

CHAPTER 17: COUNTRY CLUBBIN' OR THIRD DEGREE WHISKEY BURNS

After walking north for half a mile, Erik set his bags down on the roadside to pull up his Pip-Boy and review a map of the area. He scrolled around on his Pip-Boy as Rush and Jenkins took in the wild scenery. They were just currently behind a bunch of oddly shaped hills, west of a clubhouse. Erik hoped it would be a good place to crash. If they were lucky, they could use it to bunker down for the week and avoid unexpected company.

The three men moved Eastbound, over the numerous sloping hills and pits of sand in near silence. Although no one spoke, Rush constantly bombarded Erik mentally with an endless inquisition. "What is this place? Where are we? How far are we from your home? Does the outside always smell like this? What are those things in the sky? Why kind of trees are those? Is this crunchy green stuff grass? Why are there little lakes of dirt? What's making that sound? What's making /that/ sound?" Erik dutifully answered every question, but was working up a headache from the mental exhaustion. Erik rubbed his forehead as he stopped to turn toward Jenkins. They rounded from the battered and scarred road onto a gravel driveway leading to the club. "You recognize any of this?" Jenkins slowly shook his head. "Naw, too young back then." They were surrounded by pine trees, thick underbrush, crickets, and a dark, cloudy sky. It was quite eerie to Rush as he'd never experienced the kind of darkness and strange sounds that accompany a thick, overgrown, wild pine forest with the looming threat of rain.

By the time the trio had trudged through the thick grass surrounding the forgotten gravel drive and arrived at the rusted wrought iron fence and matching gate, Rush was violently shivering. The ambient pressure had dropped and a fierce wind picked up, foretelling a severe storm was en route. Erik sat his bags down and shoved his shoulder into the ten foot tall gate, forcing it open with a loud metal-on-metal squeal. He turned around to gather his things and noticed Rush. "What's amatter, big guy?" Erik asked. He replied in a near whisper, "Too quiet." "Whatcha mean 'too quiet'? Plenty of things to hear," Jenkins replied and readied himself to list them but paused instead. Rush was right, it was awfully quiet; the legions of grasshoppers they heard coming in seemed to have all disappeared. "Huh, I guess they didn't wanna get wet" he muttered to himself. A few moments later a barn owl screeched off in the woods.

Rush involuntarily jumped at the screech. He spun around to meet Erik's bemused gaze. "Can we go in?" he pleaded. Erik chuckled in response and led them through the

gate, across the weed-filled green and into the dark and dilapidated country club. In its heyday, the country club was a prime example of colonial architecture: cozy and inviting with perfectly white columns and molding. Now, it was heavily weathered and looked like a good, strong wind could knock it down. Incidentally, that's what Jenkins was doing: putting his size twelve boot to a set of wooden doors. Once the lock was busted, they slowly made their way in to see a great room that was surprisingly intact.

A couch and chairs crowded around a dirty fireplace that was monitored by the disembodied heads of a pair of bucks and a brown bear. A square table and chairs were overturned and clustered near ceiling-to-floor windows on the western wall of the great room. The opposite side had matching windows, half of them were cracked and stained. They were guarded by a free-standing bar and matching stools. Most of the liquor had long been enjoyed, but a few full bottles of whiskey and wine were scattered about on the bar, all covered with a layer of fine dust.

Erik shined his Pip-Boy around, trying to get an idea of their environment, but two steps in, and he quickly tripped over one of the overturned chairs near the square table. "Aw, shit," he exclaimed as he quickly found himself falling. Jenkins laughed at Erik's misfortune as both he and his bags bounced off of the pine board floor. Erik jumped up immediately, fully embarrassed, and rubbed his quickly swelling face. "Shut up, and help me get this place together," he yelled at Jenkins.

Jenkins chuckled to himself as he carefully made his way to the fireplace. After tossing his package onto the sodden hearth, he quickly offered Erik a hand: he begrudgingly accepted. After hoisting Erik up, everyone agreed to split up and put their new headquarters into order. As Rush placed his share of their guns and miscellaneous items on the square table next to the Eastern windows, a streak of lightning flashed across the sky. It light up the deserted country club, casting grotesque shadows across the room. Rush fell back with a startled yelp. He stared wide-eyed through the dirty and cracked windows as the lightning skittered across the sky again. Rush was terrified, "What?! Wh..wha...was that?!" A booming clap of thunder crashed before Erik could answer. Rush began whimpering as he fell to the ground and darted under the strong oak table and curled into a ball on the floor. Erik rushed over from his post near the hearth and joined him on the ground.

Rush whimpered loudly between the echoing thunder overhead, "what is happening? Are we...okay?" Another crash of thunder followed immediately by multiple ribbons of lightning cut the sky into contrasting abstract shapes. Erik petted him gently, "you're fine, it's just a thunderstorm. Perfectly fine. We're fine. Just gonna be a

nice light show an'," he paused just as the rain began to patter and bounce off of the scarred tin roof, "we may get wet." Erik attempted to persuade Rush out, but he refused to abandon his spot on the floor. "Must be a helluva experience, seeing a storm for the first time," Erik thought to himself. This particular storm seemed to be doing it's best to introduce Rush to the world above.

