Through A Glass Darkly

by lea_ysaye

Summary

At the CDC Shane takes out his frustration on Daryl for the first time. What will happen between the two of them as Shane becomes more and more unhinged? And will Rick be able to help?

Notes

Through a glass darkly: To have an obscure or imperfect vision of reality (1 Corinthians 13:12).
The sound was weird. That was what made Rick take notice. The voice he could hear behind that door was angry, scared. He stopped short, listened. A loud thump, like something hitting the floor hard. Then grunts. A scuffle. And a moan.

Then the door to Daryl’s room opened and out stepped Shane. Rick retreated a couple of paces, and Shane leered at him, clearly way past drunk. Rick raised an eyebrow, gestured at the door.

“What were you doing in there?”

Shane scoffed. Rick thought he looked tense, guilty. But then he said in an offhand way, “Teaching the redneck a lesson, is all. Dixon’s totally tanked, man… don’t agree with his manners.”

And without another word Shane sauntered off. Rick’s eyes narrowed. He didn’t trust this at all. And the scratches he had noticed on Shane’s neck looked very recent. Rick hesitated. True, he and Daryl had not gotten off to a good start. But considering Rick had just left his brother shackled to a roof full of walkers when they’d met Daryl could have stayed mad for much longer and Rick wouldn’t have blamed him. And if Shane had done some real damage to the man Rick should better find out now.

So he opened the door through which Shane had just come. There was no light on inside, and Rick’s eyes needed a moment to adjust to the gloom of a room only dimly lit from the corridor behind him. He would never be sure later, but at the time he thought he saw Daryl just scrambling to button his pants. The man was lying on the floor, his back to the door, and started pushing himself up as Rick walked over the threshold.

“You all right?”

Daryl didn’t give any indication that he’d heard him, just continued to struggle to his feet. He used a chair for leverage and finally managed to get back upright. To Rick he looked like he was in pain. Daryl was leaning on the back of the chair, one hand pressed into his side. He still didn’t look around.

As Rick stepped closer Daryl flinched away violently before Rick was even close enough to touch. Not looking round, keeping his back towards him, Rick could just about make out the words when Daryl finally mumbled, “I’m all right.”

It was clear to Rick that nothing more would be forthcoming, and all he was doing was making the other man nervous. He retraced his steps. Rick didn’t like leaving Daryl like this, bent over, clearly struggling and in pain, but he wasn’t sure what to do. He stopped at the door, hesitated a moment, then said, “Let me know if you need anything, all right?” Daryl stayed motionless, so Rick closed the door as quietly as he’d opened it.

He stood in the corridor for a minute, hand still on the door knob, considering. Rick was sure that Shane had given Daryl quite the beating. By the looks of it he’d kicked the other man hard in the ribs when he was on the floor. Quite apart from disliking this behavior in his colleague and best friend, Rick was struggling with the why. What could Daryl have done to provoke Shane? Rick hadn’t seen them interact all evening.

And was this really all that had gone on in that room? With a last, thoughtful look at the door Rick started towards the room he was sharing with his family.
That fucking Lori bitch. It was her fault, all of this. If Rick was suspicious now, she was to blame. How dare she lead him around by his dick for weeks, and now play Miss Innocent. She'd been happy enough for Shane to protect her, fuck her, take care of her and her brat as long as she thought Rick was dead. Now he was back, and all of a sudden Shane was the bad guy? He didn't fucking believe it.

And that redneck whore. Shane hadn't planned anything like what had happened with Dixon when he'd gone from Lori straight to that man’s room. All he'd wanted was to vent his frustration on someone without serious repercussions. He was spoiling for a good fight, and Dixon would give him that, he'd been sure. Unlikely that someone would come to his aid, or call Shane up on his bullshit, either.

It had gone south almost right away. Sure, Daryl had fought him tooth and nail, but like a cornered animal, not a man. He'd taken Shane's hissed abuse with barely a flicker of anger in his eyes. Shane thought he looked resigned, and that had made him want to hurt that weakling even more.

When he'd grabbed Daryl roughly by the arm the other man had flinched away. Shane had slammed him into the wall, and the way Daryl's head had connected hard with the concrete had given Shane a jolt of sadistic pleasure that went straight to his cock.

Then the expression in Daryl's eyes had changed. Darkly clouding over with the pain, Shane was suddenly staring at something feral, wild, and dangerous. Then Daryl had struck back.

The redneck was strong, Shane had to give him that. But bare-knuckle strength was no match for his police training. Before Dixon could even land one good punch Shane had tackled him easily and wrestled him to the floor.

As he was lying there, breathing hard, pinning the writhing man down with his body Shane had suddenly known what the punishment for this one had to be.

The odd thing, Shane realized later, was that Daryl had made no sound throughout the entire ordeal.

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Daryl's hands were shaking as he propped the crossbow up against the side of the bed. He sat down gingerly, then stretched out on his right side, which was the least sore. He let out his breath slowly and winced as his body relaxed into the mattress. Each inhalation was painful, but at least his head was throbbing less now that he was horizontal.

He gingerly touched his ribs where Shane had kicked him hardest, right towards the end. The light touch sent a jolt of pain all the way to the base of his skull and he groaned. From experience he'd say at least one rib was cracked.

Daryl shifted himself around, trying and failing to be more comfortable. He could feel the other source of soreness with every move, felt his underwear and pants sticking to his thighs. He knew he should clean the cum off and check for injuries; most likely what he was feeling on the inside of his legs was blood. But he felt too defeated to deal with this right now.

He had no idea what had brought this on. Shane hadn't really paid him any heed since the morning Rick had left Merle chained to the roof and Daryl had tried to attack Rick. Sure, he’d thrown the odd redneck insult at him, been a bit rough when he’d wrestled Daryl away from Rick
and to the ground. Daryl was used to rough treatment from cops. Scrap that, he was used to rough
treatment from everyone.

But this, he just couldn’t figure it out. He’d seen the scratches to Shane’s neck before the other
man had lain into him. Who had scratched him? Daryl was sure that there lay the cause for
Shane’s behavior.

And there was also Rick. What had he seen? And what had Shane said to him? Daryl knew he
wouldn’t be able to confide any of this to the second cop. Rough treatment and disbelief, that’s
what he knew a Dixon could expect from a cop. Whatever Rick had seen, Daryl knew he’d side
with Shane, even if Shane told him utter bullshit. As for the others, Daryl didn’t expect help from
any of them. He was at best tolerated, at worst feared by these people. Better keep his distance,
even if that meant fighting this alone, as usual.

None of this was a surprise, and none of it was new. The whole episode just seemed like a cruel,
ever ending déjà vu to Daryl. Whatever he’d received at Shane’s hand, he’d had the same, and
worse, over and over again, since childhood. From his dad, from Merle, from Merle’s stupid
friends. Why should the world ending change anything for Daryl Dixon?

And yet… Daryl felt bitterness rising in his throat like bile, and tears prickling close to the surface
just behind closed eyelids. He’d really done his best with these people, didn’t want them to think
of him just as an inconvenience. But it seemed that whatever he tried to do in this miserable life of
his, he was doomed to failure.

Bitterness was suddenly replaced with utter exhaustion. The tears that had been threatening for a
while finally broke free and ran down his face. Daryl knew he should shake the lethargy, get out
of bed and clean up. Instead, he rolled over onto his other side to face the wall, ignoring the pain
from his ribs.

Daryl didn’t move again that night. He didn’t try to stop crying, just let the tears run silently, until
finally he fell asleep.
Chapter Summary

At the CDC or on the road, Daryl, Shane and Rick are struggling with their reality.

Something was definitely off with those two. Wait, make that three. Rick couldn't quite think straight, that wine last night really had gone to his head. Lori and Shane were both definitely off kilter, looking daggers at each other.

Oddly, what had gotten to Rick most was Daryl's behavior. When he'd come into the kitchen area Daryl had been skulking against a wall. He looked very pale and... Rick wasn't sure how he had looked, exactly. The only word he could think of was stressed out. Daryl had seemed nervous and restless, cradling a cup of coffee but not drinking it.

Then Shane had come in, and the moment Daryl saw him he had almost jumped out of his skin. He'd put the cup down and had hurried out of the room, head down, not looking at anyone.

Shane had strolled over to the table as if he'd noticed nothing. Rick was now watching his oldest friend with narrow eyes. Shane sat opposite him, eating the horrible powdered eggs, sipping coffee, as cool and unconcerned looking as anything. But Rick knew that man, had worked with him for years. There was a certain set to his shoulders that belied his nonchalance. Rick looked back at his wife. Lori's head was down but she was looking at Shane every few seconds from under her lashes, as if compelled.

Strange. But then Rick was distracted by Jenner, who approached their party around the table. Dale was on him straight away. "Doc, I don't mean to slam you with questions first thing..."

Jenner sighed. "But you will anyway."

Andrea turned to him. “We didn’t come here for the eggs…”

So Jenner started to explain. As they listened to the doctor, increasingly incredulous, and as all hell broke loose in the command centre Rick almost forgot the thing with Shane, Lori and Daryl. Almost, but not quite.

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They had decided to ditch some of the cars. Less than 24 hours since the explosion, fire at the CDC probably still burning, and their lives had shifted again. Shit!

Shane watched as the others got ready for the long journey to Fort Benning. He thought it was most likely bullshit, that idea about the Fort being a stronghold. So many dead ends, he was getting tired of it. But what else was there to do?

Shane wasn’t even aware that he was staring at Daryl preparing his brother’s motorcycle for the road until he felt another set of eyes on himself. When he looked up he met Rick’s gaze, and the look on his best friend’s face made him uncomfortable. What did Rick know? What had he seen two nights ago?
He didn’t think Daryl had said anything to anyone, and Shane’s little talk with him the morning after most likely meant he never would. Shane knew that kind of man. Dumb redneck, but proud as hell. He’d rather shoot himself in the heart with his crossbow than admit what had transpired between them.

And anyway, what had transpired? Shane had let off some steam on someone who could take it, and at the same time had taught that rogue a lesson. If Daryl wanted to stay with their group he needed to know his place, plain and simple. Shane had to protect them all, and he would make sure Dixon toed the line.

