasing at his brain until a familiar sound cuts through the music in his head and he smiles broadly as he changes direction, heading for the gate instead. Throwing a glance up at the lighthouse as he goes, he sees Maggie high on the walkway, her hand shielding her eyes against the afternoon sun as she stares intently out of the compound to the road beyond. Rick waits until she gives him the all clear and then
continues to the gate to haul effortlessly on the rope that works the pulley mechanism and watch the gates swing open. Rick gives another smile as they part to reveal Daryl approaching along the clifftop road astride a purring motorcycle with a pickup following closely behind him. He grins when he sees Rick inside the gates and, although he can’t see them behind the dark glasses he’s wearing, Rick just knows that Daryl’s eyes are glowing.

He’d never spoken about it directly – it was more just casual comments and a sense that Rick got – but he knew that Daryl had been heartbroken when he had lost Merle’s bike in the fall of the prison. Scouting the nearby houses not long after they’d gotten settled at the lighthouse, they’d stumbled across an untouched garage one day where they had found a tarp-covered bike along with a whole array of parts and tools. Even though he had scoffed at it for being ‘some rich prick’s hobby’ who clearly hadn’t known what he was doing, Rick had seen the way Daryl’s eyes had lit up when they’d found the bike and he’d insisted they spent any free time they had to get it roadworthy. He had dragged Daryl out there, late at night, lighting the garage with hurricane lamps and encouraging him to work to get the bike up to his standards, finding a surprising peace in watching his lover lose himself in something that he was so obviously passionate about. It also came to no surprise to Rick that seeing Daryl working with his hands – covered in smudges of grease and dirt, alternatively cussing at the machine or humming gently under his breath as he worked – was a huge turn on for him and, more often than not, he would have Daryl pinned up against the dirty workbench by the end of the night, pants around his ankles as Rick fucked him wild and hard.

Daryl rolls the bike to a halt just inside the gates, pulling over to let the pickup pass him, and Rick gives a nod to Abraham at the wheel with Noah and Glenn beside him before he closes the gates behind them.

“Did you get it?” he asks anxiously, coming up alongside Daryl as he dismounts the bike.

“Keep your panties on,” Daryl teases him, taking off his glasses and pushing the bike towards the small garage across from the house as Rick falls into step beside him. “I got it – got ev’rythin’ you wanted. ‘s’all on the truck.”

“Yes!” Rick exclaims happily, swinging open the garage door so that Daryl can park the bike inside. He can’t resist pulling the door shut behind them and reaching out to tug Daryl to him for a kiss, noting that he was right about the otherworldly glow in his partner’s eyes. Daryl gives a little grunt of surprise but leans instantly into him, his hands sliding to Rick's hips as their mouths work gently against each other. Although he knows that Daryl is more than capable of looking after himself, Rick can’t help but worry when he goes out without him although it does make their reunions that much sweeter.

“Any trouble?” he asks when their lips finally part although they keep their bodies pressed tightly together.

“Nothin’ we couldn’t handle,” Daryl shrugs, nuzzling his lips against the smooth skin of Rick’s throat and Rick shivers under his touch at the sensation.

About three weeks after they had arrived at their new home, Rick had caught Daryl looking at him in the mirror while he was brushing his teeth before bed.

“What?” he’d asked, spitting into the sink and putting his toothbrush back in the holder.

Daryl hadn’t answered him but had just padded barefoot into the bathroom, a pair of too-big pajama pants slung dangerously low on his narrow hips that were doing all sorts of evil things to Rick’s insides, and had plucked a razor from its place beside the sink and held it up for Rick to see. Rick
had dropped his chin to his chest for a moment then, with a resigned sigh, he had raised his head to meet Daryl’s quiet gaze and had taken the razor from his hand. In the end it had taken both of them using a combination of scissors and two razors to remove every last trace of his beard from his face along with a generous amount of good-natured cursing on his part. He had stood, once they were done, staring forlornly down at the carpet of hair covering his toes, feeling naked and completely self-conscious until he had seen the look on Daryl’s face and known he’d made the right choice.

Now, he had to wonder what had made him hold out for so long as Daryl’s warm lips caress the underside of his jaw, sending a tremor across Rick’s skin.

“We should help them unload the truck,” he murmurs, wanting to stay in this moment as long as possible but also eager to see what Daryl had brought home with him, “before eager eyes catch a glimpse of what they’re not supposed to.”

Daryl grunts but steps away from him nonetheless, pulling his crossbow back into place on his shoulder from where it had slid down while they were kissing. They secure the garage door and head outside to where Glenn, Abraham and Noah have been joined by Tara and Rosita, all of them making short work of getting the supplies into the house. Carrying a large box with his name scrawled on it that Daryl hands to him from the back of the truck, Rick has one of those surreal moments when he walks out of the chilly air outside, through the mudroom and into the warmth of the bright kitchen. The large space is a little crowded with everyone coming in to claim the things the scouting party had brought back for them but there’s a fire blazing in the hearth and the smell of the soup Carol had made for lunch is still hanging in the air. It’s homely and inviting, everything they had been looking for and Rick still has moments where he can’t believe that any of it is real, that he’s going to wake up to find himself on the side of a dusty highway with a walker nibbling at his boots.

That feeling of disconnect only intensifies as he leaves the kitchen, passing the dining room with its gleaming mahogany table that easily seats twelve, and heads into the living room on his right where Carl is watching Judith play in front of another roaring fire at the far end – both of them looking cleaner and more at ease than any time Rick can remember. His eye is drawn, as it always is when he enters this room, to the large Christmas tree in the corner by the fire, its top almost scraping the ceiling and its branches festooned with decorations and twinkling lights. It’s something he thought he’d never see again in his lifetime and the sight brings an unexpected lump to his throat each time he sees it.

“They get back okay?” Carl asks, looking up from where he’s sprawled on his stomach on the floor as his father enters the room.

“Sure did,” Rick answers with a smile, repositioning the box in his arms as he tries not to step on any of the multitude of Judith’s toys that are littering the plush carpet. “I think I saw a box with your name on it in the kitchen.”

“Sweet,” Carl grins, abandoning the book he’d been reading to push up off of the floor and pick up his baby sister before stopping to eye up the box in Rick’s arms. “What did you get?”

“Now, Carl, you know better than to ask that,” Rick chides him, angling the box away from him even though the top is securely closed. “Go on with you.”

Carl laughs as he walks away to the kitchen, leaving Rick shaking his head as he takes the opposite direction to his and Daryl’s room at the front of the house. Nudging open the door with his hip, he enters the room that’s warmly lit by the afternoon sun coming through the wide windows and sets down the box on the bed, cursing under his breath as he trips on yet another of Judith’s many toys. Daryl had discovered a line of gift shops along the coast road, including a small toy store, and had brought back what Rick had assumed to be their entire inventory. Leaving the box on the bed, he
bends down to pick up the stuffed dog from the floor along with one of Daryl's dirty t-shirts and an odd sock which he takes into the bathroom to stuff into their already overflowing laundry hamper. He's coming back out with the toy tucked under his arm when Daryl enters the room carrying another small box – this one open so that Rick can see it contains a variety of bath salts, shampoos, soaps and other essentials such as toothpaste and what appears to be about a gallon of lube.

“You know, if you need somethin’ to hold, I’ve got a puppy right here for ya.” Daryl tells him, nodding at the stuffed animal under Rick’s arm and grabbing suggestively at his crotch with his free hand.

Rick snorts dismissively at him as he walks past into the small room beside the bathroom that used to be a study but that they’ve re-purposed as a nursery for Judith and tosses the toy into her crib where it lands among a dozen more just like it.

“Did you find the seeds I asked you for?” he asks, coming back out to stand in the bathroom doorway while he watches Daryl emptying the box into the cupboards under the sink.

“Mm-hmm.” Daryl mumbles, lining up the new bottles behind all the others he already has stashed under there and Rick can’t help but smile at his mate’s ever-growing obsession with bathtime now that they have the luxury of hot water whenever they want it. “Noah’s got ‘em.”

“Good,” Rick nods, thinking about how well the greenhouse is coming along and making plans for when he’ll be able to plant outside.

“Abe asked me again today,” Daryl tells him, breaking Rick’s train of thought as he stands up and leans against the sink.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I told him he’d have to talk to you about it.”

Rick exhales slowly, leaning against the doorframe as he contemplates Daryl’s words, not wanting to be the only one making this decision.

“What do you think?”

“Well… if we’re gonna do it, now’s the time. We’re pretty secure here but you know we can’t say what’s comin’, Rick. We thought we were secure at the prison too. Maybe the extra muscle wouldn’t be a bad thing.”

“I know but do you think he’s ready for this?”

“I think he wants it,” Daryl replies carefully.

“But can he handle it?”

“Guess there’s only one way to find out for sure.”

“Alright,” Rick agrees, his mind still split over the decision, “but let’s at least get Christmas out of the way first. The last thing we want is a new wolf ruining Carol’s dinner… damn, did that sound as weird to you as it did to me?”

“A little,” Daryl agrees with a small smile.

“Christmas… dinner… gifts… sometimes I wonder just whose life this is I’m living because it can’t
be mine.”

“Uh huh,” Daryl nods, moving in to rest his hand against Rick's chest before laying a deep kiss on his lips, “but anytime you need a reminder that it’s all yours, Sheriff, you just let me know.”

“Will do,” Rick breathes, snaking his arm around Daryl's waist to keep him close while he kisses him again.

By the time Christmas morning dawns, there's an air of excited anticipation filling the whole house that has everyone awake early and gathered in the living room to eat breakfast. When they had first arrived at the compound, they had found most of the equipment inside the lighthouse still working although the light itself had been disabled and had discovered a digital clock that had displayed not only the passage of time but also the date. It had been awhile since they’d had any accurate reading of the days other than Rick's wristwatch and the pocket watch Hershel had given to Glenn but, once they’d seen that display and had been able to watch the days draw inexorably closer to the end of the year, everyone agreed that it just felt right that they should celebrate in some way. An investigation of the basement had revealed a variety of neatly-labelled boxes filled with decorations for every holiday imaginable and so Rick and Glenn had gone out, at Maggie’s request, to find a suitable tree for the living room. Carol had started planning Christmas dinner like it was a military operation, something which Daryl had ribbed her about mercilessly until she had started sending him out with very specific lists of what she needed and woe betide him if he came back without something or offered her an inferior substitute. Tara had organized a sort of Secret Santa exchange for gift-giving to keep things simple with the exception of the kids, who everyone wanted to get something for even though Rick insisted that Judy already had way too many toys and that Carl was too grown up for such things. Naturally, everyone ignored him and the stack of brightly-wrapped gifts under the tree for the Grimes siblings grew until there was barely any room for anyone else’s. Not that anyone really seemed to mind – there was a general consensus among the group that this was something they wanted to do, to give the kids a normal Christmas, but Rick knew that it had evolved into something more than that for all of them.

With breakfast squared away and everyone relaxing with steaming mugs of coffee or tea, the family looks on as Carl and Judith tear into their gifts – the latter sitting on Rick's lap as he and Daryl help her with the unwrapping. The room is filled with the sounds of contented chatter and tearing paper along with more genuine laughter than Rick has heard in a long time and he can’t keep the smile from his own lips as he watches his children’s obvious delight over the gifts they’ve received. When Carl has opened the last gift from under the softly-lit tree, Rick gives Daryl a nod and he slips away to their room to retrieve their gift for their son.

“This one’s from me n’ your dad,” Daryl says, coming back into the room and handing the large box to Carl before retaking his seat next to Rick. “If it’s the wrong one… well tough. Ain’t no exchanges.”

Carl laughs as he rips into the paper and opens the box inside, his grin getting even wider as he reaches in to pull out a brand new games console followed by a dozen or so games.

“Yes!” he says triumphantly, turning over the console box in his hands to read the back and Rick can see they’ve lost him to it already. “Can we hook it up now?”

“Well…” Rick starts to say, catching some of his son’s enthusiasm but Carol's firm tones interrupt him.

“After dinner,” she says with one of those smiles that nobody dares argue with.
Rick gives Carl a knowing wink and watches as his son reluctantly puts the console aside and takes a seat on the floor beside his sister as everyone starts handing around their gifts for each other. There’s another burst of happy chatter as each gift is revealed and displayed to the group for approval until Michonne steps over to hand a slightly heavy box to Rick and a smaller one to Daryl – something about the gleam in her eye making him very nervous and he unwraps his as though he's handling explosives. Daryl, in the meantime, has torn open his box to find a small, nondescript key which he holds up between his thumb and forefinger with a puzzled look on his face. When Rick’s gift turns out to be a small wooden chest with a tiny lock on the front, the reason for Daryl's gift becomes apparent and he silently hands Rick the key, leaning in to watch as Rick slides it into the lock. With just a slight feeling of trepidation, Rick turns the key, hearing the soft click as the mechanism releases and then he lifts the lid, his eyes widening as he looks inside. He slams it back down after just the briefest of glances, feeling his face burning in embarrassment as he reaches out to slap Daryl on the back from where he's choking on the sip of coffee he'd taken just as Rick had opened the chest.

“What the fuck?” Daryl sputters, trying to catch his breath and Rick can see his face is also a deep shade of crimson.

“Language,” Carol admonishes him but Rick can see from the smirk on her lips and the amused sparkle in her eyes that she knows exactly what's in the chest that is now resting on his knees like a red hot brick.

“Merry Christmas,” laughs Michonne, leaning back into her seat and smiling like a wolf with a fat rabbit in its sights.

Rick swallows thickly, ignoring the inquisitive looks from the others as he turns the key in the lock and withdraws it, sitting the chest on the floor between his feet. As he straightens up, Daryl reaches over, deftly plucking the key from his fingers and making it disappear into the front pocket of his jeans.

“I think that part’s mine, Sheriff,” he says in a low voice, giving Rick a look that turns his insides to molten lava.

Clearing his throat, Rick can feel a new heat crawling over his skin but this one has nothing to do with the embarrassment he was feeling and everything to do with Daryl’s eyes and Michonne’s gift. The quick glimpse he'd taken had given him just enough time to see that the sleek-looking box was filled to the brim with a variety of sex-aids – from flavored condoms and lubes to things that he'd never even seen before much less had a name for but that he was already imagining trying out with Daryl. He even thought he'd glimpsed a pair of shining handcuffs tucked away in one corner before he’d hastily closed the lid and he had to wonder where in the hell Michonne had been to find this stuff.

“So… who’s next?” he asks, wiping his palms on his thighs and desperately trying not to look at Daryl. “Glenn?”

Still looking a bit confused by Rick's seemingly odd response to Michonne’s gift, Glenn shrugs it off and hands his and Maggie’s gift to Tara and the morning continues until the only ones remaining without having received anything are Rosita, Glenn and Maggie. Abraham has the gift for Rosita which he hands over with a sly grin and a kiss to her cheek, watching carefully as she rips off the poorly-wrapped paper and opens the box inside.

“Are you kidding me?” she asks in a definitely unamused tone as she holds up a pair of shiny red stilettos in one hand and a black lacy thong in the other.

“What’s wrong, darlin’? I thought you’d like ‘em,” Abraham asks with a frown while Daryl reaches
out to cover Carl’s eyes with his palm and the others shift uncomfortably in their seats.

“No… you thought you’d like them,” she hisses, getting up and shoving the box into his hands before storming off across the room and up the stairs at the far end.

Abraham sits there for a moment, staring at the crumpled paper and box in his hands and then gets to his feet without a word to follow in Rosita’s footsteps up the stairs. Nobody speaks, the only sound in the room coming from the Christmas CD that’s been playing softly in the background all morning until Carol claps her hands together, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Rick, don’t you and Daryl have something for Glenn and Maggie?” she asks, giving him a smile.

“Yes,” he replies, jumping to his feet, eager to find a distraction from the raised voices they can all hear floating down through the ceiling above. “Daryl.”

Daryl follows him across the room to the reception desk opposite the front door and they both head behind it to slide out the large package they had brought in from the workshop outside and hidden there the previous night. It takes both of them to lift it, taking care not to tear the shiny Christmas paper that’s covering it and they set it down in front of the desk, Rick beckoning Glenn and Maggie over to join them while the others turn in their seats to watch. Drawing them around to stand on the far side of the waist high box, Rick leans in to whisper in Maggie’s ear.

“Daryl and I made this for both of you… it’s up to you if you share it with the group.”

Smiling at the puzzled look on her face, he steps back to stand beside Daryl who is chewing nervously on his thumbnail as they watch the couple rip the paper from the top of the box. With a curious smile, Maggie lifts the lid of the box inside just enough for her and Glenn to be able to peek in, both of them staring at the contents for a moment before Maggie drops the lid back down and turns to face Rick and Daryl, tears welling in her eyes.

“How did you...?” she starts, her eyes wide in wonder and her hand flying up to cover her mouth.

“What is it?” yells Tara impatiently but nobody pays any attention to her.

“Ask Daryl,” Rick smiles, nudging his blushing mate with his elbow, “he was the one figured it out.”

“Figured what out?” Tara asks, now kneeling to hang over the back of the sofa.

Maggie looks from Rick back to her husband, an unasked question evident in her eyes and he gives her a nod, linking his fingers with hers as they face the others.

“I’m pregnant,” she announces and the room erupts as everyone surges from their seats and comes to gather around the couple, giving them hugs, handshakes and a babble of good wishes.

When the noise dies down a little, Maggie turns back to the half-unwrapped gift and pulls away the rest of the paper and the cardboard inside with Glenn’s help to reveal a gleaming wooden crib, its rich deep color showing off the hand-crafted details which have been painstakingly added to every part.

“You guys made this?” Glenn asks with a low whistle.

Rick nods, reaching out to shake the hand that Glenn offers him, pulling his friend to him to slap him on the back while Maggie envelopes a squirming Daryl in an enormous bear hug.

“Thank you,” she whispers, moving on to hug Rick. “It’s beautiful.”
“Congratulations,” he tells her quietly, taking her hands in his and squeezing them gently. “You’re going to be a great mom, I just know it. And you know we’re here for you… all of us. Whatever you need, it’s yours. We’re not going to let anything happen to you or the baby, I promise you.”

“I know,” Maggie answers, her eyes brimming with unshed tears once more and she takes a deep breath before letting go of Rick’s hands.

“Come on,” he says, clapping Daryl on the shoulder, “let’s get this into their room and then maybe, if we ask nicely enough, Carol will let you help her in the kitchen.”

“Hey!” Daryl grumbles but he helps Rick lift the crib anyway, carrying it down the hall to the bedroom opposite theirs on the ground floor and ignoring the comment Carol throws his way as they pass her about peeling vegetables.

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Rick is so sated that he can barely move, the arm that Daryl has draped across his stomach feeling like a lead weight, but he doesn’t care – he just wants to lay here forever, basking in the aftermath of the amazing day they had which was followed by an equally amazing night once they had closed the door to their room and cracked open Michonne’s gift for a proper look inside. Rick chuckles softly as he remembers the look on Daryl’s face as he’d pulled out item after item, his eyes widening as he’d figured out the purpose of each and every one until Rick hadn’t been able to contain himself any longer and he’d pinned his lover to the bed to start testing out their new toys. Now his body is aching in numerous ways that are still throwing pleasurable reminders at him and he makes a mental note to thank Michonne profusely for her gift in the morning.

“Will you stop grinnin’ n’ go to sleep,” Daryl grumbles from beside him, turning his face to look at Rick from under the shaggy strands of his ruffled hair, blinking in the muted light of the bedside lamp.

“Nope,” Rick replies, reaching over to push Daryl’s unruly hair back from his eyes until Daryl bats his hand away.

“Quit it.”

“I’ve got something for you… nearly forgot,” Rick tells him, rolling over to open the drawer in his bedside table.

“I already told ya… I ain’t tryin’ that thing with the spikes,” Daryl protests but he sits up when Rick turns back to lay a neatly-wrapped package on the bed in front of him.

“What is it?” he asks suspiciously, chewing on his bottom lip as he contemplates the shiny, gold paper.

“Well, you have to open it to find out, dumbass,” Rick laughs softly, giving him a small shove. “Kinda the whole point of Christmas.”

“Huh,” Daryl grunts, a shadow clouding his features for a moment. “Only thing I ever got for Christmas was a six-pack or a carton of smokes… bag of gummy bears if Merle was feelin’ generous at the checkout in the liquor store.”

“And now you have this,” Rick tells him, lifting a hand to tilt Daryl’s face up to his so that he can give him a gentle kiss and he’s gratified to see the smile on Daryl’s lips when he pulls away. “Open your damn gift, Dixon.”
Daryl dips his head shyly but does as he’s asked, undoing the paper almost reverently and smoothing it back to reveal what looks like a folded blanket until he lifts it up and shakes it out to show that it’s actually a poncho, the muted colors of the soft material finished with what is obviously hand stitching. Daryl looks down at the poncho in his hands for the longest time, running his fingers over the patterns on the cloth before he raises his eyes to Rick and gives him a quizzical look.

“Carol helped me with the stitching… I’m sorry it’s not as good as one you’d get in a store but I looked everywhere and I couldn’t find one… guess they weren’t in such great demand at the beach but I kinda missed your old one and…”

Daryl cuts him off, pushing up from the bed to wrap his hand around the back of Rick’s neck and kiss him hard until both of them are breathless and Rick’s heart is racing in his chest.

“Guess it’s okay then,” Rick laughs when Daryl finally lets him go, his eyes shining as he clutches the poncho in his fists.

“’s good,” Daryl drawls, dropping his eyes back down to his hands again, seeming suddenly nervous. “Got you somethin’ too.”

“Daryl… you didn’t have to do that… I told you…”

“I know what you said and then you did this,” he smiles, shaking the poncho under Rick’s nose before he leans over to grab something from under his side of the mattress. “Here.”

Rick takes the slim package he holds out, the neat edges of the gift wrap telling him that Carol probably had a hand in it, and he feels something slide inside it when he turns it over to pull away the sticky tape. Opening the flap on the end, he can just see the glint of silver inside and he tips it up to slide the contents onto his palm.

“It’s stupid,” Daryl mumbles and Rick can hear the sheer nervousness in his voice as his words rush out. “It was sorta Carol’s idea… I wanted rings but she had to be all smart and ask how that would work with the Shiftin’ n’all so I found these and…”

“Daryl,” Rick breathes, needing just a moment to take in what he’s seeing. Daryl falls quiet as Rick examines the pair of matching silver chains in his hand, the links strong under his fingertips and, hanging from each, a single military-style dog tag. Holding them up to the light, Rick can see that the smooth surface of each has been engraved with his and Daryl’s names, intertwined in a delicate, flowing script that is at odds with the innate style of the objects themselves. Turning them over, he finds more engraving on the back, this time just a single word: Forever.

“Did you… did you do this?” he asks, his eyes scanning Daryl’s face.

“Yeah,” Daryl answers hesitantly. “Carol found me a book to copy the script from and I used the tools in the workshop to do the engravin’ and strengthen the chains. It’s long enough so’s you can wear it when you Shift. Took a bit of trial n’ error… nearly strangled myself a coupla times ‘fore I got it right.”

“Daryl… I don’t know what to say,” Rick stammers, feeling like his heart is about to burst forth from his chest with the absolute love he feels for the man in front of him. “They’re beautiful.”

“You really like it?” Daryl asks, his face lighting up with an eagerness that only makes Rick love him more. “You don’t think it’s lame?”

“No,” Rick smiles, lifting the chain to slip it over his head, loving the way the cool metal feels as it
brushes against his skin. ‘I think it’s perfect. You’re perfect.’

“Stop,” Daryl says, his face flushing but Rick can read the delight in his eyes.

Reaching out, he places the other chain over Daryl’s head, his fingers trailing down the smooth links to wrap around the tag at the end and he uses it to tug Daryl to him until their faces are just inches apart.

“Merry Christmas,” he whispers, staring deep into Daryl’s eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Daryl answers, his eyes never leaving Rick’s. “Forever.”

“Forever,” Rick agrees and he leans in to seal his declaration with a kiss that he wishes didn’t ever have to end.
Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, mnd-dump-station

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(R&faq)

DO NOT REPOST

Daryl stretches out on the bed, a smile on his face and his fingers laced behind his head as he listens to Rick in the nursery where he's reading a bedtime story to Judith in his soft tones. It's three weeks into the new year and, on days like today when everything is right with his world, it seems to Daryl
that this has always been their home and that everything that came before is just a story that someone once told him. That’s not to say that he doesn’t still get restless once in a while, when the wolf is calling to him to be let free and he feels out of place in his own skin. The difference now is that he is more or less free to indulge those urges when they take hold of him but he still feels that frisson of guilt at the base of his spine for allowing himself to feel happy when he thinks that all of his energy should be concentrated on rebuilding their lives. When he had shared how he was feeling with Rick, he wasn’t surprised when Rick told him that there was nothing to feel guilty about – he deserved to do the thing that made him happy as much as any of them did – none of them could be switched on 24-7 without some kind of release or they’d all end up at each other’s throats. So, the whole group worked together on maintaining their home and keeping it safe and then, when their work was done for the day, they lived their lives because they finally had a place where they didn’t just feel like they were surviving anymore but a place where they could take time to read books or shoot some hoops or spend their nights running wild in the woods. And what they were building together wouldn’t collapse because they did.

With a deep sigh, Daryl rolls over into a sitting position to pull the t-shirt he's wearing off over his head and drop it to the floor. He can feel the ripples under his skin already as his body anticipates the changes that are to come and he gets to his feet to cross the room and look through the nursery door.

“Hey.”

“Hey yourself,” Rick answers, looking up at him from where he's seated in the armchair under the window with a fully-awake Judith on his knee.

“I’m heading out.”

“Already? I’m almost done here if you want to wait.”

“Really?” Daryl asks with a smile as Judith squirms on Rick's lap until she's halfway to the floor and he has to haul her chubby frame back to safety.

“Maybe not,” Rick chuckles, grabbing for the open storybook that is now sliding in the other direction. “I'll catch you up.”

“You better,” Daryl tells him, leaning down to try and kiss Judith’s face which proves impossible so he settles for giving Rick a brief peck on the lips instead before he leaves.

“Which way?” Rick calls out after him.

“You'll figure it out,” Daryl answers, discarding the rest of his clothes to join the t-shirt already on the floor even though he knows it makes Rick crazy. “You do remember how to track, right Sheriff?”

“Haha… no Judy, baby, don’t eat that… please,” Rick mutters in the other room and Daryl chuffs out a small laugh as he drops to Shift and shakes himself before nudging open the bedroom door and heading out.

Outside, away from the compound, he gives the wolf what it wants, letting it take him over completely as he lopes along the cliff track at the edge of the woods. Moving effortlessly through the trees, he flushes out a pair of quail that are nesting in the undergrowth and makes short work of devouring them, sneezing softly when he's done from the feathers stuck to his snout. With his belly full, he heads down along the path to the beach itself, breathing in the pungent smell of salt on the night air and racing down to the water’s edge to stare at the rolling waves for a moment. The sight still fascinates him, the sheer size and power of the ocean making him feel insignificant beside it but
there’s also something about its repetitive nature that soothes him and he’ll find any excuse to be out here. Turning, he continues off along the shore away from the lighthouse, making his way towards the wooden pier which stretches from high on the beach out into the water for about a quarter mile. He glances up at the shadows of the buildings on top, starting around 200ft out with a cluster of bait shops and tourist traps designed to lure gullible souls into parting with their hard-earned cash for a bunch of cheap novelties and local trinkets. At the far end of the pier is a small café with an outside seating area and Daryl wonders idly if it’s worth heading back up there to see if there’s anything worth salvaging that they might have missed on their first recon of the area.

Deciding to leave it for another day, he walks up the beach parallel to the pier until he reaches the point where the fine sand is no longer damp from the ocean swells breaking against it and then Shifts into his human form. Taking a seat on the cool sand, he digs his toes into the soft grains, wiggling them until they’re buried and then silently watches the rise and fall of the waves before him as they break against the shore, their frothy tips bleached white in the bright moonlight. He sits like that, his mind wandering without really touching on any one topic for too long until he catches a familiar scent on the breeze and turns his head to see Rick coming along the beach towards him. His silver pelt glistens with reflected moonlight and he shakes himself as he comes to a stop before Shifting and moving to wrap himself around Daryl as he sits down behind him. Daryl leans back into the heat of Rick’s skin, feeling his strong hands come around to rub lightly down his arms as Rick nuzzles his lips against Daryl’s bare shoulder.

“Found you,” he whispers, laying a line of feather-light kisses on Daryl's skin.

“Weren’t hidin’,” Daryl answers, tilting his head away to allow Rick better access to his neck. “You remember to turn the baby monitor on?”

“One time,” Rick says, pausing in his perusal of Daryl's skin to huff out an indignant breath, “I forgot one time and you’re never gonna let it go, are you? It was ten minutes and she was absolutely fine.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, Daryl, I remembered to turn the baby monitor on and I remembered to give Glenn and Maggie the other half. Thought it would be good practice for them.”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” Daryl says smugly, knowing that it’s going to be a while before he lets this one go. “You can carry on now.”

“Ass,” Rick mutters, nipping at Daryl’s neck with his teeth.

“What was that about my ass, Sheriff… how much you love it?” Daryl chuckles, reaching a hand up behind him to capture Rick’s head so that he can turn and press a kiss against his lips.

For a moment there’s resistance and Daryl knows that Rick is just being stubborn over his teasing so he kisses him harder, sucking on Rick’s bottom lip in the way that he knows will make him crazy. Sure enough, it doesn’t take long for Rick to relax under his touch and return his kiss with equal enthusiasm, his hands sliding down Daryl’s arms to lock fingers with him as he parts his lips to accept Daryl’s insistent tongue. Smiling to himself, Daryl licks his way into Rick’s mouth, breathing harder as their tongues dance across each other’s, both of them seeking control and neither of them winning. Rick’s breath becomes Daryl’s and he finds himself letting go to the desire that’s fueling him, his body aching for nothing more than Rick’s touch and wanting only to touch him in return. He pushes back, flattening Rick to the sand so that he can clamber on top of him, still furiously kissing him as he lays flush against him, feeling the elevated beat of Rick’s heart through his skin. He plants his palms against the sand on either side of Rick’s body and leverages himself up, panting hard
as their lips part, the pulsing throb of his cock between them a blazing signal of the lust that he’s experiencing. He runs his tongue across his puffy lips, staring down at Rick whose eyes are glittering from within and Daryl can see the sharp points of his fangs jutting from below his top lip. The sight sends a shiver throughout his body and he feels the wolf respond in kind, his back arching up as his spine ripples under his skin and he growls slightly, baring his teeth at Rick.

“Fuck or hunt?” he demands, grinding his hips against Rick who gives him a warning growl in response.

“How about a swim?” Rick answers, pushing up under Daryl to tip him off into the soft sand beside him.

“Are you nuts? It’s fuckin’ January.”

“So? We’ve been in colder,” Rick tells him, getting to his feet and hauling Daryl up after him to wrap his arms around him and lean into his body, “and besides, you’re the one that’s gonna be complaining if you don’t wash the sand off that pretty little ass of yours before I start fuckin’ it.”

He reaches around to slap the warm skin of Daryl’s rear, making Daryl feel the gritty layer of fine sand that’s coating his skin, and he grimaces at the thought of the abrasive substance getting where it shouldn’t, something that had caught him unawares once and he wasn’t about to let it happen again.

“Who says I’m the one getting’ fucked?” he grumbles, shoving Rick away from him with a grin and taking off down the beach to the water.

“Oh… is that how it is?” Rick calls after him, catching up just as Daryl steps into the icy waves with a sharp intake of breath.

“Fuuuuckkk!!” he yells, bracing himself as the frigid water washes over him but he moves forward until it’s up to his waist. “Ain’t nobody getting’ fucked after this… I think my balls are trying to crawl up inta my throat.”

Rick snorts but Daryl can see the water is obviously colder than he was expecting and, after a brief amount of splashing, he turns tail and heads back to dry land with Daryl close on his heels. Moving in close to Rick once more, Daryl isn’t surprised to find that the cold bath did nothing to dampen his ardor and, if anything, he’s even hornier than he was before. He reaches out to stroke his hand up Rick’s torso, teasing his fingers through the hair on his chest before slipping them around the back of his neck and into his hair, tugging him forward to resume their kiss from before. It’s slower this time, both of them parting to stare at each other between the soft licks and nips against each other’s lips, Rick’s hands gently caressing Daryl’s back and sliding down to rest on the curve of his ass.

“Babe,” Rick murmurs, squeezing Daryl’s ass tightly, his breath hot on his neck, “we should probably take this under cover, less’n you want a repeat of the woodshed incident.”

Daryl laughs, half embarrassed, as he remembers the look on Michonne’s face when she had thrown open the door in the middle of one of their spontaneous make-out sessions, claiming she was investigating what she thought was a wild animal trapped inside. Her peals of laughter as she had abruptly turned around and left, slamming the door behind her, had done more to kill his desire than any amount of freezing water ever could so he’s in absolute agreement with Rick’s suggestion.

“C’mon,” he says, reluctantly stepping out of Rick’s warm embrace but eager to move their tryst along to someplace they won’t be discovered even if Michonne decides to take a run in their direction.
He leads the way a little further up the beach, ducking under one of the thick support beams, and pulling Rick in after him until they’re hidden away under the dark depths of the pier and Rick is pushing him up against one of the rough, wooden posts to tease his lips with another kiss. He tangles his fingers in Rick’s hair, licking the taste of salt from his lips and groaning as his lover’s firm hand finds its way to the aching length of his cock, giving it a slow, gentle stroke.

“What do you want me to do?” Rick asks, leaning back to meet Daryl's gaze, his voice low and husky with his desire. “Anything. I’m yours.”

“This,” Daryl breathes, recapturing Rick’s lips in a firm kiss and Rick sinks back in against him, molding the sculpted lines of his warm body against Daryl’s.

Daryl thinks that he would die a happy man if the last thing he ever got to taste was Rick’s lips on his own, breathing in every exhale that he makes and feeling the touch of his skin covering his own. If it wasn’t for the increasing ache in his balls, he’d be content to just kiss Rick all night long but his body is craving more and he somehow manages to part himself from Rick just long enough to gasp out a single instruction.

“Touch me.”

Rick’s face breaks into a predatory smile, his lips curling up to reveal those sharpened teeth again and Daryl knows the wolf has been waiting for this, that its needs are just as urgent as his but Rick has been holding it in check until Daryl gave him the go ahead. Now, Daryl can smell the subtle changes in Rick’s scent as he pushes a hand down between them and draws his fingertip up the length of Daryl’s leaking cock, stopping to slide his finger over the sticky head before bringing the digit up and slipping it between his lips. Daryl’s cock twitches at the sight and he almost blows his load at the thought of Rick’s lips wrapping around his length but Rick distracts him by returning his hand down to now wrap his fingers around Daryl’s base and give him an almost painful squeeze.

“Not yet,” he growls, reading Daryl’s body as easily as if he could read his mind.

Daryl whimpers, shifting under the tight pressure circling his shaft and feeling the old wood dig into his back as he does, throwing a hand up behind him to clutch at the rough surface and steady himself. His claws extend into the wood as Rick slides his fist up Daryl’s length, brushing his thumb over the wet tip and then changing hands as he brings it up to Daryl’s mouth and teases his lips open to suck the taste of himself from Rick’s skin. With his hand tight under Daryl’s jaw and his thumb securely in his mouth, Rick starts a painfully slow stroke along his cock, drawing every sensation he can from Daryl’s trembling skin. He tortures him with variations in pressure and speed, keeping the rhythm uneven so that Daryl just can’t seem to tip over the edge and he’s almost tempted to bite down on the thumb Rick still has firmly in his mouth but, instead, he just wraps his tongue around it, sucking and licking in the hope that it’s making Rick as frustrated as he’s making him.

“Look at you, Dixon… you’re a fucking mess,” Rick tells him, his eyes flashing in the dark. “Anybody’d think you never got your dick tugged before and we both know that’s a lie, don’t we? I think we both know what a filthy whore you are, Dixon, how you love to spread that pretty ass and let me fuck that tight hole of yours.”

“Unnhhh,” Daryl groans around the obstruction in his mouth, trying to buck his hips harder into Rick’s grip but all Rick does is tease him by pulling away.

“Nuh-uh,” Rick whispers, leaning in to scrape his lips across Daryl’s shoulder. “Not until I say you’re ready… are you ready, Daryl?”

At the sound of his name tripping dirtily from Rick's lips, Daryl loses it, clutching tightly enough at
the wood behind his head to splinter it under his claws as he hisses his agreement out between his clenched teeth.

‘Then come on, baby,’ Rick urges, his hand turning and twisting along Daryl's rigid length, “show me what you’ve got… that’s right… let me see how much you love me… cum for me, Daryl.”

Daryl’s world dissolves into nothing except the pure pleasure Rick’s teasing out of him, his breath flying from him in ragged pants as he thrusts his hips forward and shoots his load over both of them, Rick's name bursting from his lips.

“That’s my boy,” Rick soothes, stroking him gently as he rides out the tremors that are coursing through his body. “Such a beautiful mess.”

Unclasping his hand from the punctured post behind him, Daryl lowers his aching arm and pulls Rick to him for a breathless kiss, making small, contented noises in his throat until his body returns to normal.

“Good?” Rick asks him when they finally part but all Daryl can manage is a nod of acknowledgement. “You ready for more?”

“What ya got in mind?” Daryl asks, wetting his dry lips with his tongue and feeling a renewed jolt to his cock at the look in Rick's eyes.

With a feral grin tugging at his lips, Rick pulls Daryl away from the support post and guides him down onto his knees in the cool sand, moving around behind him as he pushes him forward onto all fours. As Rick takes up a position kneeling behind him, Daryl digs his fingers into the sand and parts his knees to anchor himself, his mouth wet with anticipation and his cock swinging heavily beneath him. He feels the rough glide of Rick's palms as they push up his back, tracing wide circles on his flesh and then coming down to knead at his ass until he pushes his cheeks apart and Daryl’s head whips back at the first swipe of Rick's tongue against his hole. He curls his fingers in the sand as Rick licks and sucks his way inside of him, his tongue pressing deep and a low keening sound comes from Daryl's throat. Pulling back, Rick nips at his rounded flesh with his teeth, scraping them up over his back in a series of small bites until his head is beside Daryl's and his cock is pressed firmly between his cheeks. Daryl can feel the silky coolness of the chain around Rick’s neck as it slithers against the heat of his skin and he shudders with pleasure.

“Do you trust me?” Rick whispers against his neck, his lips brushing Daryl's skin and making him shiver.

“Always,” he answers, turning his face to nuzzle against Rick’s.

Rick withdraws from his back, trailing his fingers down Daryl's spine as he straightens up behind him and Daryl feels the weight of his cock slide down between his cheeks to press insistently against his entrance. He rolls back just slightly, more than ready to have Rick inside of him, and hears Rick growl under his breath but he's rewarded with sticky head of his cock opening his flesh. Rick's hands come to his hips as he pushes slowly into him and Daryl can hear the soft moans coming from behind him as they both take a moment to steady themselves. When he thinks Rick's been still long enough, Daryl squeezes around him and rocks his hips back, loving the guttural groan that Rick gives and the way his hands tighten on Daryl's flesh. Pulling back, he thrusts hard into Daryl, his cock filling him over and over and Daryl has to bite down on his bottom lip to keep from howling out loud.