Jenkins carried on reassembling the great room as Erik was doing his best to calm a quivering Rush. After making his way across the room by dim flashlight, Jenkins located the bar and decided that a hard drink should help calm everyone's nerves. Peeking behind the bar to take stock, he quickly yelled through the darkness, "we got wine and," he squinted at the faded label on a bottle of yellowed liquid, "looks like whiskey. How's that sound?"

Erik yelled back in response, "Yeah. That'll help. A couple'a fingers please, thanks." Jenkins replied by deftly sloshing the amber liquid into three stained glasses, placing the flashlight in his mouth, and carefully walking across the warped floor to his comrades under the table. After bending down and spitting his flashlight onto the floor between them, he smiled sympathetically and said, "this'll make you feel better, big guy." Another resounding report of thunder and lightning issues from the sky, forcing Rush to yelp again. Jenkins reached up to place the bottle of whiskey above them on the table, well out of their ability to spill it. Jenkins sat down with a grunt on the rough pine floor and nudged Erik and Rush with their own tumblers of whiskey. Erik gladly accepted his as Rush continued to whimper with each rumble of thunder and flash of lightning. Jenkins gently nudged Rush's forehead with the tumbler again.

He looked up at the gentle man poking him in the head with glassware and felt wholly ashamed of his childish behavior. He made a concerted effort to whimper less as each report of thunder crashed above. A few minutes later, and he was upright and slowly sipping on the dusty glass of alcohol, much to Erik and Jenkins' relief. After he'd choked down about half of his drink, he felt much better and decided to show his gratitude by licking them both.

Erik smiled and ruffled Rush's head fur before sliding out from under the table, drink in hand. Jenkins grimaced as he wiped the saliva from his forehead. The wind-driven rain that was browbeating the tall windows to their backs forced a sigh out of Erik; he sincerely hoped this storm would hurry up and get a move on. He didn't like the idea of having a grown man scared senseless underneath a table on his first day on the surface. He wasn't mad at Rush by any means, he was embarrassed for him, sympathetic. Erik's tiny sigh escaped and dissolved into the humid air as he thought

back to Rush, "Don't worry, just enjoy your drink and try to relax, brother. It'll get easier, you know, maybe you'll even learn to like it. I love when it rains; everything's fresh and clean and not hot as balls. It's even better at night, like now, makes it easy to sleep."

Rush nodded and tipped up his whiskey, coughing and sputtering at the end. Jenkins chuckled, "bit strong, eh? Enjoy it while you can. We don't often get a chance to drink freely like this." Rush blinked away a tear caused by the searing alcohol and nodded, "refill?" Jenkins laughed. "Bet you got a constitution like your brother there; that kid can drink anyone 'cept Frank under the table." As soon as those words escaped, he chuckled and elbowed Rush "Ha! Under the table! /We're/ under the table." Rush smiled, forcing a bit of color into his cheeks and humor into his mood.

Erik chuckled at the two men who were themselves chuckling as he dug around in his bag for something to start a fire. The wind picked up again, howling through the pines and lashing at the windows. Failing to find anything, Erik decided that now was a good a time as any to wander off and investigate the remainder of the country club as Jenkins and Rush continued their conversation. Jenkins reached around the top of the table to locate the whiskey bottle. After knocking it to the ground and retrieving it, Jenkins patted Rush on the thigh and refilled Rush's tumbler. "Y' know, these storms aren't all that bad. Lots of blowin' and goin'," he paused to take a long sip of his drink, "nothin' to be worried 'bout. An' don't let anyone tell you any old wive's tales 'bout the devil beatin' 'is wife or whatever just because it's rainin'."

Maybe it was because Rush just finished his second tumbler of whiskey, but he was confused by Jenkins' explanation, "who's that and why would he beat his wife? What does that have to do with rain?" Jenkins sipped his whiskey, "You never heard'a the devil? Mean sum'bitch. Makes ya do evil deeds, or so the old wive's tales go. Idle hands an' all that. Anyway," he took another sip, "the tale goes that one bluebird day, devil's wife messed up real bad in the kitchen. He decided to teach 'er a lesson with 'er own cookin' pan. She started cryin', you know, 'cause she's getting beat. With a pan." Jenkins stopped to finish his drink and refill it. "Long story short, when it rains heavy like it is now, and it's a bright day out, the folks down here say he's beatin' his wife with a fryin' pan."

Rush shook his head, he was at a loss of words, the story he just got made no sense. Jenkins sat silently nursing his drink, "what 'bout y'all?" Rush raised an eyebrow and sipped his drink, "who?" "Tell me 'bout 'em, your folks. You got parents, ain't ya?" Rush chugged the remainder of his drink and gently placed the empty tumbler by

the bottle. "No, not parents like you have. Clan raises everyone. Aunts, uncles, parents, grandparents, cousins, bothers, sisters, all help. All have tasks. All designed by our grandfather, started experimenting for the Army; making stronger soldiers for the war." Rush picked up his glass and tried to drink from it, but it was empty. Jenkins quickly filled up the glass to the brim for him.