Rick was getting into the driver’s seat of the station wagon now, and Shane’s eyes returned to Daryl. The man was just getting onto his bike. Once in the seat, Daryl lowered his head for a moment and pressed a hand to the left side of his chest, panting. Shane knew that feeling his cock twitch at the sight of that man’s pain was not a normal reaction, but he had to admit to himself that the thought of having caused that discomfort turned him on.

Maybe this wasn’t the last lesson to teach that redneck whore.

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Daryl gripped the handles of his motorcycle hard enough to turn his knuckles white. If he didn't his hands were shaking hard enough to make an accident a real possibility. He tried to concentrate on nothing but the road in front of him. At least for now, driving alone, he was safe from the other's stares. And from Shane.

It wasn't the explosion that had rattled him, or Jenner's betrayal. As much as Daryl tried to push the memory away, it was no use. Staring straight ahead he got a flash of Shane's cruel, angry gaze every few seconds.

The cop had waited for Daryl outside the bathrooms the morning after the attack. Daryl had been up very early, woken by the pain from his ribs. Remembering that he hadn’t cleaned himself up before falling asleep, and not wanting anyone to see him and suspect something had happened, Daryl had gone straight into the shower. Cleaning up had been painful, and he’d been right, there was quite a bit of blood. Still, putting on fresh clothes and stuffing the soiled garments into the bathroom’s trash bin had made him feel better.

When Daryl came out of the bathroom Shane had been waiting for him.

Daryl was annoyed with himself that he had let the other man surprise him like he did, after what had happened the night before. As soon as he spotted Shane he’d tried to retreat into the bathroom and shut the door, but Shane was too fast. Before he could even take a step back Shane had grabbed him and slammed him hard into the wall. Another déjà vu.

Shane had leaned very close, eyes dark with a hatred Daryl didn’t understand. He’d not spoken to anyone, and had no plan to, either. But of course Shane didn’t know that.

“Look, man,” Daryl offered, hating himself for not being able to keep a tremor from his voice. “I ain’t gonna say nothin’…”

“You bloody well won’t!” Shane’s arm on Daryl’s neck felt like a vice. He leaned in close enough for Daryl to feel the breath on his cheek. “If you utter a word, I promise you, I make sure the others kick you out.”

And then, in a flash, he was gone. Daryl had stayed propped against the wall for a moment. His knees had felt shaky, both with fear and rage. His instincts had screamed at him to get away while
he could, but the more reasonable part of him knew that he had to stick with these people, at least for now. Nobody stood a chance in this world alone. Feeling more lonely than he ever did on his own out on a hunt Daryl had gone to join the others for breakfast.

And now here they were, back out on the road. In the adrenaline-fueled rush after Jenner’s confession Shane had paid no more attention to Daryl. But Daryl knew that Rick suspected something. He had noticed the other cop looking at him, and Daryl knew that his reaction to Shane appearing at breakfast had not gone unnoticed.

He was afraid now of more than just Shane. If Rick decided to find out what had happened Daryl suspected he’d not rest until he had all the details. And he knew what side of the line Rick would land on. Maybe it would be better just to leave, after all, and spare himself the humiliation of people knowing what had happened, and despising him for it.

Blinking away tears of shame yet again Daryl focused back on the road. As soon as his ribs had healed enough for him to have full mobility back, Daryl swore to himself, he would leave the group behind.
Bloodletting

Chapter Summary

Shane is going off the rails for real.

The water was hot on his skin. It felt so good, to wash away the sweat, and the grime, and the blood. When the jet hit the spot on his head where Otis had ripped out a patch of hair Shane winced. Behind closed eyes he could see the panicked look on the large man’s face still. That idiot!

He hadn’t meant to use him as bait, and the memory made him shudder again. But it had to be done. Only way to save Carl. Only way to save himself. And let’s face it, these people here, they needed him. More than anyone, he knew that now. Even if they didn’t, yet.

Rick, in whom they all trusted? He couldn’t save them. The thought alone made Shane scoff. And none of the other men were even worth mentioning. What was Dale gonna do? Talk those walking corpses to death? And Daryl… At the thought of the redneck Shane’s train of thought wavered. Memories of Otis, of scores of walkers, replaced with the image of the broad back beneath him, pinned to the concrete floor at the CDC. Strong arms trying, and failing, to keep Shane from doing exactly what he wanted to do.

Without even noticing it Shane reached for his cock. He was already half hard just from the memory of Daryl futilely struggling. He remembered how he had pulled down pants and boxer shorts, how he felt his way in the almost darkness. The grunt of pain as he punched the man into submission when he reared up again in panic. Then a hiss, almost a sob, as Shane force himself in.

Head down, hand on his erection, water still running and getting cold, Shane relived the first time he had ever raped a man, and even before he came into his fist he knew he was going to do it again, very soon.

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Why wasn’t it more of a surprise? Daryl heard heavy footsteps outside his tent, and knew this could only be one person. He got up from his field bed. It was too late to get out of the tent and away from Shane but maybe, maybe he could be reasoned with. Daryl was almost certain that was an idle hope.

When Shane had come back a few hours ago, limping, bloodied and without Otis Daryl had caught one glance from the cop that had made the blood freeze in his veins. The expression in Shane’s eyes had been one of utter madness, and Daryl knew someone would have to pay when that madness spilled over.

Now there was a rustle at the tent entrance. Daryl tensed, his hand going for the knife at his belt. He had no intention of drawing it, it was merely a reflex. Shane stepped inside, crouching low to avoid hitting the low canvas roof. He seemed to know already what to expect and didn’t hesitate.

Everything seemed to be happening at once yet in slow motion. Daryl felt a jab of pain in his left temple and saw stars before he had even gotten a proper look at the other man. Shane’s reflexes were even better than his own, and his right hook was mean. Daryl felt his knees buckle and a
Then Shane was on top of him, throwing his whole weight against him. He grabbed Daryl’s wrists in a painfully strong grip and held him down with his body as Daryl struggled. The added weight on top, pushing his already busted ribcage into the floor, caused Daryl enough pain to give up his struggle quickly. Each breath was agony, and he knew that this was just the beginning.

“’d’ya want… please, Shane…”

Daryl would have liked to reason with the other man, but he hardly had enough breath left for a few words. He felt anger bubbling inside him for the cop, but the real hatred was reserved for himself. How could he have let this happen again? He’d known Shane was on the war path, why had he not made sure to protect himself, move his tent closer to the others?

Panic was rising in his chest now. Daryl could feel Shane’s erection pressing against the back of his thigh. He knew what was coming. He tried to hold very still, understanding that his attempts at fighting back were what aroused Shane most. Daryl could feel the other man’s hot breath against his neck. Shane smelled of spirits.

“Now, hold still, you little redneck scum, and I might not hurt you too bad. Fight me, or call for help, and you will regret it for the rest of your life. I will make sure the others know what a whore you are, Dixon, and you’ll be gone by morning. Understood?”

Daryl didn’t answer. Shane let go of Daryl’s left arm and punched him hard in the already busted ribs. Daryl groaned, even as he tried to stay completely still.

“I asked you if that was understood.”

He punched Daryl again, and tears started prickling behind Daryl’s closed eyelids. Each breath, each heartbeat hurt him now.

“Yeah…” Daryl whispered grudgingly.

Shane’s left hand was pulling roughly on Daryl’s pants. Daryl could feel himself shaking, but he suppressed the urge to fight back. He knew that this was exactly what he deserved. Finally, Shane got his pants and underpants down with one hard yank.

The weight of the other body on top of Daryl vanished for a moment, and he heard the sound of a zipper. Then Shane was back on top of him, and Daryl felt a hand slide between his legs, spreading them. A moment later he could feel Shane’s erection pressing against his entrance.

Shane was no longer holding his wrists. Daryl crossed his arms and buried his face in them. As Shane entered him with one hard thrust he bit down hard on the sleeve of his jacket. A whimper escaped him but he was long past caring. The pain was if possible even worse than the first time; the renewed penetration opening the tears and cuts again just as they were starting to heal.

The ordeal lasted only a short while. Having Daryl newly compliant seemed to turn Shane on as much as having Daryl fight him, and he came quickly. When he had pulled out, adjusted his clothes and vanished as quickly as he’d arrived Daryl just stayed where he was.

In all the horror and humiliation of the ordeal there was one aspect that Daryl’s mind came back to again and again. As painful and traumatic as this situation was Daryl’s body had not merely been a passive tool. Shane penetrating him had given Daryl an erection, and, disgusted with himself, tears streaming down his face, Daryl now rolled onto his side and took his own cock into one hand. Still feeling Shane on him and in him, his smell lingering in his own clothes, Daryl finished himself off.
When he was done he stayed on the ground for a long time, hate coursing through his veins.

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Rick heard the words, but he didn’t believe a single one. He was grateful that Carl would live, more than grateful. But at what price had this come about? And what was going on with Shane?

He knew, that man over there, lying through his teeth about what had happened at the FEMA camp, that was a stranger. It wasn’t the Shane he had loved like a brother since high school. Or maybe it was, and he had just never shown his true colors before. Rick scanned the others’ faces. Lori looked suspicious, too.

Rick frowned. What was going on with her and Shane? He had yet to elicit a straight answer to that question. That would have to wait now, Lori was fully focused on Carl. And anyway, Rick knew she was safe in the house, with Hershel and his family.

Rick’s eyes wandered to the other knotty question instead, the person who Rick knew for a fact was not safe, camping out in the middle of that field. Daryl was standing a little way away, half hidden behind the tree he was leaning against.

Rick had watched Daryl when he had walked over from his tent, and he was good at sussing people out. So he knew something was definitely up with the hunter. Walking slowly and very deliberately Rick knew Daryl was in pain but didn’t want to let on. Close to Rick thought he looked paler than usual, and certainly skittish. He had looked like this ever since the CDC, and Rick suddenly realized that he was surprised Daryl was even still here. He had the unmistakable air of a man who wanted to be gone.

Daryl wasn’t looking at anyone in the group, his eyes kept darting anywhere but the people around him. With one exception. Every so often, Rick noticed, Daryl was throwing Shane a glance, so quickly that had he not been looking for it Rick would have missed it.

Just then Shane finished talking, and Rick’s attention went back to his old friend for a moment, amazed at the show Shane was putting on. Had this been any other time but now Rick would have fully bought into Shane’s display of shock and remorse.