“Daryl,” Rick grunts, dropping forward over his back once more, his sweat-slicked skin sticking to Daryl's as he slows his movements to a gentle rocking and Daryl moves back in time to meet him
before he eventually pulls out and whispers in Daryl's ear, “Shift.”

Daryl thinks for a moment that he's misheard him, his brain already misfiring from the stimulation his body is receiving but then he feels the unmistakable changes happening in Rick's skin. He feels him grow larger behind him, expanding his body to his hybrid state, the smooth heat of his flesh replaced with a sparse coating of hair where he's still pressed against Daryl. Acting on pure instinct, Daryl's body follows suit, the musculature of his upper body taking the brunt of his weight as his hind legs reshape to their new form pushing his rear up higher and presenting it to Rick. There's a brief moment of disorientation and then he feels his tail pushed roughly aside and Rick is back inside him, the extra girth of his cock widening Daryl enough to make him whine until his body compensates for what’s going on. As Rick pounds furiously into him, Daryl digs his back paws deep into the sand to brace himself, the position he's in feeling at once both alien and completely natural. His lips are peeled back in a snarl, drool flying from his wavering jaws and, this time, he can’t stop the small howl that escapes from his throat as he feels Rick’s enormous hand reach around and grab surprisingly gently at the iron hard length of Daryl’s cock. Keeping his claws retracted, he starts fisting Daryl’s cock in time with his own thrusts and all Daryl can do is surrender to the double assault on his senses, his body being pushed and pulled into oblivion.

“Rick!” he roars, coming hard enough that his vision swims for a moment and he feels Rick's head drop to his shoulder as his teeth sink into Daryl's flesh and he comes deep inside him.

His orgasm seems to roll through him forever, both of their bodies shuddering as Rick wraps one arm around his waist and leans his weight on the other to support himself until either of them is able to move. Daryl gives another of those low keening sounds when he feels Rick’s cock slip from him in a rush of sticky wetness and his lover lifts himself away from Daryl's back so that he can straighten up. Pushing himself upright from the crouch he’s in, Daryl turns to face Rick finding him standing with one arm outstretched to steady himself against a support beam, his eyes glowing from his half-human face. His heavy jaw is open, revealing the sharp lines of his teeth that Daryl can still feel in the bite on his shoulder and he can see the thick length of his cock still standing proud away from the dense fur of his lower half, its tip dripping with his cum. As Daryl takes a step forward, Rick’s nose wrinkles back and he lets out a warning growl which Daryl answers with one of his own, baring his teeth and stopping in his tracks for a mere second before he pushes his body against Rick’s. They stand, face to face, chests heaving as their bodies align and Daryl is shocked to find that Rick isn’t the only one that’s still sporting a pretty serious hard-on.

“That was…” he starts to say but realizes he has no idea how to finish his sentence, his mind is awash with a dozen different thoughts and emotions and he knows it will take time for him to work through all of them and figure out how he feels about what just happened.

“Different?” Rick supplies, his face softening as he Shifts back from hybrid to human and Daryl does the same.

“Yeah,” Daryl agrees, letting Rick pull him into his embrace and resting his head against his shoulder.

“You okay?” Rick whispers into his hair, reaching a hand up to cradle the back of Daryl's head and Daryl can hear the concern lacing his question.

“'m good,” he replies, tilting his head back so that Rick can see his face.

Rick eyes scan his face and then he smiles, dipping his head to give Daryl a soft kiss that he eagerly returns, his hands sliding up Rick's sides. It’s comfortable and unhurried, both of them exploring each other’s mouths as if it’s the first time they’ve ever kissed and Daryl can’t help the smile that’s bubbling to the surface.
“Damn… why do I still feel like I can go again?” Rick asks, nudging his hips into Daryl’s with a tiny laugh.

“Cos you’re…” Daryl starts but breaks off as his nose picks up an unusual smell over the heady scent of their sex clinging to both of them. “Is that smoke?”

He watches as Rick cocks his head to one side, inhaling deeply, and then steps back from Daryl to look up at the dark underside of the wooden pier above them and Daryl knows from the look on his face that he smells it too. Wordlessly, the pair of them race out from under the darkness of the pier, far enough away that Daryl can scan its entire length in a single glance and see immediately that the café on the far end has flames licking furiously out from its windows and under the low roof.

“What the fuck,” Rick says but his words are lost in the unmistakable sound of a woman’s scream coming from the burning building.

Without hesitation they both run for the steps leading from the beach up to the pier itself, their bodies Shifting as they go, pushing the wolves to cover the length of the wooden structure in mere seconds. Daryl can feel the intense heat coiling in the air as they draw near and he slows as it becomes apparent that they’re too late, the fire is consuming the dry wood of the abandoned café faster than they could ever hope to stop if they even had a way and there’s not a chance that anyone inside could still possibly be alive. Rick however forges past him, heading for the door on the far side of the building where the flames don’t seem to have quite taken hold yet and Daryl hears another of those heart-wrenching screams coming from within as Rick surges up into his hybrid form and reaches for the chains holding the door shut tight.

“Rick! No!” Daryl shouts, Shifting rapidly up and throwing himself across the space between him and Rick, his heart thudding painfully in his chest.

Daryl had seen enough house fires in his time, including the one that took the life of his own mother, to know that the last place he wanted Rick standing was right in front of the door, trying to open it. Grabbing at Rick's torso, he fights to haul him away but Rick shoves him off and makes another attempt on getting the door open.

“We can still get her out,” he yells, tugging ineffectively on the thick chains that are looped through the doors handles.

“It’s too late,” Daryl shouts back at him, moving in to tackle him again and not giving in even though Rick is pushing back against him with all his might. “Rick… you have to let it go. You open that door and you’re as dead as she is.”

“No!” he yells, wrestling against Daryl’s hold on him but Daryl refuses to budge, using everything he has to force Rick away from the door and over to the edge of the pier.

With no clear thought in his mind other than protecting Rick, he uses the momentum he’s gained combined with his considerable strength and height to pitch both of them over the pier’s railing and into the water below. He flounders for a moment as the icy water closes over his head and he loses his grip on Rick, both of them sinking rapidly in their hybrid form, a fist of panic rising in his chest before he can initiate his Shift and propel himself to the surface. He gasps in a lungful of the chill night air, coughing as he manages to inhale a fair amount of the salty water at the same time and he turns in place, his panic rising until Rick breaks the surface beside him and sucks in a deep breath of his own.

“Are you outta your mind?” he yells, furiously treading water once he can see that Rick is okay.
“Me?” Rick throws back indignantly at him. “What about you? We could’ve gotten her out… what if she’s one of us?”

“They were all home when I left… nobody was heading anywhere ‘cept for us.”

“But you can’t know that for sure. What if that was Maggie in there… or Carol,” Rick argues and Daryl winces at the thought but he’s also sure that he’s right.

“Wouldn’t’ve made any difference. Whoever was in there was a goner and you would’ve been too if your fool ass had opened that door. You were a cop, dammit… what were they teaching you at that half-ass academy… how to eat donuts? You ain’t never heard of a backdraft? That door was red hot… the paint was blisterin’ off… if you’d opened it, you would’ve been toast faster’n you could spit. I wasn’t about to stand there n’ let that happen, no matter who was inside.”

Daryl sees the comprehension dawning on Rick’s face but he still sees that streak of stubbornness that tells him Rick still would’ve tried anyway and thought he could’ve survived and he feels his anger boiling over. Striking out through the rolling waves, he swims strongly back to shore, wading up onto the beach to shake the water from his hair as Rick follows after him. They stand apart, neither of them speaking as they watch the café on the end of the pier light the night sky with its orange glow, no sound coming to them now except the crackle of the flames and the endless whisper of the ocean.

The next morning dawns damp and overcast, the sea a churning mass of dark grey waves and a storm flickering far out on the horizon that Daryl thinks just sums up his mood for the day perfectly. He's standing out on the end of the pier, leaning over the railing as he watches the waters roil below and smoking a cigarette while he waits for the others to arrive. It’s not something he does very often anymore – Rick hates the smell on him – but, just occasionally, he misses it, the way it feels between his fingers and the tiny rituals that go along with it. He was never a heavy smoker, not as bad as Merle by a long shot but, when he was having a hard time of things, he would light one up to calm his nerves. Strangely enough, the world turning to shit around his ears had actually lessened his addiction rather than increasing it and it was a rare occasion that found him reaching for the battered pack he always kept tucked away in his jacket. Tipping his head back to exhale his last lungful of smoke, he watches as the wind tears it from his lips and scatters it in an instant then turns his attention to the road leading to the top of the pier where he can hear the approaching engine of the compound pickup.

When he and Rick had arrived back at the lighthouse the previous night, they had quickly ascertained that all their people were safe and then Daryl had headed up to the lighthouse without another word. His simmering anger at Rick's recklessness had driven him to be alone, taking over Carol’s watch with a barely muttered explanation and, from there, he had spent the entire night pacing the walkway, his eyes constantly drawn to the burning building in the near distance. A little after midnight, a sudden downpour had blown in from ocean, causing Daryl to retreat inside the safety of the lighthouse from where he had watched through the rain-soaked glass until the last flame was extinguished and the darkened pier had faded against the equally black sky. He had stayed on watch until the first glimmer of dawn had brought its muted glow to the skyline, the rain long since passed, and then he had made his way down to the kitchen where Maggie was already pouring her coffee ready to take up for her turn on watch. He had told her he was heading back out to the pier and then had set out on foot along the clifftop, hoping the walk would blow away some of the antagonism he was feeling. Arriving at the pier, he had walked its length, treading carefully once he got close to the still smoldering carcass of the café but it seemed that most of the damage had been to the building and the pier itself was still standing strong beneath it. He’d taken a quick peek at the
debris, coming around to the door that Rick had tried to open which was now nothing more than a charcoaled sheet of metal standing alone with its chains still intact, the wood walls around it having burnt away. In the ashes beyond, he had been able to make out the blackened remains of the woman who had been trapped inside, her corpse curled into a fetal position behind the door and he had turned away, sickened by more than just the horror of her death.

Now, with the pickup approaching, he strides back along the pier to meet them as they pull into the small lot at the entrance and he can see Rick is driving with Michonne at his side and Abraham and Glenn are riding in the flatbed.

“Fire’s out,” he says as everyone piles out of the vehicle, deliberately avoiding Rick’s gaze which he can feel on him. “There’s not much left but we’ve got a few walkers down on the beach… musta been attracted by the flames last night. We might want to take care of em’ so they don’t keep wandrin’ our way.”

“On it,” Abraham answers him, swinging his rifle around to his back in order to arm himself with a machete instead. “Glenn, you with me?”

“Sure,” Glenn answers less than enthusiastically but he follows the larger man down to the beach anyway, grimacing at Daryl as he goes.

“Should we take a look?” Michonne asks, indicating her head towards the end of the pier.

“Nothin’ to see,” Daryl says sharply.

“Humor me,” she tells him, bumping him as she passes and setting off for the former café.

Rick follows her wordlessly, not even glancing in Daryl’s direction and Daryl sighs deeply, waiting for them to get a short lead before he trails after them. When he catches them up they’re both standing looking down at the shriveled corpse of the dead woman and he hangs back, shifting his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other.

“We should bury her,” Michonne says after they’ve stood in silence for a few minutes.

“Why?” Daryl blurts out and he feels his hands balling into fists against his thighs but he can’t stop them. “We don’t know her from Adam.”

“Because if it was one of us out there and something terrible like this happened, I’d want somebody to do the same thing,” Michonne tells him solemnly, turning her gaze on him. “She died a horrible, tragic death and she was all alone…we should do what’s right, Daryl.”

“Fine,” Daryl snaps, waving a dismissive hand in her direction, “I’ll go find a shovel but I ain’t touchin’ that… thing.”

He turns and storms off before Michonne can say another word, practically running back to the pickup where he grabs a shovel from the back and paces off beyond the parking lot fence to where the earth is relatively flat and has been softened by the previous night’s rain. He starts to dig, growling with each shovelful he moves but, as the hole deepens, he feels some of his anger dissipating until he’s left with nothing more than a raging headache and a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He climbs out of the grave just as Rick and Michonne approach from the pier, Michonne carrying the dead woman’s body wrapped in a blanket they must have found in one of the gift shops further down the pier, its bright colors and sunny beach motif completely at odds with the darkness it’s covering. With Rick’s help she lowers the body into the grave and Daryl doesn’t argue when Rick takes the shovel from his hand to refill the hole, he just moves away, standing in the shelter of
some nearby trees to light another cigarette and watch as they lay the unknown woman to rest. While Rick pats the last of the earth into place, Michonne fashions a small marker from a broken fence slat and places it at the head of the grave, stepping back just as the radio in Daryl’s pocket crackles into life.

“Guys,” comes Glenn’s voice from the small speaker, “you should come see this.”

“Where are you?” Daryl asks, relieved to hear there’s no urgency in Glenn’s tone which means they’re not in trouble.

“Clifftop… follow the path out of the back of the lot.”

“On our way.”

The three of them move off, easily climbing the winding path that leads up from the beachside lot to the cliffs above, coming out in another small parking lot, this one really more of a scenic lookout that would have given visitors outstanding views of the ocean and the coastline. There are a few abandoned cars still parked in between the faded paint lines on the ground and a littering of dead walkers laying between them, some of them obviously fresh kills.

“Thought we’d come up, get a better view of any trouble headin’ our way,” Abraham explains and Daryl can see the fresh splatters of gore that are marking his shirt. “Found this.”

They approach the car he’s indicating, Daryl noting that it can’t have been there very long judging by the way the grass has been freshly flattened by its wheels and the fact that it’s a damn sight cleaner than the rest of the vehicles which have been sitting there exposed to the elements for who knows how long. Taking a quick look inside, Daryl can see there’s a box of supplies on the back seat, probably a couple of weeks’ worth, plus extra clothing and a handful of maps scattered on the front seat along with a small notebook.

“Seems our mystery lady was scouting the area,” Glenn tells them, reaching in to pick up the notebook and hand it to Rick. “There’s a list of places in there, mostly schools, big stores, warehouses, anyplace you might be able to make secure or find something useful. Look what’s next.”

“The pier and then the lighthouse,” Rick reads and Daryl feels a pricking sensation at the base of his spine. “You think she was alone?”

“Yeah,” Abraham answers, nodding towards the car. “There was only one person travelling in here but, the question is, was she reporting back to somebody or was she just out here in her lonesome?”

“There’s more of ‘em,” Daryl tells them quietly.

“How do you know?” Michonne asks.

“That many supplies… clean clothes… the list. That’s somebody with a plan. If’n she was on her own, why make a list? Just get in the car and drive. Single person ain’t gonna be lookin’ at all those big buildings for a place to make secure. Nah, she was scoutin’ for somebody.”

“There’s no weapons in the car,” Rick notes, rooting through the boxes on the back seat, “nothing personal. She probably took a backpack down to the pier when she went, thought she’d stay there overnight. Maybe she lit the gas for warmth… I don’t know… maybe thought she could cook something. There was most likely a build-up in the pipes, maybe a leak she didn’t notice. That place smelled pretty ripe last time we were there as it was, wouldn’t be surprised if she didn’t smell it.”
“Whatever,” Abraham adds, rubbing a hand over his chin. “It don’t matter. What matters is the fact that we don’t know who’s out there and if they’re gonna come lookin’ for our little deep-fried friend back there.”

“They might be like us,” Michonne tells him, her lip pulling up a little at his words. “People just looking for a place to survive… maybe someone we can join forces with.”

“Or they might be another bunch of a-holes lookin’ to put a bullet in our brains and eat what’s left… we don’t know.”

“No, we don’t,” Rick intercedes, stopping the argument that Daryl can feel brewing between Michonne and Abraham. “So, until we do, we just keep doing what we’re doing and we’ll deal with whatever happens. For now, let’s get those supplies out of there and get back home.”

With no further commentary from anybody, they pull anything that might be useful from the car and head back down to the pickup, Michonne stopping at the grave they’d dug along the way to hang a rosary on the marker that Daryl had seen swinging from the rearview mirror in the car. He gives her a nod as she steps away and she returns it with a small smile, falling into step with him as they walk over to the pickup where she stretches up to put the box she’s carrying into the back and then makes to climb in after it but he stops her.

“I’ll take the back… you ride up front,” he tells her and she frowns at him for a moment, her eyes flicking to Rick who is already behind the wheel but she doesn’t say anything.

Daryl boosts himself up into the back of the pickup, sitting down with his back against the cab next to Glenn for the short ride back to the compound with Abraham taking a seat at the other end of the flatbed.

“Trouble in paradise?” Abraham asks as Rick puts the truck in gear and they set off over the bumpy gravel of the lot back to the road and Daryl scowls at the shit-eating grin on his face. “Thought as much. Well you two better stow that shit real fast because we need to talk and it ain’t waitin’ for you two lovebirds to work out your differences.”

Daryl doesn’t answer him, just turns his head to look out over the water as the truck makes its way back up onto the coast road, knowing full well what it is that Abraham wants to discuss, that knowledge only adding to the uneasy feeling that’s already churning his insides.
DELICIOUS ART BY THE INCOMPARABLE lecherous_portmanteau

(Original here or here)

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Thank You.
After a brief meeting in the kitchen where they had brought the others up to speed on what they had found, everyone splits off to carry on with their assigned jobs for the day and Rick brushes off Abraham’s request to talk, telling him he’ll speak to him later.

“Daryl… a word,” he says, catching his mate’s arm just as he's about to slip out of the kitchen door.

He can see Daryl hesitate, his body tensing for a moment but then his shoulders loosen and he gives
Rick a small shrug before opening the door and waiting outside for Rick to close it behind them.

“Not here,” Rick tells him, walking away from the stone house, heading between the greenhouse and the woodshed and then out past the lighthouse itself.

Daryl follows him until they’re out on the furthest point of the small island, the sea crashing angrily against the cliffs below them and then Rick turns to him, pulling the collar of his jacket up to cover his neck.

“We could’ve saved her,” he states, getting directly to what’s been on his mind since the previous night.

“Pfft… no, we couldn’t,” Daryl fires back at him and Rick can see the anger that’s been simmering in him rising to the surface again. “It was too late for her and it would’ve been too late for you too. No way she was survivin’ that and, if you had gotten the door open without gettin’ fried and had gotten her out, how were you plannin’ on treatin’ her burns, huh? We ain’t got those kind of resources. She was good as dead the minute the place went up. And you openin’ the damn door to hell wasn’t gonna help her none and it was sure as shit gonna set your own ass on fire.”

“You don’t know that,” Rick answers, feeling his own anger spark at the assumptions Daryl had made. “It wasn’t your call.”

“I do know,” Daryl yells, the wind tearing his words away but Rick can hear the anguish behind his fury. “When the fire that took my mom was done with our place there was even less of her left than that girl last night, so don’t tell me that I don’t know.”

“Daryl… I didn-”

“Don’t,” Daryl snaps, throwing up his hand to shake off the one Rick has reached out to him. “I ain’t lookin’ for your sympathy. Not my call? Keepin’ you alive is always my fuckin’ call even when you’re too fuckin’ dumb to see it. You may think the wolf makes you invincible but even you ain’t comin’ back when your damn flesh is seared offa ya bones.”

“I didn’t think,” Rick says softly, seeing now the reason for Daryl’s anger – he hadn’t thought, not about himself anyway or what putting himself in danger could mean for Daryl or the kids, all he had seen was someone who needed help and his natural instinct had been to save them.

“No… you damn well didn’t,” Daryl agrees, his chest heaving and Rick can see the wetness filling his eyes. “Every time I leave this place, you tell me not to be the hero when I’m out there… maybe it’s time I started telling you the same thing. You don’t have to be that guy anymore, Rick, it’s not your job.”

“I know,” Rick answers, starting to feel like he’s the most selfish person left in the whole world.

“This,” Daryl says, slapping a hand to his chest, “this is your job now. Me n’ the kids. Your family. No more of this gung-ho shit.”

“I’m sorry, Daryl, I…” Rick tapers off not knowing what else he can say to make it right and he’s surprised when Daryl suddenly steps forward to grab at his jacket and pull him in for a hard kiss.

“Don’t make me bury you,” Daryl whispers, his head sliding down to rest on Rick's shoulder as he clutches onto him.

“Promise,” Rick tells him, his arms coming up around Daryl’s back to hold him tight.
“Still mad at ya,” Daryl mumbles, turning his head to plant a wet kiss against Rick's neck before stepping away from him.

“I know,” Rick answers and they stand for a moment, their eyes locked on each other until Daryl turns away.

“Ain’t you got chickens to feed or somethin’?” he asks in a gruff tone but Rick knows now that it’s all for show and he feels a small smile tugging at his lips as he watches Daryl swagger away towards the house.

“Hey!” he calls, suddenly remembering Abraham’s request to talk to both of them and Daryl swings back around to look at him.

“What?”

“We need to talk about Abe,” Rick says, catching up to him and lowering his voice the closer they get to the house.

“Not much to say,” Daryl answers, stopping on the path where it divides between leading to the patio at the back of the house and the lighthouse. “We both know what he wants and I’m pretty sure he ain’t takin’ no for an answer.”

“So… you think it’s a good idea?”

Daryl sighs, looking at his feet for a moment and Rick knows he's been thinking about this as much as he has, they’ve discussed it over and over, always putting off the decision for another day.

“I think it’s time.”

“I think it is too. What we found today was just a reminder that we’re not alone in the world. We might have found a safe haven and had a few months to breathe but eventually the world is going to catch up to us again and Abe’s right, we have no idea whether it’s going to be friend or foe out there. I think we need to strengthen ourselves and now’s the time to do it.”

“Alright,” Daryl agrees with a nod. “You want me to tell him?”

“Later… they’re going out on a run this afternoon. We’ll tell him tonight when he gets back… maybe do it tomorrow if he’s really ready.”

“You’re the boss,” Daryl tells him with just a tinge of sarcasm in his tone and then continues on towards the lighthouse, leaving Rick alone with his thoughts.

Taking a deep breath, he heads into the house to get some water before he sets to work in the greenhouse and he finds Carol waiting for him just inside the door.

“Everything okay?” she asks him, giving him a hard stare.

“Everything’s fine,” he tells her, feeling as though he's missing something.

“Really?” she says, raising an eyebrow at him and folding her arms over her chest. “Is that why Daryl spent the night in the lighthouse and you spent it pacing back and forth like a caged beast all night?”

“How did you know I wa-”

“Woman’s intuition, Rick, so don’t give me that bullshit, “Everything’s fine”, unless it really is.”
“It really is,” Rick reassures her with a smile, leaning in to tug on her elbow and plant a small kiss on her temple. “Thank you for worrying.”

“Well, that’s my job,” she huffs, glaring up at his smiling face. “If I don’t keep you two stubborn asses in check, we’re all in trouble.”

“Well me and my stubborn ass are grateful,” he grins at her and this time he's rewarded with her lips quirking up as she tries to suppress a smile.

“Okay… shoo with you,” she tells him as he opens the fridge and snags a full water bottle from inside. “Go see if you can find me some eggs.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rick laughs, heading back out into the chill wind but, with the warmth inside him from Carol’s words, he doesn’t even feel it.

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The afternoon run had been a bust, the group that had gone out coming back not only empty-handed but also pretty beaten up from a skirmish with a group of walkers they had found trapped in a bakery. A series of mishaps had led to the walkers getting loose and Abraham and the others had had a pretty serious fight on their hands for a while although, fortunately nobody was hurt other than the usual scrapes and bruises but tempers were running high and Rick was happy to escape to the lighthouse for his turn on watch. He had half expected Daryl to come up and join him but he guessed there really was a little truth to his statement that he was still mad at Rick for his recklessness the previous night when he hadn’t shown by the end of Rick’s shift. The house is in darkness when he enters but it makes no difference to him as he secures his weapon in the mudroom and makes his way to his and Daryl’s room at the other end of the house. The curtains are drawn but there’s enough moonlight seeping around the edges that he can still make out Daryl’s form in the bed as he sits down to take off his boots, letting out a little sigh as he does, and he knows his mate is still awake.

“Where’s Judy?” he asks quietly, standing back up to peel off his clothes and take them into the bathroom to dump in the hamper, gathering Daryl’s from the floor as he goes.

“Carol took her… said she misses her,” Daryl answers him without turning from his position facing the opposite wall. “You say somethin’ to her?”

“About what?”

“Us.”

“No,” Rick answers truthfully, coming to the bathroom door with his toothbrush in one hand but still Daryl doesn’t turn his way, “but you know nothing we do gets past her. She was concerned and, knowing her, taking Judy is her way of giving us some uninterrupted time together.”

“Hmmf,” Daryl grunts and Rick goes back into the bathroom to finish cleaning his teeth.

Flipping off the light, he crosses the room and pulls back the covers on his side of the bed to climb in, Daryl’s heat radiating out to greet him as he shuffles across to wrap his body around Daryl’s, sliding his arm over him to reach for his hand.

“Hi,” he whispers, pressing his lips to the bare skin of Daryl’s shoulder. “I thought you might come up to the tower and see me.”

Daryl shrugs silently in his arms.
“You still mad at me?”

Another shrug.

“Can I make it up to you?” he asks, nuzzling his lips against the side of Daryl’s neck and this time he’s rewarded with Daryl turning in his arms to face him.

“What ya got in mind?” Daryl says, just the merest hint of a pout on his lips that Rick is eager to kiss away.

Pushing back the comforter that’s covering them both, Rick runs his hand up the firm flesh of Daryl’s stomach, skimming his chest and slipping his fingers around to curl into the hair at his neck while he dips his head to brush his lips over Daryl’s. With a tiny growl just to let Rick know he’s not yet forgiven, Daryl parts his lips to allow Rick’s tongue access and their kiss deepens until Rick can feel some of the tension leaving Daryl's body. Parting their lips, he lowers his head to suck at the pulse point just under Daryl's jaw, licking over the spot until he can feel it fluttering beneath his touch and then he moves further down, taking his time to pay attention to all the little spots he knows drive Daryl wild. Taking his right wrist in one hand, Rick turns Daryl's arm out away from his body so that he can kiss the small demon tattoo hiding on his inner bicep and Daryl moans hard in response, a sound that sends a shiver through Rick’s nervous system. Smiling, Rick moves his lips back to Daryl’s torso, moving slowly down his stomach and scraping his fangs gently over his hip bones before sucking at the sensitive skin just below them. He’s fully aware of Daryl’s cock laying hard against his stomach, the heady scent of his sex making Rick’s mouth moisten, but he keeps up his attention elsewhere until Daryl's hands land on his head and Rick lets him steer him to the prize.

He pauses, his mouth watering in anticipation, and then runs his tongue all the way up Daryl’s length, moaning with pleasure as the ripe taste bursts in his mouth when he slides his lips over the tip. Daryl’s hips thrust up to meet him and Rick has to pin him back down before he chokes, sliding him wetly back out and down once more. Wrapping a hand around Daryl's length, Rick moves lower, cupping his balls to give them a gentle tug before he starts to suck on them, massaging them with his tongue. There’s a soft mewling sound dripping from Daryl’s lips and Rick can feel his own cock aching where it’s pressed painfully into the bed beneath him, his hips grinding to find just a little relief as he releases Daryl’s balls and gives another long lick to his rigid length. Lifting his head, Rick looks up into Daryl’s face, licking his lips at the sight of his dilated pupils and the sheen of sweat that’s now covering his skin, his bottom lip caught between his teeth. Moving up to stretch across him, Rick makes sure that his body is grinding against Daryl’s as he hooks a finger in the drawer on Daryl’s side of the bed and reaches in, fumbling for one of the many tubes of lube he knows is lurking in there.

“Mmm… vanilla,” he says, pulling out the first tube he finds and looking at the label in the dim light before giving Daryl an exaggerated wink. “Somebody’s gonna smell like a cupcake.”

Daryl snatches the tube out of his hand with a snort, wrinkling his nose up as he squints at it in the dark, and slapping Rick’s ass back down when he starts to move off of him so Rick stays where he is, laying across Daryl’s lap and letting him take the lead. He turns his head to watch as Daryl squeezes out some of the lube onto his fingers and the room is immediately filled with the sickly sweet scent of artificial vanilla which, strangely enough, doesn’t remind Rick of cupcakes but does give him a fleeting memory of drinking vanilla milkshakes at the local diner after school. He tenses for a moment as he feels Daryl's hand on him, kneading at the tight flesh of his butcheeks, setting a tingle running across his skin as he pushes them apart and uses his finger to smear the warm, sticky lube against his puckered hole. Rick inhales and holds his breath as he feels the first push of Daryl’s blunt fingertip inside him, teasing him slowly open and working deeper before withdrawing again. Rick lets go of the breath he’s holding, resting his head down to his folded arms as Daryl repeats the
move, enjoying the sensation of Daryl’s finger slipping into him and the way his cock is pressed hotly against Daryl’s between them.

“Favorite thing to jack off with?” he asks, his mind wandering from thoughts of vanilla milkshakes to other, less innocent, teenage pursuits.

“Huh?”

“When you were younger… you know… what did teenage Daryl with all those raging hormones do to keep li’l Daryl happy?”

“Pfft… nothin’, man… just my fist and a lot of spit.”

“Really? Never anything else… no silk panties stolen from the neighbor’s washing line… no sucking adventures with the vacuum?”

“No,” Daryl chuckles, his body moving under Rick's with his laughter, his finger keeping up the same slow pace in Rick's ass, “we didn’t own a vacuum.”

“Hmm,” Rick says thoughtfully, arching his butt up a little as Daryl teases him by pulling out and rubbing circles on his cheeks instead.

“What about you? What got young Officer Grimes all hot under the collar?”

“Me? Oh, that's easy… once I knew what I liked, I was all about the pillow humping.”

“Pillow humpin’?” Daryl asks with another of those deep chuckles and the dip of his fingers back between Rick's cheeks to brush over his sensitive hole.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t do it, Dixon, because I’ll call bullshit. Used to pile ‘em up and kneel over them to slip my dick between them and there you go. Man, I had this t-shirt… real old so it didn’t fit anymore but damn… that thing was so soft… I’d fold that up between the pillows and just go to town on it. Made clean up easier too,” he finishes with a quiet laugh of his own.

“Damn,” Daryl says with a soft whistle, “I would’ve liked to have seen that… little Ricky Grimes getting’ himself off… betcha spent all your time with the Sears catalog while you were chokin’ ya chicken, dintcha?”

“Men’s underwear section every damn time,” Rick laughs, pushing himself up into a kneeling position beside him and Daryl moves up so that he’s sitting with his back against the wooden headboard. “Least if my folks found it, they’d think I was looking at the lingerie section.”

Daryl smiles, his eyes dropping to Rick’s cock before flicking back up to his eyes and Rick feels another thrill of anticipation run through him, moving himself to straddle Daryl’s lap and rest his hands on his shoulders. Daryl’s hands reach first for his waist and then slide around to cup his ass, pulling Rick forward and up until his cock is rubbing against Daryl’s chest and Daryl's fingers are finding their way back to slide into his hole again. He inhales sharply, his fingers tightening reflexively in Daryl's skin as his mate adds a second finger, working slowly to stretch him, his eyes never leaving Rick’s. Loosening one hand from Daryl’s shoulder, Rick reaches around behind him, wrapping his fist around Daryl’s cock and giving it a gentle tug, pleased at the small hiss he hears escape from Daryl’s lips. He feels Daryl’s fingers slide from him, his hands taking position on Rick's hips as Rick eases himself onto the slippery head of his cock and lowers himself down, his mouth forming a circle of pleasure as Daryl fills him. He holds his position, sliding his hands around Daryl’s neck and tangling them in his hair to tip his head back so that Rick can watch his face as he starts moving gently up and down. Daryl’s lips are parted, his tongue darting out to wet them, and Rick
dips his head to kiss them softly, feeling the tickle of Daryl's goatee against his now smooth chin.

He rides him slowly, reading Daryl's body, drawing out the intimacy of their lovemaking with deep, wet kisses, their breath mingling as their foreheads touch. The room is filled with nothing but the whispers of their skin against each other and the heavy beat of their hearts as their bodies move lazily together. It's familiar and reassuring, their natural rhythm together bonding them once more and easing away the residual tension from their fight earlier although Rick is still carrying a small amount of guilt over his actions.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, his face brushing against Daryl's as he leans his head back to meet his eye. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Shut up, ya dumbass,” Daryl chides him, a smile quirking the corner of his lips as he wraps his arms tighter around Rick's back, angling his head to kiss him again and Rick knows their balance has been restored.

Tightening his muscles around Daryl’s cock, Rick starts moving a little faster, leveraging himself against Daryl's shoulders again and feeling his own cock straining for stimulation as it rubs loosely against his stomach. Daryl tenses under him and Rick knows he's about to come, his breath quickening and his fingers gripping tightly at Rick's flesh as he throws his head back, the tendons in his neck standing out, and Rick gasps as Daryl’s cock jerks inside him.

“Yes,” he murmurs, bearing down on Daryl’s length and holding steady until he's done. “Easy, babe, I've got ya.”

“Fuck,” Daryl croaks, his body sagging limply back against the pillows and his hands sliding down to rest on Rick’s thighs.

Carefully, Rick eases off of Daryl's cock, lifting his leg over and rolling onto his back to stretch out his aching legs, his knees popping as he unbends them with a sigh.

“You need a hand there, old timer?” Daryl chuckles, turning over on his side to face Rick and reaching out a hand to lay against Rick's stomach.

“Only on my dick, smart mouth,” Rick grumbles back at him, grabbing at Daryl's hand and moving it down to wrap around his tender cock.

Daryl snorts but takes a firm grip around his shaft anyway and Rick keeps his hand on top as Daryl starts jerking him off, his pace steady but fast enough that Rick knows he won’t last long and he's fine with that. He slides his feet up a little so that he can thrust his hips up into Daryl's pumping fist, his hands falling down to twist the bedsheets as he closes his eyes and Daryl's name trips like a mantra from his lips until he gives a final push and feels the hot splashes of his cum hitting his stomach and chest. He sinks back to the bed, his breath a little ragged, Daryl's hot palm still wrapped tightly around his cock and Rick starts as he feels an equally hot tongue lapping the dripping cum from his tip. His eyes flash open and he moans under his breath as he watches Daryl lick him clean, his cock twitching sporadically with the additional stimulation until Daryl seems satisfied with the job at hand and moves up to clean the other splashes from his skin, ending up at Rick's lips to share a salty kiss with him.

“Mmm,” Daryl drawls, breaking their kiss to grin at Rick and smacking his lips together.

Rick reaches out to trace his fingertips across the soft skin of Daryl's lips, taking mental snapshots of how he looks in this moment with his hair all messed up and his pupils blown wide enough to push away almost all the blue apart from a tiny glowing ring at the edges.
“Bathroom?” he asks, feeling the sticky patch of Daryl’s cum pooling under him when he moves and he sighs a little. “I just cleaned these sheets by the way.”

“Sorry, wifey,” Daryl smirks, climbing off the bed and heading into the other room.

Rick watches him cross the room in the semi-darkness, his pale skin gleaming, and then he rolls to his feet and follows him, both of them fighting over the sink as they grab for washcloths to clean themselves up a little. Tempted as he is to just push Daryl into the shower and get him off again, Rick knows that they have a big day ahead of them so he reluctantly turns off the light and leads the way back to bed, Daryl curling into his favorite position against Rick’s chest as soon as they lay down. Rick wraps an arm around his back, idly stroking at Daryl’s skin as he lets his body relax and start to drift, a blanket of satisfaction and peace lulling him to sleep.

“The summer I was fourteen, Merle got himself a job at the gas station in the next town over… nothin’ fancy, just pumpin’ gas n’ tinkerin’ with the cars that needed fixin’,” Daryl says softly and Rick opens his eyes again, wondering where this story is going but content to just listen to Daryl talk all night if he wants to. “I used to go with him most days… was better’n stayin’ home with the old man… and he’d be flirtin’ with all the college chicks that’d come by, puffin’ out his chest n’ givin’ them that ol’ Merle charm – though I don’t think he ever got lucky with any of ‘em but that didn’t seem to stop him tryin’. Anyways, the owner, Jed, he was a pretty cool guy… let me try out this old dirt bike he had out back a few times and I guess he could see how it was with Merle n’ me, so he set me up washin’ cars for a couple of bucks a pop. You ever washed your own car, Officer?”

“Oh course… every Saturday, regular as clockwork,” Rick tells him, puzzled by the question but even more curious now as to what this slice of Dixon history has to do with anything.

“You use a chamois leather to dry it off? Course ya did… seeing’s you were a professional n’ all. Me… I’d never even seen one before, hell, if Merle’s pickup got too muddy, we’d hose that shit off but, let me tell ya, I spent all damn summer with my sweaty little palms wrapped around those peach fuzz squares and, by the end of the first day, I knew one of ‘em was goin’ home with me.”

“Wait,” Rick says, pulling away from Daryl and making him look up at him, “you’re telling me your fucktoy was a piece of car leather? Why am I not surprised?”

“Hey… don’t knock it till you try it. You ever soak that stuff in warm water… get it all kinds of slippery… remember how that feels? Now think about that wrapped around your fist while you beat your meat.”

“Shit,” Rick mumbles, his sense memory dragging up exactly the wet silky feeling Daryl is talking about and he feels himself growing hard again at the thought.

“Course,” Daryl continues, burrowing his head down against Rick’s chest again and wrapping his arm tighter around his waist, “that ain’t got nothin’ on cuttin’ a hole in a ripe melon that’s been sittin’ out in the sun all day n’ slippin’ your dick into that wet heat so’s you can fuck it till you blow.”

“Jesus, Daryl,” Rick growls, his hard on now thrusting up against the comforter, “you trying to kill me?”

“You asked,” Daryl chuckles, pushing his hand down to tease at Rick’s rigid cock with his fingers and Rick knows that the early night he had planned has just been blown out of the water.
wants to forget about the whole situation with Abraham, something telling him that this might not be such a good idea after all. The man himself, however is all for it, and Rick is out of excuses as to why they shouldn’t move forward if this is what he really wants. So, with Daryl watching on, Rick takes on the wolf to bite Abraham and then they begin yet another waiting game until they know if it’s worked or not. It takes five days before there’s any sign - Rick having started to think that Abraham was going to be one of those people where it would have no effect at all – with Rosita knocking on their door in the early hours of the morning to tell them that Abraham is delirious with a raging fever. Quickly pulling on their clothes and instructing Rosita to take care of Judith, Rick and Daryl race up the stairs to the room Abraham shares with Rosita and they half-carry, half-drag him down the stairs and out to the woodshed where they had set up a temporary cot earlier in the week, ready for this eventuality. Laying him down, Rick can feel the sickly heat that’s burning through his body and smell the wolf blood that’s coursing through his veins. They undress him, not an easy task even with their added strength as he rails against them, lashing out with poorly aimed punches and wild kicks, but eventually they get him calmed down and back on the cot, wrapped in a loose blanket.

“Christ,” Rick mutters, pulling Daryl aside to tend to the bloody nose he’d gotten from one of Abe’s flailing fists. “I’m starting to think this was a bad idea.”

“Yeah, well it’s too late now,” Daryl answers, turning to spit a wad of blood to the dusty floor. “We’re stuck with him now.”