Rush took a long draw from his nearly overflowing glass, making his lips tingle and go numb. "Wanted to make your kind," Rush pointed at Jenkins with a wavering clawed index finger, "humans, more...better." Rush returned to nursing his whiskey. Jenkins laughed at the giant werewolf next to him who was rapidly getting tanked. Rush took another sip and started chuckling himself. Before they knew it, but were both laughing aloud. They got so loud and boisterous, they caught Erik's attention from the dusty library that held his attention captive. The sight of two drunk men stumbling around and laughing was heartwarming: maybe getting a large werewolf sloshed wasn't the best idea, but it was exactly what Rush needed. He wasn't afraid of the storm anymore and even seemed to be coming out of his shell.

Ducking back into the library, Erik continued his search as he thought aloud, "well, at least there's lots of old books here. The scribes'd murder me if I burned up any good ones." As he pulled scattered books off of the grand floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that surrounded stained glass windows, he tossed them into piles on the floor. "Burnt. Shit. Good. Burnt, moldy, burnt, useless, useless, useless, good, good, burnt. Burnt. Burnt. Burnt. Burnt. Burnt. Burnt. Shit. Burnt. Who the hell keeps burnt books?!" He continued sorting for ten minutes until he heard a loud crash from the great room. A streak of lightning flashed across the sky, lighting up the library in strange colors.

He peered through the small crack between the double doors that separated the great room from the library, his 10mm at the ready: he couldn't see well through the darkness, but he did hear Jenkins and Rush laughing madly. Erik poked his head fully through the doors and yelled, "Hey! Anyone bleeding in there?" For a moment, Rush and Jenkins were dead silent until Rush hiccupped loudly, refreshing their laughter. "Damn, you two," Erik snarled under his breath as he tucked his sidearm away and turned to resume his task. He halfheartedly kicked at a haphazard stack of burnt books on the ground. "Let's get a fire goin' damn it, I'm hungry." Erik hoisted up a stack of useless books and kicked a door open to make his way out of the library. He paused to look around for his two companions, but they were nowhere to be seen. "Guys?" No response. Erik reached out to find Rush's mind, "where are you?" Rush was so drunk, he couldn't think straight enough to reply properly, but he did manage to send a single word back to Erik through the drunken haze in his mind: "trees."

"Trees?" Erik replied in question, "what about 'em? Are you outside? You're not scared? Wet?" Rush nodded physically, but neglected to respond mentally. A sloshed Jenkins watched an even more drunk Rush with wonder, "watcha noddin' for?" Rush slurred, "talkin' t' Erik." Jenkin laughed, "Nuh uh. He's not out 'ere." Rush shook his head and poked his forehead. "In 'ere." Jenkins slapped Rush on his back so hard, he nearly knocked him off of the ancient wooden bench they were sitting on. Rush managed to prevent most of his remaining whiskey from escaping, but growled a drunk and unconvincing threat to Jenkins: it was hard to be scary and hiccup at the same time.

"You're crazy, Rush. Can't talk t' people in your head," Jenkins laughed. Rush nodded roughly in response. "Can too. See?" Rush squinted at Jenkins and yelled at Erik mentally, "See Jenkins!? I'm talking to Erik!" Erik entire head vibrated as Rush's drunken mind trounced around in his own. Erik yelled aloud, "Why are you yelling," shaking his head clear of Rush's distraction. Erik began fighting to rip the books loose of their bindings and toss them into the pit of the fireplace. Half way through the stack, Erik realized he didn't have any way to light the fire. "Damn it," he muttered and sighed. "Where are you two?" he thought back to Rush. Rush yelled aloud in response, "outside! It's ringing!!" Jenkins laughed as he corrected him, "Raining Rush, not ringing. Why're you yellin'?" Rush corrected himself, "raining!" They both continued to watch as the rain sheeted down in front of them from their perch on the weather-beaten oak bench under the safety of the tin roof overhanging the porch.

Rush blinked unevenly and growled playfully at Jenkins who stopped laughing to turn and imitated Rush's growl. That was an invitation to grapple him out of the bench they were sharing. They both laughed as they fell to the pine porch and rolled around, wrestling. Erik heard the heavy thud of two grown men trashing around and followed the raucous sounds to the northern windows.

After wiping away some dirt and grime from one of the more intact windows, he laughed aloud, watching them clumsily flail around, attempting to top one another. Rush ended up sitting on Jenkins for a moment before he fought free, spun around, and jumped on Rush's back. Rush began bucking around wildly, trying to fling the grown man off of back. Erik chuckled to himself as he turned back to his previous task of lighting the fire. "Well, maybe I can find something in there," he thought to himself while looking southward toward the opposite pair of doors that flanked the fireplace.

After making his way across the wrecked room, he slowly pushed the door open and peered inside, doing his best to get his Pip-Boy to shine some light in a useful direction. Three sets of doors matching the ones he was peering through greeted him. "That one should go back out to the porch," he mumbled to himself as he glanced at the western doors. "Oh, cool." Erik said lamely as he just discovered a nondescript bathroom through the eastern door. After glancing around momentarily and finding nothing of interest, he decided to investigate the remaining set of doors to the south.