Now Shane started walking back to their camp, and Rick made to follow. He looked around again towards where Daryl had stood, but the hunter was gone. Rick sighed. He could sense two very uncomfortable conversations in his near future, and he didn’t relish the thought.
Interlude – Pretty much dead already

Chapter Summary

Rick talks to Daryl

Chapter Notes

I am slowing events down a little here now. Canon will be continuing for the most part, but some things are going to be different now by necessity.

Numbness, in them all. Rick knew, he saw. Hershel's group went one way, his the other. Nobody spoke, everyone seemed to try and find a space as far away from the others as possible.

Rick walked around for a while, no aim, unseeing. He couldn't wrap his head around it. How had this happened, right under their noses?

Then he saw Daryl, off ahead, just standing in the field, smoking. Rick looked around. He hadn't realized it but he was very close now to where Daryl had pitched his tent. Rick hesitated. He'd been meaning to talk to both Daryl and Shane but searching for Sophia had pushed this task away again and again.

Now was maybe not the worst time. Daryl had invested more than most of them into the search, had even gotten himself injured in the process. He might be open to accept some praise and consolation, you never knew… Rick walked towards the other man, making sure he was in Daryl's line of sight so as not to spook him.

Daryl gave no sign of recognition as Rick approached, but Rick knew that the other man had seen him. Rick stopped about fifteen yards away, half turned his back on Daryl and let his eyes gaze in the same middle distance as Daryl’s. He waited a few moments before speaking, keeping tabs on Daryl from the corner of his eye. There wasn’t much to notice in the other man just now, only the same numbness as in them all, maybe more rigidity and guardedness than usual.

“You check on Carol?”

Rick knew the answer. Neither of them had yet spoken to anyone. But he had to start somewhere. There was no reply. Rick turned towards Daryl a bit more but still didn’t look at him directly. He kept his voice low when he continued.

“I thought, maybe you could look out for her, now, after this? She appreciates your help more than she can say, y’know? The way you looked for her little girl…”

Daryl snorted impatiently and turned away further. With anyone else Rick would have moved closer now, trying to get them to look at him, acknowledge him, and take the praise as the compliment it was meant. He had a feeling that wouldn’t work with this one, though. He carried on as if Daryl hadn’t reacted.
“We are all grateful. I am grateful. You’ve really been pulling your weight. Your tracking skills, your prowess as a hunter, I have a feeling we’ll need all of that soon. But I am worried, Daryl.”

Daryl didn’t look round, but from the corner of his eye Rick could tell he had stopped his fidgeting for a moment. Making the most of the small reaction Rick got to the point. He turned around fully now.

“I am worried you are planning on leaving.”

Daryl shifted, almost imperceptibly, but Rick noticed. He thought he was getting better at reading this man. His shoulders became rigid, and he bunched his fists. Rick felt a wave of sympathy. If his hunch was right and Shane had been hurting Daryl in some way then this must be excruciating for the proud hunter.

“Daryl, I’m sorry to bring it up, I really am, man. Tell me what’s going on with you and Shane, and I promise, I’ll do whatever I can to help…”

He could tell immediately he’d gone too far. Daryl’s head jerked round, though he kept his eyes fixed to the ground. Rick saw he was shaking, and when Daryl finally spoke there was a tremor to his voice. He didn’t shout, or sound angry, but Rick would have preferred that. The anguish in Daryl’s voice as he lied to him was almost too much to bear.

“Got no idea what’cha talkin ‘bout. Nothin’s gone on. You d’y’r own looking out fer people. I’m done…”

And with that Daryl stalked off. Rick briefly contemplated going after him, but then realized how much worse that would make the situation. With a sigh he turned away and walked back to the house. As he got closer he could see Maggie hurrying towards him. When she got within earshot she called over.

“Have you seen my dad?”

Rick sighed again. What now? Yet another crisis to fall into his lap? He squared his shoulders and determinately walked on to deal with this new problem, whatever it might be.
Better angels

Chapter Summary

Things are coming to a head, dynamics are about to change.

Chapter Notes

I am currently moving house so am a bit slow in writing fic. Do bear with me. :) And thank y'all for the great feedback on this one... x

The bloody knuckles were as good a reminder, and a distraction, as anything to make up Daryl’s mind. He sat outside the small barn, smoking his cigarette, flexing his hands again and again. The boy in that barn hadn’t deserved the beating he’d just given him, but then, when was life ever fair? It certainly had never been to him. Let the rest of the world taste some of that reality, too.

Daryl balled both hands into fists until fresh blood started seeping from the cuts on both. The smarting and throbbing this elicited was a welcome distraction from the soreness and pain Shane’s last visit had left in his body. Just sitting here on the ground was agony, but Daryl ignored his body’s protest. He deserved everything he was getting from Shane.

Why was he too weak to stop that man from torturing him? Why didn’t he just leave? There was no reason for him to stay. Sophia was dead, nobody needed him now. He hadn’t been able to help that little girl, and that still hurt, too. Why had he even believed he could help Sophia, and Carol? He wasn’t even man enough to help himself.

All he seemed good for, really, was to cause pain, and receive it in return. Nobody had asked him to interrogate Randall, but when Shane and Rick had come back the night before, still with that boy in the boot of the car, it had been clear that Rick couldn’t do the dirty deed.

This morning, when Daryl had woken up, right where he’d passed out on the floor of his tent, sore all over from Shane laying into him and then raping him again, hungover from the nearly full bottle of whiskey with which he’d tried to numb the shame and humiliation of the act, Daryl had had only one thought. Be useful to the group, prove to himself and to them that he was worth something, worth keeping around, having close. If he couldn’t do that, then he might as well leave that very same day.

Daryl had only wanted to rough Randall up a little, scare him into giving up some useful intel. But when the boy had started talking about the rape on the two sisters that he’d witnessed while with his group Daryl had seen red. Randall had sworn he’d not participated in that act of brutality, but Daryl didn’t really care. The guy was probably lying, anyway.

In any case, here he was, another perpetrator, or at least a silent witness. Daryl knew he would never have a chance paying Shane back for what he’d done, but this guy was right here, at his mercy. So Daryl had given in to his rage, made sure the boy felt some of the pain he most likely had caused others.
That it wasn’t really about hurting someone in return for having been hurt so badly himself didn’t occur to Daryl until after he’d left Randall lying in the barn, half dead. It was all about pain, yes. But it was his pain, the physical pain to his hands, and the mental anguish of realizing that he was no better than Shane, or than his dad and Merle had been when he was small. He was just as much a piece of shit as Shane kept telling him, and he deserved every beating, every brutal fucking that Shane felt like giving him. That circle would never be broken while Daryl stayed with the group.

Not even noticing the tears that were running down his face until they started dripping into his lap Daryl stayed slumped against the barn long after his cigarette had burned down to its filter in his hand, head down, hopelessness the only thing penetrating the numbness.

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Rick had to die. That was the only solution that made sense. Why had it taken Shane so long to realize it? And when had he made the decision that this was how it had to be done?

He had Daryl to thank, really. When Shane and Rick had returned with Randall still in tow tempers had run high. There had been arguments left, right and center, and Shane had nearly hit Dale when the old man wouldn't shut up about the moral wrongs of killing the little piece of scum.

Instead of taking his frustration out on Dale while everyone was watching Shane had gone back to Daryl's tent late that night. At least he knew that Daryl wouldn't rat on him. And the truth was, nothing was more satisfying to Shane right now than hurting the filthy redneck. The knowledge that someone was so completely at his mercy was making him hard just thinking about it.

Shane had been unable to stop himself going back to Daryl that night, even though Rick had challenged him about it on the drive to rid themselves of Randall. Rick had demanded to know what Shane had been up to with the redneck. Shane had deflected the question, pointing out that they had bigger problems right now that needed addressing.

“And anyway, I’m not doing anything to him.” The lie had come so easily to Shane, he’d been surprised himself. In the past he and Rick had been very honest with each other, but somehow in this new world lies were what got things done.

Rick had looked at him with that calculating gaze Shane knew only too well. But then he’d looked back at the road and not brought it up again. They’d had some of the other things out in the open on that drive, too, and somehow they seemed more straightforward. Shane understood Rick’s feelings about the whole Lori business. Having a wife who might be pregnant with your best friend’s kid would do anyone’s head in. But Shane knew if that was all it was they could work it out, somehow.

The biggest issue by far was that Shane didn’t trust Rick to keep them all safe. Shane knew that he’d be the better leader, but he was certain that Rick would never listen to his counsel now. The trust of old, built over so many years of friendship, was gone. What with Lori pregnant, and Rick suspecting something was up with Daryl, and Shane not trusting Rick to do the right thing by their group, there was but one solution. Rick had to go.

As they were walking through the forest now, looking for a Randall that Shane knew to be dead because he’d killed him himself, Shane allowed himself a few moments to fantasize about the future that was just at his fingertips. If he got rid of Rick - and he was sure he could, and easily - then Lori would be his, and he’d be a father at last. As long as he pulled off his plan with Rick the same way he’d pulled off the thing with Otis, Lori would be only too happy to turn back to him in her distress, just as she had turned to him when she’d thought Rick had died in the hospital.
And Shane would have it all. A wife, a family, the leadership of that ragtag bunch of weaklings. And, if he wanted to, he could keep Daryl close and take his frustration out on him whenever he had the need. All he had to do now was get Rick to drop his guard, and kill him.

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Shane would have to die. The horror in Rick’s heart about this fact was only outweighed by how close he was to die at Shane’s hand instead. Rick had known Shane was out to harm him as soon as they’d set out into the woods looking for Randall. In fact, Rick had known Randall was just a ruse the moment Shane had fed them the story of how the boy had attacked him in the barn and taken his gun.

But Rick had wanted answers, so he’d played along for a while. Now he wasn’t sure any more what he’d hoped to get from Shane. A confession that Shane wanted to be their leader, to get rid of Rick? An apology, an admission of guilt about what had happened with Lori? Rick didn’t really think he’d get either.

What he definitely wanted to get was the truth about what Shane was doing to Daryl. The moment Daryl had turned up with bloody knuckles, telling them what Randall had confessed to him under torture, Rick knew for certain that something wasn’t right. Rick still didn’t know Daryl well, but he knew the hunter wasn’t a brutal man. He talked a tough talk, but the way he had been invested in the search for Sophia, and his devastation after they found the girl in the barn, had told Rick that under the rough exterior this man was decent, wanting the right things for their group.