“Will you be okay here for a few minutes while I run back to the house and let the others know what’s happening? I don’t want anybody wandering out here unexpectedly although, most likely, they all know by now anyway. The noise he was making was surely enough to wake them all up”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Better bring some more water though, we’re gonna need it.”

Rick nods, taking a last glance at Abraham’s sweating form before he exits the shed, closing the door quickly behind him when he finds Rosita standing outside.

“Where’s Judy?” he asks, blocking her way.

“Carol has her,” she replies, her eyes widening as a loud, painful-sounding groan comes from behind him.

“You can’t go in there,” Rick tells her firmly, taking her by the upper arms and making sure he has her attention. “Understood?”

She nods and he can see in her eyes that, although she’s obviously scared and anxious, she has enough common sense to do as she’s told and he’s confident he can leave her without her bursting in on Daryl.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a minute. Don’t move.”

He leaves her standing there, her arms crossed over her chest and her breath billowing in the misty air around her head, and he heads quickly into the kitchen finding pretty much everyone waiting for him. He looks around at their sleep-filled faces, everyone still clad in their pajamas, and he wants to smile despite the severity of the situation unfolding outside because he realizes that they truly are a family now and not just people thrown together by fate. Every single one of the people in his life are an important part of his pack now, whether by blood or by love, and he would fight to his dying breath for each and every one of them.

“How is he?” Carol asks, handing Rick a thermos and two mugs along with something wrapped in
tinfoil that he can only assume is breakfast for him and Daryl and he wonders just how long he was out there.

“He’s okay… so far,” he tells them, grabbing water from the pantry. “It’s too early to know anything yet. He has a fever but the change is definitely on him. I want everybody to stay inside today unless you’re on watch. We have no idea what might happen but I’d rather be safe than sorry. Soon as we know something, we’ll come tell you.”

“Nobody’s going anywhere,” Michonne states, staring pointedly at Carl who looks sheepishly at the floor. “I’ll keep them in line. Rosita?”

“Well, now, I’m not sure anything less than a tidal wave is going to dissuade her from being outside and I’m not about to be the one that tries. Daryl and I will take care of her, don’t worry.”

With nothing more to be said, he leaves again, the cold wind whipping a light rain against his face that has him squinting a little before he reaches the woodshed where Rosita is standing outside, shivering.

“You should go back in the house,” he tells her softly, knowing how he’d feel if it was someone he loved on the other side of that door but also wanting the best for her as well. “This could take all day or it might be over in ten minutes… we just don’t know. There’s no point in you standing out here, catching cold, when there’s nothing you can do.”

“I know… I just feel so helpless… like I should be in there doing something.”

“I get that, believe me, I do but there’s nothing you can do – there’s nothing any of us can do except let nature take its course. And he wouldn’t want you standing out here like this, you know that.”

The look she gives him tells him she isn’t buying his pathetic attempt at manipulating her at all and he fully expects her to stand her ground but, to his surprise and relief, she gives one last longing look at the shed door and then turns around to walk wordlessly back to the house. With a relieved sigh, Rick pulls on the woodshed door, balancing his supplies in one arm and goes in to check on what’s happening there.

“Any change?” he asks, handing Daryl the coffee and breakfast which he sits on a nearby workbench.

“Nah,” Daryl answers quietly, nodding at Abraham’s still form under the blanket. “I think he passed out… breathing’s good though.”

“Are we crazy?” Rick asks, shaking his head as he watches the rise and fall of Abraham’s chest under the thin cover.

“Certifiable,” Daryl answers with a grim chuckle, “but when’s that ever stopped us?”

Shaking his head, Rick takes a seat on one of the wooden stools by the workbench, Daryl climbing onto the one beside him, and they settle down to wait.

It’s early afternoon before anything happens and, when it does, it’s fast and brutal – one moment there’s nothing but the sound of the rain on the shed roof, lulling Rick into an unfocused daze, and then the walls are echoing with the sounds of tearing flesh and cracking bones as Abraham’s body fights its way into a new shape. The changes are happening so rapidly that Rick’s eyes can barely keep up, parts of his body forming and reforming in lightning succession but none of it seeming to take hold.
“What’s happening?” Rick yells but he knows Daryl doesn’t have an answer for him, that this is beyond anything they can do to help.

They watch in impotent horror as Abraham’s body literally tears itself apart, the snapping of bone and tearing of sinews providing a stomach churning soundtrack to the destruction playing out before their eyes. There’s nothing they can do but bear witness to his death as his body gives one last, failed attempt to Shift and they hear the final erratic beat of his heart as it gives out under the strain his body has put it through. He doesn’t even consider trying to resuscitate him, he knows there’s no hope considering the mangled mess that’s lying in front of them, and he’s grateful that the man’s death was swift at least. Rick moves in to close Abraham’s eyelids in his misshapen face, trying not to see an accusation in his lifeless eyes, then withdraws his knife from its place on his belt and holds it against the man’s temple.

“I’ve got it,” Daryl says, his voice thick with emotion, but Rick shakes his head.

“You don’t have to.”

Before Daryl can say more and take the burden that neither of them needs added to their load but that somebody has to carry, Rick slips the knife into Abraham’s skull and twists it before pulling it out and reaching for a rag to wipe it on. Daryl pulls the blanket up over Abraham’s grotesque corpse and then they stand, looking at each other, neither of them having the words to follow what they just saw. Slowly they gravitate towards each other, folding into each other’s arms to take comfort in the other’s presence and Rick can feel the wet trickle of Daryl’s tears against his neck, his own eyes threatening to overflow. Taking a deep breath, Rick steps back, scrubbing a hand over his face as he glances at the shed door.

“We have to tell Rosita,” he says quietly, “and the others.”

“I know,” Daryl answers in a weary voice, “but wha-”

“Rick!” Maggie yells from outside, cutting Daryl off and Rick’s heart leaps into his throat as he hears the panic in her voice.

Racing for the door with Daryl fast on his heels, he opens it and they get outside just as Maggie runs breathlessly up to them, her cheeks flushed red and her rifle clutched tightly in her white-knuckled fists.

“What is it?” he asks, slamming the door shut behind him as he sees her eyes flick over his shoulder.

“There’s people at the gates,” she tells him, her words pouring out in a rush and he feels his heart trip into overdrive. “They want to speak to you.”

“Shit,” he curses, his mind racing with a hundred new questions while he’s still trying to process what had just happened. “Alright… Daryl you’re with me. Maggie, stay here… nobody goes in, understand me?”

He sees her eyes widen at the implication of his words, her face crumpling a little, but then she squares her chin at him and gives him a brief nod.

“C’mon,” he tells Daryl, feeling his mate already bristling with adrenaline next to him and together they take off for the front gates, Rick wondering what fate has in store for them now.
Daryl's heart is pounding as he and Rick race side by side around the house to the gates where Carol is waiting for them, armed to the teeth and holding Daryl's crossbow in her hands.

“What do we have?” Rick asks, pitching his voice low and drawing his gun as she hands Daryl his weapon.

“Three women – say they want to talk to whoever’s in charge but wouldn’t say why.”
“Well then, let’s find out,” Rick tells her with a tight nod to Daryl and the pair split off to climb the ladders to the small guard platforms on either side of the gates.

Daryl takes a deep breath and raises his crossbow to his shoulder as he steps forward to take a look over the edge at their visitors, Rick mirroring his actions on the other side.

“Something we can help you with?” Rick asks and all three women below turn in his direction with just one of them throwing a rapid glance at Daryl before she steps forward.

“You in charge?” the woman in front asks, obviously the trio’s leader.

“I am.”

“We’re not looking for trouble,” she continues, Daryl hearing a slight accent in her voice that he can’t place. “My name’s Amanda, this is Lisa and Barb.”

She indicates the women on either side of her in turn and Daryl looks them over, quickly assessing them and determining that, although they appear more than capable of looking after themselves, he’s not sensing anything about them that signals trouble. They’re obviously being cautious but their weapons are holstered and all three are making a conscious effort to keep their hands in plain sight although that’s not to say that there aren’t others hiding out in the treeline and Daryl divides his attention between them and the woods beyond. They’ve left their vehicle parked at the top of the rise, another gesture to show that they’re non-threatening and Daryl feels his heartbeat ramp down a notch.

“I’m Rick, this is Daryl,” Rick tells them, lowering his gun and Daryl follows suit, bringing his crossbow halfway down but still staying on alert in case any of them try anything. “If you’re looking for shelter, we’re full up. Sorry, but that’s just the way it is. We could probably spare you some supplies though, if that’s what you need.”

“We’re just looking for information,” Amanda tells them, narrowing her eyes as she looks up at Rick. “The pier down the beach away… the building on the end is burnt out.”

“There was a fire, few nights ago.”

“And the grave nearby?” Amanda asks holding up her hand and Daryl can see the rosary that Michonne had placed on the grave’s marker dangling from her fingers.

“She was a friend of yours?” Rick says and Daryl can hear the residual guilt still tracing his words. “We tried to get her out but it was too late… I’m sorry.”

“But you went back and buried her?” Lisa interrupts and Daryl hears the disbelief in her tone.

“It was the right thing to do,” Rick says slowly and she falls silent.

“That’s why we came looking for you,” Amanda continues, straightening her back a little as she looks up at Rick. “We’re part of a community not too far from here… it’s a pretty big group and we’re always looking for like-minded people to join us.”

“Well… we’re not really interested in moving,” Rick says with a smile.

“And I don’t blame you. It looks like you’ve got a pretty sweet set up here but what about trade? There’s always going to be something you need, right? And it doesn’t hurt to have friends out here.”

“We don’t exactly have a stellar track record in the making friends department… why should we
trust you?"

“You shouldn’t, not on my word alone anyway. But you should definitely come meet with our leader, hear what she has to say. I know, at least, she’ll want to thank you personally for what you did for Junie.”

“I’d need time to think it over,” Rick’s says carefully after a moment’s hesitation. “Discuss it with my people.”

“Fair enough,” Amanda agrees with an incline of her head. “We’ll come back in the morning and you can let us know what you’ve decided. I really do think that it’d be beneficial to all of us but it’s up to you. If you’re not comfortable with it then we’ll move on, no harm no foul.”

Rick nods and nothing more is said as the women turn to walk back to their car, Daryl watching them like a hawk until they get in and drive away and then he lowers his weapon completely to climb back down the ladder, joining Rick and Carol at the bottom.

“What do you think?” Carol asks, worry lines creasing her forehead and Daryl can see the tight grip she has on her gun.

“I think they’re telling the truth,” Rick answers. “Daryl?”

“Yeah, it didn’t seem like they were hidin’ anythin’.”

“So, what do we do?”

“We take it to the others and see what they think,” Rick tells her and Daryl sees his eyes flick to the house behind her, “but first we have something else to deal with.”

“Oh my God… Abe,” Carol exclaims, turning towards the house. “I forgot about him with all this. How is he? You didn’t leave Maggie alone with him.”

“Carol,” Rick says, reaching out a hand to lay calmly on her shoulder and Daryl sees her face crumple as she reads the truth in Rick’s eyes.

“Oh no… Rick… really?”

“It was sudden… nothin’ we could do,” Daryl adds, reaching out to take the hand that Carol holds out to him, enveloping her cold fingers in his warm ones. “His body didn’t take the Shift.”

“We knew that might happen,” Carol says, shaking her head and taking a deep breath to stop her emotions from overcoming her.

“It was a possibility,” Rick agrees, bowing his head.

“Hey, both of you,” Carol tells them, squeezing hard on Daryl’s fingers and shaking Rick’s arm until she has both their attention. “This wasn’t your fault, neither of you. It was a calculated risk and everyone went into it knowing it might fail. Don’t you dare take this on yourselves. Abraham wouldn’t blame you and you shouldn’t either. He knew what he was signing on for.”

“We know,” Rick sighs, his eyes meeting Daryl’s, “doesn’t make it any easier.”

“C’mon, best we go tell the others what’s goin’ on,” Daryl says quietly, dropping Carol’s hand and shouldering his crossbow, wanting more than anything not to have to walk into the house and face his family right now.
He falls into step between Carol and Rick, drawing strength from both of them as they make their way back to the house, calling to Maggie to join them from her post outside the woodshed and, together, they go inside, closing the door on the bleakness of the day outside.

Daryl pauses in his task to wipe the sweat away that’s trickling down from his brow despite the cool wind that’s cutting through the trees and then resumes digging in the soft earth under his feet. He’s almost done with Abraham’s grave, the sheer sides of the hole coming almost up to his chest, and he just tosses out a few more shovelfuls of the rich, damp soil before he leverages himself up and out. Michonne is waiting for him, her katana on her back and a rifle held loosely in her hands as she surveys the area, her nostrils flaring. Daryl plunges the shovel into one of the piles of dirt at the grave’s edge, leaving it there ready for its next task, and he takes his own look around to reassure himself that they’re alone out there.

“It’s ready,” he tells Michonne and she looks over her shoulder at him, her solemn eyes regarding him for a moment before she pulls the radio from her pocket and calls the compound.

They wait, standing slightly apart, both of them maintaining their watchfulness over their surroundings until they hear the familiar sound of the pickup coming slowly up the road towards them. Daryl turns as it pulls off and onto the grass, bumping gently over the rough ground until it’s as close to the trees as it can get and then it stops, Rick climbing out of the driver’s side and walking around to the back. Daryl heads down to join him as he lowers the tailgate and together they lift Abraham’s sheet-wrapped body from the flatbed and carry him back to the freshly-dug grave. By the time they’ve laid him carefully in the ground, the rest of their family has walked up from the compound to join them, Rosita being supported by Tara’s arm tightly around her waist. Carol had volunteered to stay behind with Carl and Judith, Rick having expressed his concern at them coming outside the walls so soon after there had been strangers at the gates and it hits Daryl just how small their group is becoming. He steps back from the group, standing slightly behind Rick, still uncomfortable at these things despite the growing number of them he’s attended. As Rick’s strong voice fills the silence, Daryl’s mind wanders unbidden to all those they’ve lost along the way – to all the freshly dug graves he’s stood beside and to those where there wasn’t even time to give them a proper goodbye – and he feels his shoulders sag under the weight of their absence.

When everyone has paid their respects, the subdued group makes its way slowly back to the compound, Daryl bringing up the rear in the pickup which he parks in front of the small garage before joining the others in the house where they gather in the living room.

“I know today is hard and I appreciate that everyone probably needs a minute to process what happened but we need to talk about the people that were here earlier,” Rick says once everyone is settled and Daryl feels the mood in the room shift in an instant.

“Are they dangerous?”

“Where did they come from?”

“Are they coming back?”

“One at a time,” Rick tells them, holding up his hand as the questions that he had refused to answer earlier until Abraham was taken care of come flying at him.

“Who are they?” Michonne asks.

“They say they’re part of a larger group – pretty big if they’re to be believed. The woman who died
in the fire… she was one of them, they were looking for whoever buried her. They want us to go meet with their leader, maybe join with them.”

“Do you trust them?” Glenn asks, taking Maggie’s hand in his.

“Too soon to tell but they don’t seem to be hiding anything, least’s not at far as I could make out from what little conversation we had.”

“Where are they now?” Noah asks and Daryl can see the worry hiding in his normally bright eyes.

“Camped nearby… they’re coming back tomorrow for an answer. When we’re done here, Michonne, I want you and Daryl to take a run and see if they’re telling the truth about it only being the three of them out here.”

Daryl looks to Michonne and she gives him a tight nod in reply.

“So… are we considerin’ it? What they’re offerin’?” he asks, turning to look at Rick.

“Well, that’s what we have to decide. If what they say is true and they have a larger group then we might want to consider joining them.”

“And give up our home?” Maggie says, cradling her stomach with one arm.

“They might have a larger group but, if they’re sending out scouts to look for safe locations, then it doesn’t sound like they’re living anywhere stable,” Glenn adds and Daryl agrees with him.

“For all we know, there’s just enough of them to kill us all and take this place for themselves,” he says, feeling more and more that this is a bad idea.

“We don’t know, that’s the problem,” Carol chimes in. “I think we should go talk with this leader of theirs, see what the deal is. We’re doing okay here for now but how long till somebody else less friendly knocks on our door or one of us gets sick? They might have a secure place to live and they’re just scouting for other people to join them… they could have a doctor… food, ammunition. We’re not going to know unless we go talk to them. If we don’t like what we hear then we back away and, if they come for us, then let them try and take this place. They’ll have the fight of their lives on their hands.”

“Carol’s right,” Michonne says, “we should go see what they’re offering and what they expect from us in return. We might be doing fine right now but what about Maggie’s pregnancy? If they have someone with medical training, I’m sure we’d all sleep a lot better. And what’s our long-term plan? Are we just going to stay here until we’re old and grey? We’ve spent so long just surviving that we never think about the future. Eventually there’ll be no more walkers… they’re going to decay so much they’ll barely be a threat anymore and what then? If we want the human race to survive, we’re going to need a damn sight more people than just the twelve of us.”

The room falls silent after her words, everyone contemplating more than just themselves and their immediate situation for once and Daryl hates to admit that she’s right but he knows that it’s true. He also knows that he’s going to have to put aside his natural feelings of distrust at some point if they want to do more than just keep surviving.

“So, we go?” Rick asks and nobody counters his suggestion. “Okay, we’ll arrange a meeting when they come back tomorrow but it’ll be where we choose and on our terms. In the meantime, Daryl and Michonne, you should head out now and take a look at our new friends.”

“On it,” Daryl tells him, getting up and heading for the door with Michonne close on his heels and he
can practically feel her wolf snapping to be set free.

Their recon is short and efficient, the pair of them Shifting to easily track the three women back to where they’ve made their camp in one of the empty houses close to the pier. A quick glance at the area shows Michonne and Daryl that they’re alone, the vehicle they had arrived in earlier parked out of sight at the rear of the house and the three of them clearly visible through the windows at the back. Satisfied that their visitors are telling the truth so far, Daryl nudges Michonne’s shoulder and the pair of them turn and head back to the lighthouse, taking the longer route along the beach so that they can both stretch their legs with a full out run. Back at the lighthouse, Carol opens the gate to let them in, swatting at Daryl as he attempts to lick her hands, and they head inside to Shift back and let the others know what they’d found. With that done, Daryl heads back outside to take his turn on watch in the lighthouse, relieving Tara who gives him a worried look as she starts down the stairs.

“What?” he asks and she pauses for a second, looking up at him through the stair railings.

“Did you speak to Carol when you got back?”

“Nope… saw her on the way in but she didn’t say nothin’. What’s goin’ on?”

“Talk to her.”

Tara drops her gaze, continuing on and Daryl listens to her footsteps retreating until she’s outside and he can see her in the fading light, making her way to the main house, leaving him to wonder what the hell is going on now. It doesn’t take long until he finds out in the shape of Carol approaching the base of the lighthouse with a confused looking Rick in tow. He feels another of those fingers of dread caressing his spine as he waits for them to climb the winding stairs to the room at the top, Carol’s stoic face coming into view first with Rick close behind her.

“What’s goin’ on?” he asks as they cross the small room to join him.

“Beats me,” Rick answers with a small shrug. “I was just told my presence was required.”

“I’m going to say this just once and you’re going to listen until I’m done and you’re not going to argue with me,” Carol tells them, her face stern in the moonlight coming through the glass. “Are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Rick answers, shooting a puzzled glance at Daryl but Daryl just shrugs in return – he’s as clueless as to what’s going on in her mind as he always is.

“I want you to change me,” Carol states, her voice calm and measured and her eyes locked on Daryl's. “Now.”

“What?” Daryl exclaims, his mind trying to desperately comprehend what she's asking them.

“You’re fuckin’ shittin’ me, right?”

“I’m as serious as I’ve ever been.”

“No… just… no, not a fuckin’ chance,” Daryl tells her, raising his voice and throwing up a hand dismissively in her direction as he wheels away and paces across the room. “You’re outta your mind, woman.”

“You said you’d hear me out,” Carol says defiantly, crossing her arms and tilting her chin at him.
“Pfft… not for this crazy bullshit.”

“Daryl,” Rick says calmly, his eyes unreadable in the shadowy light and Daryl’s fury ratchets down just a tiny percent, confident that Rick will be able to talk some sense into her. “Carol… why now?”

“Why? I’d think that was obvious. I’ve been fooling myself - hiding behind the safety of these walls pretending that the world had gone away but it really hasn’t. For Christ’s sake, Daryl, I’ve been baking cakes and planning day trips to the beach with the kids, what was I thinking? Meanwhile there are strangers on our doorstep and the world isn’t ever going away. These women might be safe, hell their group might be the answer to a lot of our problems down the line but they’re not the only ones out there and I was naïve to think we’d found a safe haven. Nothing is safe anymore.”

“But this isn’t the answer,” Daryl pleads, not disagreeing with her in the slightest – hell, they’d all been guilty of becoming too complacent in their new life – but scared to death of the possible outcomes of her decision. “Abe just died not even twelve hours ago and you’re standin’ here, tellin’ me you want to volunteer for the same thing that took him down. No… it’s not gonna happen. I ain’t losin’ you like that.”

“You’re not going to lose me,” Carol tells him, unfolding her arms to rest her small hand strongly against his forearm and he resists the urge to just shake her off. “What about Michonne? It could turn out just like that instead. We don’t know, Daryl, you said it yourself. I’m willing to take the risk.”

“Well I’m not,” he huffs, walking away from her to stare out over the darkened ocean, his heart aching at the image of her broken body his mind casually tosses at him.

“Rick?” he hears her ask and he draws in a breath as he waits for his mate’s response.

“Are you sure?” Rick asks after a long silence and Daryl feels his heart sink to his boots, knowing that, no matter what he thinks, the choice is no longer in his hands.

“Yes,” she answers, the confidence in her voice filling the room. “I’m not stupid, Rick, I understand the risks just as well as Abraham and Michonne did but I think it’s the right thing to do… I feel it.”

“Daryl?”

“No… you do this… you two are on your own. I ain’t being a part of your crazy,” he tells them whirling back to face Rick, seeing the resigned look in his partner’s eyes.

Ignoring their pleas for him to stop, he runs for the stairs, bounding down them into the warmly lit room at the lighthouse’s base, not caring that he just walked out on his watch but needing to be as far from them as he can. The blood is pounding in his ears as he races into the house, doors slamming in his wake until he’s safely inside his room where he paces the floor relentlessly, trying to calm the beast that’s rebelling deep in his chest. When the door opens behind him and Rick slips through it, Daryl meets him with an echoing snarl and Rick’s hands fly up into a submissive gesture as he approaches him.

“What do you do it?” he demands, his hands balling into fists at his sides and a wave of nausea rolling through his stomach.

“No,” Rick says evenly, dropping his hands and coming to a halt before Daryl. “I told her I wanted her to come with us to the meeting first… I thought she might change her mind if it turns out these people can help us.”

“Good,” Daryl snaps, some of his anxiety subsiding. “Maybe she’ll see what a damn fool she’s being.”
“You really think she’s wrong?”

“Don’t you?”

“I think she’s a smart woman and I don’t think she came to this decision lightly. Out of all of us, she’s known for the longest… don’t you think she hasn’t thought about it in all that time? Hell, she’s probably been analyzing every angle since the day you showed her. If she says she’s ready, I have to believe that she is.”

“I don’t want to lose her,” Daryl says, feeling his body sag under the possibility.

“I know,” Rick answers quietly, stepping forward to open his arms and fold Daryl in against his chest. “I don’t want to either but I think we have to trust her.”

Daryl lets himself be held, resting his forehead against the rough leather of Rick’s jacket and letting go of a shaky breath before he curls his fists into the sides of Rick’s shirt underneath and clings to him like he never wants to let go.

“Hey,” Rick says eventually, nudging Daryl’s head from his shoulder and looking him in the eye, “it’s been a clusterfuck of a day… what do you say to a hot meal, some quality time with our kids and then a hot bath and an early night.”

“I’d say you were tryin’ to distract me,” Daryl answers, stepping back and giving Rick a small smile. “But I’d also say, hell yes.”

“Come on then,” Rick smiles, leaning forward to brush his lips lightly against Daryl’s before steering him towards the door and Daryl follows him, making a conscious effort to push aside the issues crowding his mind at least for the rest of the evening.

Three days later and the change in the weather is as tempestuous as the mood in the pickup that Daryl is driving to their meeting with the other group’s leader. The sun is blazing down around them, throwing sparks of light up from every wreck they pass along the highway, its heat filling the cab of the truck even with all the windows down.

“How in the hell is it this hot in January?” Carol complains, her annoyance at being sandwiched between Rick and Daryl in the front of the truck obvious in her tone.

“Global warming?” Rick answers drily and Daryl hears the slight outrush of breath as Carol jabs her elbow in his ribs.

“You could’ve stayed home,” Daryl mutters, staring straight ahead at the road in front of them.

Since her declaration that she wanted to be turned, Daryl had barely spoken to Carol even though she’d made numerous attempts over the past few days but had finally given up with a tired shake of her head. With so much else going on, he just couldn’t deal with what she had asked and had coped with it the only way he knew how – by retreating from her and point blank refusing to discuss it any further, even with Rick. When Rick had asked her to come along for this meeting, Daryl had almost pulled the childish argument of “I’m not going if she’s going” but then he realized that this wasn’t about his issues with Carol but Rick’s need to have somebody he trusted by his side who would be able to handle themselves if things went south. He had tasked Michonne with staying behind to protect the compound, not wanting to put all three of his strongest players out on the road and leave their home vulnerable in case this was still some elaborate ruse to get them away from the safety of their walls. They had met with Amanda’s group the following day, telling them they would be happy
to meet with the leader of her group and giving her a time and place to find them, three days later. It was Daryl who had eventually decided on a good location for the meeting to take place – he had remembered the fire station they had passed when they had first abandoned the train to set out on foot for the coast and Rick had agreed immediately. The two-story building was set on open ground, nothing but empty fields stretching away on either side of the road for a few miles making it easy to spot if there was anybody coming. It was far enough from the lighthouse to make Daryl feel comfortable should anything go wrong and they could keep someone on the roof during the meeting as a lookout.

They had sent Amanda away with the location and an agreement to meet there in three days, their plan being to arrive at the fire station a couple of hours before the scheduled time to get into position. That plan is quickly blown to shreds when they round a bend on the highway and see the fire station up ahead with a large SUV already parked in front and two women standing watch.

“What d’ya wanna do?” Daryl asks, slowing the pickup to a halt before they get too close and glancing across at Rick.

“Well… we’ve come this far, may as well see it through,” Rick answers, a frown creasing his brow as he narrows his eyes to peer through the window. “Can’t fault ‘em for doing exactly what we were planning. Shows they have some smarts at least.”

“Alright,” Daryl agrees, putting the car back into gear and carrying on until they’re pulling into the wide, cracked parking lot in front of the station.

Getting carefully out of the pickup with their arms raised to show that they’re armed but not on the attack, they walk over to greet the women by the SUV.

“You’re early,” Amanda says, a knowing smile on her lips as she holds out her hand which Rick dutifully shakes.

“So are you,” he retorts as Daryl scans the area quickly, finding nothing out of the ordinary and gives Rick a nod to let him know.

“Shall we?” Amanda says, turning to lead the way into the shadowed interior of the empty bays where the fire engines had once stood, ready for duty, and the other woman follows her.

Daryl’s fingers tighten on his bow and he sees Carol’s hand slip to rest on the hilt of her knife as they step forward to follow the woman inside and then he freezes, his hand coming out instinctively to grab at Rick’s arm. Rick turns to him, his eyes wide, and Daryl knows he’s not imagining the scent that’s just hit him like a ton of bricks at the entrance to the building – another of their kind is waiting inside for them.

“Well, you might as well come on in now,” chuckles a dry female voice from inside, “doesn’t look like we have any more secrets to keep.”

Daryl shares a look with Rick, letting him make the decision, his body ready to flee if that’s the call his mate makes but Rick just shakes his head and walks forward. All Daryl can do is glance briefly at Carol’s confused face before he steps after Rick into the slightly cooler interior, his fingers flexing on his bow as his eyes adjust to the dim light inside. Across the empty room a table has been dragged out into the center of the floor, a single chair set up on either side and Daryl has a sickening flashback to Rick’s meeting with the Governor in what seems like another lifetime. In the chair on the far side of the table is a woman, smaller than Daryl would have imagined from the strong sound of her voice, and she stands as they approach. It’s hard to judge her actual age, she looks to be in her late fifties but Daryl knows that the effect of the wolf could mean that she’s far older than that - her
reddish hair is just starting to show a hint of gray at her temples and her weathered face is deeply lined but her eyes are glowing a bright amber. Although there’s a genuine smile on her face, the hair on the back of Daryl's neck bristles as she holds out a hand to Rick and he can’t shake the feeling that there’s more to this she-wolf than meets the eye, his instincts telling him to be watchful.

“You must be Rick,” she says warmly, shaking Rick's hand and looking up into his face. “Well, this is an unexpected surprise, I have to tell you.”

“For us too,” Rick answers cautiously. “And you are?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, where are my manners?” she laughs and the sound shudders along Daryl's spine. “I’m Deanna, Deanna Monroe, and it’s a pleasure to meet you.”
Rick takes the hand that Deanna offers him, feeling the elevated heat from her skin against his own, her strong grip telling him that he would be wise not to underestimate her despite her petite stature.

“Sit… please,” she offers, waving a hand to indicate the empty seat across from her and Rick realizes that the control he was expecting to have over this meeting has been subtly shifted into her court.

He lowers himself onto the wooden seat, his eyes fixed on Deanna but he's aware of Daryl moving...
away behind him - he assumes to watch the entrance - and of Carol coming to stand at his left shoulder. For a moment he and Deanna do nothing more than regard each other across the table, two players in a game where the rules have just been inexplicably changed on them and they have to decide how to proceed. Although he can feel the anxiety rolling off of Daryl from across the room, Rick knows that this could be the first step in making a powerful ally so he's ready to listen to what Deanna’s proposing with an open mind.

“Are there more of you?” she asks finally, leaning in to rest her elbows on the table and steeple her fingers in front of her.

“Yes,” Rick answers cautiously, not ready to give her any idea exactly how many of them are wolves without knowing more about her motives first. “You?”

“Not yet but there will be,” she tells him, an enigmatic smile stealing across her lips that tells him she knows exactly what game he's playing. “Amanda told me what you did for Junie… I appreciate that.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. I – we – tried to save her but we couldn’t. Laying her to rest was the least we could do.”

“Thank you,” Deanna says, acknowledging his words with a dip of her head. “Junie may not have always been the smartest girl but she was an excellent tracker and she was family. We don’t seem to meet many people anymore who would take the time to do what you did for a complete stranger and I won’t forget that. Tell me about your group, Rick. Amanda says you’re all living in a lighthouse.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Rick,’ Deanna laughs, the lines around her eyes deepening with her mirth, “I’m not looking to steal your land.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I’m here to make you an offer.”

“I’m listening.”

“My group is living in a school, about thirty miles west of here. We’ve fortified the building and the grounds as best we can – turned the football field into a pretty decent area to grow some crops – but we’ve suffered some pretty big losses as I’m sure you have too. There’s been two large herds of the undead coming through – one when we first were getting established that almost wiped out half of us and took some of our key players and then another a few months ago. The fences are holding but I’m not sure we could take another hit like that so we’ve been sending scouts out, looking for a new place where we could really dig in and make a safe environment for everyone. Half my people are sleeping in tents right now and that’s no way to live.”

“I’m not sure how we can help?”

“It’s time we started looking to the future… rebuilding… and we can’t do that alone. Join with us, Rick, help us find somewhere we can all live. Your family may be surviving right now but what
about a month from now or a year? Are you going to keep yourselves cut off for the rest of your lives? I knew you were good people from the moment Amanda told me what you’d done but now I know you’re Shifters on top of that… well, I think we’d be crazy not to form an alliance, don’t you? Think of what we could accomplish with our combined strength. You say there’s more of you at home… then that’s something that benefits both our groups.”

“How so?”

“Well, I have strength in numbers – people who’ll be willing to work hard to build something for all of us – and you have the means to protect them while they do. This could be our future, Rick, the way we come back from all of this.”

Rick doesn’t answer her, leaning back in his seat as he mulls over what she’s proposing, carefully weighing up her words from every angle. It’s not like he hasn’t put forward the same idea himself, had endless discussions with Daryl and the others about this becoming the next step on the human race’s evolutionary ladder, but he still has too many unanswered questions where Deanna’s concerned. She’s feeding him a solid pitch but he has to wonder why, if her group is as large as she’s claiming, she hasn’t already made more of them like her.

“I’ll have to talk it over with my people,” he declares finally, looking her straight in the eye. “I can’t make that decision for them.”

“Can’t you?” she asks and, for a second, he thinks he sees something darker in her eyes, hidden behind the genial façade she’s presenting, but then it’s gone as quickly as it appeared. “No, of course you can’t and I wouldn’t expect you to. Go then… think it over, talk to your people.”

“A week,” Rick states, getting to his feet and Deanna follows suit. “We’ll meet back here one week from today and I’ll give you my answer. “But… if we decide it’s not right for us, then that’s it, understood? We part ways – no harm, no foul.”

“Deal,” Deanna agrees, holding out her hand across the table and Rick hesitates for the merest fraction of a second before he shakes it but it’s just long enough for him to see that dark shadow cloud her eyes again and then disappear. “I’m sure you’ll see it’s the right choice to make though, once you’ve had time to think it over clearly.”

“We’ll see,” Rick tells her, releasing her hand and turning away from the table to walk over to where Daryl is waiting by the entrance with Carol now at his side.

They’re silent as they get back into the pickup, Rick taking the driving seat this time, with Daryl throwing endless watchful glances behind them until the fire station disappears from view and they let out a collective sigh of relief.

“She was a wolf,” Carol states, shaking her head in disbelief. “I guess Glenn was right… it stands to reason that your kind would have better odds of survival against the walkers.”

“I don’t trust her,” Daryl blurts out, obviously unable to hold his silence a moment longer.

“I’m not sure I do either,” Rick tells them honestly. “I know what she’s offering makes sense but I think there’s something she’s not telling us.”

“Absolutely,” Carol agrees, “and did you see her slip when you told her you had to talk with the others first? Almost like she expected you to give her an answer right there – as if it was a weakness that you wouldn’t make that decision for them as their leader.”

“Yeah… I saw it and that might have been the only moment she was herself in the whole damn
conversation.”

“So, what do you want to do?”

“First off… talk to the others. If what she's saying is true then she's not wrong about there being safety in numbers and rebuilding. But she's definitely not giving us the whole story and I think we should pay our new friend a visit before we agree to anything.”

“You’re going to go check her out… are you sure that’s wise?”

“Oh… she won’t even know we’re there. Can’t be too hard to figure out where her group is – we have the notes that Junie left behind in her car. We have a week… that should be plenty of time to do a little recon and see if we can’t figure out what she’s hiding.”

“You don’t think she’ll be expecting you?”

“We’ll be careful – stick to the back roads until we’re close then make it the rest of the way on foot.”

“Sounds like we have a plan,” Daryl says and Rick nods as he presses down on the gas pedal a little harder, eager to get them home.

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Once they’ve brought the others up to speed it seems that the consensus is that Rick’s right – they can’t afford to turn away the opportunity of expanding their group with the goal of rebuilding but they need to approach the situation with caution. Rick proposes that they wait a couple of days before setting out to locate Deanna’s base just in case she is anticipating their recon and to spend the time looking over Junie’s notes to help them find their way. After dinner that night, with Glenn’s help, he and Michonne spread out the maps they’ve gathered along the way on the kitchen table and work on marking off each of the school locations that they can find. They narrow down their search based on the information Deanna gave them and backtracking along the route Junie was making until Rick is happy that they have a couple of potential sites to investigate. With that out of the way, he heads outside to check on Daryl who is on watch at the top of the lighthouse, climbing the winding staircase with a practiced ease.

“Did ya miss me already?” Daryl drawls, turning his head from the glass as Rick arrives in the moonlit room.

“Always,” Rick answers with a smile, coming to stand beside him, his eyes drawn to the silver-painted landscape in front of them. “Everything quiet?”

“Yeah… nothin’ goin’ on.”

“Good.”

Rick rubs at the back of his neck as he stares through the window, the tension from the day having worked its way into his muscles, and he catches Daryl giving him a sidelong glance.

“What?”

“I’ve got somethin’ that can fix that,” Daryl tells him, giving him a suggestive wink.

“Oh yeah?” Rick asks, raising an eyebrow, more than familiar with Daryl's method of ‘fixing’ his aches and pains. “Guess it’s a shame you have another two hours on watch then.”
“Well… you could stay,” Daryl answers, moving in to slide his hands onto Rick's hips while he kisses the side of his neck. “Keep me company.”

“I’m not sure that's such a good idea,” Rick chuckles, the sound tapering off into a low moan as Daryl's lips find the sweet spot at the base of his throat and, with an effort, he pushes him off. “Eyes on the prize, Dixon.”

“Oh, they are,” Daryl smirks, glancing down as he cups Rick's cock through his jeans and gives it a squeeze.

“Dammit, Daryl,” Rick hisses, jumping back and laughing. “Just finish your damn watch. I’ll be waiting up for you.”

He leaves the tower with Daryl's soft laughter following after him, adjusting the uncomfortable bulge now pressing at the front of his jeans, and slips back into the house, thankful that he doesn’t bump into any of the others on his way. Taking the baby monitor from his breast pocket and placing it on the bedside table, he quietly sneaks a quick glance into Judy’s room and then softly closes the door once he assures himself that she’s sleeping peacefully. Stretching his arms up behind his head, rolling his neck to try and work out some of the kinks, his eyes light on the dark, wooden chest tucked away on the shelf below Daryl's nightstand and a smile creeps across his face.

By the time Daryl finishes his watch and gets back to their room, locking the door behind him and kicking off his boots in the middle of the floor, Rick is sweating and it has nothing to do with the comforter he has pulled up to his chin. While he had waited for Daryl to return, Rick had opened the box and perused its contents, not ashamed to admit that some of the items inside still baffled him as to their function. It wasn’t that he was a prude but what with his upbringing and his need to keep his sexual predilections a secret once he had discovered what they were, he had never had many opportunities to expose himself to the vast variety of stimulants out there. His encounters with other men had been strictly of the no frills kind – sloppy blow jobs and frantic fucks in the alley behind the bar he’d go to when his needs kept him awake at night and Lori would pretend not to notice when he’d crawl back into their bed in the early hours, reeking of cheap cologne and cigarettes. With an inquisitive pre-teen in the house, he hadn’t dared keep anything there nor use the home computer to access the world of porn he knew was just beyond his reach and so he was clueless in a lot of ways. But one thing he wasn’t, was stupid and, while some of the things in Michonne’s gift box might take a little further figuring out, there are others whose function is as clear as day.

“Why does it smell like strawberries in here?” Daryl grunts, his nose wrinkling as he hops from one foot to the other to pull off his jeans before tossing them aside.

“Does it?” Rick asks, his voice cracking a little.

“You okay?” Daryl questions him with a small frown.

“Mm-hmm,” he answers, feeling the sweat pool at the base of his spine where he’s holding himself as motionless as possible against the bed. “Just waiting for you.”

“Then move your ass over… I’m here now,” Daryl tells him, pulling back the comforter and stopping dead as he takes in the sight of Rick laying exposed before him.