Prying this pair of grand oak doors granted him access to the remains of a kitchen. Back in its day, it would have been quite nice: floor and ceiling cabinets, an island, and not one, but two refrigerators! "Gotta be some matches or a striker 'round here," Erik muttered as he began sifting through drawers. The storm outside intensified as Erik continued his search. He paused to peer through a cracked window overlooking the deep stainless-steel sink; the rain seemed to be getting out of hand: the wind-driven rain seemed to be going sideways. "This is stupid," he complained after his fifth drawer of rubbish. "Not even a damn bottle cap." He'd cleared the entire floor's worth of cabinetry before starting on the ceiling cabinets. The second one he opened above the sink rewarded him: some power cells and two boxes of kitchen matches. "Sweet!" As he reached up to grab his loot, lightning flashed outside, lighting up the pine forest and creating unnatural shapes and shadows in the distance.

Erik involuntarily shuddered and snatched up the matches without a second thought. Slamming the cabinet door, He hastily made his way through the foyer, into the great room and halted immediately at the threshold and laughed at the scene before him. Jenkins and Rush had wrestled and roughhoused their way back into the country club, sopping wet and covered in mud, Rush even had pine needles sticking out of his fur coat. "What're you two doing?" Erik laughed. Jenkins shrugged from atop Rush's back and replied, "havin' fun," with a slur. "Good," Erik replied, "you two work up an appetite yet?"

Rush threw Jenkins off of his back at the mere thought of food. "Yes, brother," Rush slurred, "hungry." Jenkins picked himself off of the floor with a groan. "Damn it, boy. Gotta gimme warnin' nex' time." Jenkins grunted again and punched Rush in the arm, with a light laugh. Rush punched him back and snapped his strong jaw shut with a loud snap. Jenkins stopped laughing and wavered on his feet, "whas that all 'bout?" Rush stopped, matched Jenkins' wavering and shrugged, "same to us." Jenkins looked sluggishly to Erik who matched Rush's shrug. "Dunno what he's on about."

Jenkins reached up to Rush and gently grabbed his large triangular furred ears, pulling him down to his face. "What. Are. You. Talkin' bout, you crazy wolf man?" Rush blinked unevenly and licked Jenkins' face and forehead with a wide grin, catching the young man off guard. He stumbled back and wiped the slobber off of his forehead with his forearm, staring agape at a smiling Rush. "Playing, like you," Rush explained.

Erik was fighting with the old matches as he listened to the two men chatter: "Why you lickin' everyone?" "Sign of gratitude, respect, camaraderie, appreciation." "That's weird, what are you French?" "No? I'm Rush." "Nevermind, lickin' people's weird. Stop it." "No." "Yeah. Stop it." "No." "Yeah, stop." Rush started laughing and licked Jenkins again. "Ew," Jenkins laughed, "you got my eye! You licked my eye! I felt your tongue. On. My. Eye!" Erik laughed again, "why are you licking people's eyes, Rush?" Rush shrugged again, "he put it in my way." Erik chuckled to himself as the whistling wind caught his attention: it had shifted north. Hopefully that storm would dissipate quickly.

When Erik's fifth kitchen match sparked, he tossed it onto the pile of gutted tomes and watched as flames greedily ate the old, dry books. "Finally," Erik muttered. Rush noted the warm light from the fire and turned to see that Erik was successful. "fire, brother?" Erik nodded. "Yup, fire." Rush and Erik stared at the dancing flames momentarily before Rush's stomach began grumbling. Erik's and Jenkins' both followed suit. Erik whispered, "somethin' about fires, huh?" Rush nodded in agreement as he and Jenkins walked over from their previous position near the doors leading out to the porch, "beautiful." They both continued staring until Jenkins cleared his throat, "got wood?" "What? Wood?" Erik asked. Rush looked down and replied, "no. Why?" "No, dumb ass," he slapped Rush on the back, laughing. "Those books ain't gonna last long enough to cook with." Rush chuckled awkwardly, "ah hah. *Wood.*"

Erik shook his head and snorted, "Uh, hey, Rush? See if you can find something better to burn, maybe a broken chair or table or somethin'?" Rush blinked then nodded and wandered off as requested. Jenkins stared at the books as they curled and turned black in the fireplace, "go give 'em a hand, I'll get dinner goin'." Erik nodded silently as he clapped Jenkins on the back and went to accompany Rush.

Tracing Rush's muddy paw prints into the kitchen, Erik found Rush rummaging through one of the two refrigerators. "Anything good?" Startled, Rush jerked up and smacked his head on the frame of the refrigerator. "Ow!" he growled. "No, this one is broken. Hot soda and beer." Erik nodded, "that's normal. Grab 'em anyway. We'll make

do." Rush nodded and emptied the refrigerator onto the island. Erik opened the other refrigerator and was surprised, it was still running! The refrigerator's yellow light lit up the kitchen like a flare. "More soda. What's this," he handed a mysterious bottle to Rush who sniffed it. Rush grimaced and squinted at the bottle, it was labeled "XXX". Erik shrugged and sniffed it, "damn! That's awful stuff."

Erik sniffed the bottle again and poured it down the nearby sink. "There, no worries. Keep lookin' around here, I'm gonna go this way," Erik said as he gestured South. Rush waved him off as he stuck his head in the second refrigerator to sniff around. Erik walked to the back of the kitchen and exited through the battered screen door to the porch. He stopped once he was on the porch and took a deep breath. "Fresh, clean air. Beats being cooped up in some old facility," he thought to himself.