Unlike Shane. Rick had been worried at least since the CDC that his formerly best friend was hell bent on destruction, but until this night he’d harbored some last vestiges of hope that Shane could come back from the brink. This last lie about Randall, and Shane’s blatant trap for him, had convinced Rick that that hope was dead.

But he’d still try to get some answers before he dealt with the liability Shane had become. Rick now knew that he should have gotten to the bottom of what was going on with Daryl sooner. A terrible suspicion had taken hold of him since Daryl had come to them with bloody knuckles. Rick feared that if he’d had the guts to force Shane into confessing what he’d done while they’d been out with Randall he could have stopped Shane from doing this last bit of damage that had driven Daryl into a bloody rage.

Stopping on the edge of the wood Rick had not turned around even though he could feel Shane’s eyes boring into the back of his head.

“I know where this is going to end, man,” he’d said calmly, but loud enough to know Shane could hear every word. “Before it does, tell me the truth: What did you do to Daryl?”

Shane gave a snort. “Really? Of all the things that have been going on, this is what you’re worried about? Some redneck bastard?”

“You have damaged the group, Shane. I am worried about all of it. This is the last piece of the puzzle that I don’t yet understand.” Rick half turned, fixing Shane from the corner of one eye. He repeated the question. “What did you do?”

Shane stood very still, staring into the distance even though it was too dark now to see anything. “Nothing that filthy redneck didn’t deserve. What do you think? I taught him a lesson…” A pause, then, as if compelled to explain to Rick even though he wanted his best friend dead, “He’s a danger to the group, Rick, he’s not one of us…”

But Rick didn’t need to hear more. Or maybe, and he felt ashamed again to admit it, he simply
couldn’t listen to this. The Shane he’d known most of his life was gone, replaced with this
caricature, this lie. This problem he would have to deal with, right now. Rick walked on.
Daryl had to stop the bike, he was shaking too hard, his vision was blurring. He came to a standstill just inside the Greene property. Placing his feet on the ground either side of the bike Daryl lowered his head and tried to just concentrate on his breathing.

The farm was gone. If he’d cared to he could have still seen the glow of the burning barn behind him in the smudged early morning light. Soon the fire would spread, he was sure. And when it did he would be far, far away.

Daryl had made up his mind. He was leaving. The thing with Shane, Sophia’s fate, then Dale’s horrible death, it all was too much. People were just too much. He’d be all right on his own. Stay off the roads, hunt and scavenge what he needed. Anything better than this. Daryl put a hand against his chest on the left, where Shane had cracked ribs that first night. He’d kicked and punched Daryl there every time he’d come to him since, knowing the pain that would cause. Now that pain was a reminder of why he had to get away. Daryl pressed his hand down hard, hissed with the sensation of a knife slicing into his side.

Still motionless by the road, Daryl heard a car behind him. Cursing under his breath he turned around. A pickup truck was quickly approaching, and Daryl knew it was too late to get away unnoticed. Again, he had failed to do the right thing. More pain surely would follow. Suddenly he could hardly bring himself to care.

The truck stopped close by. Daryl saw that it only held Carl and Rick. Small mercies, he supposed. Rick turned to Carl, and Daryl could hear him tell his son to stay put. Then Rick got out and approached. Daryl lowered his head again. He couldn’t meet Rick’s eyes, but the probing stare from the cop still had the power to make him uncomfortable. Daryl stayed seated on his bike, body averted from the other man.

"You all right? Didn't get hurt back there?"

"'m fine."

There was an uncomfortable pause. Daryl chanced a glance at Rick, who was now looking into the distance. He squared his shoulders and Daryl thought he looked like he was psyching himself up to say something difficult.

"Shane’s dead. I killed him."
Daryl couldn't breathe. It felt like the world stopped, narrowed on that one word. Dead. His tormentor, gone. Then time started again, and he took a deep breath, closing his eyes on a world that had yet again begun to spin too fast.

Rick stepped closer, Daryl could hear his feet crunching on the gravel road. When Rick spoke again his voice was so quiet Daryl knew it would never carry to Carl in the car.

"Don't leave, man. Not now. I need your help. Please..."

Daryl didn't reply and made no acknowledgement of what he'd heard. He couldn't move. Rick knew. But how? And how much, exactly? The other man stayed equally motionless, but after a moment spoke again.

"I'm so sorry, Daryl. I should have helped you. There is no excuse... Please, will you stay?"

Daryl forced himself to continue to breathe. There was no anger or disgust in Rick's voice, just sorrow. A small part of Daryl’s mind suddenly felt some hope. Did this change everything? Could he actually stay? And more importantly, did the others really want him to?

With a huge effort Daryl forced himself to give a small jerk of the head. He could hear Rick exhale audibly behind him. Daryl had to be sure, though. He didn’t quite trust this all yet. Forcing his voice into cooperation, it still only came out as a whisper.

“D’y’ mean it? Y’want me t’?”

Rick didn’t come any closer for which Daryl was grateful. His nerves were so taut, he didn’t trust himself not to lash out if Rick had tried to touch him now. The cop’s voice stayed quiet, but the gentleness in it touched Daryl to the core.

“With all my heart.”
Chapter Summary

After a hard winter Rick and Daryl have a heart-to-heart.

Chapter Notes

Please note the updated tags! This chapter has a significant focus on self-harm. I apologise for not mentioning it was going in this direction sooner. If this is a trigger for you, please don't read on!

When Rick thought about that winter later he was never quite sure how they all made it through. It was a miracle, really, that they lost nobody. There were so many close calls and accidents, hardly a day went by without at least one rush of adrenaline. Rick knew they were also incredibly lucky that nobody got seriously ill. There were infections, sprained ankles and lots of deep cuts, but between Hershel and Merle’s remaining antibiotics they dealt with everything.

The months on the road had left their brutal marks on all of them. Looking around him Rick hardly recognized the people he’d first met in that quarry and on the farm. Everyone was thinner and dirtier, with a few more lines on their faces every time he seemed to catch sight of them.

There were also new scars to all their souls, and Rick could see them just as clearly. Lori kept herself averted from everyone's eyes, shielding her belly as if from their judgement as much as from harm. Rick had hardly spoken to her in weeks, and when they did speak, they fought. It was cutting Rick up inside every time he turned away from his wife in anger only to catch his son looking at them with such sadness.

Rick knew the others all knew by now what was going on. Impossible to hide anything from the group when from necessity they all had to stick close. Nobody ever mention it to him, but Rick suspected they all felt sorry for Lori. He spent as much time as possible far away from his wife.

One of the best things to take his mind off his wife's betrayal and his son's unhappiness had become spending time with Daryl. It had taken some time for that arrangement to solidify because the hunter remained suspicious and withdrawn. After the farm Rick had it made clear to the others to give Daryl his space because he had been afraid that the man would still decide to leave if he felt anything but at ease in their company. Rick hadn't told them what had happened between Daryl and Shane, but the others had understood quickly how to behave around Daryl to keep him from looking like he was about to bolt or lash out.

And Daryl had integrated into their group, better in fact than Rick had dared to hope. His tracking skills had been the sole reason why they didn't starve to death most days, and while he still had trouble accepting praise and gratitude he seemed to take some pleasure from his part in keeping their little band going.

The thing most satisfying to Rick had been when Daryl had started asking him along for his
hunting trips. He didn't always, and still in fact spent a very large amount of time out alone in the woods, but Rick had noticed how astute Daryl's senses were when it came to conflicts within the group. When he noticed Rick looking grim, or Lori shooting daggers at everyone he'd ask Rick to go hunting with him, and to Rick these were the most restful times during that winter.

They didn't talk much, sometimes not at all. But to Rick, that was a bonus. Out there with Daryl he didn't need to have all the answers. Nobody looked to him for solutions to impossible problems. In the wild the other man was the expert. And Rick relaxed into it. Initially it seemed to cost Daryl some willpower to have him around but gradually he became more at ease with Rick, and also around the others.

Rick had noticed, however, that over the past few weeks Daryl had started to withdraw again into his shell. It was finally getting warmer, but their situation was now desperate. They had picked over the same few settlements several times, going in circles more and more, trying to stay ahead of a large herd that seemed to be getting bigger and closer every day.

Rick wondered whether their current situation had anything to do with Daryl's renewed distancing from the group. They were all under a lot of strain, but somehow Rick didn't think that it was the main reason for this regression. Daryl didn't seem to sleep. It had started gradually but now he volunteered for almost all of the watch shifts at night, and spent all his days scouting alone. Rick was starting to get worried. He'd also noticed how Daryl would pass nearly all his food to Lori and Carl, if he bothered turning up at the fireside at all.

All of this was the reason why Rick had asked Daryl to come out with him scouting now. They needed to talk.

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Daryl didn't want to go with Rick this time. He had an idea what the other man wanted with him, and he couldn't do it. It wasn't even that Daryl didn't want to talk to Rick, he just didn't think he could.

And he had no answers anyway. He didn't know what was going on. His strategy was failing, but he didn't know how to deal with what had happened any other way. When the nightmares had started shortly after the farm had fallen he hadn't even had to think about what to do. The first time he'd woken with a start in the middle of the night, a barely suppressed scream on his lips and covered in sweat, he'd automatically reached for the knife hanging from his belt. That first night all he'd done was pierce the soft skin at the base of his thumb.

Since then he'd defaulted back to razor blades. He'd used these all through his childhood and teens, to crowd out the pain his dad and Merle had inflicted on him. Cutting his thighs, upper arms and torso made the other pain more bearable somehow, made him more complete. It reminded him of what people thought of him. Nobody needed a Dixon, and especially not him.

Back then the cutting had also stopped him having nightmares every time he closed his eyes. It had done so after what Shane had done, too, until it didn't any longer. The last few weeks had been impossible. Daryl had been unable to sleep a single night without bad dreams for weeks, until he finally gave up and stopped sleeping altogether, or near as. These days, he subsisted on cat naps on their car rides, mostly.

He knew it couldn't go on like this. But he was out of ideas. No more coping strategies seemed available. The lack of sleep was making him irascible, and he was constantly on edge. And he was a danger to the others. In this world everyone needed their wits about them at all times. If he made a mistake other people's lives were at stake. But Daryl couldn't talk to anyone about this. He would have to tell them why he had nightmares in the first place, and they would certainly be
disgusted by his powerlessness to stop Shane.