Rick watches as Daryl's face changes from concern through momentary confusion to recognition and he nervously wets his bottom lip with the tip of his tongue before letting out a low whistle.

“Well now, Sheriff, what do we have here?”
“Got you a little something,” Rick tells him, trying to keep his breathing even but failing miserably.

“Me?” Daryl laughs, his eyes grazing down Rick's torso and lingering on his cock. “Looks more like you’re treatin’ yourself there, officer.”

Rick looks down at himself, drawing in a sharp breath at the sight of his turgid cock standing rigidly out from his body now that the oppressive weight of the comforter has been lifted. Nestled tightly at the base of his shaft is a shiny silicone cock ring, one of three that had been included in the box but he had chosen this one specifically for the added bonus that it came with an attached butt plug – something that he had eased into himself half an hour earlier with copious amounts of strawberry scented lube.

“Could use a hand,” he says, drawing up his knees and parting his thighs to reveal the black strap connecting his cock to his asshole and he sees Daryl's eyes widen at the sight.

“Nuh-uh,” Daryl tells him, shaking his head as he climbs onto the bed and kneels between Rick's thighs. “You got yourself into this mess… I think I’m just gonna sit here n’ see how long you can last like that.”

Before Rick can protest, Daryl leans forward and teases his mouth open with a yearning kiss, his tongue rolling across Rick's as his hands cup Rick's knees and then slide down to wrap around his thighs. Rick groans against Daryl's lips as he presses forward and his body traps Rick's throbbing cock between them, that small amount of stimulation making his balls ache. Daryl pulls back, sucking at Rick's bottom lip before releasing it with a distinct popping sound, and looks at Rick with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Still need that hand?” Daryl asks and Rick swallows, his mouth dry, before nodding his head.

He feels his cock twitch in anticipation as Daryl reaches past him and grabs the lube from the bedside table, squirting a generous amount onto his palm before tossing it aside and then he groans as Daryl slides his sticky palm around his own length instead. Leaning back so that Rick has a full view of everything, Daryl starts slowly pumping his fist around his own cock, moaning softly under his breath as he brings his thumb up to swipe across the head.

“Prick,” Rick mutters, stretching his own hand out to grasp at his dripping hard on.

“Don’t you dare,” Daryl growls and Rick's fingers freeze barely an inch away from his aching flesh.

Baring his teeth at Daryl, he drops his hand back to the bed beside him, watching the slow smile spread across his mate’s face.

“That’s better,” Daryl says softly, his hand still working at his cock and Rick whimpers as he sees him slide his other hand down to tug at his balls. “Fuck… yeah… that feels so good. You enjoyin’ the view, Sheriff? Oh yeah… I know you are. Dirty fucker just loves to watch me cum, dontcha?”

“Daryl…” Rick rumbles, the ache in his cock and balls turning now to a white hot pain.

“How’s your ass feelin’ there, Officer Grimes?” Daryl drawls, his fist slipping a little faster around his shaft and Rick clenches reflexively then wishes he hadn’t. “Oh yeah… I see ya… not as good as my dick shoved in there, I bet... but I’m also bettin’ y’all forgot one thing…”

Rick bites his lip hard enough to draw blood as Daryl's hand snakes out and slips down underneath him to seek out the wide base of the butt plug, his body feeling like it might explode as the silicone toy starts vibrating madly inside him and he starts sweating profusely.
“Shiiiiittt,” he hisses, trying his best not to howl as it rubs furiously against his prostate.

“Yaaasss,” Daryl crows, jerking his cock even harder, “I’m gonna… fuckin’… cuuu…”

He rises to his knees, his hips thrusting forward into his hand as he ejaculates over Rick, the hot splashes landing on his already sensitive skin and he unravels completely, his own orgasm tearing through him, his unrestrained cock shooting wildly with his bucking hips. The vibrations inside him combined with the tight ring on his shaft seem to prolong his orgasm exponentially until he can feel the veins in his neck standing out like wires and his clawed fingers are tearing shreds in the sheet below him. He can feel the comforting weight of Daryl's hands on him, soothing him and reaching to switch off the toy, pulling it gently from him. Rick's eyes are clenched shut, his heart thumping wildly in his chest and it's all he can do to remember to breathe as Daryl's dexterous fingers remove the cock ring from his still throbbing shaft.

“Easy there, Sheriff,” he whispers, his hands wiping the sweat-soaked hair back from Rick's face and Rick finally opens his eyes to find Daryl's sparkling blue ones staring back at him. “That was some ride.”

“Holy fuck,” Rick croaks, feeling his heartrate settle back down to normal. “You have to try that shit!”

Daryl laughs, leaning forward to run his tongue across Rick's bottom lip, sucking away the blood left behind by Rick's fangs and then deepening his touch to a prolonged kiss that has Rick's insides vibrating for a different reason.

“Love you,” he murmurs when Daryl finally releases him and he sees the flush that blooms on Daryl's skin at his words.

“Love you too, ya pussy,” Daryl smirks, rolling off the bed and hauling Rick's protesting body up after him, “but you stink like a possum's been dead for a week.”

“Fuck you,” Rick throws back but his nose wrinkles up as he catches the stink coming from his pores and he lets Daryl lead him to the shower, his legs still shaking a little.

Daryl takes control in the bathroom, manipulating Rick this way and that under the steady stream of hot water until he's satisfied that his mate is clean and Rick is content to just be putty in his capable hands. With the shredded bedsheet replaced, he sinks gratefully into the bed's welcoming embrace, pulling Daryl to him and kissing him softly until neither one of them can stay awake.

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Rick is conscious long before dawn, staring with bleary eyes at the clock beside his bed before carefully disentangling himself from Daryl's embrace and getting up to dress himself in his jeans and a t-shirt. Running his hand through his hair to try and tame some of the wilder curls, he pads barefoot into the kitchen, ready to make himself a strong coffee and take up his thinking spot at the solid wooden table but he finds that Carol has already beaten him to it. She smiles knowingly as he enters the softly-lit room, turning from where she was pouring herself a mug of the rich, dark liquid and handing it to him instead. He nods gratefully at her and takes a seat on the long wooden bench at one side of the table, cupping his hands around the fragrant-smelling mug and watching as she pours a second one for herself and comes to sit beside him. They sit in a companionable silence for a few minutes, Rick letting the fog of sleep gradually lift from his mind as he watches the curls of steam rise from his coffee and disappear towards the ceiling.

“Normally I wouldn’t intrude on your morning meditation,” Carol begins, her soft tones barely
making a noise in the echoing kitchen and Rick wonders if there’s anything he does that goes unnoticed by the astute woman next to him, “but this can’t wait.”

“What’s on your mind?” Rick asks, although he can already read the answer in the tight lines of her jaw and the determined gleam in her eyes.

“It’s time,” she says simply and Rick draws in a breath, holding it for a moment before slowly exhaling.

“Now? With what’s happening?”

“Because of what’s happening, Rick. We have no idea how this situation with Deanna is going to play out. I’d rather have as much muscle on our side as possible. We have a week – Daryl says if the bite doesn’t take within five days, it’s not going to happen. We have time to at least try.”

“We don’t know how much of what Daryl's been told is actually true. You really want to risk that right now?”

“I do. We’ve been over this from every angle, Rick, there’s nothing left to say. I want this and I need you to do it today – the sooner the better.”

Rick looks at her for a moment – really looks at her – seeing the undeniable strength in her that’s grown exponentially since he’d first encountered the meek-looking woman ironing his pants at the camp by the quarry. It was a lifetime ago and so much had passed between them, he’d seen her find the courage inside herself to go on after the loss of her daughter and to make the hard decisions that sometimes he wondered if he’d have been able to make and he knows that what she's asking of him is not something she's entertaining on a whim. She would have given serious thought to every outcome and weighed up the pros and cons of each before she had even thought to approach him or Daryl, especially questioning the possibility of her own death if this didn’t work.

“Alright,” he says softly, raising his coffee to his lips and taking a fortifying sip, “but Daryl isn’t going to like it.”

“Daryl's not gonna like what?” comes the sleep-laden voice of his mate from behind him and Rick turns to see Daryl shuffling along the hallway towards the kitchen, baby monitor clutched in one fist and his pajama pants riding dangerously low on his hips. “Well?”

Rick’s gaze flicks back to Carol as Daryl enters the room and takes up a position leaning against the over-sized double refrigerator, folding his arms across his bare chest and stifling a yawn.

“I’ve asked Rick to turn me today while we still have time for it to take before the meeting with Deanna,” Carol tells him and Rick sees every muscle in Daryl's torso tense, his jaw clenching as a deep frown etches his forehead.

“When?” he asks and Rick's grateful that he doesn’t open the door on yet another pointless argument that will leave them all frustrated and angry but ultimately won’t add anything new that hasn’t already been said.

“Right now… if he’s ready,” Carol answers, tearing her eyes from Daryl's sullen face to glance at Rick who gives her a silent nod.

“Then you’re on your own,” Daryl states coldly, pushing away from the fridge and setting the baby monitor on the table in front of them. “I can’t be a part of watchin’ you die.”

“Daryl… please…” Carol implores him but he brushes aside the hand she reaches out to him and
heads towards the kitchen door, unlocking it to disappear out into the first gray light of the coming dawn.

“T’m sorry,” Rick says gently, laying a hand over Carol’s but she keeps her eyes fixed firmly on the door that Daryl had closed behind him. “He’s just scared. You know how much you mean to him – to both of us.”

“I know. I just thought…”

“Look… we can still wait. It doesn’”

“No,” Carol says sharply, whipping her head around to look at him. “I want to do this now. Daryl will just have to learn to live with it.”

“So… how do you want to do this?” Rick asks at the same time as there’s a soft cry from the baby monitor on the table.

“I’ve got it,” Carol says, picking up the device and heading for the hallway to Rick's room. “Why don’t you come Shift while I settle Judy and then we can get on with it.”

Rick gets up, following her back to his room where he closes the door behind them and, while Carol is in the nursery fussing over Judith, he quickly undresses and drops into his wolfen form. Shaking himself, he pads into the nursery to find Carol smiling as she holds a gurgling Judy who reaches out her pudgy fingers to him the moment she sees him and he snuffles his nose against her bare arm making her squeal in delight.

“Okay, young lady, let’s put you back in your crib while your daddy and I go in the other room and then we’ll see about getting you some breakfast,” Carol tells the giggling child, leaning over to lay her back down and clicking on the brightly-colored mobile that’s hanging over the bed.

Rick backs out of the small room, barely having room to turn around, and he hears his daughter’s indignant huff of air as he retreats from her sight but for once she doesn’t start crying as she so often does when he leaves her in his Shifted state. Carol closes the nursery door almost all the way shut and then walks over to join him in the middle of the room, rubbing one hand against her thigh in a nervous circle. When she catches him looking at her, she stops, clenching the hand momentarily and then unbuttoning the cuff of her shirt and pushing her sleeve up to present him with the bare flesh of her forearm. Rick steps forward, lowering his muzzle to her raised arm, hesitating as his eyes meet hers wanting to give her one last opportunity to reconsider what they’re about to do but she stands fast, resolutely holding out her arm in offering to him. Giving a resigned sigh, Rick parts his jaws, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on Carol’s and is about to sink his fangs into her flesh when the bedroom door flies open and Daryl bursts through in full wolf form. Rick jerks his head back in surprise and Carol wheels around to face Daryl who heads straight for her, his eyes scanning her outstretched arm, an enquiring whine sounding in his throat. When he sees that she is unscathed, he turns his huge head to Rick, tilting it in an unasked question but Rick understands completely and backs up a few steps as Daryl moves to nuzzle Carol’s hand with his nose. She runs her palm up his snout to rest atop his skull and he whines again before tipping his head back and gently taking her forearm between his teeth, closing his eyes as he bites down to pierce her skin.

Carol utters a tiny gasp, her free hand grasping at thin air until Rick moves swiftly to her side and she digs her fingers into his thick coat, clinging to him while Daryl licks at the ring of bloodied puncture marks he’s left in her skin. When he’s done, he raises his head and the three of them stand regarding one another, the weight of what’s just taken place hanging heavy in the air between them. A plaintive cry from Judith in the other room breaks the moment, each of them jumping slightly and Rick feels his heart beating a little faster.
“I’m going to dress this,” Carol says, holding her arm out gingerly in front of her as though it has suddenly become a foreign object and no longer part of her own body. “You two get changed and then I’ll start breakfast.”

With that utterly normal declaration, she exits the room, Daryl’s eyes never leaving her back until she closes the door behind her and then he resumes his human form, turning his face from Rick as he grabs a pair of jeans and pulls them on. Sighing quietly, Rick pulls on his own pants, watching the tight lines of Daryl’s back as he pauses in getting dressed and stands staring at the wall.

“Come here,” Rick says softly, reaching out to wrap his fingers around Daryl’s wrist and draw him to him.

For a moment Daryl resists, trying to pull his arm from Rick’s grasp and turning his head away but Rick steps in closer and folds him into a tight embrace, cradling his head with one hand. Daryl sags against him, his arms snaking around Rick’s waist to cling to him and Rick can feel the rush of hot tears against his shoulder.

“It had to be me,” Daryl mumbles against Rick’s skin, his voice choked with emotion. “I couldn’t… it’s Carol…”

“I know, I know,” Rick soothes, rubbing his hand in small circles on Daryl’s lower back. “It’s going to be okay, I promise.”

“How can you know?” Daryl asks sharply, pulling his head back to look accusingly at Rick, his red-ringed eyes staring dully out of his worried face.

“Because she’s Carol,” Rick says simply, mustering up what he hopes is a reassuring smile, “and nothing can-”

He’s cut off by the sound of a blood-curdling scream from above them and, for a second, they both freeze then turn to race for the stairs, Daryl just ahead of Rick. As Rick reaches the upstairs landing, he sees everyone emerging from their rooms, their sleepy faces looking startled and confused but he’s heartened to see that they’re all armed.

“Carl,” he shouts as his son appears to his left, “downstairs now! Take your gun and stay with Judy. Don’t move until I come for you. Understood?”

Carl nods, his eyes wide and fearful under the shaggy fall of his hair and Rick holds his gaze for a second before turning to push past Eugene and Noah to join Daryl who is pounding on the door to Carol’s room.

“It’s locked,” he tells Rick with an edge of panic in his tone, punctuating his words with his fist on the solid wood. “’chonne’s in there with her.”

“What happened?” Rick asks, rounding on the others but he’s met with blank stares. “Okay… everyone downstairs now.”

As they all head for the stairs, leaving him and Daryl alone in the hallway, Rick leans in to listen at the door hearing a myriad of strange noises on the other side.

“You want me to break it?” Daryl asks, taking a step back just as it flies open and Michonne barges out, pulling it shut behind her before Rick can even glance inside.

“Touch that door, Dixon, and it’ll be the last thing you do,” she threatens, planting herself squarely in front of the door and folding her arms across her chest.
“Is she okay?” Rick asks, laying a hand on Daryl's shoulder to calm the frustration he can feel rolling off his mate.

“She will be,” Michonne answers tersely, looking him in the eye. “No thanks to you two. A little warning would’ve been nice – given us a little chance to prepare.”

“Wait… she’s Shifting already?” Rick asks in amazement, turning to Daryl. “Is that even possible?”

“Why do you keep askin’ me?” Daryl huffs, pacing a few steps down the hall and running his hands back through his hair to grip at the back of his neck. “I don’t have a fuckin’ clue.”

“Michonne!” calls Carol from inside her room and Michonne doesn’t even spare them another look as she disappears back through the door, slamming it in Rick’s face as he tries to follow.

Rick’s nose twitches as he catches Carol’s scent, changed now due to the wolf blood that’s taken her, and he leans against the wall closing his eyes and offering up a silent prayer. Daryl comes to stand beside him, the heat of his bare skin mingling with Rick's as he leans into him and Rick brushes the back of his hand over Daryl's, wondering when his life became all about waiting for things to happen rather than making them happen. This time, however, the wait is mercifully short as Michonne reopens the door only minutes later, a solemn look on her face and Daryl grips painfully at Rick’s hand.

“Is she..?” Daryl asks, swallowing thickly.

“See for yourself,” Michonne answers, stepping aside.

Rick’s heart is in his mouth as he looks past her into Carol's room and finds himself staring into the pale gray eyes of an enormous white wolf. Daryl's hand slips from his as he steps into the room, a low whistle falling from his lips, his hands stretching out and Rick watches as Carol allows him to run his palms over her, reassuring himself that she's okay.

“How do you feel?” Rick asks, stepping closer, mesmerized by the stark whiteness of her pelt in the glow of the early morning sun coming through her window.

“You tell me,” she says as her body moves fluidly into her hybrid form and she bares her impressive looking fangs at them.

“Damn!” Daryl exclaims, coming to stand back beside Rick once more and Rick can hear the relief and astonishment in his voice. “Maybe it’s a female thing.”

“Figures,” Rick agrees with a smile pulling at his lips. “Like they needed something else to hold over us.”

“You better believe it,” Michonne adds and now Rick can see the smile on her face too.

Grabbing a blanket from the bed, Carol holds it around her torso and Shifts back into her human form, her cheeks flushed and her eyes still holding their otherworldly glow.

“I thought you said this was going to be hard,” she says, her tone light and teasing as she purses her lips at them and then smiles.

“Oh… like you did with me?” Michonne butts in, cocking out her hip and resting her fingers on it, a
sly look in her eyes. “As I seem to recall, I was running rings around you.”

“Fine,” Rick states, throwing his hands up again in mock surrender. “I give up. You show her the ropes.”

“When can we go out?” Carol asks eagerly, the light in her eyes intensifying as she looks at Rick.

“Not until tonight,” he says, wanting to bring the level of excited enthusiasm he can feel building in the room back down to a manageable level. “Right now we need to go explain to our family what’s happened. I don’t think Deanna has people watching us – she has no reason to – but I’d still feel safer if we didn’t make any runs till after dark.”

He can see Carol’s disappointment and understands how she feels but, for now, he’d rather keep everyone within the safety of their walls. All of this is still new to them and, although she seems to be adapting as well and as rapidly as Michonne did, that doesn’t mean that something might not still go wrong. He at least wants to give it a few hours before he lets her loose on the world and all that entails.

“Then, can we at least get breakfast?” she asks, her eyes reverting back to their normal color. “I feel like I could eat the entire contents of the pantry and then some.”

“Pfft…” Daryl snorts and Rick sees the concern on his face fading with every word out of her mouth. “Good luck with that. You forget we have a pregnant lady in the house?”

Carol sticks her tongue out at him, a gesture so completely ridiculous in contrast to the terrifying body she had just been inhabiting moments before that it’s all Rick can do to stop himself laughing out loud at the absurdity of their entire situation. Instead he steers Daryl and Michonne from the room, leaving Carol to get dressed in peace and they head downstairs to calm what he’s sure are some very jangled nerves among the rest of their family.

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Once they have everyone assured that everything is okay and they can stand down from the state of high alert that they’ve maintained since Carol’s first scream upstairs, Rick explains what had happened – about Carol's decision and her subsequent transformation coming on much faster than anyone had expected. Eugene agrees with their hypothesis that the gestation period of the wolf blood once it’s introduced into the human bloodstream could be different for males and females. He theorizes that, had Michonne not also had the complication of the walker bite infecting her body, her change may have been just as rapid as Carol's. Once the lady herself appears in the doorway of the crowded kitchen, she’s met with a rush of questions on how she feels and heartfelt comments telling her they’re happy she’s okay. There’s a brief moment of awkwardness as Rosita congratulates her on successfully making the change and then excuses herself to go take guard duty out in the lighthouse with Tara close on her heels but Carol takes it in her stride. When the initial commotion settles down, everyone wanders off to get dressed for the day ahead leaving Carol alone in the kitchen with her morning routine as if nothing is out of the ordinary.

Rick and Daryl stay close to her during the day, watching over her as she tests her new limits and offering her advice on what she can expect once they take her outside into what is essentially a new world for her. Carol's enthusiasm to explore the untapped potential that’s lying dormant inside her is infectious to the point where even Rick finds himself urging the sun to drop just a little faster and for night to fall. There’s still a faint glow of twilight on the horizon when he finally acquiesces and the four of them Shift inside the house before heading out to the gate where a smiling Carl lets them through and then secures it behind them. They move swiftly from the compound, heading directly into the woods and checking the surrounding area just in case Deanna had decided to send any spies
their way. Satisfied that they’re the only ones around, Rick takes the lead to push them deeper into the trees, keeping a watchful eye on Carol as the scents and sounds of the night bombard her newly awakened senses. They take it slow at first, letting her become accustomed to her new form but it’s not long before she’s racing in circles around them, nipping at their hindquarters until they give in and a headlong chase through the woods and down onto the open sand begins.

When they’ve run as far and as fast as he feels comfortable with, Rick turns them around and heads them back to the lighthouse, taking time to scare up some fresh game along the way which they devour with unbridled enthusiasm. They hunt as a unit, everything from their human lives together flowing into their pack mentality although Rick makes a mental note not to send Carol on any stealth recons in the future with the way that her coat is gleaming brightly even among the dark shadows under the trees. Arriving back at the road leading to the compound, they top the small rise above it and come to a halt, Rick stopping with Daryl just slightly behind him to his right and Carol and Michonne a little further back on his left. That’s when Rick truly feels it – the strength coming from each of his pack, coiling around him like an almost tangible thing, fueling him and filling him with a sense of unequivocal belonging and the ability to conquer anything that fate sets at their feet. Now, more than ever, with Carol and Michonne’s almost seamless transitions to their new lives, he believes that what he’s hoped for from the beginning is coming true and that they have the answer they need to take back the world.
Emitting a deep bass growl that reverberates through his chest, Daryl reaches out blindly to slap away the insistent fingers that are tugging at his hair and buries his head under his pillow.

“What are you… five?” he hears Rick laugh, his voice muffled by the layers of cotton and duck down Daryl has pressed tightly over his ear.

He growls again as the pillow is torn from his grip and blinks angrily up at his smirking lover who is
already dressed in his boots and jeans with his jacket buttoned up to his chin.

“Why can’t you be a normal person and at least sleep until the birds are fuckin’ awake?” Daryl grumbles, sitting up and rubbing at his sleep-crusted eyes while he fights back a yawn.

“Daryl… it’s noon,” Rick says, tossing the pillow back at his head. “Now drink the damn coffee I brought you and get your ass moving. I want to be out of here in an hour.”

“You tell Carol?” he asks, reaching for the mug on the nightstand and taking a swallow of the pitch black liquid inside.

“I did.”

“How’d that go?”

“About as well as you’d expect,” Rick says drily. “Maybe you want to talk to her before we go.”

“Sure,” Daryl grimaces, taking another swig of the coffee to fortify himself and then setting the mug down to swing his legs out of bed.

“You need a haircut,” Rick says, absently reaching out to push Daryl's bangs out of his eyes. “Both you and Carl – boy is starting to look like Bigfoot.”

Daryl leans into his touch, savoring the brief moment of normalcy in what is probably going to be a stressful day and he hears Rick emit a tiny sigh as his fingers slide from Daryl's face and drop back to his side.

“C’mon soldier, up and at ‘em,” he says, turning to leave the room. “We’ve got us a wolf to find.”

Rubbing his hand over his face, Daryl watches the door close behind Rick and then pulls himself to his feet to get dressed, foregoing the rest of his coffee in favor of seeking out Carol instead. Rick had made the decision that only he, Daryl and Michonne should go scouting for Deanna’s camp and that Carol should stay behind. As he had explained to Daryl, he didn’t want to leave the rest of their family unprotected just in case there was any trouble and, with Carol still being fresh to her new life, she was the obvious choice to keep watch over them. It wasn’t that Rick devalued her or her abilities in any way – it was quite the opposite in fact – but he needed her where she would be the greatest asset to all of them and that was using her abilities to protect their home. Daryl had agreed completely, he knew she wasn’t ready for that type of situation yet, but he wasn’t sure that Carol would see it in the same way as him and Rick and he wasn’t looking forward to the verbal backlash he knew he was about to receive. As he approaches the greenhouse, he can see her inside, furiously shoveling soil into a row of terracotta pots on the table in front of her and he steels his nerve before opening the door.

“Hey,” he calls out, stepping into the cloying heat from the chill wind outside but Carol doesn’t turn to acknowledge him.

“Not the time, Daryl,” she replies tersely, her deft fingers still working on the pots in front of her.

“Rick told you, huh?” he asks, drawing closer to her and he’s worried to see that her hands are trembling as she works.

“It doesn’t matter,” she answers and that’s when he hears the slight hitch in her voice and realizes that she’s crying.

“Carol?” he questions, reaching out to wrap his fingers gently around her wrist to turn her to him but
she resists, keeping her face down. ‘What’s goin’ on? You know Rick's just bein’ safe.’

“It’s not about Rick,” she blurts out, finally meeting his eye and he can see the utter despair on her tear-streaked face. “Rick's right… I’m better off here. It’s the right call.”

“Then what happened?” Daryl asks, concerned to see her like this and confused if Rick's decision isn’t the cause of her being so upset.

He's not sure that she's going to answer him at first, he can see the internal struggle she’s battling, but then her face crumples and she's clinging to him, sobbing so hard that he can barely make out her words.

“So stupid… I should have… why did I wait until it was too late?” she cries, the tears streaming unchecked down her cheeks and, with a jolt of unwanted memory, Daryl recalls that he's only ever seen her this distressed once before when Sophia had emerged from Hershel’s barn.

“Too late for what?” he asks, trying to soothe her but she steps away from him, scrubbing harshly at her face with the cuff of her shirt and trying to pull herself under control.

“It doesn’t matter,” she tells him, drawing in a shaky breath and swiping her fingertips under her eyes. “Just forget it… I’m being silly. Shouldn’t you be leaving now anyway?”

“Don’t,” he says softly and he sees her hands clench into tight fists at her sides.

“Don’t what?”

“Do that… keep shit in,” he chides her, ducking his head a little to force her to look at him. “How many times you tell me, back at the prison, that keepin’ things to myself was gonna eat me alive faster’n any walker would?”

She stares him down for a moment, that internal struggle now playing out solely in her eyes, and then she sighs – a deep, bone-weary sound that makes his heart ache for her and he wants nothing more than to rip whatever’s making her feel this way out of existence. He waits patiently as she turns her face from him to look out of the cloudy glass to the garden beyond, her arms wrapping around herself and, in that moment, he doesn’t care about Deanna or their recon – he’s not going anywhere until he knows Carol is ready for him to leave.

“Maggie asked me if I thought we’d be able to find any pecan trees nearby – wanted to know if I could make pecan pie,” Carol tells him, her voice eerily flat and he keeps quiet, knowing that she has to get to what she wants to say in her own way. “I guess she’s craving it.”

She gives what starts out as a light laugh but it falters halfway and becomes a choked sob which has Daryl instinctively reaching out to guide her to a nearby bench and sitting her down, keeping her hand held fast in his.

“I was wrong, Daryl… wrong to think I didn’t need this from the start,” she tells him, briefly bringing the wolf forth in her face and holding up her free hand to flex her fingers into a new shape complete with razor-sharp claws extending from the tips. “I should’ve asked you from the moment I found out what you were but I was weak… scared… convinced that I could still be strong without it.”

“You are strong,” Daryl says emphatically, “with or without the wolf. Strongest person I ever met.”

“Then why couldn’t I save her?” Carol asks, her tone full of anguish and self-loathing as she draws the wolf back in and drops her hand to her lap.
“Sophia?” Daryl replies, his own guilt about failing to save her child creeping back to the surface. “Nothin’ could’ve saved her, you know that. I tried so damn hard, I swear, but she was lost before we even started to look. A whole pack of wolves could-”

“Not Sophia,” Carol interrupts him, her fingers tightening in his. “Mika.”

“Mika?” he asks, confused. “The kid at the prison… Lizzie’s sister?”

She nods and he falls quiet again, watching her obviously reliving something in her mind that’s tearing her apart, her eyes clouding over before she finally starts to talk again.

“I was coming back to the prison after Rick… I was coming back when I saw the smoke and the walkers everywhere. I couldn’t help – it was too late – but I saw Tyreese escaping with the girls and Judy. By the time I managed to catch up with them, everything we’d known was gone. We had nothing to go back for and three good reasons to get to safety as fast as we could. We saw the signs for Terminus, even started heading that way but then we found a house – untouched, just one walker inside, wire fences, plenty of deer nearby and pecan trees as far as the eye could see. It was idyllic and we let it lure us in and were settled down before I’d even realized it had happened.

I knew Lizzie had problems – I’d seen signs of it at the prison – but I thought maybe, just maybe, if she had a place to live where she could be safe and it was just us, she might learn to get past the darkness that was clearly inside her.”

“What happened?”

“What always happens, Daryl,” she answers wearily and he can see the weight of what she’s been carrying sitting on her shoulders like a physical entity. “Everything went to hell in a handbasket. I caught Lizzie playing with a walker in the yard – laughing like she was playing tag with her sister instead of some soulless creature that wanted nothing more than to rip her tender flesh from her bones. When I put it down, she completely snapped, raged at me in a way I didn’t think was possible for someone her age and I was so frightened for her. She had this disconnect – she couldn’t see that they weren’t people anymore, she believed that they could still be talked to and reasoned with, that there was still something of who they were left. She thought this was just a new stage of their evolution and if we’d give them a chance, they wouldn’t want to hurt us, we just needed to understand them.

I tried to talk to her and to Mika… oh, Daryl, that girl couldn’t have been more different… such an innocent soul that didn’t deserve to have to live in this world. But Lizzie… Lizzie didn’t want my help… she couldn’t see anything wrong in what she was doing even when it was putting her life and ours in danger. She was smart as a whip though, let me think she was changing… that she understood what I was telling her about how dangerous the walkers were.”

She pauses, tears falling from her eyes but Daryl doesn’t think that she even notices – he’s not sure she even knows that he’s there anymore, she’s so lost in remembering the horror of what had passed.

“Maybe if I’d had the wolf to guide me, I wouldn’t have been so quick to trust her… my instincts would have been screaming at me that her compliance was a charade… but I wanted to believe it – I wanted her to be a normal, happy child and I wanted to put my faith in her. I was stupid… I let my guard down, cocooned in that perfect little world we’d carved out for ourselves and Mika paid the price for my weakness.”

“Carol… you don’t have to…”

“Yes… yes I do,” she says, raising her voice and tearing her hand from his to get up and pace a few
steps away, stopping with her back to him. “Tyreese and I found her standing over Mika’s body, the knife in her hand still dripping with blood from where she’d stabbed her baby sister repeatedly in the stomach. Oh, she was very adamant about not having hurt her brain. She wanted to show us – to prove to us – that her sister would come back and still be herself. And she had Judy lined up as her next experiment… if we hadn’t arrived back when we did, I can’t even stand to think about what she would’ve done to her.”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Daryl hisses, his blood running cold at the thought of his daughter in that sort of danger.

“I don’t even know how I found the words to talk her down, I was petrified she’d make a move before I could stop her. Somehow I managed to convince her that Judy was too young, that she wouldn’t be able to walk and take care of herself if she changed her then and it worked. Tyreese took Judith and Lizzie inside while I sunk my knife into poor little Mika’s head, trying not to think of how scared she must have been when her own sister, the one person she trusted most in the world, had gotten close and then turned on her.”

“And Lizzie?” Daryl asks although he already knows the tragic answer to that question.

“Tyreese and I discussed what to do – we wondered what would happen if we moved on and found other people… people who wouldn’t understand what was wrong with her. We knew we couldn’t stay where we were any longer and we knew that she was never going to be able to fit in anywhere, that she’d always be a danger to herself and to others. I couldn’t live with that uncertainty… having to watch her continuously, especially with Judy around and still deal with the rest of the world at the same time. We would’ve all ended up dead. There was no choice… only one thing left that we could do. That I could do.

So, I took her out to the pecan grove… held her hand as we walked, told her everything would be fine. I took her to a place where the grass was knee deep in flowers, there were birds singing in the trees and insects buzzing in the air and, in that place that was teeming with life, I took hers with a bullet to… to…”

Daryl rises to his feet, moving swiftly to her side and pulling her into his arms where she sags against him, her lack of protest at his uninvited invasion of her personal space telling him all he needs to know about her current state of mind.

“You did the right thing,” he tells her, cradling her head against his shoulder. “Hands down. There wasn’t anythin’ else you coulda done. And wishin’ for the wolf wouldn’t’ve changed a damn thing, trust me.”

“How do you know that?” she asks, pulling away from him again.

“She was a sick little girl and you did your best to help her… the wolf wasn’t gonna to make any difference to that.”

“But I could’ve been more aware… I don’t know… sensed what she was doing. I feel that now, more in tune with what’s going on around me… I could’ve used that.”

“Carol,” he says, taking her firmly by the shoulders and making sure he has her full attention, “it makes you faster and stronger and gives you all kinds of abilities that you haven’t even figured out yet but it doesn’t make you a damn superhero. You were in a bad situation that was never gonna have a happy endin’. If you hadn’t taken care of it then it would’ve been worse… maybe you dead along with Judy. You made the right call. It’s what you do.”
“What if I don’t want to do it anymore, Daryl? What if I can’t?” she asks, her eyes filling again and he can hear the fear in her voice.

“Then you don’t have to,” he tells her, drawing her in once more. “You have all of us to back you up, you hear me?”

Carol nods against him, her small hands balled in the front of his shirt and he realizes that, since Ty’s death, she’s been carrying this burden alone and he hopes that by sharing it with him now, she’ll be able to let some of it go.

“Hey,” he says softly, leaning back to look into her face, “you know what we should do?”

She steps back from him, shaking her head and wiping her face with her sleeve once more.

“C’mon,” he tells her, taking her hand and leading her from the greenhouse to where the path continues out to the edge of the island. “Wait here.”

She opens her mouth to say something, a protest he's sure, but he doesn’t give her a chance, turning on his heel to jog back to the house where he finds Rick and the others waiting for him in the kitchen.

“You ready?” Rick asks and Daryl can see the tense lines around his eyes.

“Gonna need a minute,” he answers, frantically pulling open kitchen drawers and ignoring the curious eyes trained in his direction. “Do you know where those balloons are… the ones we had left from Judy’s birthday?”

“Top drawer by the sink,” Maggie tells him and he shoots her a grateful smile as he opens the drawer and finds the half empty pack tucked in the back.

“Daryl?” Rick says questioningly but Daryl is already halfway back out the door.

“Don’t leave without me,” he tosses over his shoulder.

Rick’s response is snatched away by the gust of wind that meets Daryl as he opens the door and bolts back outside again.

Carol has walked away from where he’d left her, making her way out towards the area of rough grass beyond the lighthouse, and he catches up with her just as she reaches the top of the jagged cliff which falls away at their feet to disappear into the heaving waves below. She turns to him as he stops alongside her and hands her one of the objects he’d retrieved from the kitchen.

“A balloon?” she asks, one eyebrow raising quizzically at him as she holds up the deflated piece of fluorescent pink latex between her thumb and forefinger.

“I know there ain’t no words that me or anyone else can say that’s gonna take away the hurt you’re carryin’ but I thought we could make a start on sharin’ some of it,” he tells her and she watches him with solemn eyes as he inflates the candy pink balloon in his hand and quickly ties off the end. “You remember what we used to do back at the prison?”

“Let it go,” she answers, her voice barely a whisper on the wind but he still hears it.

Feeling suddenly self-conscious and hoping that the gesture he's trying to make isn’t pathetically inadequate in the face of her grief, he pulls out the black marker pen he had also snagged from the kitchen and carefully writes Mika’s name in his looping script on the shiny surface. Turning it so that
she can see it while keeping a tight grip on the base as the wind bounces it against his fingers, he sees fresh tears springing to her eyes and then she lifts the other balloon to her lips and inflates it with a few deep breaths. Securing the end, she holds out her hand to him and he passes her the marker, watching while she slowly prints Lizzie’s name on it and then hands the pen back to him.

“Ready?” he asks her and she gives him the tiniest of nods. “Three… two… one…”

Together they raise their arms and release the brightly-colored balloons to the sky, the wind snatching them and tossing them high into the air where they’re buffeted in the crosswinds. As they watch them get progressively smaller as they float out to sea, Daryl moves in to wrap an arm around Carol’s shoulders and she leans into him.

“What happened… that ain’t never goin’ to fully go away… nothin’ can change that but you don’t have to carry it alone anymore, understand? You have me n’ the others – ain’t one of us wants to see you suffer or blame yourself for somethin’ you can’t control. This… tellin’ me n’ doin’ this stupid thing… this was just a baby step. I’m not dumb enough to think that this up and cured ya but I hope it’s a start.”

“It wasn’t a stupid thing, Daryl,” she tells him and he can hear some of the normal warmth returning to her tone. “It was a perfect idea.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she replies, nudging him gently in the ribs and he's relieved to see the merest hint of a smile crossing her lips. “You’re a good man, Daryl Dixon, I hope you know that. I’m not sure where any of us would be right now if we didn’t have you.”

“Oh hush,” he mumbles, feeling a flush rise on his cheeks at her words.

“It’s true and you better own it, mister. You’re not the man you used to be and we’re all better off for that, trust me.”

Daryl dips his head, feeling the heat in his face spread to his ears, and Carol leans into his side one more time before stepping away and taking one last glance to the sky where the bobbing pink balloons are no longer visible.

“You should get going,” she says, starting to walk backwards towards the lighthouse and he follows her as she turns and they fall into step together. “I can hear Rick grinding his teeth from here. I’m sorry I dropped all this on you when you have bigger things to be worrying about. It was just Maggie asking about the damn pecans opened the floodgates. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at one again.”

“You want me to stay?” he asks, as they round the corner of the house to find Rick and Michonne already geared up and waiting for him in the car. “It’s just a recon… I think these two can handle it.”

“Don’t be crazy… just get in the damn car already. I think I can hold it together without going postal on the chickens before you get back,” she chuckles, giving Rick a nod through the driver’s window as Daryl climbs into the backseat and slams the door behind him.

“We good?” Rick asks, meeting his eye in the rearview mirror and Daryl knows he's referring to more than just their imminent trip.

“We’re good,” Daryl answers, casting his eyes back to Carol as they drive out of the compound, watching her until the gate closes behind them.
Their journey is uneventful, Rick sticking to the back roads as much as possible, taking a circuitous route that adds time to their trip but makes them all feel more secure about not being spotted. Neither Rick nor Michonne ask him about what had happened with Carol and he’s grateful for that – he feels that the story is hers to tell if she chooses and not his. The lengthy, monotonous drive gives him a chance to think about what she’d told him and he wishes he could’ve been there for her to take some of the weight from her shoulders. He just hopes that now the truth is out, she’ll be able to find a way to process what happened and come to terms with it. He knows she’ll never truly forget it, after all he’s still haunted by so many that they’ve lost – Sophia and his brother weighing especially heavy on his heart.

Just as the sun is starting to dip below the horizon, they pull off of the road a few miles from the first school location, leaving the car and setting out on foot. As they skirt the shore of a small lake that’s teeming with wildlife and approach the red brick buildings stealthily through the trees, it quickly becomes apparent that this isn’t the place they’re looking for.

“Okay… the high school is about five miles north of here as the crow flies,” Rick says, pulling a map from his back pocket and spreading it for the others to see. “I say we leave the car where it is and go on foot – no need to make any more noise than necessary.”