Jenkins nudged the tarp envelope encapsulating the venison between himself and the fireplace. Some of the blood that had leaked out sizzled and bubbled at it cooked. "'Ere we go. Need something fireproof, I guess." He looked around and located a nearby fire poker, "perfect." After a few misplaced stabs, he had a makeshift skewer prepared and wedged it into some hooks in the fireplace. Jenkins sat there for what seemed like hours, turning the meat. After hearing the other two mumble and the bang of a screen door, he grew tired of waiting. "We're not gonna eat tonight if this keeps up," he mumbled aloud to himself. Weaving his way through derelict furniture by the beam of his flashlight and the warm fire, Jenkins found the bar just as he'd left it earlier: dusty and nearly barren. He ducked behind it to find another bottle of wine to match the one he'd left on the bar as well as a half-full bottle of vodka and another full bottle of whiskey that he'd missed earlier. "Heh, jackpot."

After gathering his loot on the bar top, Jenkins realized there was a surprising amount of debris underfoot. He inspected further and noticed a faint, flickering green glow under some of the broken pine boards. "th' hell's this?" He yanked some of the loose boards free and tossed them over the bar toward the fire, some bounced off of the furniture and spun off into the darkness. Seven boards and three splinters later, Jenkins was greeted by an ancient safe. "Ah, shit. I can't do anything with that," he grumbled and gave it swift kick. Shaking his head, he stood up, rounded up his various bottles of booze, and walked back to the hearth, kicking loose pine boards along the way. "'ll bug Erik 'bout it later...," he thought aloud as he haphazardly stacked pine boards atop the glowing remains of the books.

Rush rubbed his sore head and gently closed the refrigerator while humming happily to himself. Both his buzz and the rain were wearing off. After another cursory look

through the kitchen, he decided to see if Erik had found anything. He was quickly underwhelmed: Erik had found an old ammo box with a paltry handful of .44 rounds and a single micro fusion cell. Rush walked to the edge of the porch near Erik and peeked out from under the tin roof to catch some of the last raindrops on his tongue. Erik patted him on the back, "enjoy it, big brother. We don't get a lot of down time 'round here." Rush nodded and spoke to him mentally, "I understand. You all seem much more battered and streetwise than your age would lead me to imagine. It must be quite difficult surviving up here." Rush paused and inhaled the mixed scent of petrichor and pine, deeply relishing it. "Do you think I can help? Why did the elder send me up here? Why couldn't you just stay down with us?"

Erik continued absentmindedly patting him as they both stared off into the darkness of the pine forest, "I guess our elders decided you'd be more use to us up here than me to y'all down there. What good would I be down there? I can't scout or scavenge or anything. Y'all had everything you could want: shelter, food, warmth..." Rush nodded, "we're spoiled." Erik shook his head, "I dunno about spoiled, I'd say lucky. There's other places in the wastes like your home called vaults. People flocked to 'em before the Great War. Promised to care for people, feed 'em, keep 'em safe and whatnot; turns out most of 'em were experiments. The folks like the Enclave experimented on people when they needed protection the most." Erik's patting was getting erratic and harsh, forcing Rush to turn and grab his arm. "Rough, brother," he mumbled. Erik replied with a slight tremble to his voice, "sorry. Just makes me so mad when I think 'bout it. How could someone abuse people like that? Experimented on 'em, played mind games, turned 'em against each other, an' for what? Social research?"

Rush shrugged, "we're experiments too." Erik sighed and nodded, quietly responding, "yeah... I still don't think that's sunk in all the way yet." Rush tilted his head, "why not? We are living proof." He began to point out their similarities in structure: their wild "head fur" with identical cowlicks, their facial structure, their high cheekbones, bushy eyebrows, long legs, and alcohol tolerance. Erik argued back, "but I'm not a giant werewolf, Rush. I'm not built for strength, I'm short and scrawny and good with guns. I don't have long canines, I don't have claws, I can't fix people, just things, and I don't have yellow eyes. They're grey." Rush shrugged, "no matter," he thought to Erik, "I brought some materials you may like to read. Some of grandfather's books, notes on holotape. Interesting at the least, if you like science."

Erik rubbed his face and nodded, "yeah...Sure. I'll give it a shot later. Let's uh, let's go see how Jenkins' fairing: we'll get a bite to eat, work on our plan of

attack for tomorrow, probably drink s'more, then hit the hay." "Okay, brother," Rush grumbled as he ruffled Erik's hair. They stood watching the rain fade into oblivion for a long time before going back in to check on Jenkins.

His fire-induced hypnosis was broken when Erik and Rush barged through the double oak doors from the foyer. "Ah! Hey you two. Y'all get lost?" Jenkins queried as he raised his drink to their arrival. Erik and Rush simultaneously shook their heads, "no," Erik replied, "got distracted by the rain. I think it's about done out of here." Jenkins smiled, "good. Good. Y'all hungry?" Again, they nodded in unison. Rush started rapidly sniffing the wafting venison, forcing long ropey strands of saliva to stream from his pink lolling tongue and land on his chest. "Very hungry," he drooled.