Daryl couldn't think straight at the best of times right now, and Rick was adding to his stress by asking him to come scouting.

But there was nothing for it, so Daryl followed Rick away from the cars. They walked in silence for a few minutes. Usually Daryl was at ease around Rick out in the woods. The former cop was good at being quiet, even if he was no great shakes as a hunter or tracker. But today Daryl was too tense to enjoy their time together. He was waiting with bated breath for Rick to say his piece.

Rick seemed to understand this, or part of it. He didn't let Daryl wait for long. They had just walked out of sight and earshot of the others when Rick motioned for Daryl to stop. He turned towards him but kept some distance between them. Daryl was grateful for how much Rick had picked up over the last few months, and how well he was able to read Daryl's mood. Right this moment Rick seemed to understand Daryl needed his space.

The other man's eyes were kind when he spoke quietly.

"I know this isn't easy, Daryl, and I will keep it brief. But we have to talk. Is that ok?"

Reluctantly Daryl gave a small nod. Rick exhaled, then looked away. Someone else might have found this rude but Daryl was grateful not to be the focus of scrutiny.

"Can you tell me why you aren't sleeping?"

Daryl fought the rising panic in his chest. How much would he have to tell Rick for the other man to be satisfied? And how much would he even be able to put into words? He tried to stay calm. He trusted Rick now, he really did. And he wanted the other man to trust him, so he had to be as honest as he could. Daryl tried to speak, and on the second attempt managed a few words.

"Get nightmares. Better t'stay awake."

Daryl could tell that asking the next question also cost Rick willpower. “Is it because Shane… because of what happened at the farm?”

The nod Daryl gave in return required a lot of strength. Rick didn’t say anything for quite a while. The thought crossed Daryl’s mind that Rick was struggling to discuss this nearly as much as he was himself. He wasn’t sure exactly what to think of that, but it made him anxious. Then Rick continued.

“I don’t know how to fix… how to make this go away. That’s probably impossible. But… Daryl, you need to let yourself sleep. You are barely functioning. If you are worried about scaring the others, don’t be. They are concerned about you too…”

Rick broke off and Daryl looked at him then. The other man seemed to be pondering something. Then he looked over at Daryl, and Daryl didn’t break eye contact.

“Tell you what,” Rick continued. “From now on, sleep right next to me. I’m a light sleeper. If I notice you’re having a nightmare I’ll wake you, I promise… It’s not a perfect solution, but maybe, for now…”

Daryl considered. No, it wasn’t perfect, but it might just about be enough for the moment. He felt exhausted and desperate enough to try almost anything. And the fact that Rick seemed to care about him to the point of worrying touched something deep inside him. It felt frightening, unfamiliar, but also strangely nice. Daryl nodded. Rick looked relieved. “Good. I need you, man. I can’t do this without your help…”
Rick lowered his eyes, then looked back at Daryl. “I should really let you rest, but… you up for some hunting? We need to get the others something to eat today, even if it’s just squirrel…”

“Sure.”

Daryl hitched up the crossbow that was slung over his shoulder. This he knew how to do, providing for the group. He followed Rick as the other man walked down some old railway tracks. When Rick stopped after about ten minutes, Daryl caught up and followed Rick’s gaze. Just across a boggy expanse of water they could see the huge structure and grounds of a prison complex, extending far in all directions.
Chapter Summary

The first night in the prison grounds.

The fence between them and the walkers was such a relief. Rick could see it on everyone's face, a relaxedness, a calm like they hadn't felt in months. They kept the fire burning for longer than usual, sat around it, enjoying a peace that felt alien. One that was still filled with the moaning of the undead.

Lori was busy getting Carl ready for sleep on Rick's left. They still had little to say to each other, he and his wife, but they had been mostly civil that day. Rick sought out Daryl with his eyes, across from him on the other side of the fire. He looked exhausted, ready to fall asleep where he sat but not allowing himself to relax sufficiently for that to happen. Rick raised his voice a little over everyone's chatter.

"Glenn, you ok to take first watch?"

Glenn, who was sitting with Maggie, looked a little surprised, but nodded. "Sure."

Rick looked back at Daryl and gave a small jerk of the head, indicating the free space to his right. Daryl looked hesitant, but finally nodded. He got up, grabbed his things and walked around the fire. He settled himself close enough for Rick to reach out and touch him if he'd wanted to. Rick didn’t, of course, but he was glad that Daryl was at least this comfortable around him.

Daryl glanced at him as if seeking approval and Rick gave him an encouraging smile. Daryl visibly relaxed and lay down on his blankets. When he was asleep before he’d even properly settled down Rick knew that he’d done the right thing. Rest was obviously overdue for Daryl.

Rick lay down on his own blankets once Lori and Carl were down, too. Carol was just banking the fire, and gave Rick a look from where she was crouching that told him that she knew what he was doing. As he lay down Rick could see the outline of Daryl’s back in the gloom next to him. The other man’s breathing was calm and regular, and for now he seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

Rick had no intention of going to sleep himself. This night he would stay awake, if he could, so that he could keep his word to Daryl and wake him should he have a nightmare. Rick knew that forgoing sleep so that Daryl could rest was no real fix for their problem. But for now he would do anything to make Daryl really trust him. And maybe, if Daryl knew that someone had his back, the nightmares would lessen on their own.

It wasn’t easy, staying awake after the day they’d had. But Rick’s willpower had been honed throughout the years with the police force and he managed well enough. He didn’t have long to wait, in any case. The camp around him was quiet, all he could hear was the moaning of the walkers beyond the fence. Maybe an hour had passed when Daryl started getting restless. He suddenly turned onto his back and Rick could see his head moving jerkily from side to side. He could also hear Daryl mumble something unintelligible.

Considering how to best wake the other man without startling him, Rick moved closer until he had
almost covered the gap between them. He refrained from touching Daryl, certain that the reaction
to that could only be violent. Rick kept his voice very low, whispering just a couple of words
when he was very close to the other man.

“Shh, Daryl…”

The hunter woke with a start, but the reaction was not as forceful as Rick had feared. He could
hear Daryl breathing heavily for a few moments, then the other man slowly calmed down. Rick
drew back. He gave Daryl another few moments before he asked quietly, “You ok?”

Daryl didn’t reply right away, but turned over to face Rick. His eyes were two pools of black in
the light of the banked embers.

“Yeah…” And after another moment, “Thanks, man.”

Rick smiled, not sure whether Daryl could see it. “Don’t mention it. Go back to sleep.”

He thought he could see Daryl frown. “You’re not, though…”

Rick hesitated, wondering whether to own up to the plan. He decided he better should. “Just for
tonight I’m staying awake, so you can get some sleep, Daryl. You’d do the same for any of us,
right?”

There was silence again. When Daryl spoke Rick could tell he was struggling with the kindness,
but trying to accept it. Some progress, he guessed. “S’pose so…” Then, after another pause,
“Thank you, Rick…”

On an impulse Rick reached out and squeezed Daryl’s arm. The other man’s expression didn’t
change, as far as Rick could tell in the gloom, and he didn’t pull away. Rick knew then that they
were definitely on the right path.
Rick and Daryl are growing closer.

Daryl looked around the cell, unconvinced. Sleeping in here would be like sleeping in a cage. Unlike the others he hadn’t minded very much when they had had to sleep out in the open during the winter, as long as it hadn’t been too cold. He had never liked being indoors much, and this very solid concrete prison block was already starting to weigh on him, making breathing difficult.

He was just about to turn and walk out of the cell, with half a mind to just drag a mattress out onto the first floor landing and camp out there, when Rick appeared on the stairs. Daryl thought the other man looked strained. He knew there had been words exchanged again between Rick and Lori earlier, and while nobody had been close enough to overhear everyone was able to guess that it hadn’t been a friendly chat.

Daryl wished he was the type to offer comfort to a friend who looked as miserable as Rick looked just now. Somehow, he never managed to find the right thing to say. Rick had been so kind, and the fact that Daryl was starting to feel more like himself was all thanks to the former cop. How he longed to be able to repay some of that debt. Instead, all he managed was a curt nod.

Rick stopped just outside the cell and took a deep breath. When he spoke his voice was so quiet Daryl had to step closer to hear him.

“I… Daryl, can I ask you a favor.”

Daryl frowned. What could he have to offer the other man? But he nodded.

“Course. What’s up?”

“Lori and I… We just can’t be together right now. Can I… can we share a cell?”

Daryl raised an eyebrow. Rick hastily carried on. “Sure, there are enough cells to go round so we don’t need to. But I thought, maybe, this could be good for both of us. I can wake you if you have a nightmare, and I…”

Rick broke off and Daryl suddenly realized how much saying this must have cost the other man. They were both not really the type to open up about their feelings, and for Rick to almost admit that he didn’t want to be alone at night was probably as hard as talking about his nightmares had been for Daryl.

Daryl looked at his friend with a peculiar feeling building in the pit of his stomach. He didn’t think Rick weak for admitting to his feelings. In fact, he felt suddenly very close to him. And there was something else, something… more. Daryl felt real tenderness for the man who was standing in front of him, eyes downcast, looking miserable and overwhelmed. He suddenly realized he would do anything to help Rick, to support him through the impossible tasks that seemed to be mounting higher for him day after day.

Still unable to voice most of this Daryl stepped aside and motioned Rick into the cell. He tried to
put some of his feelings into the tone of his voice on the few words he did manage, tried to let Rick know that whatever happened he’d be there to have his back.

“What a day it had been. There were the two former prisoners to worry about, then Hershel’s injury which had almost killed him, and all the rest of the renewed horror they’d all had to go through just to reach the end of the day. As Rick was washing away the blood and grime in the prison bathroom with water from the barrel T-Dog and Carol had set up in there all Rick wanted was to lie down on his bunk and sleep.

He had been very relieved that Daryl had agreed for them to share a cell. Rick hadn’t been sure he would, even with all the new trust between them. He could tell that Daryl was still far from well, and it was foolish to think that one good night’s sleep would fix everything Shane had broken in the man.

Thinking of his oldest friend who had betrayed them all so badly still made Rick angry. He should have stopped Shane hurting Daryl much sooner, should have noticed what was going on. Or at least he should now be able to tell Daryl once and for all that if anyone, it was he, Rick, who was to blame for what had happened, and to stop blaming himself.