“Fine by me,” Michonne agrees as Rick tucks the map out of sight again.

“Daryl, you take point,” Rick instructs and Daryl nods, leading them surefootedly onto a narrow path between the trees.

They walk in silence, each of them on high alert, their footfalls barely making a sound until Daryl smells water ahead and halts on the edge of a wide lake.

“School’s on the other side just through the trees,” he says softly as Rick and Michonne come abreast of him. “Should probably do somethin’ ‘bout how we smell ‘fore we get any closer. Even if Deanna is the only wolf and we can’t count on that… the wind changes at the wrong moment, she’s gonna smell us comin’, no two ways about it.”

“What’d you have in mind?” Rick asks and Daryl answers him by bending to scoop up a handful of the dark viscous mud at the edge of the water and smears it onto his neck and chest.

“No!” Michonne hisses, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “No way. I am not rolling around like a pig in shit. Think of something else.”

“When did you become such a princess?” Daryl snorts as they all hear the distinctive sound of a walker close by in the trees. “You prefer walker guts? I can arrange that.”

“Fuck you, Dixon,” she mutters under her breath but she still drops to her knees besides the pair of them as they all work to cover themselves in the slick substance.

Once Daryl is content that their distinctive scents are no longer noticeable unless they’re directly on top of each other, he sets out around the lake, moving away from the water’s edge and into the treeline. It only takes them a few minutes to reach the outskirts of the school property and they can immediately see that they’re in the right place this time. With a series of rapid hand gestures, Rick directs them to split up, indicating that they should meet back at their current location once they’ve taken a good look around and learned what they can. Rick takes off towards the school buildings themselves where Daryl can see numerous lighted windows on the ground floor although the second story is in darkness. Michonne disappears into the trees to his left, circling the perimeter to the far
What had once been tennis and basketball courts were now filled edge to edge with a makeshift town of tents in every size and shape, reinforced with wooden pallets and tarps stretched between the tent edges to provide additional shelter. The chain link fencing that had once done nothing more than keep errant balls out of the parking lot and on the courts has been shored up with a conglomeration of metal sheets culled from everything from torn down roofing to the side panels from an 18-wheeler. While he had to admire their ingenuity, Daryl couldn’t say that he was surprised that two herds had nearly wiped them out. He wasn’t sure their defenses could withstand a strong wind let alone anything as substantial as a mob of hungry walkers. As it is there are plenty of gaps in the ramshackle fence for him to be able to see through without too much effort as he moves cautiously around the sides of their campground. The interior is pretty much what he expects for a group of people living in such tight quarters, a mess of trash littering the cracked concrete between the tents and rain barrels that are set up next to each dwelling.

There are lit hurricane lamps dotted around as well as a few small fires blazing safely inside steel drums which provide him enough light to do a quick count of the tents and he realizes that Deanna’s claim to have at least 200 people behind her was an exaggeration. Even if each of the tents held multiple occupants which he somehow doubts given their sizes, he was still only getting a headcount of maybe 40-50 people. Obviously there could be more holed up inside the school but something was telling him that she had purposefully inflated her numbers either as a scare tactic or as a defensive one. Whichever it is, it’s just another reason for him not to trust her and he’s starting to wonder what else she’s lying about. As he continues his observation through the fence, watching the camp’s oblivious inhabitants go about their usual nightly routine, he’s suddenly struck by the fact that everyone he’s seen so far has been either a woman or a child – there’s not a man in sight. He double checks himself, working his way back in the direction he’d come from but the fact remains the same – all of the occupants on the other side of the fence are women and it appears that at least a handful of them are heavily pregnant. Feeling confused and definitely uneasy about his observation, he makes his way stealthily back to their rendezvous point and finds that he’s the first one to arrive.

He waits anxiously, scanning the treeline in all directions for Rick and Michonne’s approach but, when neither of them appear, he feels the first fingers of dread creeping along his spine. His brain is screaming for him to run, to go get reinforcements - that something has gone horribly wrong - but his instincts are urging him into motion to find his missing pack members. He's barely taken a few steps towards the perimeter fence when a blinding light illuminates his position from the top of the school and he freezes as Deanna’s strong voice cuts across the night.

“Daryl… so nice of you to show up. I knew you wouldn’t be far from your Alpha. Why don’t you put your weapon on the ground and come inside to join Rick and his charming lady companion.”

Daryl hesitates, his nerves jangling, but he knows there’s no way he’s walking away and leaving Rick and Michonne behind that wall without him even though he can hear Rick's voice in his mind yelling for him to run. As a small group of Deanna’s people – once again all women, he notes to himself – appear to surround him, each of them heavily armed, he lowers his crossbow and lets it drop to the floor. They quickly relieve him of his knife and handgun then push him towards the entrance at the rear of the school where he's led through a series of identical hallways before being brought out into the auditorium. The tiered seating is empty but there’s a small group of armed women on the stage itself and his heart rate increases as he sees Rick and Michonne among them on their knees, both with their hands handcuffed behind them and Rick with a good deal of blood mixed in with the mud on his face. Daryl is forced up the steps onto the stage and then roughly cuffed alongside the others, his body stiffening against the hands on him but his eyes scanning his companions to make sure that they’re okay. Neither of them appear to be seriously injured, the blood on Rick's face coming from a small laceration above his left eye that is already healing and Daryl's
fear subsides a little.

“I’m sorry,” Michonne whispers to him, her dark eyes filled with regret and something that Daryl can’t read, “this is my fault. I thought I saw-”

Before she can finish, Deanna appears from the darkened wings of the stage, striding out to meet them, flanked by Amanda and a woman they haven’t seen before, her Amazonian-like frame dwarfing the petite leader beside her.

“Well there’s the big, bad wolf pack,” Deanna beams, her fake politician’s smile still firmly in place. “I’ve been expecting you.”

“Deanna, this is just a misunderstanding,” Rick starts calmly. “We just-”

“You were just coming out here to spy on me, Rick, let’s not lie to one another, shall we?” Deanna interrupts him, her tone becoming icy.

“Look, we can work this out… it doesn’t have to change anything. We were just curious… you can’t blame us for that. We had to know who we were getting into bed with. Not everybody is who they seem anymore. You can’t take anyone at face value anymore.”

“That’s very true,” Deanna agrees, her shrewd eyes flicking from Rick to Daryl and back again, “and you two have shown me that. Do you think that I don’t know what’s going on between you?”

“What are you talking about?” Rick asks, pulling back his shoulders to look up at her. “You knew what we are from the minute we met… we didn’t hide that from you.”

“No but you did hide the fact that you’re a pair of filthy sinners, abominations in the eyes of the Lord. What… you didn’t think I could smell him all over you?” she asks, leaning down into Rick’s face and Daryl issues a warning growl low in his throat which turns her attention to him instead. “And you… a pureblood… sullying your heritage with this blasphemy. You disgust me.”

“Look… who we choose to-” Rick begins and Daryl can hear the barely-controlled anger in his voice.

“Choose?” Deanna spits, whirling back to Rick and peeling her lips back to reveal the sharpened points of her fangs. “You don’t get to choose, that’s not how it works. A pureblood has the duty to continue that line… to strengthen our species not weaken it with this heresy. You’re weak… both of you… what you do makes you traitors to your kind and to God.”

“God?” Rick laughs and Daryl can see the unbridled fury rising on Deanna’s face. “You think God still exists in this world? That he what… created you in his image? You’re as much of an abomination as we are – more so if you think our sexuality determines our strength.”

"If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood is upon them,” Deanna quotes, her eyes blazing and spittle flying from her lips. “My heritage is older than you could ever imagine, Rick, and we’ve survived by respecting where we came from and who made us but I wouldn’t expect a filthy, godforsaken half breed like yourself to have any idea what faith and loyalty means.”

“So, what do you want with us?”

“Oh, I don’t want anything from you, Rick, in fact I’m going to take great delight in ending your godless existence,” Deanna sneers, stepping back to place her hands on her hips as she regards all three of them. “And then I’m going to take a trip to visit what’s left of your little band of sinners and
I’m going to slaughter every last man I find there. The time of man is over, you’re living proof of that. This plague was brought on us as a sign, a means for the tide to turn and for women to take their rightful place for they are the bringers of new life whereas men have wrought nothing but destruction and death in their wake.”

“You’re crazy,” Daryl yells, his fists balling behind his back and the cold steel of his restraints cutting into the flesh of his wrists.

“And you’re a sinner - a weak, pathetic fool being led by the confusion in his heart and mind. You could never be a true leader with that sort of weakness in your soul but, don’t worry, I have a place for you in the new world, Daryl. Your mind may be weak but your blood is as pure as mine, I could smell it from the moment we met, and we’re going to need that if we want to secure our legacy for future generations. God has sent you to me to help me with my task and, I believe, for me to help you atone for your transgressions against him.”

“You want him as breeding stock?” Rick asks incredulously, his face changing from disgust to anger. “Over my dead body.”

He surges forward and up, the wolf appearing in his face as he snaps his jaws towards Deanna’s throat but she was obviously anticipating some sort of move on his part and she easily throws out a clawed hand to fend him off, using his momentum to send him crashing back to his knees. Seemingly from out of nowhere a gun appears in her hand and she presses it to Rick’s temple causing Daryl and Michonne to try and rise but they’re quickly restrained by the others in Deanna’s group.

“Pathetic fool,” Deanna taunts, jabbing the gun barrel against Rick’s flesh as he withdraws the wolf from his features and locks eyes with Daryl.

Daryl can barely draw breath, his vision swimming as he frantically looks for a way out, anything that can help Rick, and he’s about ready to launch himself at Deanna when a movement behind her catches his eye. A woman appears from the darkened side of the stage and Daryl stops breathing, convinced he’s seeing either a ghost or an angel come to usher them into the next life but there’s no mistaking who she is even with the close-cropped hair she’s now sporting or the ragged scar on her cheek that wasn’t there the last time they saw each other. As she steps quickly up to Deanna’s side, drawing her attention from Rick, she makes eye contact with Daryl for a moment and he can see every ounce of hardship she’s had to endure in that one look but she still raises her chin as she locks eyes with the She-wolf. He stares in utter disbelief as she leans in to talk to Deanna and, from beside him, he hears Michonne’s painful whisper even though it’s barely a murmur on the air.

“Andrea.”
Chapter 36

Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, tmd-dump-station

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Rick squeezes his eyes shut and shakes his head, wondering momentarily if the rifle butt he’d taken to the temple earlier was causing him to hallucinate but, when he opens them again, he can still see Andrea standing next to Deanna. She looks different from the last time he’d seen her at the Governor’s side, her long blond hair now cropped short up to her ears but her clear eyes are still burning with the same passion he had always seen in them. As she leans in to talk to Deanna, her gaze meets his and she gives him the merest shake of her head to tell him not to acknowledge their
relationship. He can feel Michonne practically quivering next to him and he hopes she has enough
control to be able to keep herself in check and not give anything away.

“What is it?” Deanna asks impatiently, stepping back from Rick as Andrea lays a hand on her arm.

“It’s time… Rebecca’s crowning.”

“Now?” Deanna barks, throwing her hands up in obvious exasperation. “I’m a little busy here,
Andrea.”

“I know but this can’t wait or have you forgotten your vow to be at every birth?”

“Don’t you dare question my loyalty to our plan, Andrea,” Deanna snaps, whirling on the other
woman who bows her head contritely, staying that way until Deanna sighs deeply and tucks her gun
out of sight once more. “Fine! Let’s go see if we have a new candidate or another mutt I need to put
down. Amanda… take our guests and lock them up. I’ll deal with cleansing their heathen souls
later.”

With a final, sneering look down at Rick, she turns and leaves with Andrea at her heels and Rick and
the others find themselves being hauled to their feet and marched at gunpoint out of the auditorium.

They’re led to the school cafeteria and hustled through the kitchens into the large walk-in freezer,
now sitting empty and cave-like, where the door is slammed shut behind them and they find
themselves alone in the pitch black space. Everybody is silent for a moment as their eyes adjust to the
darkness and they listen to the sound of retreating footsteps outside leading away from the thick, steel
door.

“They all go?” Daryl whispers but Rick holds up a hand as he leans in closer to the door, listening
intently.

“One guard,” he answers softly, indicating that they should move to the back of the freezer to talk,
not that he thought they could be overheard but because, psychologically, it made him feel better.

“’spose there’s no chance of forcin’ the door?” Daryl grumbles quietly.

“Not like this,” Rick answers, jangling the cuffs behind his back.

“So what do we do?”

“We wait… bide our time until we’re out of here and try to make our move then. We have something
working in our favor now.”

“Andrea,” Daryl nods.

“Rick…” Michonne says, her tone reflecting the shock he knows they’re all feeling. “How is this
possible? We found her body when…”

“We found a body,” Rick says strongly, leaning in so that she looks at him, “a mangled, torn apart
body with her jacket nearby that none of us exactly took too long to examine and we all just assumed
it was her. We had no reason not to.”

“She’s been out there all this time…” Michonne whispers, struggling to hold back tears, “all alone…
she… she…”

“She survived,” Daryl tells her. “She’s strong and she’s alive and that’s more than we’ll be if we
They fall silent and, with nothing else to do but wait, they take a seat on the cool floor, Rick’s nose twitching at the long-forgotten scents of the food that had been stored inside which had ripened without the refrigeration to keep it at bay.

There’s no real concept of time passing – Rick’s watch is firmly out of sight behind his back – but he doesn’t think that they’ve been locked away for that long when he hears the sound of footsteps approaching the door and the three of them scramble to their feet. After a brief, muffled exchange of words outside, they hear somebody walk away and then there’s nothing but silence again. After a short pause, the lock on the outside of the door is released and Rick finds himself blinking stupidly in the bright light coming from the hurricane lamp Andrea has raised in her hand.

“You need to move… now,” she states, coming in and setting the lamp down on one of the empty shelves alongside the weapons that had been stripped from them on their arrival so that she can move behind Rick and unlock the cuffs at his wrists.

Michonne is quiet as Andrea frees Daryl’s hands and then moves on to hers but, as soon as the cuffs are gone, she turns and reaches for Andrea to pull her close, laughing and crying all at once as she kisses her deeply and Andrea clings to her as she returns the kiss with an equal passion. Rick glances at Daryl, unable to stop the smile forming on his lips, and Daryl just nods back at him, his eyes sparkling, the unbridled display of affection confirming what Rick had long suspected – that Michonne and Andrea’s relationship had been far deeper than just friends.

“You cut your hair,” Michonne cries, releasing Andrea enough to run her fingers through the other woman’s short locks.

“Not by choice,” Andrea replies darkly.

“Andrea, what happened? We thought you were dead.”

“Not now… there’s no time. I’m not sure how long Rebecca’s new baby is going to distract Deanna for. Just be thankful it was a girl or she might’ve already been back here. Come on… follow me.”

She douses the light and secures the freezer door behind them before taking off swiftly through the kitchen leading them along a short hallway that opens up into a small loading dock. Pulling a set of keys from her pocket, she unlocks the door next to the larger, roll-up one that would’ve been used for truck deliveries and cautiously opens it.

“There,” she whispers pointing across to the chain link fence surrounding the yard, “the trees are thickest there… you can get over the fence without being seen.”

“You’re coming with us,” Michonne hisses, her words not so much a question as a statement of fact.

“I can’t,” Andrea answers, shaking her head. “The women here need me… it’s my home.”

“Home?” Michonne scoffs, her brow furrowing. “What kind of home is this? You’re living with this crazy psycho who wants to repopulate the earth with nothing but women. Do you hear how insane that sounds?”

“They saved me… I owe them.”

“So did I,” Michonne cries, reaching out for Andrea’s hand but she pulls it away. “We have a second chance – don’t tell me you’d rather stay here.”
“No but things are different now… I’m not who I was before.”

“Neither am I,” Michonne says drily. “Are any of us?”

“I’m sorry,” Andrea states and Rick can see the tears forming in her eyes again as she steps back from them, “but I can’t.”

“Michonne,” he says gently, moving up beside her to take her arm.

“No!” she hisses, shaking her head vehemently and throwing his hand off. “If she stays, I stay.”

“Rick…” Andrea pleads, desperation in her voice.

“’chonne, we gotta go,” Daryl adds, stepping up on her other side.

“Touch me and I’ll break your arm,” Michonne growls warningly and Daryl raises his hands but doesn’t move away from her.

“Michonne, please,” Andrea begs, taking her hands and holding them tight. “Just go… do it for me. I need you to be safe and that can’t happen here. There are things going on that you just can’t understand. I’ll come find you, I promise, I just can’t leave right now.”

“When?”

“Soon, I swear, there’s just something I hav-”

She’s cut off by the sound of voices in the kitchen behind them and all of them freeze in place as they hear Andrea’s name being called.

“Outside – now,” Rick urges and they all pile through the door into the shadows along the side of the loading dock.

Andrea quickly closes the door and locks it, hopefully buying them a little time, Rick thinks as he checks out the immediate area.

“Do those run?” he asks, grabbing Andrea’s elbow and pointing to a line of vehicles parked by the fence.

“Yes,” she replies, nodding her head. “We keep the keys in them for emergencies.”

“Well I think this constitutes an emergency,” Rick states, pushing her towards the edge of the loading dock. “You’re coming with us.”

“No… Rick… I can’t.”

“You have to… let Deanna think we took you as leverage. It’s the safest option.”

He doesn’t let her argue anymore, just jumps down from the dock with the others close behind and then turns to look back up at her. For a second he sees the stubborn look on her face that he remembers so well and then she rolls her eyes at him before dropping down to the ground and they race together to the line of assorted cars and trucks. Daryl makes a beeline for the largest pickup there, jumping in behind the wheel while Rick takes the passenger side and the women take the back seat.

Rick grabs hold of the dash as Daryl slams the truck into reverse and then changes gear to send the truck roaring across the small lot towards the expanse of chainlink fence and the open ground
“Daryl… you don’t want to try for the gate?” Rick asks nervously as they rapidly approach the fence.

“Nah… reinforced… saw it earlier,” he replies, pushing just a little harder on the gas and Rick braces himself as they crash into the fence and rip through it with the sound of shrieking metal ringing in their ears.

They bounce out over the rough ground, dragging part of the fence behind them for a few seconds before it snags on something and tears free.

“See, Officer, no problem,” Daryl whoops just as a crescendo of gunfire opens up around them and Rick turns in his seat to see a row of armed women atop the moonlit roof of the school all aiming in their direction.

“Daryl!” he yells but his mate is already stomping on the gas pedal and everyone is thrown around as the truck lurches over the bumpy grass before finally finding traction on the dirt track beyond and speeding away.

Well out of the range of their weapons, Daryl keeps up his breakneck speed as they meet up with the main road and head for home. There’s no need for stealth anymore, rather they need to get back to the compound as fast as possible in case Deanna decides to pursue them. As the powerful truck eats up the miles, Daryl deftly steering around any errant walkers that wander into their path, Rick goes over what had happened in his mind and turns his thoughts to what might happen if Deanna launches an attack on them.

“Well out of the range of their weapons, Daryl keeps up his breakneck speed as they meet up with the main road and head for home. There’s no need for stealth anymore, rather they need to get back to the compound as fast as possible in case Deanna decides to pursue them. As the powerful truck eats up the miles, Daryl deftly steering around any errant walkers that wander into their path, Rick goes over what had happened in his mind and turns his thoughts to what might happen if Deanna launches an attack on them.

“Will she come after us?” he asks, swiveling in his seat to look at Andrea who is pressed firmly up against Michonne’s side, a look of misery and concern painting her features.

“Honestly,” she replies, raising her chin as she meets his eyes, “I don’t know. She’s unpredictable at best. She may take this as a defeat and decide you’re not worth her time or effort or she might look at it as an act of aggression on your part and come looking for vengeance. The way things have been going recently, I’m leaning more towards the latter especially if she thinks you’ve kidnapped me.”

“And if she does… what kind of threat are we looking at? It didn’t seem to me like she has much of anything, let alone the manpower she was bragging about unless there was a whole lot more people hiding in the school that we didn’t see.”

“No – last headcount was fifty-three… fifty-two now that we lost Junie. The women in the school with guns, that’s her muscle – her Elite Squad – twelve of them handpicked for their abilities with firearms and combat. The woman on stage with Deanna, the one who looks like the She-Hulk… that’s Zoe, she’s ex-military and never lets any of us forget it.”

“And the others?” Daryl asks over his shoulder, not taking his eyes from the road ahead. “The women outside in the tents.”

“Not a threat – none of them are armed with anything more than knives and most of them have never handled a weapon anyway, even if we did have enough to go around. If she sent them after you then they’d be nothing more than cannon fodder and they’re too precious to her for that.”

“Her breeding stock,” Michonne snorts derisively. “How in the hell did you end up there anyway?”

“Yeah,” Daryl adds, briefly turning to look over his shoulder at her before flicking his eyes forward again. “We came lookin’ for ya… after the Governor attacked the prison.”
“You did?” she asks, looking from Michonne to Rick. “I was on my way back to the prison – coming to warn you of what he was planning to do. He caught up to me just before I got there and hauled me back to Woodbury, trussed up like a piece of meat in his truck. I didn’t think anybody would know where I was. There was no reasoning with him at that point – all he wanted was revenge. He locked me up – chained me to a chair with every intention of torturing me, I’m sure. But something changed his mind and, instead, he stabbed Milton and left him in there with me to die so I’d have to watch and wait for him to turn and then kill me too. So, I guess in a way, it was a form of torture for both of us that had betrayed him.”

“We know,” Rick tells her, leaning his arm on the back of the seat and studying her face, “we found the room. The three of us were coming after the Governor, coming to finish what we’d started when we’d driven him away from the prison. On the way, we came across his people on the side of the road – he’d slaughtered all of them when they’d refused to go back to the prison with him. Karen was the only survivor so we took her with us but, when we got to Woodbury, he wasn’t there. With Karen on our side to back us up on what he’d done to the others, we persuaded Tyreese and Sasha to let us in to look for you.

We found the room you’re talking about but the door was open and there was nothing inside but the remains of a woman we assumed was you. There was barely anything of her left - the room was a bloodbath - but she was a similar build as you and had the same blond hair. We discovered your jacket on the floor beside her and just thought she was you.”

“It was ‘lissa… she arrived after you’d left Woodbury,” Andrea explains, turning to Michonne. “She must have seen Philip take me inside and had been waiting for a chance to get me out. I heard her outside calling my name just as I got free and Milton came for me. She opened the door at the wrong moment and he turned on her – she was down before I could lift a finger to help. I couldn’t even put her out of her misery.”

“I’m sorry,” Michonne says softly, taking Andrea’s hand and holding it on her lap. “I’m sorry we didn’t make sure it was you and keep looking.”

“No!” Andrea replies sharply. “It’s not your fault… any of you. I would’ve done the same thing. You couldn’t have known.”

“So what did you do? How did you end up with Deanna?”

“I ran. I didn’t know if Philip was coming back or if you’d killed him but I sure as hell wasn’t sticking around to find out. I headed out of Woodbury while it was still dark – I was intending on making my way back to the prison to find out what had happened. About two miles out of town I stumbled into a pretty big group of walkers and had nothing but a knife to fight them with so all I could do was run. Problem was I just kept running into more and more of them every way I turned and, in the dark, I somehow managed to come out of the trees and onto the highway before I knew where I was and straight into the path of an oncoming car. Luckily they weren’t going too fast or I’d have been roadkill but they clipped me hard enough to knock me out, break two of my ribs and give me this,” Andrea says, her fingers fluttering up to touch briefly at the jagged scar on her face and then drop back down to regain their hold on Michonne’s hand. “They picked me up and took me with them. I was in and out of consciousness for three days and, by the time I was finally lucid again, we were so far from the prison I didn’t have a hope of getting back alone. So I stayed with them – they were a small group but strong, I could see that immediately – and that’s how I met Deanna, her husband Reg and their two sons.”

“Wait… crazy lady has a family?” Daryl asks, twisting in his seat to look at Andrea. “What happened?”
“What always happens, Daryl,” she replies with a small sigh. “We were trapped and overrun and they sacrificed themselves so that we could go on. Deanna was inconsolable, out of her mind with grief, and it was all the rest of us could do to keep her moving. It was hard but eventually we found our way to the school and suddenly she was a different person – organizing everyone, making sure we were safe, finding others to join us – she said she wanted to honor the memory of her family by surviving and not giving up. Gradually our numbers grew and I actually thought we might make it.

And then she started refusing to let men join us, killing them if she thought they were a threat and turning out the ones that were already with us – for all I know she killed them too. She started preaching to the women – endless sermons about God’s plan and how we were the chosen ones to rebuild the earth – and a lot of them bought into it. They were scared and hungry and looking for anything to cling to that would push away the horror and give them something to believe in. Deanna was good – she knew just how to play the role of benevolent savior and fearless leader until she had them eating out of her hand. Those that didn’t agree were dealt with swiftly and with no mercy so it didn’t take long for everyone to fall in with her way of thinking.”

“And the whole baby thing?” Michonne asks.

“She’d bring a man into camp occasionally – I’m not sure what her criteria was for choosing them – but they’d think they’d hit the jackpot. Any woman was theirs for the taking… for a few days at least and then she would kill them in front of the group. Her goal was to impregnate as many of the women as possible as fast as possible.”

“To what end? What could she have been thinking would happen? One pregnancy is hard enough to protect but all of them… that’s madness,” Rick says, remembering caring for Lori during her pregnancy and the extra strain it had put on all of them to keep her and the baby alive.

“She wanted them to experiment on… to see if she could…”

“Could what?”

“Rick… there’s something I have to tell you about Deanna and you’re going to think I’m crazy but you just have to trust me, okay? Hear me out before you dismiss what I have to say.”

“Alright,” Rick answers, sharing a quick look with Michonne.

“Deanna is… well she's not like other people, Rick, she's different. She can do things I never knew were real outside of the realm of fantasy.”

“What kind of things?”

“She can change herself… her body,” Andrea says hesitantly, her tone showing that she expects to be ridiculed at any second. “She can become something else.”

“She’s a Shifter,” Daryl tosses back over his shoulder and Rick rolls his eyes to the ceiling. “Yeah, we know.”

“You know?” Andrea asks incredulously, darting her eyes from Rick to Michonne. “How? She never shares that with anyone new – not until she's sure of them, anyway.”

“Andrea, when Deanna had us in the school and you stepped in – how long were you in the wings for?” Rick asks and her gaze turns back to him, small lines of confusion forming between her eyes.

“I wasn’t – I came straight in. I’d been out on a run for the past week and, when I got back, I found Rebecca had gone into early labor and they told me Deanna was in the school with a group of
strangers. Nobody really seemed to know what was going on or who you were. I just happened to walk in at the right moment to save your sorry asses. Rick, what’s going on?”

“I think it’s time to bring you up to speed on what’s happened since the last time we were together,” Rick says after a moments pause and Michonne nods her head in agreement.

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By the time they had arrived back at the prison, everything was out in the open and Rick thought that Andrea had taken it pretty well, all things considered. He had been worried about how she would react when she found out that Michonne was also a wolf but it hadn’t seemed to be an issue judging by the way she had stuck tight to Michonne’s side when everyone had gathered around them in the living room. There had been a good deal of shocked and tearful reunions when they had arrived home with Andrea beside them and it had taken most of the night for everyone to get caught up and for introductions to be made among the newer members of their family. Eventually, Rick had called it a night and sent everybody off to get some rest but not before doubling the watch in the lighthouse and at the gates and making sure that everyone knew their roles should Deanna launch an attack. Neither Rick nor Daryl had been able to sleep though once they had retired to their room, both of them worried about what was to come. When Judith had awoken in the early hours, Rick had gotten up to see to her and then had brought her back into their bed where the two of them had soothed her back to sleep and spent the rest of the night talking softly until the morning light had crept around the edge of the curtains.

Now, the majority of his family was gathered once more in the living room and Rick could tell from their faces that nobody had slept well the night before.

“She’s doing what with the babies?” Maggie asks, her eyes wide with horror as she folds her hands instinctively over her stomach.

“If it’s a boy, she kills it immediately – offers it up as a sacrifice to her warped version of God,” Andrea explains, her blue eyes carrying a haunted look. “But, if it’s a girl, she plans on making it like her the moment it’s born.”

“She’s bitin’ them that small?” Daryl growls in disgust. “What the fuck?”

“That’s the point,” Andrea says wearily. “She’s all about the purity of the bloodline and she somehow came up with this crazy notion that biting them at birth would be as good as having the child herself. Don’t ask me to explain her logic because there isn’t any. I think she lost all reason when her family died.”

“How many children have there been?” Rick asks, laying his hand on Daryl's thigh to try and calm some of the agitation he can feel thrumming through his mate’s body.

“Five,” Andrea answers quietly and there’s a murmur of shock that runs around the room.

“What happened?”

“Three were boys… they were dead before their mothers even saw them. One was a girl and Deanna bit her instantly. She didn’t survive more than two days. Her body raged with a fever the whole time and you could see it distorting from what was going on inside it until it finally killed her.”

“And the fifth?” Rick asks, a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach as his mind fills with images of Abraham’s broken body twisting in on itself until his dying breath.
“I don’t know,” Andrea says, twisting her hands in her lap. “Rebecca just gave birth last night and Deanna bit the child as soon as she could. That’s the reason I wanted to stay… one of them at least. Rick, there are nine other women back there who are at different stages in their pregnancies.”

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” Daryl mutters under his breath and the feeling in Rick’s stomach tightens its grip.

“We have to help them, Rick, they don’t deserve this. She just has them trapped. She used the wolf to coerce them – to trick them into thinking she was going to make them like her and that they were the start of a new generation – and then she herded them into that place and made them dependent enough on her so that they couldn’t leave. She cut their hair as a symbol of each woman’s equality in the group, to show them how they were all as important as each other – only her Elite earn the right to wear it long – and then she turned them over to any man she deemed worthy of being a sperm donor for her sick little project.

I was lucky… she saw I could handle myself outside… so she made me a scout and the more I brought back for her, the more inclined she was to give me free rein… up to a point. I could’ve left so many times but, each time I was out there, all I could think about was those poor women and what she was doing to them. If, by staying there, I could help them in some way… maybe eventually find a way to take her down… then I had to do it. To her, they’re just prize sheep, Rick, nothing more than incubators for her new race and we have to end that.”

“And we will… I promise you,” Rick tells her reassuringly and he sees the nods of agreement from around the room without even having to ask. “But we need a plan. You have to tell us all you can about her and the others – strengths, weaknesses, things we can exploit to get into the school if we have to. If we’re going to do this, we need to be prepared.”

“What if she comes to us in the meantime?” Carol asks. “You said she wants Daryl because of his bloodline and she’s bound to be gunning for you for taking Andrea. I’m surprised she’s not knocking down the gate already.”

“Then, like you said, she’ll have the fight of her life on her hands. I want us to be ready. I want to double the watch around the clock and the lighthouse needs to be fully stocked. The four of us,” Rick says, looking from Carol to Michonne and then Daryl,” should take turns Shifting and go out to keep watch on the coast road. There’s only one way she can come at us and an early warning would give us an advantage.”

“I’ll go now,” Daryl says, getting to his feet and Rick stands to join him.

“Lookout only,” Rick emphasizes, making sure he has Daryl’s eye. “No damn heroics, okay? You see ‘em coming, you hightail it back here as fast as your paws will carry you, you understand me?”

“Geez… yes wife, I got it… nag, nag nag,” Daryl mutters as he leaves the room but his fingers brush Rick’s as he goes and Rick smiles to himself as he turns back to the others.

“Okay, let’s get to work, people, we have a lo-” he starts but is cut off by the squawking of the walkie in his pocket.

“Rick?” comes Eugene’s tinny voice over the speaker.

“Go ahead,” he says, pulling the radio from his pocket.

“They’re here,” Eugene states simply, his monotone voice betraying none of the nervousness Rick knows he must be feeling.
“What are they doing?” Rick asks, racing through the house with the others close on his heels.

“Nothing yet… they’re parked up on the rise.”

“Okay… you and Noah stay put.”

“Yes sir.”

“Andrea, I want you and Rosita to get the kids into the lighthouse right now then get up to the top. You’re our best sharpshooters.”

“Dad… I can help too,” Carl pleads, rushing up to him with a crying Judy cradled in his arms.

“No, Carl… I need you to watch your sister. That’s your only priority, you hear me?”

“But…”

“No buts… just go,” Rick instructs him, raising his voice and Rosita steps in to usher Carl out of the back door, Judy’s cries rising to a wail as she goes.

“Carol… you and Michonne are with me. Arm yourselves but be ready to Shift if you have to.”

“We’re ready,” Carol tells him, slipping out of her jacket and throwing it on the kitchen table as they head outside.

The chill air of morning caresses Rick's skin as he strides over to the gates, his eyes flicking back in the direction of the lighthouse where he’s gratified to see that the door is already firmly shut and Rosita is just coming out onto the balcony armed with her rifle. At the gate, Glenn and Tara are standing nervously on the platforms at either side, looking out over the top of the stone wall and Daryl arrives at his side in full wolf form as he approaches Glenn’s lookout.

“What’s happening?” he asks, climbing up onto the narrow platform as Glenn makes way for him.

“Nothing… they’re just sitting up there, watching us.”

Rick takes a look over the wall, casting his eyes up the rise to where there are two vehicles parked at the top with just four of Deanna’s Elite Squad standing casually beside them, armed but with their weapons holstered. He can see Amanda standing by the far vehicle and, as she catches sight of him, he watches as she opens the rear passenger door and Deanna steps out. Holding her arms aloft in a non-threatening gesture, she begins a slow walk forward down the slope towards the compound, stopping when she’s halfway between the cars and the gates. Rick curses under his breath and drops back down to the ground to stand in front of Daryl and he can see Carol and Michonne close by, taking up positions by the house and garage.

“I’m going out,” Rick declares and Daryl gives him a warning growl, “alone. I’ll be fine. Glenn… you got me covered? You see her put one toe out of line and you don’t hesitate.”

“Got it,” Glenn answers, aiming his rifle over the top of the wall and blowing out a steadying breath.

“Oh, Rick answers, adjusting his gun belt and checking his Colt. “Tara, get the gate and make sure you lock it behind me.”

She shoulders her weapon and climbs down to release the massive wooden bar that latches both gates together and then, with a nod from Rick, she pulls on the rope that opens them. With a last glance at Daryl, he walks outside, his hands open and away from his body as he cautiously
approaches Deanna’s position.

“Rick,” she greets him, her politician’s smile firmly in place as though she hadn’t just been threatening to put a bullet through his brain the previous night.

“What do you want, Deanna?”

“Want? What do you think I want, Rick? I want what you stole from me. Give me that and I promise I’ll leave you and your little pack alone.”

“Stole?” Rick asks, frowning at her. “We didn’t steal anything except our lives, Deanna, and those weren’t yours to begin with.”

“Liar!” she spits and her genial mask slips as her eyes blaze a brilliant amber and her upper canines lengthen just enough to protrude over her bottom lip as she speaks. “You took something far more precious to me than your worthless souls and I want her back!”

“Andrea?”

“Yes,” she hisses, baring her teeth angrily at him. “She’s mine and you kidnapped her to make your little escape. Well, it worked… you’re free. Now let her go.”

“I can’t do that,” Rick tells her, straightening his spine and resting his hands on his hips. “She’s family.”

“Family?” Deanna asks and he can see the confusion in her eyes.

“Oh yes… Andrea and us go way back and we’re not letting her go anywhere with you.”

“You’re the group she was with before Woodbury,” she says as the realization dawns.

“Small world just keeps on getting smaller,” Rick shrugs. “What can I say? So you may as well just turn around and leave because Andrea’s perfectly fine where she is.”

“With the people who betrayed her and left her for dead?” Deanna scoffs, raising a clawed finger and jabbing it in his direction and he can tell that she’s barely holding the wolf in check. “I don’t think so.”

“Fine,” Rick agrees, knowing that he can argue all day and she still won’t believe him. “Why don’t you ask her yourself?”

Slowly, he reaches into his pocket to pull out the walkie and toggles the mic open while keeping his eyes fixed firmly on Deanna.

“Eugene?”

“Present.”

“Send Andrea down to join us.”

“Affirmative.”

Rick pockets the walkie again and they wait in silence, neither of them moving a muscle until he hears the creak of the gate behind him and sees Deanna’s hands curl briefly into fists at her sides and then release again.
“Deanna,” Andrea says, acknowledging the other woman as she comes to a halt close to Rick’s side, the wind ruffling her short, blond hair around her ears.

“Andrea,” Deanna nods, turning her full attention away from Rick although he’s more than sure that she’s aware of any move that he makes, “what’s going on? Rick tells me you want to stay with them but I know that’s a lie. I know you wouldn’t betray your family like this.”

“These people are my family, Deanna… I belong with them,” Andrea says calmly and Rick is reminded of every time she’d presented the group with a well-voiced opinion on whatever challenge was facing them at the time.

“How can you say that?” Deanna cries out, spreading her arms out a little from her sides. “After all we’ve done for you… that I’ve done for you. I could’ve left you bleeding on the side of the road that night but, instead, I took you in and made you a part of my family”

“And I’m grateful for that… of course I am but I paid back that debt a long time ago, Deanna.”

“And what about the others, huh? Those women need you… you take care of them and you’re, what, just going to abandon them to hook up with some people you used to know? They don’t know you anymore, Andrea, they can’t love you like we do. We need you. What about Rebecca? She's going to need help with the baby – how’s she going to manage that without you?”

“Rebecca will be fine,” Andrea states coldly and Rick can feel her tensing at his side. “You’ll all be fine. I’m just one person – the group can survive without me. I’ve made up my mind. This is where I belong and I’m staying – I hope you can accept that. This doesn’t have to be a fight, Deanna.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Deanna snarls, spittle flying from her jaws as her face changes, “a fight is exactly what it is.”

“Andrea, run!” Rick yells, pushing her back towards the compound as Deanna rears up in front of them, tearing the loose clothing she had been wearing from her skin as easily as shredding tissue paper.

She roars in Rick's face and, before he can either draw his gun or initiate his own Shift, he hears a shot ring out and he sees a clump of bloodied fur and flesh fly from Deanna’s upper arm, causing her to stagger back. Abruptly the air around him is filled with gunfire as her Elite Squad also open fire and he turns on his heel and races back to the gates, seeing Andrea’s back just disappearing inside. He dives through the small opening and Tara slams them shut behind him, bringing the wooden beam back down into place to secure them.

“Andrea… you okay?” he asks and she nods her assent. “Then we need you in the lighthouse. Whatever she’s got out there is gonna be coming fast and that’s our best line of defense.”

She doesn’t answer, just turns and runs for the base of the lighthouse and Rick looks to Carol, Michonne and Daryl who have gathered around him in front of the gates.

“I want all of you to-” he starts but he never gets to finish his sentence as he hears Glenn, Tara and Eugene from the radio in his pocket all scream his name at once.