Jenkins pointed them to the overstuffed couch that faced the fire to his right from his overstuffed chair. Rush collapsed onto the left side near Jenkins as Erik meandered around looking for his glass of whiskey. "Hey Jenkins, where's my whiskey?" He hiccupped in response, "drank it. You abandoned it, that's alcohol abuse, young man," Jenkins replied mockingly. "Yeah, yeah. You're right. Sorry. Now, where's my glass? I've got a thirst to quench." Rush leaned over toward Jenkins, "mine too, please." Jenkins got up with a grunt and reached up to the mantle above the fireplace. After grabbing and filling two glasses to the brim with ancient Whiskey," Jenkins passed them around before refreshing his own and took a long sip.

Erik managed to get the fire poker loose without dropping it on the dirty hearth and ripped a large chunk of venison off for Jenkins, then himself. He saved the largest piece for Rush, who was more than happy to accept it. They all munched in silence, except Rush, who was voraciously inhaling the protein and washing it down with the sharp whiskey. He inhaled an entire two-pound piece in under five minutes. Jenkins and Erik looked at each other, then back to Rush who was busy sucking the last juicy remnants of venison from his fingers and claws.

Rush ignored the alarmed stares from his comrades as he stretched out to wiggle his toes in front of the fire. The black claws on his toes that weren't still covered in grime glistened in the firelight. Erik caught himself staring as he savored his venison: Rush was right, they were pretty similar in build, even if Rush was a good half-foot taller than him. Erik silently chuckled around a mouthful of venison, Rush *did* have the same damn cowlick he did. Rush felt curious eyes on him, but ignored them for the moment, the fire demanded his complete attention.

Erik wasn't the only one inspecting Rush, Jenkins was as well. "Hey," Jenkins slurred, "Rush. You an' him really kin? Y'all look an awful lot alike, but kinda don't too." Rush nodded at the fire. "Yes. Is that bad?" "Nah, just weird." Erik took another bite before turning to look at Jenkins, "whadda mean, weird?" Jenkins shrugged as he took another long sip of whiskey, "you ain't got any doggie bits on ya. He's a giant dog with people bits. Jus' weird's all. Y'all do have the same damn crazy hair though. How'd y'all get it to stick up like that?" They both shrugged and Erik responded, "just does. Always has." "Come t' think of it," Jenkins continued, "y'all hair the same color. Mostly." They both nodded, "yup. Anything else, Capitan obvious," Erik remarked. Jenkins laughed, "dunno. Hope he don't get all excited over girls like you do, th' boy don't wear clothes. Gonna be awkward." Erik blushed and looked back toward the fire.

Rush turned to question Erik mentally, "what does he mean, brother?" Erik responded in the same manner he was questioned, "uh. Well. Sometimes I see a cute girl and I get...distracted. Like this one lady that works at the bath house back home. She's got green eyes and wavy blonde hair, and knockers you could get lost between. She just keeps going from there, legs for days, an ass that could kill, and she's a sweetheart. She's got a kind voice, always listens." Erik trailed off, lost in his imagination of his crush. Rush's renewed buzz persuaded him to invade Erik's thoughts and get a look at her himself, against his better judgment.

Rush knew that Erik's imagination was over exaggerating, but he saw exactly why Erik liked her. She was well shaped, plenty of curves, piercing, dark luxurious lashes, and long, gently curving legs that were attached to healthy birthing hips. Erik was remembering a conversation they were having, but he was disinterested in the talk. Rush saw Erik was remembering this from a tub, which he thought was strange, but made sense seeing as there were in a place called a bath house. Erik was submerged in a tub, Jane was gently washing his back as they chatted. The whole ordeal seemed quite innocent. Rush was proud of his little brother, he had a fine taste in females, although the final portion of their conversation confused him. She'd moved on to massaging Erik's scalp and was beginning to move down to his chest and moved to wash his lower extremities when he panicked and asked her to leave. She genuinely looked disappointed as she turned to leave, reminding him that he was wasting his money just to take a bath here.

Rush blinked the fire back into focus and turned to Erik, "brother, have you taken a mate?" Erik almost choked on the venison he forgot he had in his mouth. After lurching forward and coughing a bit, he stuttered a response, "ye, yeah! Sure, who hasn't? Haven't you two?" Jenkins laughed hysterically, "suuuure you have, Erik.

Sure you have." Rush looked at Jenkins then back to Erik. "Why is that funny?" Erik shook his head with a face full of embarrassment, "no reason. He's just jealous that I've laid more women than he's even talked to! He's too busy with Major Artie to be findin' wild women like me!" Rush shook his head and looked back to Jenkins, "is that true? Both of you are virgins?" Jenkins shook his head, "nah. I've had my fair share, but I never settled down. That kid though, I think he's still wet behind the ears, if you catch my drift." Rush turned again to Erik, "you are a virgin?"

Erik grumbled under his breath and angrily snatched another chunk of venison and jammed it into his mouth, refusing to respond. Jenkins drank down the last dregs of his whiskey before asking, "wha'bout you, big guy? Prolly didn't get much of a selection down there, eh?" Rush shook his head, "No. The female I was to mate discovered she was not attracted to males." Jenkins sharply inhaled through his teeth at that, "ouch. That sucks. Were ya so bad you turned 'er gay?" Rush chuckled, "Don't know. We never got along long enough to try. Never got a chance to ask the other available female, she was killed recently. Never know now." Erik's demeanor softened a bit, as did Jenkins'. "Damn, man. That's rough. Look. We'll do you a favor," Jenkins pointed between Erik and himself, "when we get to The Burg, we'll buy you a 'movin' in' present."