But Rick still couldn’t address it. Couldn’t voice the terrible suspicion he had about just how far Shane had gone, how badly he had hurt Daryl. Every day that went by Rick felt more strongly that what Daryl needed was to hear precisely this, that he was not to blame, and that someone who knew what had happened still supported him, would to anything to keep him safe. And every day it became a harder and harder thing to accomplish.

As Rick was walking back to their cell and up the stairs he contemplated that there was more to it than that. Quite apart from wanting to help Daryl Rick had come to deeply care for the other man. He’d become used to spending time with Daryl and always looked forward to their shared outings. When he’d told Daryl that morning that he wanted them to share a cell for both their benefit that had been the truth. Daryl was the one constant in his life, it seemed, the person he could rely on to bring him back from rage, and from despair. Daryl’s calm and quiet world had become Rick’s safe haven, where he could be something other than the leader of their struggling band of survivors.

* Rick could see Daryl sitting at the small table in their cell as he climbed up the last steps. They’d have to hang something over the entrances to the cells, Rick realized, if they wanted any kind of privacy.

Daryl looked up from the fletches of a crossbow bolt he was mending. Rick saw the other man’s eyes soften for a moment, and a peculiar feeling started to form at the back of his brain. He smiled at Daryl as he stepped through the entrance into the cell.

"You all right?" he asked. Daryl nodded. "No injuries we missed earlier?"

Daryl got up, slotting the bolt back into place on his weapon.

"Nah, ’m good. Listen, man, maybe I should take first watch. Least keep’n eye on the Hershel situation..."

Rick shook his head. "It’s under control. Glenn and Carol got it, they insisted. You and I, we need
a rest. I need you fully back to normal, Daryl. One more good night, alright?"

The other man wasn't meeting Rick's eye, biting his lip. When he looked up his eyes belied his assent, but he nodded eventually.

"Alright..."

Daryl made to turn away, presumably to climb onto the top bunk which he'd claimed by spreading his possessions on it already. But Rick had something else on his mind, something to test out.

"Daryl..."

The hunter half turned back to face him, and Rick bridged the gap between them. His heart was hammering hard, but he felt compelled to say what had been on his mind for so long now.

"I just wanted to... say thank you. For being there like you are. Lori and the whole thing... It's been hard. But you've helped so much. You have no idea..."

Rick didn't understand later what had made him do it in the end, but he knew, with hindsight, what a risk it had been. He raised his right hand and, not breaking eye contact with Daryl, placed it around the other man's head, threading his fingers into Daryl's hair, resting his hand on the base of Daryl's neck. For a moment Rick was sure Daryl would draw away, and he could feel the rigidity in the hunter as he fought that impulse. Finally Daryl relaxed into the touch with a shuddering sigh. Rick's thumb started drawing gentle circles on the side of Daryl's throat of its own accord.

Their eyes locked they stood for what felt like an eternity. Rick could see Daryl's emotions reflected in his eyes, clear as day. He knew the other man was trying to convey some of what they now knew they both felt. Rick thought he could also detect a plea. For what? More time, perhaps, to get used to this?

"Rick..." Daryl's voice was husky. Rick thought there was more he wanted to say but couldn't quite manage.

At that moment there was a clattering on the stairs that brought their shared peace to an end. Rick looked towards the disruption distractedly, letting go of Daryl. Carol was peeking over the rim of the staircase.

"Sorry Rick. Could I..."

Rick glanced at Daryl, who had climbed onto the top bunk and had already turned his back on the room.

Rick sighed and went out of the cell to see what Carol wanted.
A week of calm had come to a brutal end. Daryl was stunned, numb as he'd never believed possible. And for once it had nothing to do with Shane, or the nightmares. Rick was missing, down in the bowels of the prison. Might as well be the dark side of the moon.

Daryl knew he would have to try and help, but the truth was that he was afraid. While the week had been restful and calm for most of their group his own newly-established calm had started to unravel quickly.

Rick had been busy so it hadn't been hard to hide that their arrangement made no difference. The nightmares were as bad as ever. After the two nights of enforced rest under Rick's vigilant eyes the discipline had slipped. Rick was too busy during the day to stay awake every night as well, so Daryl had insisted Rick get a decent night’s sleep. During their first night in the cell the nightmares really had not returned so Rick, exhausted, had been more willing to agree. Rick had slept that night, while Daryl lay awake, frightened and tense.

He'd lied every time since about it when Rick had asked him whether the nightmares had returned. They had, and they were worse than ever. In truth, Daryl had crept out of their cell every night as soon as he was sure Rick was asleep. He'd spent a lot of these nights as far away from the cell block as possible, out in the field. Here he slept some, secure in the knowledge that if he screamed nobody would hear him.

The dreams had changed. Where before he had relived Shane's abuse in detail every night now it was more a feeling of continual and unspecified horror that set in as soon as he closed his eyes. This, more than the fact of the dreams themselves, was what made Daryl reluctant to even attempt to sleep.

But nightmares, as bad as they were, were not his main worry. Even with Rick and the hope he had awoken Daryl had been unable to stop hurting himself even for a short period. The urge was simply overwhelming. His torso and legs were now a canvas of crisscrossing cuts and scars, and some of them had become badly infected. This was the main focus of his fear. Daryl knew he'd done himself real damage, and he was terrified because he didn't know what to do.

And now Lori was dead, and Rick had gone insane. This, Daryl knew, Rick could not struggle through alone. He had no choice but to try and help.

Daryl left the common area where everyone was crowding around the baby and walked down the
gloomy corridor to what they had come to call the dungeons. It was easy to follow the path Rick had taken. All Daryl had to do was follow the trail of dead walkers.

As easy as this was, the actual effort of the undertaking was considerable. Daryl felt light-headed from, he assumed, lack of sleep and the intense fighting earlier in the day, and each step caused an unpleasant burning sensation where his clothes brushed against the infected cuts. The worst and deepest damage was on his thighs, and Daryl could feel a worrying heat from the skin there even now.

Ahead Daryl saw a door that stood half ajar. There were bodies here everywhere, and Daryl thought Rick was most likely just beyond that door. He went over to it and pushed it open. At first he couldn’t see much of anything except several huge boiler tanks. There was a low, steady sound emanating from behind the contraptions, echoing strangely in this space. Daryl finally realized that it was a human sound and started towards the closest boiler, looking for the source of the noise.

Rick was crouched on the floor, head in his hands, pulling on his hair, rocking back and forth. Behind him Daryl could see a dead walker with a grotesquely huge belly. With revulsion he realized that that thing must have eaten Lori’s corpse.

Daryl could taste bile in the back of his throat and swallowed hard. He felt shaky and his legs seemed to be made of rubber. His instinct was to get out of there as quickly as possible, but he wouldn’t leave Rick here on his own. So he approached his friend where he was crouching on the floor, keeping his eyes averted from the monstrosity in the corner.

“Rick…”

Daryl never had a chance to say more, or get closer to the other man. With an unearthly cry Rick leapt to his feet and was on top of Daryl before the hunter even knew he’d moved. Daryl felt his back slam hard into the nearest machine, the air knocked from his lungs. The eyes that regarded him seemed no longer human, and they held nothing now of the man Daryl had come to consider a friend. They were feral and utterly insane.

Daryl suddenly felt very sick. The shock at Rick’s violent reaction and the pain it had caused were coursing through him like shards of glass, and his whole body felt numb and slack. Had Rick decided to do him serious harm now Daryl knew there would have been nothing he could have done to stop him.

But Rick didn’t even really seem to be aware of him. He stared unseeingly at Daryl for a moment, keeping him pinned to the machine with an iron grip. Then the pressure vanished as Rick let go and walked off quickly, deeper into the room.

“Get out…”

The voice was faint, both because Rick was walking away as fast as he could and because a loud rushing sound was starting to fill Daryl’s ears. He was sure for a moment that he would pass out right there. Eyes closed he leaned his head back against the machine Rick had slammed him into. Lights were dancing behind his eyelids and he slid down a few inches before he was able to catch himself.

Trying to slow his breathing down, and using all his willpower to keep from throwing up, Daryl finally managed to regain enough control to open his eyes. Not even contemplating going after Rick now he made his way back to the door, using the machines and the wall for support.

Daryl made his way back to the cell block slowly, almost blindly. His field of vision kept shrinking and the corridor was swaying weirdly beneath his feet. He staggered into the common
area, and the gate clanged shut behind him. If he could just get outside, get some air he was sure he’d be all right. With deliberate slow focus he made for the door.

He had almost reached the steps leading to the outside when Carol stepped through the gate that connected this ante-room to the main cell block and came towards him. Daryl could only make her out as a vague outline as she quickened her step to get to his side.

“What’s the matter?” Carol’s voice sounded very far away.

Daryl stopped at the foot of the stairs, one hand on the railing. All of a sudden climbing the stairs was too much of an effort. Shaking so much that he could no longer stay upright Daryl crumpled onto the steps. He could see Carol crouching by his side, but her face made no sense to him. She raised a hand and he flinched back, causing a sea of vertigo to engulf him.

“Don’t be silly,” Carol scolded and placed her hand on his forehead. ”You’re burning up. Since when have you been like this?”

Daryl could hardly follow the words, and had difficulty forming any of his own.

“D’anno…”

“Come on, we need you looked at…”

Carol straightened up. Daryl shook his head, but it was purely automatic. He felt too light-headed to form a coherent thought. He lowered his head, but the room kept spinning. Trying desperately to cling to consciousness he already knew it was no use. He heard Carol call for help as he felt himself tilt sideways. Then he knew nothing.

*

"Rick!"

He was shaken out of the daze that had settled on him like a blanket when he heard the desperate tone in Carol's voice. He focused his eyes on something outside his own horror for the first time in hours and saw Carol hurrying towards him. All his instincts screamed that something else, newly terrible, must have happened. Adrenaline rushed his system already overloaded with grief. What now?

"What is it?" He asked a breathless Carol. "The baby? Carl?"

"No. No they're fine. It's Daryl. When he came back from the dungeons he... He just collapsed. He's in a bad way, Rick, very bad..."

Rick's heart sped up a notch. "Where is he?"

Carol led the way over to her own cell, outside which most of the group stood, looking grave. They all moved out of the way as Rick approached. He saw that Beth was holding the sleeping bundle that was his daughter. Rick stopped briefly.

"She alright?"

Beth smiled. "She's perfect. Maggie and Glenn got formula for her. She's eating like a champ."