Before he can even turn his head to acknowledge any of them, the world around him explodes in a red hot ball of flame and smoke, his body being thrown by the concussive blast of heat coming from the RPG that just took out the gates and is now raining fiery debris down on all of them.
Daryl's ears are ringing as he shakes his head to clear it and he can taste blood and dust on his tongue, his body trembling slightly from the shock as he pushes himself to his feet and surveys the damage in front of him. The gates are gone, obliterated in a cloud of fire and smoke that is burning in his lungs as he frantically peers through the haze looking for Rick and the others. His heart lurches painfully in his chest as he spots one of Rick's legs jutting out from under a large piece of the gate and he bolts forward in that direction only to have his way blocked by a colossal wolf that appears
through the smoke. He stops dead as it lowers itself into a crouch in front of him, its teeth bared and its muscles bunched under its sand-colored coat as it issues a warning growl deep in its throat.

Daryl's concern over reaching Rick is momentarily interrupted by his own confusion as to where the beast came from and he's even more disturbed when a second wolf, this one a dark brown in color, circles around behind the first and takes up a similar stance a few feet away. His mind reels as he catches both of their scents, enough of their human selves underlying the wolf’s musk to tell him that the brown one is Amanda and the larger, more ferocious-looking one is Deanna’s muscle, Zoe. He’s shocked – knowing that Deanna could only have turned them the previous night after he and the others had escaped and he has to wonder how many more of her squad she tried it on and what the outcome of that was. It was a risky move on her part and one that only cemented her mental state as severely unpredictable but he didn’t have time to worry about that now, all he wanted was to get past them to Rick who still hasn’t moved from under the debris.

With a growl of his own, he attempts to take the direct route between them, hoping that his speed and experience will give him an advantage over their still-fresh abilities but they converge on him faster than he expects, forcing him back with a flurry of snapping jaws and brute strength. He retreats just a fraction, whining in frustration, but they don’t push their advantage which tells him, without a doubt, that they have orders from Deanna to keep him alive. The fact is of no comfort to him as they block him once more from trying to force his way past them and he manages to get a tearing bite in along Amanda’s flank, her pained cry fueling his anger. He paces back and forth, weighing up his options, the she-wolves keeping him penned in against the front of the garage until a movement behind them catches his eye and he sees Carol in full wolf form slinking out of the smoke to position herself behind Amanda. With a growl, he darts forward again, not really expecting to make it past Zoe’s bulk but wanting to cause a diversion so that Carol can launch herself at Amanda. The sounds of furious snarls and snapping jaws rents the air as Daryl sees Carol sink her teeth into Amanda’s already wounded side and the pair of them dissolves into a rolling ball of kicking limbs and flying fur. Before he even has a chance to challenge Zoe, he hears Rosita screaming his name from the top of the lighthouse and looks up to see her gesturing wildly to the gap in the wall where the gates had once stood.

His heart sinks as he sees a wave of walkers start stumbling across the debris led by yet another wolf that he doesn’t recognize and he knows that this is all part of Deanna’s plan. He flinches a little as the wolf who is darting back and forth encouraging the walkers forward abruptly takes a bullet to her skull, her head exploding in a viscous spray of blood and brain matter. As her carcass drops to the ground and becomes a welcome distraction for the oncoming walkers which fall hungrily down to feast on it, Daryl flicks his eyes up to the lighthouse where he sees Andrea’s grim countenance looking back at him over the barrel of her rifle. With the walkers’ concentration focused momentarily in one spot, the rest of his family appears at the railing above and starts raining down gunfire on them, taking out as many as they can but still they keep coming. He has a brief surge of hope as he catches sight of Michonne throwing aside walkers to reach the spot where Rick is pinned and bending to lift the broken gate off of him but then his attention is forced back onto the approaching walkers. As the first of them reach him and Zoe, who seems to be oblivious to the danger at her back or just doesn’t care, Daryl rears up into his hybrid form – noticing briefly that Carol has Amanda on the ground at her feet, both of them streaked with blood and dirt – and then throws himself at the larger wolf, his claws extended. He hits her solidly, his hands slashing at her head and throat as he tries to force her back into the waiting walkers, but she plants her feet and turns her head to sink her teeth into his forearm. He rips it from her grip, feeling his flesh tear in a white hot burst of pain and he opens his mouth to roar at her, stepping forward to tackle her again just as the first of the walkers start to surround them.

Daryl whines in frustration, knowing that he needs to end this fast before they’re both overrun and he’ll have no chance of fighting off the ever-growing number of walkers heading his way. Obviously
coming to the same conclusion, Zoe rises rapidly up into her hybrid shape and throws off the two walkers which are attempting to take hold of her from behind. Daryl doesn’t hesitate, lunging forward to grab at the back of Zoe’s neck and yanking her head back to expose her throat to him so that he can sink his fangs into her pliant flesh. She screams, a strange mixture of human and animal and her scent fills his nostrils as she punches and kicks against him, her fingers clawing for his eyes but he just burrows his head deeper against her. He can feel the walkers surrounding them, biting and scratching at his body but he doesn’t loosen his grip on Zoe’s throat even when she gouges at his stomach with her claws, tearing open stinging wounds beneath his fur. She stumbles, her breath coming raggedly from her chest as her blood rushes out over his lips and Daryl finds himself falling as she clings to him and takes him down with her.

With walkers piling oppressively on top of them, Daryl gives a final jerk of his head and tears Zoe’s throat open, her blood spraying over his face and driving the walkers into even more of a frenzy. Willing his body back into his wolfen form, wanting the extra protection of his thick coat against the walkers’ teeth and hands, Daryl struggles to fight his way out of the crowd, a sliver of panic fueling his movements as he tries to seek a way out among them. Abruptly the wall of walkers pressing in on him lightens up a little and he's relieved to see not only Carol and Michonne tearing into them but also Rick, all three of them dispatching the undead in their hybrid forms. Bolstered by the appearance of his mate, apparently unharmed and tearing the heads off of walkers with gusto, Daryl rises back up to join them in thinning out the herd.

“Rick!”

Daryl’s head whips around as he hears Tara’s plaintive cry coming from the direction of the gateposts but at first he can’t even see her among the still drifting smoke. Tearing another walker apart with his bare hands, Daryl throws aside the pieces in disgust and follows as Rick starts moving towards the entrance to the compound where they find Tara effectively trapped behind one of the downed lookout posts. The fallen wooden platform and its supports have come down against the stone wall creating a barrier which was keeping the walkers at bay but also not giving Tara any way out.

“Glenn’s back here,” she calls out as they approach and Daryl can hear the fear in her voice. “He’s hurt pretty bad… I think his arm is broken and he hit his head… I can’t wake him up.”

“Carol,” Rick shouts and she stops pulling apart walkers to move to his side. “Stay here with Tara… see if you can move any of this wood without bringing it down on them. Michonne… get to the lighthouse and bring the others down here to clear the yard – tell ‘em to stop wasting ammo and go hand to hand instead. Daryl, you’re with me.”

Michonne heads off to the base of the lighthouse, pushing through the walkers converging on them and then sprinting away once she's in the clear. Rick takes the lead as he and Daryl fight to make a path through the snarling mass of undead bodies, heading for the garage and Daryl wonders what he’s planning.

“We need to block the gate,” Rick explains as they reach the building and race behind it to the small collection of vehicles they have parked there, “then we can deal with the rest.”

“Where do you think Deanna is?” Daryl asks as Rick Shifts back to human and climbs behind the wheel of their pickup.

“Honestly… I think she’s close,” Rick answers, starting up the truck. “Just biding her time while we deal with this shit.”

Daryl nods in agreement, knowing that the threat is far from over, and then he boosts himself up into the bed of the truck and signals Rick that he’s ready to go. Rick puts the truck in gear and floors it as
The hefty vehicle mowing down any walkers in its path with ease.

"Hold on!" he yells to Daryl as he increases their speed with a roar of the engine.

Daryl braces himself on his hind paws, gripping tightly to the truck’s cab, fully aware of the maneuver Rick's about to attempt and ready to jump clear if it doesn’t work. Without the luxury of time to be able to maneuver the truck into position, Rick just hurtles towards the gap, wrenching on the steering wheel and stomping on the brakes at the last second to spin the truck sideways. With a bone-jarring crunch that almost throws Daryl loose from his perch, the pickup wedges itself firmly between the two stone posts on either side of the opening and stops the flow of walkers that Daryl can still see coming down the rise towards them. He jumps down from the back of the pickup, landing in a crouch as he surveys the yard in front of him that is still teeming with walkers. Looking to his left he can see where the occupants of the lighthouse have just come outside and are starting to cull the walkers gathered at its base, Michonne towering over the crowd.

“Let’s finish this,” Rick growls, slipping out of the truck’s cab and Shifting to his hybrid state.

Together, they work their way from the truck, first clearing the walkers gathered near to where Carol is working on freeing Tara and Glenn and then moving on towards the lighthouse until Daryl's hands and chest are slick with the putrid remains of the bodies he's tearing apart. They join the others near the lighthouse, finishing off the last of the walkers there until everyone is standing breathlessly in a loose circle, blood and gore painting their bodies from head to toe but with triumphant looks on each of their faces.

“Maggie, take Rosita… Carol needs help at the gate getting Glenn and Tara out,” Rick instructs and Daryl sees the look of concern that crosses Maggie’s face as she races away with Rosita close behind her. “Michonne… I want you to take a look around for any walkers we might have missed. Everyone else… we need you at the gate to start thinning the herd. Grab what tools you can from the shed… you know the drill. Daryl, you and I are getting out of here… I figure we can get through at the gate once we take some of them down.”

“Where we goin’?” Daryl asks as everyone else moves away to carry out Rick's instructions.

“We’re going to find Deanna before she tries anything else.”

“You sure ‘bout that… you don’t th-”

“Dad!”

Daryl jumps as Carl’s voice rips through the air behind him and he turns, his eyes widening in disbelief as he sees their son emerging from the door at the base of the lighthouse with a hybrid wolf’s claws wrapped firmly around his slender neck as she steers him into the open. Daryl instinctually lunges forward, seeing Rick move with him from the corner of his eye, and then they both stop dead as the wolf moves aside to reveal a second person behind her and Daryl's heart stutters in his chest as he sees it’s Deanna and she has Judy secured tightly in her arms. Both women stop a few feet from the door, Judy’s tiny form seeming impossibly small and fragile against Deanna’s monstrous frame and Daryl realizes that they must have slipped inside the compound when the gate had blown and everything was thrown into confusion.

“Deanna,” Rick growls and Daryl can smell the fear and anger pouring from his mate, “you let them go. Now.”

“And why would I do that, Rick?” she hisses back at him, her body quivering with suppressed rage.
“You’ve taken what’s mine… forced me to sacrifice good people to come after you – four of my team dead because their bodies were too weak for the change and now three more slaughtered at your filthy hands. I think I deserve some compensation, don’t you?”

“We didn’t ask for any of this, Deanna… all of this… this is on you and you alone. Give me the baby and we’ll let you go.”

“How naïve do you think I am?” Deanna sneers, her fangs glistening as she raises Judy closer to her face, the child’s face contorted with distress as she starts crying heavily. “I think I’m going to take this little cherub as my own… walk right out of here unharmed… and there’s nothing you can do about it unless you want to see both of your children torn to shreds in front of you.”

Daryl growls, a low rumbling sound from deep in his chest that has Deanna’s eyes flicking from Rick to him and he straightens up from his battle-ready stance once he has her attention.

“I’ll go with you,” he tells her, holding her gaze so that she can see he’s not lying. “You let the kids go and I’m all yours – no arguments, no fights. We just walk on outta here and nobody will touch you. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? My blood for your women. It’s yours. But you let my family go.”

“Daryl,” Rick murmurs and Daryl shoots a glance in his direction before looking back at Deanna.

“What d’ya say?” he asks and he can see the hesitation on her distorted features as she weighs up the validity of his offer.

She doesn’t, however, get the chance to answer him as a single gunshot splits the air from behind him and the she-wolf holding Carl drops dead to the ground. To his credit, the boy doesn’t even flinch, just jumps aside and sprints over to stand behind Rick and Daryl.

“Traitor!” Deanna screams as Andrea comes to stand beside Rick, her gun up and aimed at Deanna’s face.

“Give it up, Deanna,” Andrea says, her clear voice sounding strongly on the air as she takes another step forward. “There’s no way out of this… you’re done. Hand over the baby and we’ll let you go. It’s not worth losing your life over.”

“And where will I go exactly?” Deanna spits, her jaws still far too close to his daughter’s crying face for Daryl’s liking. “Back to the school? Do you really believe that I’m stupid enough to think that you won’t come after me?”

“That’s not my problem,” Andrea answers calmly, keeping her weapon trained steadily on Deanna’s face. “But I’m offering you the chance to live… to move on and start again someplace else. Is this what you think Reg would want you to have become, or the boys… someone who threatens children to get what she wants?”

“Don’t you dare speak about them,” Deanna roars, spittle flying from her lips as she paces on the spot and Judy’s fervent cries ramp up into high pitched wails that are cutting through Daryl like a knife. “You don’t know anything about them, you ungrateful bitch.”

“I know that they were good, strong, honorable men,” Andrea yells back, “that they gave their lives when we needed them most because they doted on you. And I know that they would be horrified by what you’ve become and what you’re trying to do with all those poor women you think you’re saving. You’ve become a monster, Deanna, and I think they’d be ashamed of you.”

What happens next, happens so rapidly that Daryl acts purely on instinct, his brain trailing behind as
Deanna first of all pitches Judy’s wailing body away from her and then launches herself in Andrea’s direction. Rick and Daryl surge forward simultaneously, each reaching for the airborne body of their daughter, the sharp retort of gunfire echoing around them as Daryl manages to snag Judith’s chubby frame from the air and curl around her as he hits the ground on his back. Rick is right beside him, hands reaching out to pull away Daryl’s arms and check that Judy is okay before he whirls away with an unbridled look of rage on his wolfen face. Daryl wills his body to get up, the wind having been knocked out of him as he hits the hard earth, and he finds Carl at his side ready to take Judy from him. He hands her gently over to her brother, the shock of her unexpected but mercifully short flight having silenced her cries, and she clings to Carl’s shirt as he moves away with her. Daryl turns, feeling his body protesting at the prolonged workout he’s given it between killing endless walkers and fighting a wolf the size of a small continent, and finds Rick standing protectively over Andrea’s prone body while Michonne stands between them and Deanna.

“Out of my way, half-breed,” Deanna yells, stepping forward to try and shove Michonne aside but Michonne easily holds her ground.

With an angry snarl, Deanna drops down to Shift into her full wolf form and then launches herself at Michonne, using her additional bulk to disrupt Michonne’s center of gravity and cause her to stagger back a few steps to readjust. Michonne drops to all fours in a heartbeat, dancing back a few steps as Deanna attempts to get the upper hand over her and wrap her jaws around Michonne’s throat. Both of them sink low, bellies scraping the ground and hackles raised, circling one another as they growl viciously and Daryl is ready to step in but a look from Rick holds him in check.

At some unseen signal, Michonne and Deanna launch themselves at each other, clashing headlong in a blur of flashing teeth and sharpened claws raking at each other’s bodies. Michonne has the advantage of size and youth but Deanna’s experience gives her an edge that has her easily blocking most of Michonne’s offensive attacks and she’s not afraid to fight dirty in return. Finally, after a prolonged bout of sparring which leaves both of them panting heavily and with their coats each streaked with blood, Michonne abruptly Shifts into her hybrid from just as Deanna is coming at her and sinks her hands into the older wolf’s flesh to lift her and slam her to the ground. With no hesitation, Michonne follows through, Shifting back to the wolf and pinning Deanna down to sink her fangs into her opponent’s throat. She shakes her head furiously, tearing open the soft flesh beneath her jaws as Deanna kicks futilely at Michonne’s underbelly, her movements gradually growing weaker as her life’s blood rushes out to pool on the ground beneath her. With a last growl rumbling in her throat, Michonne releases her death grip, stepping back with her long tongue coming out to lick the dripping blood from her muzzle. There’s a brief moment of silence as the small group contemplates each other and the dead wolf at their feet and then a small noise from Judy draws Daryl’s attention and he looks to Rick for guidance.

“Okay,” Rick says, reaching down to pull Andrea to her feet and Daryl can see the concern on her face as she moves to Michonne’s side and lays a tentative hand on her neck, “we’re not out of the woods yet. Michonne… Andrea… make sure the compound is clear of walkers. Carl… get your sister back inside, lock the door and don’t come out again unless me or Daryl comes for you, understood?”

“Yes sir,” Carl relies, soothing his baby sister as he gives Rick a final look before heading back inside the darkened entrance to the white-painted building.

Rick watches them go, not redirecting his gaze until the door is firmly closed behind them and then he turns to Daryl, beckoning him after him as he drops to all fours and heads towards the gates. Pausing briefly beside the rest of their group, Daryl is relieved to see that they have managed to free Tara and Glenn who is sitting against the rough stone wall while Maggie tends to a nasty looking cut in his hairline. He looks up as Rick approaches, managing a wan smile that dissolves back into a
grimace as his wife probes the wound on his head. Satisfied that he seems to be okay and is in more than capable hands, Daryl watches as Rick leaps up onto the back of the pickup and then onto the cab from where he can make the jump to the top of the rock wall. The sea of walkers blow shift their attention to him immediately, surging in his direction and Daryl watches as many of them are crowded off of the edge of the natural bridge, falling to the ocean hundreds of feet below.

In a flash, Daryl has an idea on how they can rid themselves permanently of the horde at the gates and, with a quick look up at Rick, who turns to meet his eyes, he knows unquestioningly that Rick has just had the same thought. Taking a deep breath, Daryl makes the leap onto the back of the pickup and launches himself off the other side where the walkers have thinned slightly in their quest to reach Rick. He feels hands grabbing at his fur but he plows forward, forcing his way out into the open behind them where he runs a short distance away before turning to Shift back up to his hybrid form.

“Hey!” he yells, waving his arms wildly in the air and he sees Rick disappearing back down behind the wall. “Over here ya ugly sons of bitches.”

He keeps yelling and gesticulating until he has the attention of the herd and they turn to investigate this new stimulus, the compound already forgotten. Daryl backs up as they start to move in his direction, leading them away from the path and up the rise towards the trees. Behind them he can see the flash of Rick’s silver pelt as he leaps from the pickup and races to join Daryl, skirting the edge of the slow-moving herd and half-Shifting when he arrives. Keeping a short distance between them, they work together to entice the undead after them, up through the trees and back out onto the clifftop beyond.

“Ready?” Rick shouts and Daryl can see the light blazing in his eyes.

“Always,” he answers, turning his back on the ravenous faces that are following them.

Ahead of them the ocean stretches out as far as the eye can see, the jagged coastline to their left disappearing into the horizon. Directly in front of them is a rocky promontory jutting out above the ocean’s glittering waves, the sheer drop at its edge even higher than the one surrounding the lighthouse. Between them and the edge is a crevasse, cutting through the earth as though some cosmic hand had sliced a wedge out of the cliff itself. They’re approaching the widest part of the wedge where the opening is at least fifteen feet across and Daryl can hear the roar of the waves crashing against the rocks below, the sound being amplified as it travels up between the rock walls. With Rick at his side, they increase their speed, easily clearing the gap to land on the other side where they whirl around to draw the walkers on, making as much noise and movement as they can. Daryl’s lips peel back in a satisfied grin as the first walkers stumble like lemmings over the steep edge, their reaching hands and slack faces concentrated on nothing but the prize ahead. None of them have the capacity to realize that moving a little further along the cliff would bring them to a safe path out to where their meals are now howling triumphantly as they beckon them on. With a single-minded focus, each of the walkers steps up to and over the edge, nothing driving them except the need to feed and it’s not long until Rick and Daryl are alone on the clifftop.

“Come on,” Rick says, reaching out to clap Daryl on the shoulder and Daryl winces as the aches and pains in his body make themselves known now that he’s no longer in any immediate danger. “We have a shit ton of clean up to do.”

Daryl sighs wistfully, visions of a hot shower and a long nap floating in his mind, but he still follows Rick as he takes on the wolf and races back around the end of the crevasse to head for home. They arrive to find that the pickup has been moved and that Michonne, now in her human form and dressed in her usual attire with her sword on her back, is busy loading supplies into the back of one
of the other cars.

“What’s going on?” Rick asks as they draw closer and Andrea appears from inside the house carrying another backpack.

“We’re going back to the school,” she explains, throwing the pack onto the back seat and closing the door. “I need to get back and find out what happened. If Deanna left the others behind, they’re going to need our help to survive.”

“What about the rest of her crew… her Elite Squad?” Daryl asks, watching Michonne take off her sword to slide it into the front seat.

“You heard her,” Andrea answers, holding open the passenger door, “seven of them are already dead and the others… well, I have a pretty good idea who she would’ve left behind and I think we can handle them. Once they find out she’s gone, I don’t think they’ll give us any trouble.”

“And you’re sure about that?” Rick asks, looking at each of them in turn. “Why don’t you take Carol along with you, just in case?”

“Because you’re going to need her here,” Michonne states, climbing in behind the wheel. “We’ll be fine, I swear.”

“Just be careful, okay?” Rick instructs, stepping back from the car as Michonne guns the engine. “If you’re not back in two days, we’re coming after you. Clear?”

“Crystal, boss,” Michonne grins up at him and then she puts the car in gear and they’re gone, disappearing quickly up the gravel track and out of sight over the rise.

“We need to get people out here working on fixing these gates,” Rick says, turning to look at the smoldering debris littering the ground, “but first, what do you say, we go get our kids back?”

“Best plan I’ve heard all day,” Daryl tells him with a grin of his own.

The cleanup takes some time, both in terms of disposing of all the corpses littering the yard – the pickup making endless trips up to the crevasse to dump the bodies – and in designing and building new gates that would be just as strong as the ones that had been in place when they had arrived. Luckily they had Eugene’s smarts to call on for that and he had soon drawn up a plan of what was needed to make their home secure again. Even with everyone pitching in and the combined strength of three wolves, they were still working long after the sun had gone down, the brightness of the clear night sky lighting their way as the last piece of wood was shaped from the trees they had cut down and stacked outside ready for assembly the next day. Carol had volunteered to take first watch by the pickup with Rosita, Rick wanting at least one wolf on duty out there all night until the compound was secure again. With a series of joking complaints about the workout everyone had undertaken but with an underlying sense of relief that none of their family had been lost that day, they all eat a cold meal in the kitchen before heading for their beds and a well-deserved rest. Having made sure that Carl is okay after what had happened and finding him already fast asleep in his room, Daryl and Rick stop briefly outside of Glenn and Maggie’s room on the way to their own.

“Hey, just wanted to see how he’s doing,” Rick says after Maggie opens the door to his gentle knock.

“See for yourself,” she replies, stepping aside and letting them enter the room where Glenn is propped up against the headboard of their bed with his left arm laying splinted on a pillow beside
“So, it’s broken?” Daryl asks, moving over to stand next to Glenn.

“Carol seems to think so,” Maggie answers, folding her arms in front of her, “but Mr. Stubborn here seems to think that he’ll be up and about tomorrow.”

“Not gonna happen,” Rick tells Glenn firmly with a shake of his head. “You’re staying just where you are until I tell you different, you hear me?”

“But there’s so-”

“But nothing,” Rick interrupts, raising his hands. “You’re no good to me running around like a lame duck. Take time… heal… and then you can go back to being a badass.”

Maggie smirks as Rick turns and leaves the room, allowing no further argument on the subject and Daryl knows she’s been having the same fight with her husband over and over.

“You know… if you get bored, I’m sure Carol has some sewin’ you can help her with… or maybe she can bring you a pot of potatoes to peel… nothin’ too taxin’ for ya now,” Daryl ribs him, relieved to find that his friend is okay, and heading to the door with Maggie close behind him.

“Bite me,” Glenn tosses at him, raising his good hand to flip Daryl off.

“Maybe I should,” Daryl chuckles as he slips through the open door. “Might toughen you up a little.”

Glenn’s reply is cut off by Maggie closing the door behind him and Daryl smiles to himself as he crosses the hall to his and Rick’s room, toeing off his boots the minute he’s inside with a grunt of relief. He can already hear the shower running and he quickly peeks in on Judy sleeping serenely in her crib, the day’s traumas already forgotten, before he joins Rick in the bathroom. They don’t speak as they slowly undress, peeling their clothes from their filthy bodies and then stepping under the welcoming water together. Daryl draws in a sharp breath as the warm water needles his skin, finding each and every scrape, bump and laceration as he turns beneath it. Gently, he and Rick wash each other down, both of them too sore and exhausted to find anything other than comfort in this act of intimacy – each of them quietly cataloging the others wounds and making sure that there’s none that need more attention than their own enhanced bodies will provide. Once they feel they’ve cleaned all of the grime from their skin, they dry off and collapse onto their bed, Daryl’s head barely hitting the pillow before he feels himself drifting away. At some point during the night each of them wakes, stiff and aching, and they Shift, almost without thinking and that’s how they wake the next day, curled around each other’s wolfen form with their muzzles resting on the other’s back.
So... I just wanted to say a big thank you to everyone who has taken the time to read this story. I still can't believe it's done as well as it has. For all of you that have left me comments, especially those that take the time on every chapter, just know that you've kept me going even when I've been tired and frustrated with the whole thing. It's truly been a pleasure to interact with you all. That said, I thought I should let you all know that we're coming to an end. There will only be two more chapters after this. I originally gave myself a goal of 20 and I've doubled that because those boys just wouldn't stop talking to me but the time is right now to bring it to a close. I hope everyone enjoys the way it plays out and I'm sure that, down the line, I'll revisit this pairing again because I love them so much. ♥
Rick stretches himself on the sand, lowering his front legs and arching his back so that his tail points to the stars, his mouth widening in a long yawn. He grunts as he feels the residual tightness in the muscles between his shoulders, a reminder of the piece of gate that had landed on him during the fight with Deanna’s people. The other scrapes and bruises he had received had healed nicely in the two days that had followed the attack but that one thing was still bothering him – probably due to all the manual labor he’d done in helping to erect the new gates, he thinks as he straightens himself up and gives his body a vigorous shake. Further down the beach towards the rolling waves, he can see Daryl chasing ineffectually after a flock of seagulls that he had ousted from their roosting spot. Rick’s tongue lolls out in a canine grin as he watches his mate lunge and snap at the squawking birds which are easily too fast for his lumbering form. With the gates firmly back in place and his family secure once more, Rick had felt comfortable enough to take this run with Daryl, wanting to scare up some fresh game to refresh their supplies. They had left the compound as soon as the moon had risen, both of them eager to let loose a little, and had made short work of killing a brace of rabbits which Rick had carried back in his hybrid form and handed off to Maggie at the gate. Rejoining Daryl back on the road, they had scouted the area for a while, wanting to reassure themselves that everything was back to normal in their small corner of the world and ending up down on the beach.

Rick gives a warning growl as Daryl gives up on his bird hunt and bounds up to him instead, his eyes blazing as he dances around Rick, whining and snapping his jaws in an invitation to come play. Rick huffs out a resigned breath and then lunges forward, catching Daryl off guard enough to pitch him off balance and get a sly nip in at his neck before he turns and races off along the sand. He runs full out, letting the wolf have free reign and feeling the knots working themselves out of his aching muscles, enjoying the sharp tang of the briny air as it flows over his tongue and tickles at his nose. He can feel Daryl’s approach even before he makes his move, allowing Rick time to swerve at the last possible moment and avoid his mate’s attack. They race each other back and forth along the beach for a good half hour, neither of them really gaining the upper hand until Rick finally gives in and flops panting to the sand, letting Daryl pin him down and sink his teeth into his scruff. Daryl gives his head a small shake, tugging playfully on Rick’s fur before releasing him and moving to run his dripping tongue over Rick’s face and ears instead. With another small growl of annoyance, Rick wriggles out from beneath him and shakes himself once more to try and loosen some of the sand that’s clinging to his coat before he turns and starts heading back up the beach in the direction of home.

Daryl falls into step beside him and they make their way back up the cliffside until they arrive back on the road leading down to the lighthouse. At the top of the rise Rick stops, drawing himself up into his hybrid state as he looks back along the coast road one last time.

“’Chonne ‘n Andrea… they’ll be back.”

“Should’ve been here already,” Rick sighs, shifting his weight on his back paws as he glances at the empty road again.”
“Well… technically, they still have till tomorrow,” Daryl says lightly with a small bump against his shoulder and Rick knows that he’s worried too but he’s trying to make him feel better.

“Technically,” Rick replies, allowing himself a small smile as Daryl rubs his shoulder against him again and the friction of his coarse hair on Rick’s sends an involuntary shiver down his spine, “but, if they’re not home by lunchtime tomorrow, we’re going after them.”

“Know what ya need, Officer?” Daryl rumbles, pressing his body into Rick's personal space, his eyes glinting in the moonlight.

“What’s that?” Rick asks, his nostrils flaring as he catches the subtle changes in Daryl's scent signaling his growing arousal.

“Somethin’ to take your mind offa things,” Daryl growls, running the tips of one clawed hand down over Rick’s chest to his abdomen.

“You got something in mind?” Rick breathes, feeling his cock stir among the long hair at his groin.

“C’mon,” Daryl tells him, pushing away from him and dropping to all fours to lead the way back home with Rick following eagerly behind.

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“Working on your bike?” Rick asks skeptically twenty minutes later, once they’ve redressed and checked in with everyone before heading back outside to the garage. “That’s your distraction?”

“Yeah… what did you think I meant?” Daryl says, a tone of innocent confusion in his voice that has Rick almost believing him until he catches sight of him sneakily bolting the door from the inside.

Rick knows immediately the game that Daryl’s playing and, knowing the reward that’s waiting for him at the end, he’s more than happy to play along with his partner’s distraction. So he takes a seat beside the workbench while Daryl sets about tinkering with the gleaming machine in the center of the room. He dutifully hands over tools when they’re requested, ignoring Daryl’s impatient scowl when he deliberately gives him the wrong one, and spends his time silently watching and appreciating the experienced way Daryl's hands work on the bike. The confidence with which Daryl performs his checks on the engine, his hands moving surely and methodically over its parts only serves – as it always does – to increase Rick's desire. With every turn of a screw or tightening of a nut, he finds himself becoming increasingly aroused, knowing exactly how it feels to have Daryl's hands take care of him in such a thorough manner. He can feel the press of his cock straining against the inside of the well-worn jean he had hastily slipped into when they had returned home and he knows that Daryl is more than aware of his arousal too, can see it in the slight flaring of his nostrils as Rick leans in to hand him another wrench.

For his part, Daryl maintains his concentration on the task in front of him, taking his time over each minute adjustment that Rick is sure are making no difference to the bike’s performance whatsoever and barely even acknowledges Rick’s presence in the room with him. Finally, just as Rick is starting to think that the temperature inside the garage can’t get any higher or he's going to dissolve into a puddle on the grease-stained concrete, Daryl straightens up from the bike and pulls a rag from his back pocket to wipe his hands on.

“Guess it’s time to turn this beast on… see how it sounds,” Daryl says, shooting a sly glance in Rick's direction and Rick can’t fail to miss the thinly-veiled innuendo behind his words.

He watches as Daryl digs deep in his front pocket for his key then inserts it in the ignition and turns
it, the powerful engine roaring to life and then settling down to a gentle purr.

“Sounds pretty damn good to me,” Rick states, licking his lips as his eyes travel the lean lines of Daryl's back where his shirt is pulled taut against his skin while he leans over the seat to check something on the other side.

“Yeah… but did I ever tell ya there’s only one way to make sure that everythin’s in order?” Daryl asks, turning back to Rick and meeting his eyes as he slowly peels off the threadbare t-shirt that’s been clinging to him like a glove.

“No,” Rick answers, feeling his mouth moisten as Daryl's rich scent grows stronger and fills the room. “What’s that?”

“You have to feel it… let your whole body tune into what the bike’s tellin’ ya,” Daryl tells him, kicking off his boots and slipping smoothly out of his pants to stand naked before Rick. “’s the only way to know.”

“Is that so?” Rick asks, trying to keep a neutral expression on his face when, in reality, he feels like his tongue is about to unroll out of his mouth like a cartoon dog at the sight of a juicy bone.

“Uh-huh,” Daryl mutters in agreement, moving to raise his leg and slowly mount the bike, giving Rick an unfettered view of his puckered asshole and his balls skimming the seat beneath him. “Now… you gonna stand there starin’ like an idjit all night or you gonna come over here n’ learn somethin’?”

With no hesitation, Rick does as he’s bid, quickly removing his clothes and climbing on the bike behind Daryl, planting his feet on the concrete on either side and shivering a little at the cool slide of the leather seat against his bare skin. Daryl balances the bike to release the kickstand and Rick's body is immediately enveloped in the gentle vibrations coming from the humming engine beneath him, making him groan a little at the stimulation as he slides his hands onto Daryl's back.

“Never had ya in the bitch seat before,” Daryl chuckles throatily, throwing a smirking glance back over his shoulder and Rick feels the hair bristle on the back of his neck at the implied insult.

“Who’s the bitch?” he asks sharply, reaching roughly around in front of Daryl to grab at his hardened cock and give it a tight squeeze.

“Uhhh…” Daryl moans with a tiny mewl of pleasure that has Rick's cock twitching hard.

“That’s what I thought,” Rick tells him, stroking his fist along Daryl's length and being rewarded with another of those needy sounds.

He runs his free hand down Daryl's spine, mesmerized by the rich, golden hue of his skin in the light of the hurricane lamps they had lit earlier, his fingers drawing lazy spirals on his flesh. Drawing his other fist up to the head of Daryl's cock, he uses one finger to brush lightly over his slit, tapping it in the sticky pre-cum he finds there. Withdrawing his hand from Daryl's cock, he lifts it up to his face instead, rubbing the wet tip across his bottom lip and then slipping his forefinger into Daryl's mouth where his tongue curls eagerly around it.

“Oh yeah… that’s right… suck it real good, babe,” Rick instructs him, leaning into Daryl’s back to whisper in his ear.

Daryl takes Rick's hand in his, releasing his finger for a moment before parting his lips again and this time sliding them over two of Rick's digits to coat them in saliva. Rick relishes the sensation with a breathy moan then pulls his hand from Daryl’s mouth and brings it back behind him to press one
slick fingertip against his exposed hole. Daryl gives a shuddering sigh as Rick pushes into him, working him slowly to open him up before he adds the second finger, his lips pressing tight kisses against the scarred skin of Daryl's back. He takes his time, despite the wolf howling in his head at him to just fuck his mate already, making sure that Daryl is relaxed and prepared before he goes any further.

"Got lube?" he asks with a grin and Daryl snorts out a small laugh like he hasn't heard Rick make the same lame-ass joke about a hundred times before and it just makes Rick love him that little bit more.

"Pocket," Daryl answers with a nod of his head towards his discarded pants. "Tell me again why I'm the only one who's ever prepared 'round here. Boy Scouts would be ashamed of you, Officer Grimes."

"Yeah, yeah," Rick grumbles, hopping off the bike to scoop up Daryl's pants from the floor and retrieve the small tube from the front pocket before turning back around. "Holy fuck… I wish I had a camera right now."

He can't help but stand and stare at Daryl for a long moment, the sight of him bent forward over the bike, his dripping cock pressed against the tank and his slick hole spread ready for Rick to fill, causing Rick's breath to catch in his throat and for a deep ache to start in his balls.

"Quit it," Daryl growls and Rick can see the flush of embarrassment creeping up his cheeks. "We doin' this or what? I ain't gettin' any younger here."

Rick shakes his head and, as he steps back to the bike, he catches sight of something folded on the workbench that makes him pause again, this time with an even wider grin on his face.

"Here… hold this," he says, tossing the lube to Daryl who plucks it deftly out of the air. "Got a surprise for you."

"Don't need no surprises," Daryl complains from behind him as Rick grabs his find from the bench along with a bottle of water which he swiftly_uncaps.

"Oh I think you'll want this one alright," he tells him, turning from the bench and dangling a dripping chamois leather in front of Daryl's face, watching his eyes widen in surprise. "Thought we'd take you on a little trip down memory lane."

Daryl doesn't reply as Rick climbs back on the bike behind him but he straightens up when Rick reaches around him with the warm, slippery leather draped over his palm and his breath quickens as Rick wraps the dripping cloth around his length. Rick feels Daryl tremble slightly as he starts a slow pump of his fist around his leather encased cock and he smiles to himself, brushing his lips across Daryl's shoulder.

"Jesus… Rick…" Daryl murmurs, his hips grinding forward in rhythm with Rick's slowly moving fist.

"Keep it together, Dixon," Rick growls against his shoulder, "I didn’t even get started yet."

Sliding his hand up over the end of Daryl's cock and letting it drop back to rest against the fuel tank, Rick unwraps the soaking leather from his fingers and hands it to Daryl who, in turn, hands him back the lube.

"Mint?" he asks, raising an eyebrow as he pops the lid on the small tube and the sharp scent tickles his nose.
“’sposed to tingle or somethin’,” Daryl mutters in front of him as Rick squirts the sticky liquid in his palm and applies it generously to his cock.

“Woah,” he gasps as the lube does, in fact, give him a not unpleasant tingling sensation along his length.

Smearing yet more of the lube onto his fingers, Rick tosses aside the tube and uses his free hand to push Daryl forward onto the bike again before inserting his slippery fingers back inside him. Daryl grunts at the initial sensation and then whines low in his throat as Rick starts massaging his fingers in and out of his hole.

‘You ready?’ Rick asks, grasping at his cock and giving himself a tight stroke.

“Always,” Daryl replies, planting his feet more firmly on either side of the purring bike and raising himself up from the seat a little more.

Rick withdraws his fingers, taking no time at all to replace them with the tip of his cock, teasing Daryl's entrance for a moment before he can’t resist any longer and he pushes slowly inside of his lover. Daryl makes a deep keening sound that travels straight to Rick's cock as he pulls back a little before rolling his hips forward once more, feeling Daryl's slick walls squeezing tight around him. He places his hands on Daryl's hips looking for better leverage but he can’t quite seem to get the angle to go as deep as he wants.

“Shit,” he growls in frustration and Daryl takes his hands, guiding them past his body to rest on the bike’s handlebars which Rick immediately latches onto and uses to pull himself forward to deepen his thrust.

Daryl presses back against him, his cock rutting into the wet leather wrapped around it with each thrust that Rick makes into his ass, a string of hushed profanities tripping from his lips. Rick buries his face against Daryl's shoulder, breathing hard and leaving sloppy kisses against his skin while Daryl groans beneath him, one hand coming up to clasp around Rick's rigid forearm.

They move together, forwards and back, the bike’s vibrations adding extra stimulation that Rick can feel from his balls to his lips as he loses himself inside Daryl. He wants him to come while he’s buried deep inside of him, needs to feel him come apart around him and know that his downfall is Rick's doing, so he rolls his hips a little faster. He's rewarded with the sound of Daryl's moans getting louder, the feel of his sweat coating Rick’s chest, and he tightens his hands on the handlebars as he thrusts faster into him. He knows Daryl is close to the edge, can read it in every beat of his heart, every ragged breath he exhales so, with a flick of his wrist, Rick revs the engine beneath them sending a shockwave of stimulation straight to his core. He's coming before he can stop himself, his hands slipping from the handlebars to wrap around Daryl's waist and cling to him as they both ride out their orgasms in a heaving mass of sweat-slicked skin and muttered curses against each other.

Daryl is the first to move, flipping off the engine and tilting the bike to reinstate the kickstand while Rick keeps his arms wrapped firmly around his waist and moves in tandem with him to relieve some of the pressure in both their thighs from keeping the bike in position while they’d fucked. He can hear the rapid thud of both their heartbeats, now crystal clear in the silent space, and can feel the sweat trickling down his sides and back.