Rush finished his whiskey and gestured for more before responding, Jenkins obliged. "What do you mean? A present?" Well big guy, we'll buy you some time with a girl at th' bathhouse. Pop your cherry. Turn you into a real man!" Rush sipped on his fresh drink momentarily, "How does that work? Buying People? Sounds immoral." Jenkins looked over past him to Erik who was avoiding his stare. "Uh, you mean you never bought anything?" Rush shook his head, "no. We all helped each other get what we needed in the clan. Bartered sometimes."

Jenkins sighed, "okay, good. That's what we do. We barter for goods on the road: ammunition, goods, food, guns, sex, whatever." Rush nodded. "We use caps mostly," Jenkins continued, "bottle caps to be exact. There's some folks 'round that'll take other stuff, scrap metal, old tech and the like and trade goods or caps for 'em too." Rush nodded again. "So you purchase people with caps?" Jenkins shook his head, "no. Well some people do. That's slavery. That's not cool. We ain't had slavers down here in ten years or so I guess, eh Erik?" Erik nodded silently.

"So, how does purchasing women work?" Jenkins shook his head more violently this time, "don't say stuff like that. It's weird. You ain't buying a person, just some private time with 'em. What y'all do is up to y'all. Some like to take it easy, do lots of talkin' an' foreplay, and some like it freaky. You can ask Willis 'bout

that." Rush absorbed this information with a whiskey-soaked filter. "So, buy time from people. For whatever?" Jenkins slowly nodded, "yup. Not everyone's got someone. Bathhouses an' the like make life on the road less lonely. They sometimes the workin' ladies got good info too, if you're willin' to pay more or do 'em favors."

Rush fell silent and sipped on his drink, staring at the fire. He thought to Erik, "no need to be ashamed, little brother. You have a good eye for females. You will find one to continue our lineage." Erik thought back, "how d'ya know what I like?" "You described her, I saw you remembering her," he answered. Erik jumped up from the couch and glared at Rush angrily, "I told you not to do that!" He downed his drink, slammed the empty container on the mantle and stormed off to the kitchen.

Jenkins looked genuinely surprised at Erik's sudden outburst. "What'd you do?" Rush sighed, quickly finished his drink, and placed his glass next to Erik's on the mantle before proceeding to bob and weave after him. Rush clumsily crashed through the double oak doors into the foyer and stopped in his tracks—he heard Erik in the kitchen cursing to himself and storming around. "Oh, I've done it now," he thought. Peeking through the set of doors that lead into the kitchen, he saw Erik standing over the sink, staring through the cracked window. He was shaking.

Erik spun on his heel and quickly wiped his face as he heard the doors creak. He stared at Rush's bright yellow eyes that centered on him. Rush continued staring, unsure of what to do. "What? What, Rush? Why are you staring at me again?!", Erik threw a spatula across the kitchen, "What do you want?!" Erik turned back to the sink, rage surging through his veins. Rush slowly entered the kitchen, tail lowered and ears pinned to his scalp. "Apologies, brother, you make it easy to pry."

Rush's strange apology fell on deaf ears. Rush stared at the ground, dipped his head into his chest and continued. "Please speak." Erik continued his silence. Rush pleaded, quickly getting choked, "please, brother. Do not abandon me. Do not want to be alone again." Erik heaved a sigh and replied to the window he was staring through in a low bristly voice, "I'm not gonna abandon you, you big baby—stop it." Erik pounded his fist into the stainless steel sink, "How the hell am I supposed to have a private thought with you digging around in my brain pan? I thought we talked about this already?!"

Rush quietly stood his ground, "it's...how we communicate and bond, brother. Easier to learn and teach that way. You must learn to block it if you want privacy." He paused to approach it a different way: "Do you know how electronics work? Like your wrist computer?" Erik shrugged silently with a huff. "That computer can communicate over

radio and wire. When it does, it radiates signals, data. If you know how, you can read it, analyze it. That's what our clan does with thoughts and memories, brother. We can listen to the memories and thoughts of other creatures."

"I figured that much out," Erik replied grumpily. He continued his response mentally, "It's hard, Rush. This is all still kinda new." He paused and turned to look back at Rush who was still in a submissive position, "look up. You look sad and guilty like that. C'mere." Rush obliged, staking the spot next on Erik's left, keeping his tail low. They both turned to stare out of the dark window, "help me, Rush. Tell me about the clan, why we're better, how we can help everyone? If our granddad worked so hard to make us, then we've gotta make him proud, do something good for everyone tryin' to survive." Rush nodded affirmatively, "will do my best." Erik nodded and halfheartedly apologized for his behavior. "Look. Just...don't dig in my head unless it's necessary, okay?" He paused, "shit. Jenkins will wonder why I stormed off. If he asks, it's just because I'm embarrassed about my lack of, er, performance." Rush nodded and ruffled Erik's hair with a smile of relief.