Rick looked at the baby, then said, "Thank you..."

His attention was drawn from the baby by a low moan coming from the cell. Rick stepped through
the door, taking in the scene.

Hershel was on a low stool by the bunk. His face looked grave as he listened to Daryl's chest with a stethoscope.

Rick’s eyes travelled from the old man to the figure on the bed. Daryl’s upper body was bare and what Rick saw took his breath away. He took a couple of steps towards the unconscious man, not even aware he was moving.

“What happened? What… what did this?”

Rick couldn’t take it in. Daryl’s abdomen and part of his torso were covered in deep cuts, some bleeding, some clearly infected. Pus was oozing from more than one place, and the thought that Hershel had probably just cut open the bigger areas of infection made Rick feel sick. Daryl’s body was rigid, every so often a shiver gripped him hard enough to make the bunks rattle against the wall. The unconscious man’s breath was shallow, his face paper white and covered in a thin sheen of sweat. The only color against the pillow was an unhealthy feverish glow in both cheeks.

Rick sank to his knees without thinking and took Daryl’s hand. It was ice cold even though Rick could tell that the rest of Daryl’s body radiated a furious heat. Rick looked at Hershel, his mind swimming with so much horror he couldn’t form any more words. Hershel indicated the cuts.

“All of these are self-inflicted,” he said in a voice that betrayed a deep sadness. “There are more, on his thighs and ankles. We’ve bandaged those. Some of them are even worse than the ones you can see.”

Hershel looked at Rick and his expression was of utter severity. “He’s developed sepsis, Rick. The fever has climbed so high he’s already had several seizures. There’s a real danger that his heart will give out, from the extreme drop in blood pressure.”

None of this really registered. Rick thought about the incident in the boiler room, which seemed hardly ten minutes ago, though he now realized it must have been hours. True, Rick had been in no condition then to notice anything odd about Daryl. It seemed he had failed to notice things for much longer than that, however. And he’d hoped so sincerely that Daryl had been steadily improving.

The guilt was overwhelming. First Lori had to die because Rick hadn't been man enough to stand by her in her hardest time. Now the only person who Rick had come to think of as his ally was dying, too. It was too much, he couldn't handle it. Rick slumped on the floor, despair washing over him. Tears were running down his face and he could hear a low moaning that started in his throat and grew louder and louder.

Hershel's hand came to alight on Rick's shoulder. "We are doing everything we can to save him, son. Maggie and Glenn are out now looking for more antibiotics, and IV fluid, to bring Daryl’s pressure up. For now we'll try and keep his fever under control."

Rick looked up. "What can I do?"

Hershel’s gaze fixed him with intensity. "Just stay here. Let Daryl know he's not alone in this. He needs to believe it."
He was floating on a lake of pain. Fire was raging through his organs, in every single cell. Blood was pounding so loudly he couldn’t hear himself think, even when coherent thoughts were getting though. And even here, now, the beast of panic, devouring him, laughing. Telling him he was nothing, a joke, disgusting. It would never stop, he was sure now. He could try and hold it at bay, but it would be there always, lurking, gnawing away at his heart. He would never be free.

Breathing was impossible. Too much effort, too painful. Like the air was made of phlegm, and his lungs were caught in an iron vice. The world was blinking in and out of existence. During a lucid period he thought he heard someone sobbing, and felt hands stroking his face. Always, always, the instinct to draw away. But now he couldn’t move. Was it Rick, by his side? A tiny hopeful sliver of a thought that made him feel strangely safe. Maybe if Rick was there he could help keep the monster away. But he couldn’t be sure, mustn’t rely on it, or anyone… or maybe he could. Maybe he’d try, yes…

Holding on to that thought as best he could Daryl drifted off into deeper sleep.

* 

A sleepless night turned into an endless day. There was much to do but the other’s kept Rick’s back free and took care of everything, so he could stay with Daryl. Hershel had impressed on all of them that even in a hospital, with the best care, Daryl’s condition was so serious there would have been a real danger of his dying. As things stood, it was a miracle he was still alive twelve hours after his collapse.

Glenn and Maggie had finally arrived back with some of the required medication and a small number of saline solution IV bags. Hershel’s face had creased in worry again when he held them in his hand and inspected each one carefully.

“‘We have no way of testing these for contamination. But we have no choice. Either we get Daryl’s pressure up, or he’s not going to make it. If these are contaminated he will most likely die. But without them he will definitely die. We can only hope…”

So they had hoped. And waited. Rick hardly moved from where he sat by the bedside, sometimes on the stool, sometimes on the floor. He kept replacing the wet cloth on Daryl’s forehead every few minutes, seemingly wiping away as much sweat as they could get fluids into the man. Daryl’s face was waxen and so still that Rick frequently felt for the other man’s pulse or watched for an intake of breath so intently he was holding his own.

Every few hours that stillness was rent apart by a sudden stiffening of Daryl’s whole body, and he started shaking hard enough to make his teeth chatter. This was followed by a period of restlessness, where Daryl tossed from side to side, moaning softly. Every one of these attacks was weaker than the previous one, but they quickly realized that this was no sign of improvement. Daryl’s energy was waning.
There had also been one more of the terrible seizures, which Hershel said were caused by the lack of oxygen delivery to the brain due to the low blood pressure, and the high fever. Daryl’s back had arched right off the mattress all of a sudden, his head snapping back. Rick could see the whites of his eyes under the not quite closed lids as his eyes had rolled wildly. Between them he and Hershel had had a hard time keeping Daryl from falling right off the narrow bed, so violent were the convulsions.

When the seizure had finally abated Rick had been horrified to see the real panic on Hershel’s face. He had placed a hand on the old man’s arm.

“What?”

The other man had looked at him for a long moment before speaking. “Rick, Daryl will not be able to withstand any more of these episodes. I am worried that brain damage has occurred already.”

Rick had looked down at the now still form in front of them. Daryl was entirely motionless, and he looked strangely diminished, lying twisted between the crumpled, sweaty sheets. He reminded Rick of a puppet whose strings had been cut, and he had wanted to run screaming from the cell. But he didn’t. Instead he had straightened out Daryl’s limbs, trying to make him comfortable. Lastly he had smoothed back some strands of hair that were clinging to Daryl’s brow, and had replaced the wet cloth. Then he had waited some more. Every time Daryl stirred after this Rick’s heartbeat had sped up, anticipating the next, and last, seizure. But it hadn’t come.

Finally, five or six hours after the IV fluids had been connected, the first break came. Rick had just returned from a trip to the bathroom, and to stretch his legs. Carol, who had stayed with Daryl while Rick was out of earshot, had left the two of them alone after Rick had reassured her that he was fine. As he looked down at Daryl Rick thought that his cheeks looked less flushed, his breathing seemed a little less shallow.

Rick took both Daryl’s hands in his, which had been alternating between freezing cold and much too hot throughout the night. They still felt warm, but nothing like as awful as before. With a small, hopeful flame burning in his chest Rick settled back down on the floor, to wait some more. He watched as the sweat dried on Daryl’s face, a semblance of normal color returned to it, and his breathing became more regular.

When Daryl relaxed into what seemed a more normal, deep sleep Rick put his head down onto the mattress by Daryl’s side. He was so exhausted that, despite the impossibly uncomfortable position, he was asleep in under a minute.
Chapter Summary

Things are getting better.

Carol had found Rick asleep on the floor of her cell in the early hours. He was slumped at an awkward angle half onto the mattress, his hands still intertwined with Daryl's. Neither of them looked like they were willing to let go any time soon.

She hesitated. Rick would be terribly sore come morning, but she was loath to wake him. What an ordeal the last couple of days had been.

And yet, here they were, these two, supporting each other. Badly, true. But they were both still alive, weren't they? And maybe these tragedies would be what finally brought them together.

Because Carol knew, together was what they should be. She had seen it coming for a long time. The moment hadn't ever been right, but maybe now it was. Of course, there was more that was holding them back. Holding Daryl back, to be precise.

Carol knew something awful had happened on the farm. They all knew it had something to do with Shane. Nobody had talked with her about it or, as far as Carol could tell, with each other. Their group wasn't like that, and anyway, this was no time nor topic for gossip. But everyone knew Daryl was suffering. Carol just wished somebody had realized sooner just how much.

She had helped Hershel clean up Daryl's wounds. The infections had been awful, making his skin mottled and puffy over large parts of his body. Hershel had said it was a small miracle that necrosis hadn't set in anywhere yet. The thought had made Carol feel like fainting herself.

But what had gotten to her most was the sheer number and extent of the cuts. How could Daryl have thought he deserved such severe punishment when he'd done nothing whatsoever wrong? Somewhere along the way Daryl had lost the sense for what was real and true, and Carol had a feeling that that had happened a long time ago.

And he wasn't the only one. Rick's reaction to his wife’s death had been understandable, but was it also excusable? That he'd gone off and left them all to deal with the newborn child? His newborn child, in all likelihood? And what about Daryl? What had happened down in the bowels of the prison? For Carol knew something must have happened to distract Rick so thoroughly he had completely missed how ill Daryl had been when he came looking for him.

Whatever it was that had transpired, Carol was certain Rick had not meant to hurt Daryl. She had watched them during the long winter, had seen how content they were when they were together, and how trying it had increasingly become for both men to be apart. Several times she had been on the verge of taking one or the other of them aside, giving them a little nudge, getting them to acknowledge their feelings for the other, before it might be too late to do so. Maybe it was too late now.

But they mustn't let that thought take root. As Carol was thinking this, still standing in the doorway and contemplating the two men currently sleeping peacefully, Rick started to stir. He straightened up, stretched and groaned. Carol was sure he must be feeling stiff all over. Rick
carefully replaced Daryl’s hands on top of the blanket, then turned around and spotted her. He gave a wan smile. Carol returned it, then motioned to Rick.

“A word?”

Rick nodded, looked back at Daryl, and pushed himself up. Carol turned and walked far enough from her own cell to make sure they wouldn’t disturb the sleeping man. She faced Rick who had followed her, noticing just how exhausted he looked.

“You need to take a break, or we’ll have two critical patients on our hands next.”

Rick raised an eyebrow, but gave a half smile. “That what you got me out here for?”

“Not entirely,” Carol smiled back. “I should have said this to you a long time ago, and considering how things stand, this might be the last opportunity… Talk to Daryl, Rick.”