‘So,” he croaks, having to stop and clear his throat before he continues, “how does it feel?”

“Oh, it feels damn fine, Sheriff… damn fine,” Daryl answers, loosening Rick's grip a little so that he can turn and look over his shoulder at him.
“Really?” Rick asks, ducking his head forward to nip his teeth into the side of Daryl's neck, the salty taste of his sweat bursting on his tongue. “You don’t think it needs another tune up?”

“Well, there’s always room for improvement,” Daryl chuckles, reaching up to capture Rick’s head and tug playfully on his damp curls. “You feelin’ distracted enough back there?”

“Daryl, I can honestly say there’s nothing on my mind but you right now,” Rick tells him and he means it, all of his worries pushed temporarily aside in favor of enjoying the here and now.

“Good,” says Daryl, turning more in his arms so that he can angle his head for a kiss which Rick is more than happy to grant him, the two of them losing themselves in each other for just a little longer.

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Breakfast is barely over the next morning when Rick’s walkie squawks to life just as he’s pouring himself a second cup of coffee, causing the hot liquid to splash across the back of his hand when it makes him jump.

“What?” he yells, maybe a little too sharply as he reaches for a handful of paper towels to clean up the mess.

“Umm… just thought you’d like to know we have traffic on the road but if this is a bad time…” comes Noah’s hesitant voice from the tiny speaker.

“On my way,” Rick barks, pocketing the radio and abandoning his coffee as he heads for the door, checking his Colt on the way.

Outside, as he strides across the yard, he’s greeted by the sight of Michonne and Andrea’s car pulling through the already open gates being followed by two school buses painted in their distinctive yellow color and a large pickup with its flatbed piled high with a variety of plants and crates of food. Once all three vehicles are safely inside, Tara and Carol secure the gates once more and everyone gathers around as Michonne steps out of the lead car.

“You’re late,” he says accusingly, stepping up to Michonne but he can’t keep the smile from his lips now that he knows they’re safe.

“And you worry too much,” she smiles, patting her palm against his chest, “it’s making you grey.”

He laughs, shifting his gaze to Andrea as she joins them, motioning to the numerous women on the buses to stay put and Rick takes in the faces he can see packed into the two vehicles, all of them looking back at him with a mixture of apprehension and fear on their faces.

“What happened?” he asks, walking out of earshot of the buses where the rest of his family is gathered.

“Just what we expected,” Andrea explains, her solemn eyes holding his. “The guards that Deanna left behind were those who were the least loyal to her cause and seemed more relieved than anything when we came back without her. They’d watched her try and turn those who’d volunteered to go with her – had seen some of their friends die horribly when it didn’t work – and they were scared she was going to come back and force it on the rest of them if she didn’t defeat you the first time. They weren’t exactly too cut up about it when they heard she was dead.”

“So why are they all here?” Carol asks and Andrea’s head swings in her direction but it’s Michonne
“Because the school had been attacked by walkers not long after Deanna had left them… maybe it was all the commotion she and her new pack made getting ready to come after you, we don’t know… but part of the fence was down and all the women were hiding in the school when we got there. The tents were overrun and a few of the women were bit before they could get inside. It was chaos.”

“You have to understand how these women have been living,” Andrea says, her tone defensive, “how much of a short leash Deanna kept them on. She fed them just enough that they wouldn’t starve but not enough that they’d have the strength to rise up against her. She told them she was keeping them safe but they were basically her prisoners… her lab rats. They’re not completely helpless but they’re pretty damn close. You tell someone they’re weak and worthless long enough, they’re going to start believing it.”

“We couldn’t leave them,” Michonne adds, stepping closer to Andrea. “Not with the kids to take care of and the ones that are still pregnant… it would’ve been a death sentence.”

“Where are they going to go now?” Rosita chips in and Rick can hear the rightful concern in her voice although he knows there’s only one answer to the question she’s asking. “You can’t seriously be thinking about letting them stay here… we can take a few of them, maybe, but anything past that and we’ll be crippling ourselves.”

“Rosita’s right,” Eugene interjects before anyone else can speak and Rick can feel the tension spreading through the group. “It’s just basic math… providing food for that many people is going to deplete our stocks exponentially and, while I’m sure that your lycan counterparts can keep us supplied with fresh meat for a short amount of time, there’s not a chipmunks chance in hell that our crops and supplies are going to last past more than a week or two at the most. Not to mention that none of us have any medical training and we’re already dealing with the imminent but joyous arrival of our own baby which will come with its own set of unexpected events I’m sure but factor that by another nine pregnancies, assuming they all survived the attack, and we’re looking at a daunting time ahead of us to say the least.”

“What did you want us to do?” Andrea asks angrily, the color rising on her cheeks. “Leave them there to fend for themselves… to wash our hands of them and say they’re not our problem because it’s going to make things tough around here? That might be your way of thinking but it’s certainly not mine. I thought you were all better than that.”

“Now, Andrea,” Rick says, stepping forward with his palms raised to try and calm some of the frustration he can feel pouring from her. “Eugene wasn’t saying it can’t be done… he was just making sure we have all the facts. It’s kind of his thing so don’t take it the wrong way. Nobody’s going anywhere, I promise you.”

She stares back at him for a long moment and then he can see the fight dissipate from her eyes and he understands emphatically what a tough time she and Michonne must have had uprooting these women from their home and making sure they arrived safely at their destination. He can’t blame her for her anger or her frustration for one second and he knows that, deep down, she understands both sides of the argument and she’s probably just as worried as the rest of them about trying to provide for such a large group.

“I’m sorry,” she says, exhaling deeply and mustering up a weary smile for Eugene. “I know it’s not ideal and I know it’s going to be a lot of work but I just didn’t know where else to go… at least for now.”
“It’s okay,” Carol tells her, wrapping her arm around Andrea’s shoulders and giving her a squeeze, “we’ll make it work until we can find a more permanent solution.”

“That’s right,” Rick agrees, his mind already working on the logistics of accommodating all their new guests. “We have plenty of room in the house if some of us double up… that’ll give the pregnant ones someplace to sleep and the kids can camp out in the living room.”

“And we have both floors in the lighthouse,” Michonne adds. “We can make a run for sleeping bags and bedding… get some space heaters in there. At least it has a working bathroom so that’s a blessing.”

“I can move into Rosita’s room,” Tara blurts out a little too eagerly then blushes as all eyes turn to her. “I mean… Noah can share with Carl as there are twin beds in there and…”

“And I’ll move out the lighthouse with the others,” Carol says with a quick smile in Tara’s direction. “That’ll give us another room inside and it might make them feel a little more at ease if we don’t make it seem like an ‘us’ and ‘them’ situation.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Rick nods as another thought crosses his mind. “What about the whole wolf thing? Do they know… about us, I mean?”

“No,” Andrea replies, shaking her head, “the only ones who knew were among Deanna’s Elite Squad that she brought with her after you.”

“Then I think that, for now at least, we should keep that to ourselves. I don’t want them to think that they’ve just moved from one bad situation to another. Let’s show them that we can be trusted before we drop that bombshell in their laps.”

“I don’t like lying to them,” Andrea says slowly, “but I know that you’re right. They’ve been through so much already… I just want them to feel safe.”

“Then maybe we should get them off the buses and get them settled,” Rick says loudly, clapping Eugene on the back hard enough to pitch him forward just a little.

“Thank you,” Andrea mouths as everyone moves off and Rick gives her a nod before turning to Daryl who has been standing silently at his side throughout the entire exchange. “You okay with all this?”

“Do I gotta choice?” Daryl replies, walking away towards the second bus, muttering under his breath as he goes. “Just like damn Woodbury all over again.”

Rick watches him for a moment, trying to judge if he really thinks that this is a bad idea or if it’s just Daryl’s usual gruffness at being thrown a curveball he wasn’t expecting. Rick decides it’s the latter as his mate shoots forward to help one of the heavily pregnant women down from the bus steps, supporting her weight and pulling her overstuffed pack from her hands to sling over his own shoulder while he escorts her into the house. With a smile and a shake of his head, knowing that his partner is fully behind his decision, Rick joins the others in welcoming the newcomers as they file off the buses.

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“You know, there might be a solution to where they can go,” Andrea tells him a short while later as they’re unloading the boxes of food from the back of the pickup.

“Yeah… and where’s that?”
“The place that Deanna was scouting for the last couple of months,” she tells him, leaning against the truck’s tailgate for a moment. “Supposedly there’s a community out here, somewhere along the coast, that’s been here since the beginning. Solid walls, plenty of room, electricity and running water… you name it and they’ve got it.”

“Sounds too good to be true,” Rick says skeptically.

“Normally I’d think so too but there was this guy, Pete, who came to the school not too long ago… Deanna took him in as one of her ‘chosen’ ones and, when she was done with him, he told her about this place that he’d come from. I guess he thought she’d spare him if he had something worthwhile to barter with so he told her everything he could about this place except for the location. He made it sound like she’d be welcomed with open arms and, if she wasn’t, then he’d help her take the place himself. Seems he’d had a falling out with the man who runs the place and had gotten himself banished so he was looking for a way back in.”

“What did Deanna do?”

“She kept him alive for a while, gathering more information from him, but, in the end, she killed him once she thought she had all that she needed to find the place on her own. Unfortunately, her wolf-enhanced ego – no offence – coupled with her own special brand of insanity meant that she neglected to ask him two incredibly pertinent questions… How far? And in which direction? With Pete dead, she suddenly realized that she had no idea which way he’d come to reach us. The coast is a pretty big place when you have no idea if your search radius is forty miles or four hundred miles and you don’t even know if you should be going north or south! I can tell you she spent two days holed up with Pete’s rotting corpse trying to get the answers out of him. That was not a fun time for any of us.”

“So she started sending out scouts like Junie,” Rick says, grimacing at the visual she’s planted in his mind. “And what makes you believe it wasn’t just a lie this Pete made up to keep himself alive long enough to try and escape?”

“I’m still not sure that it wasn’t, not entirely, but there was just something about the way he talked about it, you know, all the little details that just rang true somehow. He was a nasty piece of work – I’m still not sure what Deanna saw in him but then her criteria seemed to change from one man to the next. He was one of those creepy guys that would hit on you in a bar, all smiles and respectability on the outside but after a little conversation and a couple of drinks you could see their inner sleazebag start to show. He even claimed that he was a doctor but I didn’t buy that for a second and, even if he was – and Lord knows we could’ve used one – I didn’t like the way he was around the girls she let him have. They didn’t say as much because they were more scared of her than of him but I’m pretty sure that he beat at least two of them when he was done with them.”

“Sounds like a real upstanding citizen,” Rick says darkly, having met more than his fair share of entitled pricks just like Pete when he was on patrol, “and yet you still believed him on the whole hidden community thing?”

“I really did, Rick,” she tells him earnestly. “I honestly believe it’s still worth looking for.”

“Then we’ll keep looking. We’re going to have to find another place anyway, may as well have somewhere to aim for.”

“We?”

“Yes, ‘we’,“ Rick smiles at her, taking a box from the back of the truck and handing it to her. “Deanna might have been batshit crazy but she wasn’t wrong when she said we couldn’t hide away
behind these walls forever. Eventually, we’re going to need other people if we want the human race to survive. We’ll have to take a chance and see who’s out there. This might be the answer we’re all looking for.”

“You’ve changed,” Andrea tells him, after looking at him for a moment.

“You haven’t,” he laughs, pulling forward another box. “Still the same headstrong woman who put me in my place on more than one occasion.”

“Well… only when you really deserved it,” she tells him, her clear eyes sparkling in the afternoon sun.

“You know we’re here because of you, right?” he asks her, gesturing at the lighthouse looming behind them. “I think that some days getting here… to a place where you’d been… was the only thing that kept Michonne going and she kept the rest of us going.”

As if she knows that her name is being spoken, Michonne appears in the doorway to the house and Rick sees the glisten of tears in Andrea’s eyes as she waves to her.

“Go on… I’ve got this,” he tells her, taking the box back from her hands.

“You sure? We can both help.”

“No… you two go rest up, you did all the hard work. I’m sure Daryl's lurking someplace nearby… he’ll help me.”

“You and Daryl,” she says, giving him a knowing look, “that’s still a story I have to hear.”

“Well, when I figure it out, I’ll be sure to clue you in,” he tells her and she laughs - a sound that he’s truly missed - before she races across the yard to usher Michonne back into the house, leaving Rick standing alone with a smile on his face.
Chapter 39

There’s a low mist hanging in the air, just thick enough to keep Daryl’s speed down on the bike but not enough to have delayed today’s scouting trip and he knows it won’t take long to burn off once the sun gets a little higher. For now, he pulls his poncho a little higher around his throat, more for comfort than for warmth, and checks his side mirror to make sure that the pickup truck carrying
Glenn and Carl is still keeping pace with him. His mouth quirks up in a smile as he catches sight of the two of them inside the cab obviously singing enthusiastically along with whatever music they have playing, Carl drumming his hands wildly on the dash in front of him. Daryl turns his attention back to the road ahead, swerving easily around a limping walker which has veered in his direction, and thinks to himself how much he's missed this – their outing today reminding him of all the scouting trips he and Glenn would take while they were back at the prison.

It’s been three weeks since Deanna’s group moved in with them and, even though he's been out almost every day since, the sheer volume of people in such tight quarters has had Daryl on edge the entire time. He was first in line to start organizing their scouting groups, poring over endless maps of the area with Glenn as they decided on, not only, potential areas for finding supplies that they hadn’t yet searched but also possible locations for Andrea’s mysterious hidden community. However, at night, when it was just him and Rick alone in their bed - trying so hard to tune out the sound of everyone else sharing the overpopulated house - he had whispered his confession that he thought the place they were looking for just didn’t exist and he was concerned about how much stock everyone was putting into finding it. Rick had calmed his fears somewhat, telling him that he had faith in Andrea’s beliefs but that, even if she was wrong, they still had to be out there searching for something better for all of them. Daryl had agreed which is why he was out every morning, usually with Glenn trailing him but sometimes one of the others, before the rest of their group had even rubbed the sleep out of their eyes. They had been making progressively longer runs, working their way north up along the coastline from the lighthouse until they had reached an inlet that was too wide for them to cross without heading a good ways inland to get to the first bridge over the waterway.

Today their plan was to search the area surrounding the bridge on the south side of the river, firstly to make sure it was safe to cross but also because they had spotted signs for a nearby Walmart and Babies R’ Us along the way. Daryl wanted to check both of them out in the hopes that they might at least find something they could bring home to make their pregnant companions a little more at ease. As he pulls off of the main highway and onto the sliproad leading to the unassuming brick boxes housing both stores along with a craft store and an electronics store, his heart sinks a little as he sees the fenced off area at the front protecting a small cluster of tents. Somebody had obviously set up camp here at one point, although it looked long abandoned judging by the flapping tears in some of the tent sides and the lone walker that throws itself against the fence at their arrival. He was sure that there would be pretty slim pickings inside the Walmart at this point but he had to hope that not too many people would have been interested in the baby store. He parks his bike on the cracked asphalt in front of the cheerfully painted building and dismounts as the pickup pulls up beside him.

“Let’s do a quick sweep of the outside,” he tells Glenn, swinging his crossbow off of his back as the others climb out of the truck, “make sure there are no surprises waiting for us.”

“We should check the other cars for gas,” Glenn suggests, nodding his head to the grime-laden vehicles that are parked haphazardly beside the sagging fence.

“Think you can handle it?” Daryl asks with a pointed look at the plastic cast on Glenn’s arm.

“Don’t even start with me,” Glenn snaps back at him and Daryl chuckles softly as he pushes past him to grab an empty gas can from the back of the pickup.

“You’re with me, kid,” he tells Carl who pulls his knife out and nods back at him as Daryl leads the way around the side of the two story building.

The building’s footprint is easily 200,000 square feet, with the Walmart commandeering half of that and the remainder split up between the other three stores at the rear, a road on the right leading to
another parking lot and another, smaller road leading around to the left and the loading docks. They
walk in silence for a moment down the left hand road, beating their way through the straggly
undergrowth which has crept up to the side of the building without anybody to keep it in check.

“Dad’s gonna be pissed, you know,” Carl says quietly from behind Daryl as he boosts himself up
onto the concrete dock and turns to reach down and help the boy up as well.

“Yup,” Daryl agrees, knowing exactly the conversation he’ll be having with Rick later that day.

“We didn’t even wait until he was up.”

“Left him a note,” Daryl shrugs, checking the first door he comes to and then moving on when it
doesn’t budge. “I can handle your old man, don’t worry ‘bout it.”

“Why did you let me come?” Carl asks after another brief silence where they try the next few doors.

Daryl pauses before answering, the truth being that Carl and Rick had been fighting non-stop for the
past few days – the boy pleading to be given more responsibilities such as guard duty in the tower
and Rick shutting down his every suggestion without question, saying that he needed him to watch
over the other kids and that was the biggest responsibility he could have. Their constant bickering
had struck a nerve with Daryl and was making him more miserable than he cared to admit so he had
decided to take matters into his own hands and give both of them a break from each other. He knew
that Rick would be pissed about him not running it by him first and no doubt would worry until they
got home, just as Daryl would do in his place but, really, if Carl wasn’t with Rick there was no safer
place he could be than at Daryl's side.

“Thought you should be more ‘n just a glorified babysitter,” Daryl says with another shrug of his
shoulders, leading them across to the rear of the baby store.

“See… and that’s why you’re the cool dad wher-”

“Don’t,” Daryl says sharply, whirling to face Carl who has to stop himself from walking into him.
“Don’t do that.”

“What?” the kid asks and Daryl can hear a hint of the cocksure bravado that sometimes gets the
better of Carl’s common sense.

“Don’t pit me against your father, not even when you think you’re jokin’. You have no idea how
lucky you are to have a man like that to raise you right. No idea. You should be thankin’ the Lord
every damn day that Rick Grimes is lookin’ out for ya. Lot of kids get dealt a shitty hand when it
comes to who raises ‘em.”

He moves away a few feet, trying not to let the latent anger about his own family that still reared its
ugly head on occasion get the better of him and make him say something he might regret.

“Like you?” Carl asks quietly and there’s nothing in his voice now except for an honest curiosity.

“Yeah,” Daryl confirms without looking at him.

“He beat you?” Carl whispers and this time Daryl does face him again. “I’m sorry… I just… the
scars on your back…”

Daryl sighs, dropping down and swinging his legs over the edge of the loading dock to take a seat
and indicating that Carl should sit too.
“My old man was a wolf… I told ya that, right?” Daryl starts and Carl nods his head as he slips down beside him. “Well he hated it… don’t know if I mentioned that part. Anyways, when I was born… even ‘fore he knew for sure I was gonna be one too… he said he could tell it was comin’. Course I didn’t know any of that – not what he was or what I was gonna be – not until Merle filled me in later. All I knew growin’ up was that my daddy was a mean drunk and I was never gonna do right by him, no matter how hard I tried. And, believe me, I tried to please him… I really did… every little boy wants his daddy’s approval but all I ever got was the back of his hand or, when things were really bad, the sting of his belt.”

“How come you never healed them… your scars?” Carl asks and Daryl’s thankful that he doesn’t see pity in his son’s eyes, only a genuine need to understand.

“’cos most of them happened ‘fore I even turned and the wolf can’t change what’s already there… n’ the ones that came after… well I thought that I deserved them. It took me a long time to realize that wasn’t true. That what he did to me wasn’t my fault. The family I have now… Carol, Michonne, your dad most of all, they helped me see that I’m better than what I was raised to be. Rick’s a good man, Carl, better’n you’ll ever know… even when he’s all up in your face n’ you two are buttin’ heads like a pair of ornery mules.”

“He doesn’t listen,” Carl says, a touch of his downtrodden teenager persona creeping into his voice. “I’m old enough to do more around the group than just watch the little lids. You know I can shoot… and hunt… but he never lets me go with you guys. I’m not a kid anymore but he still keeps treating me like one.”

“Yes, you are,” Daryl states emphatically, making sure that Carl is really paying attention to him. “You’re his kid and now you’re mine. That’s never gonna change whether you’re fifteen or fifty. We’re both still gonna be lookin’ out for ya no matter how old ya are. Ever since I met him, everthin’ your dad’s done has been about keepin’ you n’ your sister safe. It’s the thing that guides him in everythin’ he does… even when he’s made the wrong call – and, believe me, he has – every thought… every action he makes is based on how it will affect you. Do you understand that?”

“I guess,” Carl answers hesitantly and Daryl can see he’s mulling over his words.

“No… don’t guess… know it,” he tells him passionately. “There’s not one choice he makes that doesn’t revolve around you n’ Judy… same for me. If he doesn’t want you standin’ watch with a gun in your hand, it ain’t ‘cos he doesn’t think you can handle it, it’s ‘cos he doesn’t want you to have to. He wants you to have a life… not just a fight for survival… that’s why we’re out here lookin’ for someplace better for all of us – so’s you n’ your sister can grow old in peace.

I know you think it’s unfair and he’s been’ extra hard on you – and maybe he is – but, trust me, you don’t want the alternative, kid, you really don’t. If I can teach you one thing that’s more important than settin’ a snare or firin’ a bow, let it be this… there are men in this world that will never be fit to walk the same earth as Rick Grimes. I don’t think either one of us truly understands just how goddamned blessed we are to have him in our corner, fightin’ for us every day but, if we’re smart, we won’t let him forget how much we appreciate him for even a second.”

With that, Daryl jumps down off of the loading dock, a rustling ahead of them in the bushes signaling the approach of a pair of walkers which he easily dispatches with a bolt to each of their heads. After retrieving the used bolts and wiping them on his pants, he turns back to find Carl watching him, a thoughtful look on his face.

“C’mon,” Daryl says, hoping that at least some of what he’d struggled to convey had penetrated the teenager’s brain, “’fore Glenn thinks we got ourselves eaten.”
They finish their sweep of the perimeter, killing a handful of walkers but finding nothing else amiss—all the side doors to the building are securely locked from the insides. Meeting back up with a slightly anxious-looking Glenn by the vehicles, the three of them arm themselves with flashlights and close range weapons before heading through the broken door into the Walmart. As Daryl had expected, the place has been picked clean and what’s left has been reclaimed by the wilderness outside which has made its way in through a series of gaping holes in the high ceiling. Daryl cuts their recon short—there are a few too many walkers for his liking still milling around inside—and he’s grateful to be back outside in the sunshine, the whole situation reminding him a little too much of his fateful run to the Big Spot where he had lost Zach on his watch.

Cautiously entering the baby store, they fare much better, hitting the jackpot with everything on the list of essentials that Glenn has tucked in his pocket. It takes them a couple of hours to load everything into the pickup and there’s still enough left behind that they all agree it will warrant a return trip to collect. Daryl secures the door he had forced open to let them in before mounting his bike and leading them back out to the highway where they can increase their speed now that the sun has burnt away all of the morning mist. It’s not far from their present location to where the bridge is, only about twenty miles, but Daryl keeps a wary eye on his surroundings as they head into a slightly more built up area, ready to signal the others back at the first sign of trouble. As it is, they reach the bridge without incident but that’s when their luck runs out, Daryl killing the bike’s engine at the top of the on ramp as Glenn pulls up beside him.

“Shit!” Glenn exclaims with a low whistle, leaning out of the driver’s window and shielding his eyes to look along the bridge’s length.

Daryl does likewise, taking note that the bridge’s expanse seems to be intact—at least as far as he can see from his limited viewpoint—but that almost every part of it is littered with abandoned vehicles and makeshift shelters of tents and the like. The road in front of them is effectively blocked by two vans parked sideways across the bridge’s two lanes and reinforced with wooden panels to close the gaps. Another group had obviously made this their home for a while, a choice that Daryl would never have made in a million years, but there are no signs of life there now unless you count the walkers wandering between the vehicles.

“I’m gonna take a closer look,” he tells Glenn, starting to undress and toss his clothes over the bike. “You two wait here and stay alert.”

Free of his clothes, Daryl drops to all fours and Shifts, moving swiftly off and leaping easily onto the roof of one of the vans blocking the highway. He jumps down on the other side, making his way carefully between the various parked vehicles, taking out any walkers that cross his path. It doesn’t take him long to reach the other side where he finds a similar blockade although the road on the other side is clear. He doubles back, darting between the slow-moving walkers and coming to a halt back where he started.

“It’d take some work but I think we could clear a way through,” he tells Glenn and Carl as he redresses. “Not sure if it’s worth it though. How far’s the next crossing?”

“About ten miles further in,” Glenn informs him, consulting a map that Carl hands him, “but then you’re almost in the heart of the city. We’d have to weigh up which is the better option if we want to keep pushing on up the coast.”

“Yeah… well, we’re not doin’ it today, that’s for sure. Let’s get back and we can look at where we’re goin’ next.”

He’s just climbing back on his bike when he’s struck by the feeling that they’re being watched and he pauses, his eyes scanning their immediate surroundings and his nose twitching as he scents the air.
“What is it?” Glenn asks, a hint of concern in his voice.

“Nothin’,” Daryl answers, taking a final look around and seeing nothing out of the ordinary. “Let’s go.”

He starts the bike and they turn around on the ramp, his eyes still darting towards any potential hiding spots as they pull out onto the main road again, the wolf whining in the back of his skull at the lingering feeling that there is somebody other than them close by.

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Rick is naturally waiting for them the moment they return home and Daryl can see the anger he’s keeping in check written all over his face but he doesn’t let loose until he and Daryl are alone later on.

“What the hell were you thinking?” he demands, turning furiously on Daryl the moment their bedroom door is closed behind them. “Taking Carl out there with you… have you lost your goddamned mind?”

“It was fine,” Daryl answers softly, pulling off his gore-stained pants and dropping them to the floor. “He was fine.”

“Fine?” Rick echoes, incredulously. “Do you have any clue what could’ve happened to him out there? Whatever possessed you to think that this was a good idea?”

“Kid needed a break,” Daryl tells him, shrugging out of his t-shirt and letting it land on his discarded pants. “I’m gonna take a shower.”

“A shower? Wait… we’re not done talking about this, Daryl. This is serious.”

“Then seriously come with me,” Daryl tosses over his shoulder as he pads naked into the bathroom and starts the water running.

He’s already washed his hair and is rinsing it when the shower door opens to let Rick slip in behind him and Daryl smiles inwardly to himself.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing, Dixon,” Rick rumbles, nudging him aside to get under the warm stream of water. “I’m mad at you.”

“Ain’t doin’ nothin’,” Daryl answers innocently, making sure to brush against Rick as he reaches for the bodywash from the shelf. “I had a long day… got dirty… need a shower.”

“Just tell me why you took him,” Rick demands in an annoyed tone, snatching the bodywash from Daryl’s hand and squirting it into his own palm.

“Told ya… kid needed a break,” Daryl tells him as the sweet smell of peaches fills the shower stall from where Rick is vigorously scrubbing his chest with the foaming soap.

“What the kid needs is to be safely behind these walls where we can keep an eye on him and not out running around, looking for trouble.”

“Weren’t lookin’ for trouble,” Daryl states, turning from Rick to bend and rub his soapy hands down his thighs, making sure his ass is pressed firmly against Rick’s crotch. “We took a simple drive… did
an easy in n’ out of two places and came home. No big deal.”

“Dammit, Daryl,” Rick growls, grabbing tightly at Daryl's hips and rubbing his cock against his ass. “You should’ve run it by me at least. You left a fucking note!”

“Didn’t wanna wake ya… you’re so cute when you’re sleepin’,” Daryl smirks, straightening up and turning to reach out and wrap his slick palm around Rick's cock. “n’ Lord knows ya need your beauty sleep.”

“Fuck you,” Rick mutters, his fingers scrabbling for purchase on the wet tiles as Daryl starts pumping his fist harder around his cock.

“If you want,” Daryl answers agreeably, leaning in to scrape his fangs along the underside of Rick's jaw as he puts a temporary stop to the conversation.

Later, with each of them satiated and their still damp bodies curled together in their bed, Rick pauses the slow kiss he's been giving Daryl to look into his eyes.

“Why’d you take him, really?” he asks softly and Daryl can see he already knows the answer but he needs to hear Daryl say it.

“’cos I thought he needed a day without you yellin’ at him,” Daryl tells him honestly and he can see the sting of his words reflected in Rick’s eyes, “and I thought he could do with someone explainin’ why you yell so’s he don’t get to thinkin’ that it’s him.”

“Jesus Christ,” Rick mutters, rolling onto his back and pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. “Is that all I do?”

“Nah,” Daryl reassures him, laying his hand on Rick's chest and rubbing his thumb against his skin, “just the past few days have been a little intense. Everyone’s feelin’ the pressure n’ the kid just wants to pull his weight, that’s all.”

“I’m a terrible father.”

“No… you just want to keep him safe, ain’t nothin’ wrong with that. I do too but he's becomin’ his own man, Rick. You've already raised him to be tough n’ smart… now you're tellin’ him he can't use what you showed him n’ he’s frustrated is all.”

“I don’t want him to get hurt,” Rick says sadly, lowering his hand to rest it on top of Daryl's.

“Me neither… that’s why we gotta give him a little freedom… else he's just gonna take it for himself and we might not be around to back him up when he does.”

“I hate it when you’re smarter than me,” Rick tells him good-naturedly, squeezing Daryl's fingers.

“Really… think ya’d be used to it by now,” Daryl laughs, leaning up to silence the indignant sound coming from Rick's lips with another deep kiss.

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It’s another two days before Daryl can take Rick back out to show him the bridge and pick up the rest of the supplies from the baby store. The unexpected early arrival of a healthy baby boy for one
of their new family members had thrown the group into a minor panic until they were sure that both mother and son were doing okay. The birth had just hammered home the urgency of finding a new home so Rick and Daryl had left before dawn to take the pickup back out to collect the rest of the supplies from the baby store before driving inland to the bridge. Before they left, Daryl had spotted Rick and Carl deep in conversation out past the lighthouse, the sight lightening his heart, and he wasn’t too surprised to find his son standing on one of the watchtowers by the gate as they drove out. Once they reached the bridge, Rick had assessed the situation and agreed with Daryl's proposal that a way could be cleared so that they could continue scouting for settlements on the other side. Although it would take a little time, he still thought it was a better option than heading into the nearby city and risking running into greater numbers of walkers there. As long as they were already there, Daryl suggested clearing the bridge of the undead which were trapped among the cars so that it would make the work easier when they returned. Shifting into their hybrid forms, they had methodically worked from one end of the bridge to the other, clearing the abandoned vehicles and rotting tents of any walkers and pitching them over the railings into the water below.

Once that piece of work was complete, they had headed home, Rick poring over their maps as they made plans for expanding their search, both of them bouncing ideas back and forth about what would or wouldn’t work as possible places for relocation. The second the gates had closed behind them and they had parked the pickup, Daryl could tell that something was wrong, even before Noah came hurrying over to them, his limping gait not slowing him at all.

“What’s goin’ on?” he demands as the younger man skids to a halt, his eyes glittering with excitement.

“We have a visitor,” he exclaims, nodding his head towards the house.

“Inside?” Rick snaps, the disbelief in his voice echoing Daryl's own concerns.

Neither of them wait for a reply, pushing past Noah to storm into the house, Daryl immediately picking up on an unfamiliar scent in their midst. They enter the kitchen to find a man sitting calmly at the kitchen table, a glass of water before him, chatting with Carol who is seated opposite him. Andrea is sitting on the bench beside him and Michonne is standing in the doorway that leads to the rest of the house, appearing to lean nonchalantly on the doorframe but Daryl can read that her body is on high alert. She’s the one that Rick makes a beeline for, ignoring the man completely who has fallen silent and is looking at the two newcomers expectantly.

“What the hell is this?” Rick demands and Daryl can hear the fury in his words but Michonne just looks serenely back at him. “You let somebody in here while we were gone? He’s not even restrained.”

“Rick… it’s okay,” Carol says calmly, turning in her seat, “we’ve got this.”

“Got it?” Rick practically yells, turning on her and fixing her with an angry glare. “You let a stranger into our home after what just happened and you’ve ‘got it’… are you insane?”

“He’s alone,” Michonne says, raising her hands towards Rick in a placating gesture. “I checked. And he’s unarmed. How much of a threat do you think he is? He approached Eugene and Tara while they were on gate duty. I think you’re gonna want to hear what he has to say, that’s why we brought him in.”

Rick's attention finally shifts to the man at the table who has wisely kept silent up until this point and Daryl takes his first good look at him too. He’s in his mid-thirties – his clothing clean enough to tell Daryl that he must have a camp nearby – dark brown curls topping an open, affable face that’s wearing an understandable look of concern as Rick slams his palms on the table and leans over to
“Who are you?” Rick asks, his voice low and dangerous but, as scared as the stranger ought to be, his voice is steady when he answers.

“My name is Aaron and I think I have what you’re looking for,” he replies, mustering up a warm smile despite Rick's aggressive demeanor as he glares back at him.

“Rick…” Daryl says quietly, something about the man giving him an unexplainable feeling that they can trust him.

His mate glances at him and Daryl gives him the slightest shake of his head, wanting him to back off just a fraction and Rick straightens up to rest one hand pointedly on the butt of his gun at his hip.

“And what would that be?” Rick directs back at Aaron.

“Sanctuary.”

“Is that so?” Rick asks skeptically, looking at Daryl once more.

“Yes sir,” Aaron confirms and Daryl doesn’t detect anything but the truth coming from him. “Seems like what you’re looking for and where I’m from are one and the same place.”

“How’d you know what we’re looking for?” Rick questions him, throwing an accusing look at Michonne who shakes her head.

“Because I’ve been watching you for a while,” Aaron informs them, almost apologetically, and Daryl sees Rick tense at his confession. “Well I was watching the school technically but I only discovered them just as your people showed up to rescue them so I followed them here. I’ve been observing your group ever since, keeping a safe distance during the day… using, umm, surveillance gear so I could listen in without being discovered.”

“Why?”

“To see if you’re the kind of people we want to join our community.”

“And?”

“Oh I’d say you’re definitely people we want, you’ve already proven that by taking in these women when you knew it would cause you a logistical nightmare. You could’ve so easily abandoned them but you chose to protect them instead. Not many people would do that anymore but your group seems to thrive on doing the right thing.”

“So… tell us about this community of yours. Where is it? How many of you are there?”

“I can do better than that… I can show you,” Aaron says with another of those beatific smiles as he reaches inside his jacket pocket and, to Daryl's surprise, pulls out a cell phone which he switches on and hands to Rick. “Sorry… most people just seem more comfortable with something familiar in their hands and, I have to confess, it’s the one thing from before that I just can’t seem to bring myself to give up on.”

With Rick holding the phone like it’s some sort of ancient relic, Daryl steps closer as he thumbs through a dizzying array of photos of pristine-looking homes set in well-tended landscapes followed by shots of a towering brick wall stretching as far as the camera can capture. There are yet more shots of the town’s inhabitants working in fields and greenhouses and catching fish from a dock.
beside sparkling water or tending to a variety of livestock.

“You saw these?” Rick asks the others and they all nod before he looks back to Aaron. “Where?”

“About fifty miles as the crow flies… a little more when you take the bridge you guys have been looking at.”

“That was you!” Daryl exclaims, knowing for sure now that he hadn’t been imagining somebody there with them the other day and with a new realization dawning in his mind. “At the bridge… coupla days ago, spyin’ on us.”

“Yes, I was on my way back home to discuss your group with our leader when you caught up with me.”

“Then you know what I am,” Daryl states, the look on Aaron’s face confirming that he’d seen Daryl’s Shift at the bridge and the tension in the room edges up a notch.

“I do,” Aaron says steadily, squaring his jaw as he meets Daryl's eyes.

“And you ain’t scared?”

“Do I look stupid to you? Of course I’m scared but I don’t think you’re going to harm me – that’s not who you are. It’s the reason I came back now instead of heading home. I don’t need to discuss it with anyone – we’d be fools if we didn’t want you to join us.”

“And you think your whole community is going to welcome us,” Rick states, leaning over the table again to bring the wolf out in his features, “with open arms and open minds?”

“I’m not sure we have a choice,” Aaron answers, obviously rattled by Rick's appearance but doing his best not to pull back from the fearsome countenance in front of him. “Most of us have been behind the walls since this mess began and we’ve been ridiculously lucky so far. None of us are fighters, not really… we’re lawyers, doctors, engineers and schoolteachers. Sure, we’ve managed to build a thriving community that’s damn near self-sufficient and we’ve managed to keep the dead at bay so far but we haven’t experienced the world out here. We’re weak and, if the day came that we were discovered by a group that wants what we have, then I think we’d be defenseless to stop them. Your people have fought for what you have, I can see it in all of you. And what you are… what you can do… that’s an advantage I’d like in my corner for sure.”

“And what’s to say we won’t ride up to your gates, kill you all and take what you have for ourselves?”

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take,” Aaron shrugs, and Daryl finds himself liking this man more and more, something in his earnest nature putting Daryl at ease in a way he doesn’t often feel around strangers. “I’m putting my faith in the fact that you’re good people and that you’re smart enough to understand that the world’s going to end if we don’t make a stand to keep it alive. None of us can do that alone, it’s just common sense.”

“You have doctors?” Andrea asks and Aaron turns his head to her.

“Well… we have one now – Denise – and she’s not technically a doctor but she does have medical training and she hasn’t killed anybody yet. Our previous physician… umm… left because he was… umm…”

“What was his name?” Andrea interrupts him.
“Pete,” Aaron answers, looking baffled at her question and Andrea thumps her fist on the table as she looks around at the others.

“Oh, Rick says, his face back to normal now, “here’s what we’re going to do. Aaron is going to be our guest tonight – in the woodshed, under guard - which I’m sure he has no objection to, and the rest of us are going to talk this over and decide what we want to do.”

Aaron nods his assent and stands up from the table with Michonne stepping quickly to his side to escort him from the kitchen.

“Gather everyone out by the lighthouse,” Rick tells Andrea and Carol. “I want them all to know what’s going on.’

An hour later and Daryl's head is buzzing from the incessant chatter around him and the seemingly endless questions being thrown at them from the rest of the group, most of which they don’t have answers for. He's seriously contemplating making a run for it when Rick finally holds up his hands and tells everybody that they know as much as he does and he wants them to take the night and think about it. Everyone wanders away, multiple conversations still echoing in Daryl's ears, so he grabs Rick and drags him back to their room so that they can talk in private, taking Carl along with them.

“I think we should go,” Daryl says, once the door is closed behind them and Carl is settled on the bed with Judy on his lap.

“You trust this guy that much?” Rick asks, pacing the room while Carl looks at the cell phone they had taken from Aaron, lifting it out of Judy’s reach as he flicks through the photos.

“I do… I can’t explain it, call it instinct, but I think we need to go with him.”

“I don’t know, Daryl… how do we even know that this place is still intact? Aaron’s been out on the road looking for survivors, a lot could’ve happened since he’s been away.”

“Then we just take a small group… check it out first… then come back for the others once were sure.”

“I hate spreading us thin like that… it could be just what they want. For all we kn-”

“Dad!” Carl says sharply, stopping the conversation dead, his eyes brimming with excitement as he hands Rick back the phone. “Look.”

Rick takes the phone, his eyes narrowing as he focuses on the brightly lit screen and Daryl sees his expression change to disbelief as he studies the image in front of him.