Erik wiped his face again and they both went back into the great room to find Jenkins passed out in his recliner. He'd spilled his drink on himself. "Damn it. So much for planning tonight. We'll get to it in the morning," Erik grumbled. "Jenkins! Wake up! You gotta go to bed!" He failed to respond. Erik sighed and turned to Rush, "go look 'round through the library an' see if there's anywhere we can bed down." Rush nodded his acknowledgment and set off as requested. One half-ransacked library, one uninteresting restroom, and a second set of oak doors led him to a dark hall that he assumed was on the other side of the kitchen. His yellow eyes cut through the pitch black darkness without issue. Peering into the first of two doors on this hall, he saw relief in sight: a queen-sized bed. He left the door wide open as he investigated the second room to find it identical to the first: a fully-equipped bedroom.

He quickly made his way back through the library then stopped at the small bathroom to take advantage of the facilities: all that whiskey was doing a number on his bladder. After relieving himself, flushing, and washing his hands in rust-colored water, he returned to Erik pouring himself another drink and Jenkins' rhythmic snoring. "Found beds," he reported. Erik nodded and took a quick swig of his drink. "Let's get sleeping beauty here to bed, then." Rush nodded and helped a very drunk Erik hoist Jenkins through the library and into the first bedroom on the right. Rush had him by the chest, Erik by the feet. They stumbled through the dark corridor, through the first door, and heaved him onto the dusty duvet, face down. "Should we leave him in his armor? Doesn't look comfortable," Rush noted. Erik shrugged, "yeah,

if you wanna be nice, I'll help get 'im out of it." Rush nodded, "He would for you, wouldn't he?" Erik sighed and agreed, quickly growing ready for bed himself.

Erik had trouble getting claps unhooked as his fingers refused to respond properly. Between disobeying fingers and Rush's claws making things difficult, it took them nearly fifteen minutes to get Jenkins out of his battered armor and down to his grey and tattered boxers and sweat stained wife beater. Rush took the time to neatly arrange his gear on the nearby chest of drawers before they closed the door and left him to sleep. Erik patted Rush on the shoulder and followed him to the second bedroom. Rush suddenly turned and left Erik alone in the dark bedroom. He ignored Rush's absence and began to disrobe. By the time came back with two glasses and the remainder of the whiskey, Erik had only managed to free himself of a single boot and his gauntlets. Rush offered his assistance.

A very sloshed Erik agreed. It took them less time to get Erik out of his armor as his armor was heavily modified to be lighter than a regular set. When he got down to his undergarments, Erik stretched, relieved to be free of the constricting metal clothing. Rush stacked his garments as he did for Jenkins and returned to Erik with a glass, three extra-large fingers of whiskey. Erik took it and stared at the amber liquid. "Why so much, big guy, you got plans for a party or somethin'?" Rush shook his head, "no. Seems to make everyone happy." Erik nodded and sipped on his whiskey as he collapsed on the bed, "sometimes. Sometimes it makes ya sad, or angry. Almost always makes you do stupid shit." Rush stood near the desk and sipped on his own, savoring the burn.

Erik stared at Rush for a moment before asking, "what're you doin'?" Rush shrugged, "may I sleep here?" Erik squinted groggily at him, "why the hell couldn't you?" "Didn't know if it was acceptable. You don't mind? There's a couch in the other room," Rush asked as he hiked a thumb behind him. Erik shook his head after taking a long draw from his whiskey and slurring, "Naah. You're good people. Anyone says otherwise, I'll rip off their dick and throw it at 'im." Rush eyes watered as he snorted in pain due to the whiskey that invaded his sinus cavity through laughter. "That's very violent, brother." "Mebbe, but I don' care. Gotta protect mah big brother," he managed slur before nearly spilling the remainder of his drink on himself and the bed.

Rush retrieved Erik's drink and set his and Erik's both on the desk. He turned around to see Erik staring at him again, "Understand why you don't like being stared at. It's off-putting," he thought to Erik. Erik responded by thinking back unsteadily, to Rush he was fading in-and-out like a weak radio signal. "Tell

me.....our folks. I wannaout the clan.ch me what I forgot." Rush walked over to his younger brother and tucked him into bed, swiping his wild hair from his eyes and did as he was asked. He told Erik all about their clan; about how they started, how they used to live together underground, how they fought, how they learned and studied together, how they loved and hated one another and how terrible men came down to their home to wreak havoc. Twice their clan had been attacked, and twice they rebuilt.

By the time Rush got to Erik's birth, Erik mumbled something unintelligible, then fell to a whiskey-soaked sleep. Rush got up from the desk chair he'd borrowed and stretched, yawning. His long pink tongue curled out past his glistening pointy white teeth. He turned southward to stare through the tall dust-caked windows above the bed. The clouds had been swept from the sky, giving him his first glimpse of the full moon and millions of stars that dotted the southern sky. Rush gasped to himself and shook Erik, "what is that, brother?" Erik grunted and rolled over. Rush shook him again. Erik again grunted but wedged a swimming eye open and glared at Rush. "Whatcha want?" Rush pointed up at the sky and asked again, "what is it?!" Erik nodded and rolled over onto his stomach with a sigh. "Yup, its th' moon." "It's beautiful," Rush whispered to no one in particular. He continued scanning the night sky for an hour before turning in to bed next to his severely drunk and snoring sibling.