“I am planning to,” Rick nodded. “Soon as he’s got his wits about him enough. I will make sure this stops. Whatever it takes, he will not hurt himself again.”

Carol gave him a long look, considering how far she thought she could push their leader in his current state. “Good. But that’s not all.”

Rick looked genuinely surprised. “What else is there? He needs to stop doing this. He almost died. He still might…”

Carol raised her hands. “I don’t disagree, Rick. But have you thought about why he’s doing this to himself?” Noting the look of pain and discomfort on Rick’s face she quickly continued, “Whatever it is that’s caused Daryl to self-harm didn’t just start with Shane. He’s done it before, I saw the old scars when I helped Hershel…”

She stopped, waiting for Rick to speak. “How do you know about Shane?”

“I don’t, not really. I just guessed.” Carol could see that Rick hadn’t quite worked out what she was getting at, so she tried to be very clear. “You need to talk about your feelings, Rick.”

A guilty expression appeared on Rick’s face. He didn’t say anything, just looked down at the floor. After a moment he nodded.

Heartened by this Carol pressed on. “He needs to hear it. Daryl needs to know how important he is to you. I know what it’s like, living with people who treat you like scum every single day of your life. After a while you start believing that’s what you are. Daryl will never guess what he means to you. It’s up to you to spell it out.”

She placed a hand on Rick’s arm, and he looked at her, eyes full of sadness, but determination slowly building, too. Carol smiled encouragingly.

“From what I’ve seen over these last few months, you will find that you’re not the only one holding feelings back.”

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Relief wasn’t strong enough a word. When it became clear towards morning that the danger had passed and Daryl would recover Rick left the cell block and walked down into the fields. There, in the high grass, he let his body go slack, hung his head.

For a moment he just stood still, eyes closed, letting the tension of days drain away, not feeling or
thinking a thing. Then it all caught up with him and he tipped his head back and let out a scream that travelled down towards the woods, finally getting swallowed up by the trees. On the way it got the walkers by the fence into a right state, but Rick ignored their increased groaning and scrabbling.

Rick no longer cared to keep his body from crumpling to the ground. He just kind of folded up on himself, hitting the grass hard, then let the tears take over. He sat like this for a long time, sobbing, letting it all flow through him and away, no longer holding back from the barrage of feelings that had built up. It felt cleansing and right, but it left him exhausted and with a headache.

When he eventually got back to the cell block at mid-day all was quiet. He knew everyone was keeping the noise to a minimum to make sure the convalescent remained undisturbed. Carol smiled at him from across the room. Rick smiled back warmly. He hadn’t forgotten their talk and was formulating a plan how to best act upon it as soon as possible.

Rick went over to the cell where he had left Daryl peacefully asleep a few hours ago. The sheet was down over the entrance and he pushed it aside. Inside Hershel was bent over the lower bunk. Rick stepped through the entrance and peered around the old man. Daryl was awake, but he wasn’t looking at Hershel, or him. The hunter kept his eyes averted, even as Rick drew closer and Hershel straightened up, stepping back. Rick looked at the old man with his eyebrows raised inquiringly. Hershel nodded at him.

“All’s as well as can be expected.”

With a last look at Daryl, who still refused to meet anyone’s eye, the old man withdrew. Rick stepped closer to the side of the bunk and crouched down.

“Hey.”

He kept his voice very quiet, and his eyes didn’t waver from the other man. He didn’t move, didn’t say anything for a while. Rick used the time waiting for Daryl to acknowledge him to assess the other’s condition. Daryl was still very pale, the ordeal he’d just been through clearly etched into the lines on his face. The uncharacteristic stillness in Daryl told Rick that his mind and body were utterly exhausted, and that a long recovery would require all their patience.

Eventually, Daryl’s eyes flickered over at Rick, even if just for a second. Progress. Rick shifted, bringing his face ever so slightly closer to Daryl’s.

“Now is no time for a big speech, or to talk all this through in detail. We will have to, but not now, you’ve been through enough… Daryl, I just wanted to say, you have no idea how glad I am that you came through this. I’ve been so scared…”

As he spoke Rick lowered his eyes. He wasn’t sure how long he would have before his emotions got the better of him again. He thought he could feel Daryl’s eyes flick over to him several times more, but didn’t look up for the moment. Instead, he closed his eyes and breathed deeply a few times, willing his feelings to stop their rollercoaster. Finally he looked back at Daryl, whose eyes met his.

The look Daryl gave him almost defied description. There was disbelief in the sky blue eyes that had not yet entirely lost their feverish gleam, but also a steadily growing glimmer of hope. Daryl never looked away, which surprised Rick more than anything. When Daryl spoke his voice was full of wonder.

“Y’stayed. Y’were here the entire time. Y’came back, and y’stayed. With me.”
Rick’s throat was so choked with emotion he couldn’t speak. Instead, he just nodded. He glanced down, considering the risk of this next move for a moment, then took both Daryl’s hand in his again. Daryl didn’t draw away.

Night fell outside. Inside it was quiet. The two men stayed motionless in the cell, not speaking. There was no need.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Things end on a hopeful note.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He just had to get out. Being cooped up inside for so many days had made Daryl more restless and less inclined to follow Hershel’s and Rick’s instructions than ever, which was unhelpful. So, on the first day that he felt like he could walk for more than ten yards without blacking out he had snuck away when nobody was looking. Now he was sitting at the table furthest away from the entrance to their block, and wasn’t sure he’d ever get back inside without help.

But he didn’t want to think about that. For the moment all he wanted was to sit here, feel the sun on his face and the wind all around. He yearned to be even further away from it all, out there in the woods, no concrete anywhere in evidence, and no soul far and wide, either living or dead. But that would take a long time yet. He’d hardly made it to this spot on his own, there was no way he would leave the prison and risk his life.

For Daryl no longer wanted to die. He had at one point, it was true. When the despair, the nightmares and the disgust with himself had settled over him like a suffocating blanket he had accepted the fact that by hurting himself, cutting into his body as deeply as he could bear, he risked infection, and death. Now he knew that there was a better way to deal with it, that he wasn’t alone with the pain. That Rick was there for him.

As if on cue the door to their cell block opened and Rick appeared. He looked around, and when he spotted Daryl he started to walk over with a determined stride. His face displayed exasperation when he came near enough for Daryl to see him properly.

“Really, man, did you have to sneak off like that? We’re all worried sick.”

Daryl felt a stab of remorse. Maybe he should have said something to someone. It was still hard for him to remember that people actually cared.

“Wanted some fresh air, was going crazy. Guess I should’ve said…”

Rick gave a deep sigh. “Yeah, you should have… remember for next time, alright?”

There was a pause. Rick looked a little hesitant, and Daryl knew it was on him to make the next move. It cost him something to overcome his usual reticence, but he knew he had to, if he wanted things to change for good. He motioned to the seat next to him on the bench.

“Come and sit?”

Rick looked surprised, but gratified. He stepped around to Daryl’s side quickly and slid onto the bench. For a while they sat quietly, but it wasn’t an uncomfortable silence. After a few minutes Rick moved closer and their arms and legs touched.
Daryl let himself relax into the sensation. He had not enjoyed being touched in longer than he could remember. His experiences before the world ended had never taught him how to let himself place trust in others, and since what Shane had done to him so much in Daryl had felt broken, he would have never believed that physical closeness with another person would ever bring him pleasure again. But, to his surprise, having Rick close was not only a pleasure, it was something Daryl was starting to actively crave.

He knew he owed it to Rick to open up about what had happened, and he wanted to tell him, he really did. It was the only way for them to move forward. Daryl looked down on his hands as they lay clasped on the concrete slab that served as a table. He wished he had a cigarette, but he’d run out before they got to the prison. He took a deep breath, and could feel Rick’s eyes alight on him. He didn’t look up.

“Carol is right, y’know. There’re things t’say. ‘m just not so good at it, ‘s all…”

Rick didn’t reply when Daryl stopped, just leaned into him a little more firmly. Daryl was sure Rick was still looking at him. He closed his eyes and continued.

“Whatever y’might imagine Shane did, he did all of that, ‘n worse. ‘twas no real surprise. ‘m used t’it. My pa, an’ Merle… Point ‘s, I never thought’d matter much. ‘d just’ ge’ on wi’t. But this time, I coudn’… ‘t got too much…”

Still Rick didn’t say anything. Daryl was both glad he didn’t, and nervous. Rick would have known what words to use, how to make it sound right, how to be understood. He kept his eyes closed, feeling wretched. He wanted, he needed Rick to understand. He needed Rick. It was that simple. And at the same time it was incredibly complicated. For Daryl had no idea if he’d ever be able to be with another person, the way he craved to be with Rick, and, he had a feeling, Rick wanted to be with him. How could he explain that that’s what he wanted more than anything, and it frightened him out of his mind.

When Rick spoke it was so quietly Daryl thought at first he wasn’t speaking at all.

“Nothing like this will ever happen again. Nobody will ever hurt you while I’m alive, while we’re together. Shane did a terrible thing, and I will never forgive myself that I didn’t stop him. But Daryl, none of this is your fault, you didn’t do anything to deserve what he did to you. Or your pa, and Merle…”

Rick took a deep breath before continuing. “I want to be with you, Daryl. Whatever that’ll mean, I don’t know. I get it, that you can’t do what we both want so much. And if that’s permanent, so be it. It doesn’t matter. Whatever anyone thinks together means, I don’t care. I only care about one thing: You are here, with me. This is where I need you to stay, always. Nothing can change that.”

Daryl opened his eyes and glanced up. The look Rick gave him confirmed everything he had just heard, and more. There was a gentleness in Rick’s blue eyes that Daryl had never felt before from anyone. There was also a question, a small one to which he knew the answer right away. Daryl nodded.

And then Rick kissed him. It wasn’t a passionate kiss, but it wasn’t chaste, either. It was gentle enough to keep Daryl from feeling any fear, but it was so full of love he knew that nothing could now come between him and Rick.

No nightmares would ever truly be able to touch him now. No violence they might encounter could ever really hurt them. Life would be hard, and there would be violence and hate and nightmares aplenty. But as long as the two of them stood together, and always had each other’s back, nothing could be as bad as what lay behind them both.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you, everyone, for your amazing feedback! I enjoyed writing this story very much, and I hope you liked the ending. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!