“It can’t be,” he whispers under his breath.

“What is it?” Daryl asks, perplexed, but Rick is already on his way out of the room and striding through the house.

Daryl and Carl, with Judy still tucked in his arms, catch up with Rick as he's swinging open the door to the woodshed and hauling a confused-looking Aaron to his feet while Michonne looks on.

“Who is this?” Rick asks, flicking the phone back on and thrusting it into Aaron’s hands to jab a finger at the screen.

“That’s our council at one of our meetings,” Aaron says cautiously and Daryl can hear his heart racing with fear.
“This man,” Rick says, pointing again to the slightly out of focus shot of a group of men and women seated at a long table that Daryl can now see displayed on the screen.

“He’s our leader.”

“His name?” Rick practically yells in the other man’s face.

“Morgan… Morgan Jones.”
Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Art as always by the ridiculously talented Lucia, tmd-dump-station

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(R&faq)

DO NOT REPOST

Rick is mentally and physically drained by the time they reach their destination, slumped in the passenger seat of the lead car with Aaron behind the wheel and Carl in the back with a, thankfully,
sleeping Judith. The late afternoon sun is behind them as they make their way east towards the coast again, its fiery rays shooting amber and white glints of light off of the chrome on Daryl's bike where he is riding ahead of them. From the time they had voted to leave – the group making the decision almost unanimously – it had taken two days to pack up the buses, pickups and cars with all their supplies and then a further, grueling, four days on the road where they had juggled taking care of nine pregnant women, numerous children including two newborns as well as keeping the walkers at bay and praying that they didn’t encounter any hostile groups on their journey. Aaron had wanted to go ahead to let his community know about their imminent arrival and maybe bring back some reinforcements but Rick had quickly vetoed that idea, still not fully sure that he trusted the man and wanting to keep him close by.

Truth be told, he was quite frankly amazed that they had completed their journey pretty much unscathed with the exception of one incident that had left them all shaken along the way. Rebecca – the mother of the last baby born in Deanna’s camp and the last one she had bitten as part of her experiments – had started acting strangely once they were on the road. The baby girl, who was as yet unnamed, had not only survived the crazed She Wolf’s bite but actually seemed to be thriving on it, showing no signs that it had done her any harm at all. Daryl had speculated – because that was all he could do with the unprecedented situation – that the child might just be one of the small percentage of people that have no reaction to a wolf bite whatsoever. That theory had only held up until the child had started to exhibit signs of the wolf, most notably the way her tiny green eyes sometimes glittered like polished emeralds, shining with a light from within. Rick had suspected that the first time Rebecca had seen those otherworldly eyes looking back at her from the face of her daughter is when her grip on reality had started to slide and she had descended into her own personal hell.

Those closest to her had kept a watchful eye on her as her behavior had become more and more erratic, culminating in her having a full-on meltdown while the group was halfway across the bridge, working to clear the rest of the way. She had worked herself up into a state of high anxiety, pacing frenetically between the two parked buses, the baby clutched tightly to her chest as she had muttered to herself about how the child belonged to the devil now and was going to kill them all. Andrea had tried to calm her but she had just become increasingly distressed until she had surprised them all by racing for the bridge’s railing and hauling herself onto the narrow width. Everyone had rushed forward to stop her before she completed her climb, Michonne’s preternatural speed allowing her to at least get her hands on the woman but it was too late as, with a blood-curdling scream, Rebecca had fought against her and plunged from the bridge to crash brokenly against the water below, leaving Michonne somehow holding the wolf-child in her hands. The group had been naturally stunned but, as happened all too often in their world, they had no time to process their shock and grief as Rebecca’s death scream had attracted enough nearby walkers to give them a serious fight while they continued to work on clearing their path and making their escape.

Nether Rick nor Daryl had slept since they’d left the lighthouse and he suspected that Carol hadn’t either but now, as Aaron stops the car and Rick steps out, blinking and rubbing at his burning eyes, he thinks that he might be having another of his hallucinations. The sight in front of him is impressive to say the least, a foreboding stone wall complete with evenly spaced crenellations towering above them at the end of the single two-lane road that leads up to it, stretching as far as he could see in either direction. There are two monstrous towers built from the same rough-hewn stone as the wall, suggesting to Rick that there must be a local quarry nearby, and flanking what can only be a genuine, larger than life drawbridge that is currently pulled up flush in line with the towers.

“Is that a moat?” Carl asks, stepping up beside him but Rick is too dumbfounded to even answer him.

“Welcome to Avalon,” Aaron states grandly, first spreading his arms wide and then signaling to the person on watch in one of the towers. “Not quite what you were expecting, huh? Let’s just say that
the architect who had the idea for this place was unique in his vision and more than a little eccentric. It was supposed to be a gimmick… something to draw in men with more money than sense who wanted to feel secure in their homes. An impenetrable defense against the outside world protecting the crème de la crème who could afford the luxury behind the walls.

So, yes Carl that is an actual moat, it’s seven feet deep, ten feet wide and runs around the entire property. I wouldn’t advise getting too near the edge either as you’ll see we have quite the collection of walkers lining the bottom. Just an added incentive to keep out any would-be marauders.”

“Jesus,” Daryl says with a low whistle as he joins them. “Thought you people needed protectin’? Looks like you got that shit covered. How high’s that wall?”

“About twelve feet, give or take,” Aaron replies, and Rick’s eyes travel up to its top, noting that there is a copious amount of razor wire attached to the light stone along its entire length.

Rick’s ears prickle up at the sound of machinery working somewhere beyond the wall and then the drawbridge lowers with a resounding clang, sending his hand flying to the butt of his gun although he doesn’t draw it and he sees Daryl adopting a similarly wary stance. Just before the bridge meets the asphalt in front of them, he realizes that both sides of it have been reinforced with thick steel plating and he feels reassured that not even an RPG will be getting through it anytime soon. The top of the drawbridge nestles snugly into a custom-made groove on the outside edge of the road they’re standing on and, as soon as it’s safely home, Aaron ushers them back into the car and drives them inside, Daryl waiting to bring up the rear once all the other vehicles have passed him by. Rick is out of the car the second Aaron pulls it to a halt, cautioning Carl to wait in the back seat until he gives him the all clear, his eyes roving over the limited view he has of the interior from where they’re parked. He relaxes just a fraction as he senses no immediate danger, whoever is on guard duty not even leaving the tower to greet the newcomers, but he can’t help the trapped feeling he gets when the drawbridge is pulled back up behind them.

“We should head up to the clubhouse,” Aaron tells him, standing in the open door of the car. “I’m sure that Heath has radioed ahead already to let them know we’re here so it’s best we get the introductions over with.”

“Just us,” Rick instructs, his eyes still assessing his surroundings for any kind of threat. “You, me and Daryl… the others stay here for now.”

“Whatever you want,” Aaron agrees with a nod. “You’re safe here, I promise, but I know that you need to see that for yourselves.”

He gets back into the car and Rick walks over to open Carl’s door, holding Judith for a moment while his son climbs out and then passing her back to him with instructions for them to go join Carol in one of the buses and wait for him to come back. Daryl is already climbing into the opposite side of the back seat, his crossbow coming to rest across his knees as he slams the door shut and Rick retakes his position in front. As Aaron restarts the car, Rick’s eyes light on a large sign set on two ornately carved posts at the center of a large flowerbed that is directly ahead of them with the road splitting to branch off on either side of it. The dominant image on the billboard is that of a medieval castle, flanked on either side by knights on rearing white steeds, brandishing impossibly long swords while a gaggle of fair maidens look on from the sidelines and, in a flowing font at the top and bottom is the legend: Welcome to Avalon, Where Every Man’s Home Is His Castle. It takes all Rick’s willpower not to roll his eyes and leave there and then but he grits his teeth and listens to Aaron do his tour guide bit as he swings the car right and they drive down a one–way street that’s lined on either side with lush green, rolling lawns and well-kept flowerbeds that are a riot of color.

“Over there are the stables, “Aaron tells them with a vague wave of his hand in a southerly
direction. “There’s a bridle path that runs around the inside of the entire wall, we use it for patrolling now but it used to be recreational – the community was built with the stables already a part of it but we’ve added a barn for the other livestock in the winter. Some cattle, pigs, goats, chickens… anything we can catch really. We brought in some diggers from a nearby construction site and levelled the golf course to make way for crops… dug out all the sand traps and filled them in with fresh soil… that ruffled a few feathers back in the early days, let me tell you. Everything is solar or wind-powered – I’ll take you up on the wall tomorrow if you like so that you can see the wind turbines offshore, it’s a beautiful sight. We have our own water and sewage system and irrigation set up for the fields… there’s even a swimming pool. Not that we use it much but it’s clean and now maybe there’s more kids, they’ll get more use out of it. The road we came in on is the only way in or out of here… you’ve already seen the wall, nobody’s coming over that. Where the road split, outside at the drawbridge, that leads around the south side of the property and down to the beach… it’s about two miles away and there’s a pretty fancy marina down there just full of boats that the rich pricks used to impress their conquests. There’s also a nice dock built out into the water and the fishing’s pretty good. The whole place is fenced off so it’s pretty secure.”

Rick’s head is swimming as his mind tries to keep up with all the information Aaron is throwing at him and his eyes are trying to take in the streets lined with expensive-looking houses they’re now driving through, each of them set on their own spacious lots.

“Were you one of those rich pricks?” he hears Daryl ask from the back seat and Aaron laughs in response.

“No, Daryl… I most certainly was not. I didn’t arrive until a little after it had all started. I was working in D.C. and the military evacuated a bunch of us out here – a few politicians and the like – with the promise that they were coming back… which never happened. This place wasn’t even a quarter full when we arrived… it hadn’t been open that long so not many of the houses had been sold. Gradually more people drifted in and then… it just seemed to stop… the only ones showing up at the gate were the undead.”

The three of them fall silent as the car rounds a bend and their destination appears, Rick hearing Daryl give another of those low whistles as they take in the building ahead of them through the windshield. Avalon’s clubhouse certainly falls in line with the whole medieval theme, Rick thinks as he stares at the light stone walls of the mock castle looming into view, complete with turrets and a portcullis at its ivy-clad entrance. His initial thoughts of it being a defensible location in case of an attack are dashed when he sees that the ground floor is mostly floor to ceiling windows. Aaron parks the car in the nearly empty lot situated to the left of the entrance and the three of them get out to stand before the imposing façade of the building for a moment before heading to the main doors which are flanked by two huge, snarling stone lions each with a massive paw resting on the hilt of a gleaming broadsword. Aaron leads them inside, past the gleaming oak reception desk and under a carved archway bearing a sign for ‘The Round Table Restaurant & Bar’ which, unsurprisingly, is modelled after a large banquet hall. A few of the circular dining tables are still dressed with the startlingly white linens that only high end restaurants seem to be able to maintain but Rick’s eyes are drawn past all of the opulent decorations to the small group of men who are gathered in a loose circle at the far end of the room.

The last time Rick had seen Morgan Jones the man had tried to stab him in the chest, his mind barely clinging to reality anymore after the death of first his wife and then his teenage son, Duane. It was a far cry from the man Rick had first met when he had emerged from his coma and left the hospital to a new and frightening world. Morgan and his son had helped him then, given him shelter while they tried their best to explain what had taken place while he was sleeping and they had formed a short-lived alliance. When Rick was ready to move on in search of his family, Morgan elected to stay behind – the presence of his undead wife making him unable to leave without the closure he so
desperately needed – and they had parted ways with Rick promising to keep in touch by walkie as long as he could. And he had tried, he really had but there was no response to his morning updates and eventually time and circumstance had forced him to give up, although he had always hoped that the other man was surviving somehow. A chance encounter with him while Rick was on a supply run in his old neighborhood with Michonne and Carl in tow had confirmed that hope but Morgan was no longer the man he’d left - living mostly in his own mind, alone in the world. Somehow Rick had gotten through to him, making Morgan see that he was real and not a figment of his troubled mind and they had had a strange reunion of sorts although, ultimately, Morgan had opted to stay where he was rather than move on with Rick and the others.

Looking at the man in front of him, now turning at their approach, Rick can see a difference in him that’s startling – gone is the haunted look that was clouding his vision and, instead, his eyes are filled with a peaceful calm that seems almost jarring considering the world they both inhabit.

“Rick?” Morgan says quietly, a tone of shocked disbelief in his words but a beatific smile lighting up his face as he walks forward.

There’s a moment’s pause as they take stock of each other and then Morgan is pulling him in for a genuinely warm embrace, slapping his back before releasing him with his hands still resting on Rick’s shoulders and Rick can’t stop the smile from forming on his lips either.

“How did you get here?” Rick asks incredulously, weighing up the odds of both of them coming together again after the different paths they had taken.

“Same way you did,” he answers, with a nod at Aaron. “Why don’t we get the rest of your people in here and get you fed and I’ll tell you all about it? Heath said you have quite a large group at the gates.”

“Is that going to be a problem?”

“No… far from it. Everyone is welcome in Avalon,” Morgan informs him and Rick knows that he’s being straight with him and he feels his anxiety at this new situation drop down a few notches even though he’s not entirely off his guard yet.

Morgan makes a call to the gate to have the rest of Rick's group brought to the restaurant and another requesting additional people come in to prepare a meal for everyone. With the restaurant becoming a hub of activity, he steers Rick and Daryl towards a booth along one of the floor to ceiling windows and the three of them take a seat.

“We don’t usually eat in here unless it’s a special occasion or we’re having a meeting,” Morgan explains as Daryl rests his crossbow on the tablecloth in front of him, causing the cutlery laid there to jangle together. “Everyone has their own kitchen but the one here is all in fully working order. I figure it would just be easier until we get houses assigned for you guys.”

“Aaron says you have a doctor on site… we have nine women who are pregnant travelling with us. I’d appreciate it if she could take a look at them as soon as possible. It was a rough trip.”

“Of course,” Morgan agrees, pulling out his walkie to make another call. “Nine, you say?”
“Yup,” Rick answers, his eyes roving he room as new faces appear and disappear between the dining room and the kitchens.

“That’s a story I want to hear,” Morgan says, leaving his walkie on the table now that he's made arrangements for the doctor to attend to the women once they’ve been fed.

“Yours first,” Rick tells him, leaning forward to fold his hands together and rest them on the table. “How’d you end up here?”

“You know how they say that fire cleanses everything it touches? Well… sometimes the opposite is true too. When you found me, back in King County, I was lost… following a path that even I didn’t understand and I guess seeing you only exacerbated what was already going on in my head. In the blink of an eye, my world was burning and I had no choice but to move on… even as lost as I was, my survival instinct kept me alive at least. But I sunk lower than I ever knew a man could sink – it no longer mattered if the body in front of me was living or dead, they all had to be cleared and I took down every one with a single-minded purpose.”

“What happened?” Rick asks quietly, seeing the obvious distress in Morgan’s eyes at reliving his tale despite his attempts to hide it.

“I met a man in the woods… a man who my first instinct was to kill so that I could take what he had but, instead, he reached out to me… brought me back from the darkness I was drowning in and made me see that things could be different. It wasn’t as easy as that… it took me a long time to understand what he was trying to teach me and, even then, I still struggled with it. But he was patient and we had nothing else but time so eventually I knew what it was that he was teaching me and I became a different man because of it.”

“He here?” Daryl asks but Rick knows the answer to that before Morgan even takes a breath to answer, can see it in the tight line of his jaw as he draws a breath to speak.

“No, there was an... accident with a walker and he didn’t make it... so I moved on, tried to put what he taught me into practice. I followed you for a while, Rick, I don’t know why... something was telling me that maybe our story wasn’t quite over yet but then, one night, I was taking shelter in an office building when the darndest thing happened. I was up on the roof, had a small fire going in a can to heat up some beans I’d found when I looked across the flames and there was a damn seagull sitting there just staring back at me. Just calm as anything, tilting its head to look at me from both sides, wings folded like it didn’t have a care in the world and it wasn’t sitting on a rooftop in the middle of a state it had no business being in, hundreds of miles from the nearest ocean. So, we watched each other a little more until I realized my beans were smoking and, by the time I’d rescued the pot from the flames, the damn bird was gone. Now, whether it was a hungry man’s hallucination or a fluke of nature, I’ll never know but when morning rolled around and I hit the road again, I was headed for the coast. Eventually I ran into Aaron, out searching for people, he brought me here and that was that… I knew this was where I was supposed to be.”

“And now you’re the man in charge,” Rick states and Morgan acknowledges his words with a bob of his head.

“Let’s just say they were lacking direction when I got here. They’d suffered the loss of some key players and were having trouble coming back from that. I just helped set them on the right road again, that’s all.”

Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of their group into the dining hall, Rick seeing their tired and anxious faces filling with wonder as they take in their new surroundings and he’s pleased to see that they are being warmly welcomed by Morgan’s people. The three of them rise to join the
others, Morgan greeting Carl and Michonne with the same enthusiasm he’d had for seeing Rick and
Rick watches as people find seats and the food starts being brought out from the kitchen. He's about
to return to the table they had been sitting at when a movement across the room catches his eye and
he sees a younger man rushing between the tables, his face set with a determined look. Rick tenses
for a moment as he sees him storm to a halt behind Aaron who is helping pass out baskets of bread at
the table next to them but then he relaxes as Aaron turns, catching sight of the man, and suddenly
they’re locked in a passionate embrace, regardless of the other people sharing the room. Rick grins,
sneaking a sly glance at Daryl who is standing open-mouthed as he watches the two men kissing
beside them, and then nudges him back to his seat.

“That’s Eric, Aaron’s husband,” Morgan explains with a chuckle, the pair in the middle of the room
now whispering intimately together, still oblivious or choosing to ignore the eyes that are trained on
them, “and I’m sure Aaron is in trouble for not making him his first stop when he got back after three
weeks out on the road.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Rick agrees, recognizing the look on Eric’s face as one he’s felt on his own far too
often when Daryl had returned from a run.

Rick sits, Daryl close enough to his side in the booth that he can hear the smooth rise and fall of his
breath above the animated chatter that’s filling the room to its vaulted ceiling as the two groups get to
know each other, and he feels something steal over him – a sense of belonging that he hasn’t felt in a
long time, maybe not even at the lighthouse as much as he’d thought of that as their home and he lets
himself indulge in the hope that maybe they’ve finally found what they’ve been looking for.

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Epilogue

The light rain that had blown in around lunchtime had steadily increased until it was a consistent
downpour, the light dimming in the living room until Rick had reached out absentmindedly and
flipped on the lamp beside the sofa, its warm circle of light illuminating the book that he had clasped
in his fingers. He was lost in the pages, the thriller he was reading capturing his imagination until a
noise outside on the porch claims his attention and his eyes flick up just as the door bursts open and a
bedraggled-looking Daryl enters, bringing a blast of rain-scented air with him. He quickly shuts the
doors behind him and shucks his wet boots onto the mat by the door while he shrugs out of his leather
vest to hang it on the nearby coatrack. Rick's mouth quirks up at the corner as he takes in the sight of
his mate’s rain-slicked bare arms, his skin glistening in the soft light, and the way his plaid shirt is
clinging to his torso.

“Raining?” he asks brightly, laughing at the snort Daryl throws his way as he squelches into the
kitchen to grab a towel and start roughly drying his hair. “How was the run?”

“Found a stash of weapons in one of the boats ‘cross the bay,” Daryl answers, coming back around
the kitchen island to throw himself onto the sofa beside Rick, laying his still damp head on Rick’s
lap, forcing him to raise his book higher, “along with about a month’s supplies… most of it still
good. Guess someone was plannin’ on comin’ back for it but never made it.”

“No sign of people?”

“Not today… nah,” Daryl sighs and Rick reaches out to stroke the damp strands of hair from his
forehead, thinking once again how much he likes the haircut Maggie had given him – it reminded him of how Daryl's hair had been back at the prison and it was one of the few memories from that time that he could remember fondly. “Where’s Judy?”

“Over at Tara and Denise’s… they requested a sleepover.”

“Great… she’ll be all hopped up on sugar n’ crankier than a bear with a sore head in the mornin’,” Daryl grumbles, his eyes closing as Rick keeps up the gentle caress against his temples. “Carl?”

“Where’d you think?”

“Enid’s,” they both say in unison, Rick feeling Daryl's chuckle reverberate through his fingertips.

“Carol came by… brought some pie. I made sure Carl left you a piece.”

“Apple?”

“Yes.”

“Guess that means Morgan’s out of the doghouse if she’s bakin’ again.”

“For now at least,” Rick laughs, shaking his head as he thinks of the unlikely and sometimes volatile relationship between their Warrior Queen and the self-proclaimed pacifist leader of their community.

“I saw ‘chonne on the way in… she said li’l Amy has a full set of teeth already… that ain’t normal, right?”

“For a human baby, no, but for a hybrid, who knows?” Rick answers honestly, the young wolf still an enigma to all of them.

It had taken almost three months before they had come clean about the whole wolf situation – three months were they had maintained their secret among their family, slipping out to Shift on night patrols or in the privacy of their own homes – wanting to gain the trust of their new community first and prove that they were no threat to them. They had even debated not telling them at all, although Carol had been uncomfortable with that scenario, wanting their fresh start not to be built on lies from the get go. The women they had rescued from Deanna were still none the wiser about their saviors’ true identities and seemed to form an unspoken vow not to talk about what had happened to them in her camp, understandably wanting to put that behind them now that they had a new life. Their hand had been forced when, during a routine checkup, the hybrid baby that Michonne and Andrea had taken in as their own had suddenly displayed her otherworldly eyes and growled at Denise when she had given her a shot. Naturally rattled by this turn of events, Denise had run shrieking from her clinic, ignoring Tara’s pleas to stop and had blurted the whole story out to Morgan. Rick had arrived in the middle of her freak-out, having heard the commotion two blocks over, and had decided it was time they shared their true nature with their neighbors.

The revelation was met with the outright disbelief that Rick had expected which soon turned to a mixture of curiosity and some fear when they had backed up their words with an undeniable display of what they could do. They had backed away, leaving their new friends with an entreaty to believe that nothing had changed between them, that they were still to be trusted and meant them no harm. Aaron, who had held their secret close to his chest up until that point, had spoken on their behalf and Rick believed that his words had done most of the work in getting the others to trust them. It had taken some time but now, almost a year after their arrival at the gates of Avalon, they were more than just accepted as a part of the community, they had become invaluable resources whose only goal was to keep their people safe.
“Talkin’ of babies… did you see Papa Wolf today?” Daryl asks, cracking one eye open and tilting his head back a little to look at Rick. “How they doin’?”

“Doing good… Maggie is feeling much better now she’s over that flu, said she’s ready to get back to work tomorrow.”

Daryl nods, Rick’s fingers sliding against the silkiness of his still damp hair and Rick’s thoughts turn to the day Glenn had come to them, not long after the birth of his son, tears running down his cheeks as he had begged them to make him into a wolf so that he would always be able to protect his child. They had naturally refused as had Carol and Michonne when he had approached them, claiming that his emotions at the birth were clouding his judgment and he would change his mind after a few days when he realized exactly what it was he was asking them. Glenn didn’t give up, however, making impassioned pleas to all of them every day until, surprisingly, it had been Maggie who had backed him up, telling them that it was what they had both agreed on. So, a week after the birth of his son, Daryl had bitten the one man he considered his brother above all others and they had waited an anxious four days until Glenn had made his first transformation with no complications. His adjustment period, however, had been even slower than Rick's and Daryl had taken great delight in mocking Glenn’s initial lack of coordination on four legs, constantly calling him a late bloomer and the runt of the litter. But he had determinedly improved until he was on par with the others and could hold his own against whatever wolfly challenges they threw at him and Rick knew that Daryl was proud of him despite the endless digs at Glenn’s expense.

“Earth to Grimes,” comes Daryl's impatient voice, interrupting his thoughts.

“Huh?”

“I said, did the desperate housewife come sniffin’ around again today while I was gone?”

“You mean Jessie?”

“Yeah… who else has a man-sized crush on ya ‘n isn’t takin’ the hint?”

“She’s just sad and lonely, Daryl, she doesn’t mean anything by it.”

“Uh-huh… you say that now but how’re ya gonna feel when she’s boilin’ a bunny on ya stove?”

“What?” Rick laughs and Daryl sits up to look him in the eye.

“’s not funny. I seen it happen… woman like that… justin’ after a married man she ain’t never gonna have… makes ‘em crazy. Maybe I should give her another warnin’ to stay away from ya.”

“Daryl, you pissing on her roses is not a warning, it’s just you making an ass out of yourself.”

“Yeah… well I don’t see you doin’ anythin’ about it,” Daryl rants, pushing up off of the sofa to pace around to the other side of the coffee table Rick’s feet are resting on.

“Anybody would think you’re jealous of her,” Rick baits him, trying to keep a straight face because he knows how much their neighbor gets under Daryl’s skin with the obvious way she fawns all over Rick even though all of Avalon is quite clear on his and Daryl’s relationship status.

“Pfft,” Daryl snorts, coming to a halt across the table from Rick and putting his hands up under his armpits, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. “The day I’m jealous of that owl-lovin’ twig is the day they can put me in the ground.”

“Is that so?” Rick asks, carefully slipping a piece of paper into his book to mark his place before
laying it on the table beside him and getting up to walk around and stand in front of Daryl. “So you
won’t mind that she asked me over this evening to help her move some furniture around, then?”

Daryl growls low in his throat, a guttural sound that has the hair on the back of Rick's neck standing
to attention and a dull ache starting deep in the pit of his stomach as he watches Daryl's eyes start to
glow. Rick can practically see the steam rising from Daryl's shirt as his body temperature elevates
even more when Rick reaches out a hand and wraps it in the wet material to drag Daryl flush against
his chest.

“Or… I could just stay home with my husband and you could show me how not jealous you are,”
Rick whispers, his eyes never leaving Daryl's but his free hand reaching up under his shirt to ghost
over the contours of his abdomen making Daryl inhale sharply between his gritted teeth.

“I could do that,” Daryl breathes out, his eyes still glowing as he tilts his head to look at Rick.

“Then what do you say we get you out of those wet clothes,” Rick suggests, letting go of Daryl's
shirt to work on unbuttoning it instead.

He works slowly at the buttons, drawing out the process until he can feel Daryl's skin practically
thrumming under his fingertips with the anticipation and then he slides the shirt from his shoulders
and lets it drop to the floor. Daryl slowly lets out the breath he’s been holding as Rick's dexterous
fingers relieve him of the rest of his clothing and then skim up his thighs to rest on his hips as he dips
his head to nuzzle his lips against Daryl's neck. He sucks at the sensitive skin over his pulse point,
the taste of rain mingling with Daryl's own musk to make Rick's mouth moisten and he trails wet
kisses up his lover’s neck, nipping at his earlobe before capturing his lips in a teasing kiss. Daryl,
however, is not in the mood for teasing it seems as he reaches up to slide a hand around the back of
Rick's neck and tug his head back so that he can scrape his teeth along the underside of Rick's jaw,
pulling aside his shirt collar. He sucks at Rick's skin, hard enough to leave a mark which Rick thinks
he won’t let heal, at least for a day or two, just to give Daryl the satisfaction of knowing he’d
branded his mate as his own. He hums under his breath, the sound deepening into a reverberating
growl as Daryl's sharpened teeth pierce the skin over his collarbone with a sharp pain that he doesn’t
find entirely unpleasant especially when Daryl parts his lips to lick at the wound he's created.

“You know,” Rick says, giving Daryl a sly look as he trails his fingers across the tattoo on his chest,
“I never dated a blond.”

The growl that emanates from Daryl's chest along with the blazing blue flash if his eyes makes Rick
chuckle deeply but his mirth soon fades as he takes to his knees, letting his fingers skim Daryl's torso
to end up resting on his hips. Looking up, he finds Daryl staring down at him, his lips slightly parted,
and Rick winks at him before teasing his fingers in slow strokes against his skin, moving ever closer
to the thick thatch of hair at Daryl's groin. Daryl's growl morphs into a rolling purr as Rick's fingers
finally work their way to the base of his rigid cock and he wraps his fist around it to give a light
stroke up and down its length. His mouth is flush with saliva as he takes a tighter grip around Daryl's
shaft and lowers his head to brush his lips across the tip, his own cock stiffening uncomfortably in his
jeans as Daryl's ripe taste explodes across his tongue. Rick sucks at the head, lowering his lips just
even more – he wants nothing more than to pleasure his mate, it’s all he ever wants, to let him know that he's the one
Rick desires above all others and always will be.

Tilting his head back a little more, he slides Daryl's cock all the way into his mouth, sucking tight
around him as he feels Daryl's hands land on his shoulders and grasp tight at his shirt. He begins a
slow move up and down his length, keeping a firm hand at Daryl's base and sliding his other hand
down to tease at his balls. Daryl's grip on his shirt increases, the stitching at the seams creaking in his ears, and Rick flicks his eyes up as he pulls back a little, seeing the pure lust on Daryl's face as he looks back at him from under heavy-lidded eyes, his bottom lip pulled in between his teeth. Rick slides his mouth all the way off of Daryl's cock, his lip quirking up at the small mewl of displeasure from above him, and sits back on his haunches to look up at Daryl.

“Own me,” he says softly, his hands still gently caressing Daryl's skin, “mark me… make me yours.”

Daryl moans as he watches Rick raise his fingers to his mouth and slide the first two inside, coating them liberally with spit before removing them and pressing his lips back to the head of Daryl's cock again to take him deep into his throat. One of Daryl's hands moves from Rick's shoulder to his head, his fingers winding into Rick's curls and holding tight as he begins rock his hips back and forth. Rick lets him take the lead, moving his hand from Daryl's cock to wrap it around his thigh instead, his other hand pushing under him to press his spit-slicked finger against Daryl's asshole and work him open. Daryl grunts loudly above him as first one and then a second of Rick's fingers pushes into him, his hips bucking a little into Rick's mouth. They find a rhythm together, Daryl's hips rocking to slide his cock into Rick's throat while he massages his prostate, causing a litany of groans and nonsense words to spill from Daryl's lips. He can read the trembling in Daryl's thighs that indicates he's about to come as easily as he could read the book he'd abandoned on the coffee table so Rick increases the pressure in his ass to push him over the edge.

Giving a strangled cry, Daryl pulls his dripping cock from Rick's lips at the last moment but keeping his grip firmly in Rick's hair as he grabs his cock and tugs it to shoot his load all over Rick's face. Rick widens his mouth, catching as much of the salty liquid as he can, feeling it splatter hotly across his skin to drip down his face, his tongue curling out to lick it away when it reaches his lips. Daryl is groaning and panting over him, jerking his cock until he's spent and then his fingers slide from Rick's hair down to cup his face, his thumb smearing the sticky residue from Rick's cheek onto his lips. Rick eagerly wraps his tongue around Daryl's thumb, sucking it with as much enthusiasm as he'd had for sucking his cock and Daryl moans out his name.

“Damn,” Daryl's pants, drawing out the word to an obscene length as he slips his thumb from Rick's lips and staggers back to collapse on the sofa.

“Doing okay there, baby?” Rick grins, grabbing Daryl's discarded t-shirt from the floor and using it to wipe his face clean before tossing it aside.

“Asshole,” Daryl mutters, his eyes half-closing as he rests his head on the back of the sofa. Rick looks at him, licking at the salty taste of him that's still on his lips and admiring the way the low light is bouncing off of the sweat-slicked contours of his skin, his glistening cock still standing half-hard against his stomach. Rick quickly strips off his own clothes, breathing a sigh of relief as his hardened cock springs free, and moves to the sofa, climbing on to straddle Daryl's lap and capture his lips in an urgent kiss. His lust is powering his movements, making his kisses rough and wet, teeth and tongues clashing, as his body craves as much of Daryl as he can get. Rick grinds his hips into Daryl's, groaning at the friction on his cock and hearing the slight clink of metal on metal as his dog tag swings from its chain and hits Daryl's. He breaks their kiss, breathing hard as he straightens up and takes the chain around Daryl's neck in his hand, sliding it over his palm until he's holding the tag on the end. Brushing his thumb over the metal, warmed by the heat of Daryl's skin, he reads the word ‘Forever’ as he has a hundred times before and smiles.

“'s still true,” Daryl tells him and Rick looks up from the tag in his hand to meet his eye.

“Sure is,” he replies, dropping the chain back down between them and cupping Daryl's face in both his hands so that he can kiss him again.
Daryl's hands slide around his back, his palms rough on Rick's skin, one hand pushing up into his hair and the other trailing up and down his spine in a maddening caress. As their kiss intensifies, Rick’s lips starting to feel raw from the rub of Daryl's stubble against them, he feels his body making subtle changes, the wolf clamoring to couple with its mate. It happened more often than not these days when they were making love, so much so that he barely even notices anymore – it’s a part of him now, as much as the color of his eyes or the curl in his hair and he embraces it fully. Parting his lips from Daryl's he turns his attention to his jawline and down his neck, nipping with his teeth between soft kisses, maneuvering Daryl's body under him until he's half-lying on the sofa. He licks his way across Daryl's chest, stopping to suck hard against each of his nipples, feeling Daryl's body change and grow in tandem with his own. Daryl's nails have become claws against his flesh, raking through the fine hair covering Rick's torso and Rick has to change position to accommodate for their hybrid state. He looks down in wonder at the feral beauty of Daryl's animalistic face from the points of his erect ears to the think mane of black hair falling to his shoulders, his eyes trailing down over the thick line of fur leading from his navel and spreading out to surround his rigid cock. Daryl's lower half has twisted into enormous paws, as has Rick's, which he has drawn up onto the sofa, the thick brush of his tail hanging down over the edge of the seat.

Rick drools at the sight of him spread open before him, his elongated tongue coming out to swipe around his jaw as he moves to position himself between Daryl's thighs. Bracing himself with one knee on the sofa and the other paw resting on the floor, he slides his hand under the back of Daryl's thigh, encouraging him to lift his leg until it’s hooked loosely at Rick's waist. He leans in, guiding the head of his leaking cock to Daryl's entrance, rubbing the tip on his asshole for a moment to slick it with his pre-cum before he pushes forward. There’s the smallest moment of resistance as Daryl throws an arm up around Rick's back, his claws digging deep into his shoulder, and then Rick is inside of him, letting loose a reverberating groan. His body moves of its own volition – or maybe it’s the wolf taking charge – Rick’s brain is lost someplace in the sensation of being wrapped in Daryl's heat. Rick thrusts into him, holding onto Daryl's thighs for leverage, his pace becoming more frantic with each roll of his hips. Daryl clings to him, his soft moans and growls filling the air around them and Rick drops his forehead to Daryl’s shoulder, deeply breathing in his musk.

“Mine,” he whispers, his words stuttering over Daryl's skin, “mine, mine, mine.”

His teeth scrape Daryl's throat, skimming over his jugular before sinking into his shoulder and he can feel the heat of Daryl's cock pressed between them, painting both of their stomachs with pre-cum. With a muffled roar against Daryl's flesh, Rick comes, pumping his cock deep into Daryl's ass with the heady taste of his blood bursting in his mouth and he's dimly aware of Daryl ejaculating with him, the hot splashes sticking to his skin. His hips buck until his body and mind realign and he loosens his teeth from where he has Daryl pinned beneath him, laving his tongue over the bloodied patch of skin. Easing his cock from Daryl's ass with a gush of cum, Rick raises himself up, seeing the glistening dribbles trickling down Daryl's side from his own pulsing cock and he moves down, his legs trembling a little as the feeling returns, and sets about washing Daryl's skin with his tongue. Paying special attention to his cock, he carefully runs his tongue along the entire length and around the tip until Daryl groans and pushes his head away. Rick grins, licking his lips as he crawls back up Daryl's body, Shifting as he goes, until the two of them are lying face to face in their human forms.

“Yours, huh?” Daryl asks softly, stretching his body more like a cat than a member of the canine family and then curling his leg over Rick's.

“I think that’s what I said,” Rick agrees, laying his hand against the damp flesh of Daryl's chest. “Every damn inch of you… no matter how crazy you make me.”

“Forever?” Daryl murmurs, his fingers toying with Rick's dog tag.
“Forever,” Rick assures him, lifting his hand to tilt up Daryl’s chin, tugging a little on his goatee before giving him a light kiss.

“Mmm,” Daryl breathes, laying his head down against Rick’s shoulder and staring up at him.

They stay like that, sharing slow kisses and soft caresses, as the day rolls into night and the rain keeps up its endless soundtrack against the roof and windows, thunder rumbling occasionally in the distance.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Rick asks, pulling them both from the doze they were falling into, his mind drifting lazily through the past.

“Hmm?”

“The first night we spent together… you remember… in the garage… with the rain coming down like this.”

“’n that damn narrow sofa with the springs pokin’ in my ass all night.”

“Yeah,” Rick chuckles, his fingers brushing against Daryl's hip in small circles before he makes a small confession, “I was so scared that night.”

“You,” Daryl asks incredulously, tilting his head back and looking at Rick in disbelief.

“You weren’t the only one scared of rejection, Daryl.”

“Guess it’s a good job you got it right then, Sheriff.” Daryl grins at him, a teasing look in his eye.

“Well if I’d known you’d be leaving the lid off the toothpaste for the rest of my life, I might not have tried so hard.”

“Prick,” Daryl grumbles, giving a half-hearted jab to Rick’s ribs with his elbow.

“We’ve come a long way since then,” Rick muses, pulling Daryl closer and laying a kiss on his forehead.

“Uh-huh,” Daryl agrees, snuggling in against Rick’s chest and closing his eyes again. “Got a long way ahead of us too.”

Rick nods his head in agreement even though he knows Daryl is already drifting between wakefulness and sleep. They really have come a long way, Rick thinks as he pulls a blanket down from the back of the sofa and drapes it over them, not just in their personal journey which never stops surprising him but in the new world as a whole. When he had awoken in the hospital, every last vestige of the man he was before torn away from him, he had never expected to survive as long as he had, let alone find a place where he truly believed they could start to rebuild the world from. He wasn’t naïve by any means and he certainly hadn’t become complacent behind the relative safety of the Avalon’s monstrous walls. He knew that the world was still out there and that it could be cruel, always poised to take away what he and his family had but he also felt that they were more than
ready to challenge anything or anyone that came at them. They had strengthened both Avalon and its citizens with their presence, making sure every man, woman and child with the walls was ready and knew how to fight on a moment’s notice.

This was their home now, he could feel it in his core, and he knew that they would all defend it to their last breath if needed and that thought gave him the comfort to be able to finally sleep at night. That, and the man beside him, now softly snoring against Rick’s skin, his face relaxed in sleep into an expression of beauty that Rick had never thought possible in either the world before or after. Looking down at Daryl, he was filled with an unwavering belief that, with him as his mate in both love and life, they could be happy and safe here.

Forever.
Full Moon

lecherous_portmanteau

Posted her with her permission.

Please go show your appreciation for this talented artist here and here

DO NOT REPOST

Chapter End Notes

So... here we are at the end. I want to thank you all again for sticking with me in this world and leaving all your amazing comments - each one meant so much to me.

I hope you like the way we leave our heroes... yes, it may be schmaltzy and sappy and tied up with a post-apocalyptic bow but, dammit, I thought it was time they got a little peace in their lives. ♥

Works inspired by this one
Rickyl Shifting by lecherous_portmanteau

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!