

CHAPTER 18: HANGOVERS OR A NEW DAY HAS BEGUN

Rush's dream was a confusing mix of euphoria, excitement, and despair. In his dream, he and Erik were back home at Research Station Magnolia; a safe five floors below ground. They were having a great time: playing with the cubs, wrestling, and telling stories, just like they used to as children. Dorian and Harmony were there, just as sweet as always. Their cousins Mikael and Sophia were there too, smiling and laughing. They'd all gathered for a feast the elder and, her sister, and their children prepared for Erik's return. They all ate, drank, and told more stories. Rush then introduced Erik to the rest of his family: his cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, their parents, and someone else he couldn't remember that reminded him of Jenkins. Their fathers were so proud to have Erik back home they were literally weeping tears of joy. Their grandfather was even human for the occasion. Rush turned to find his beautiful mate, Amanda, heavily pregnant with Erik's first nephew, apparently they'd decided to name their son after he and Erik's grandfather: James Colin Hawthorne.

Rush had never seen Erik so happy, as when he told him of his nephew-to-be. Erik was positively beaming. Rush was terribly pleased until he realized he was mistaken; Erik was *literally* beaming. He'd started glowing as his face went slack. His grand smile became a twisted, soundless scream. His eyes turned from their natural slate grey color to something far more sinister: his eyes grew in size, turned black like minuscule black holes, then grew to the size of dinner plates, blocking out the whites of his eyes. Everyone stopped at turned to stare at Erik, as if they knew something horrible was coming. He started screeching at the top of his lungs, tearing at his face. The children began screaming in fright as wide beams of light escaped from the fresh lacerations. Parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents all froze in fright as Erik's every orifice blinded everyone. "No! Stop it, brother! You can't! NOO!" Rush screamed, running to save Erik. He was too late: Erik exploded just like his grandfather did, destroying everyone and everything, leaving only Rush behind: damaged, burnt, and solely alone.

Rush awoke startled, his messy coffee-colored fur was matted to his body with sweat. He felt sick to his stomach: he just watched everyone die, and again he failed to prevent it. Rush's stomach turned sour and forced him to stumble out of bed to find the nearest bathroom. He crashed through their bedroom door, bounced off of the hallway wall, and rounded into the library. Slipping on a pile of books, he slammed through the bathroom door and nearly concussed himself on the toilet. He shook and

stared at his reflection in the soiled commode before vomiting. He dry heaved multiple times before losing the remainder of his stomach contents. Chunky bits of roughly chewed venison and whiskey came spraying out, leaving Rush with a terribly sour taste in his mouth. Fortunately, just as quickly as his sickness had come, it abated.

He sat dazed and confused on the cold bathroom floor. "Why do I feel this way?" he thought to himself, "is something bad going to happen?" He stood up, flushed the toilet multiple times, and bent over the sink to rinse out his mouth and wash his face. The questionable water tasted like dirt, but it was better than the mixture of whiskey and bile contaminating his maw. After wiping his face dry, he exited into the library and stared. The rays of early morning light caught his attention as they filtered through the geometric patterns in the stained glass windows.

The colorful shapes reminded him of the clan: individuals surrounded by those like them, but still starkly different from each other. They all depended on one another to keep thriving. Rush sighed to himself as he looked around for something to shake his memory of the terrible nightmare. He looked over to the bookshelves for relief. Erik had done a good job of sorting them. He bent down to grab a tome off of the top of the good stack: it was well read, white with grey angled stripes, and had a grey skull on the front. In large, black block letters it spelled "The Wasteland Survival Guide." He chuckled, it couldn't be more perfect for someone new to this world like himself. He snatched it up and walked back to the bedroom he and Erik were sharing. Erik had rolled over and was now occupying the entirety of the bed. Rush smirked with a shrug to himself and instead sat in the desk chair and began studying. The first page was mangled and smudged, making it difficult to read:

Lead Author and Subject Matter Expert: The Lone Wanderer
Assistant Author: Moira Brown

This indispensable guidebook contains everything that a survivor in the wasteland could need to know. Every page contains a gem of brilliant insight into how to survive in the wastes, thrive among its denizens, and revive your survivor community. This exceptional guide can not only save your life, but may even inspire you to reach for the lost greatness of the prewar era.

"Sounds good," he thought to himself as he dug in. A short hour later, and Rush found himself dozing off amidst pages and paragraphs that would one day save his life, or so he hoped. Somewhere between how to properly skin a mole rat and

alternative uses for deathclaw claws, he finally fell asleep. His muzzle was nuzzled between the soiled pages as he slumped onto the desk face first with a light snore. A few hours later, Jenkins roused from his drunken sleep, mostly naked, completely confused, and tangled in the bedding. "How the...who...what? Where the hell am I?" he muttered to himself. He tried to dig the memories out, but was instead rewarded with a new pounding headache. "Shit." He held his pounding head. Stumbling out of bed, his memory began to return. "Ah. Damn whiskey. We must've made it to Red Creek," Jenkins muttered to himself as he tried to glance through the filthy window overlooking his bed. "Heh, I'll be damned. I know that lake."

Standing up instantly made him want to retch, but he valiantly held it down last night's dinner and debauchery. He took a few unsure steps and stopped as he exited his bedroom and listened; Jenkins didn't hear much of interest: the sounds of the ancient wooden building settling and a slight whistle of a gentle breeze squeezing through a nearby cracked window. He listened again. This time he heard a gentle, rhythmic snoring from next door that piqued his interest. "Sounds like at least one of 'em made it in okay," he thought to himself. Jenkins leaned against the frame and sighed before stumbling off toward the snoring. "Damn whiskey."

He gently persuaded the second bedroom door open and took stock of the snoring situation. Leaning in on the frame of the door, Jenkins saw Erik tangled in the sheets and partially hanging off of the queen-sized bed, nearly motionless. The gentle rise and fall of the man's chest was the only indication that he was indeed alive. The snoring was coming from Rush; he'd fallen asleep, nose first, in a book. Jenkins smiled inwardly, thinking that he was glad Rush was literate, and at the behest of his rumbling stomach, decided that preparing a hangover-destroying breakfast for he and his comrades would be much easier by himself.

Jenkins took two steps away from the bedroom and stomped squarely on the one squeaky board in the floor. He flinched at the piercing sound and then again as he heard what he assumed was Rush. He dropped his book onto the desk with a dull ***thump***, and nearly jumped out of chair—ready and alert for any incoming threat. Rush's brilliant yellow eyes were scanning the room and his ears were swiveling to pick up any hint of what caused the piercing sound. Jenkins sighed and turned around to wave at Rush through the door.

"Uh, mornin'," Jenkins mumbled. Rush visibly relaxed and grinned in his usually awkward and toothy way. "Morning," he replied softly with relief. They stared at one another momentarily before Jenkins hiked a thumb back at the kitchen on the other side of the wall from their current position, "gonna get some grub. Hungry?" Rush

nodded affirmatively, dog eared the page in his book, stood up and continued to stare at Jenkins—Rush's continuous stare was starting to grate Jenkins' nerves. "I'm not breakfast." Rush blinked and quickly looked away, embarrassed. "Apologies."

Jenkins shook his head and waved Rush to follow him through the hall, "c'mon." As they weaved around the stacks of books in the library, Rush paused and glanced at the waist-high misshapen columns of knowledge. "Do you read," he asked Jenkins nonchalantly. Jenkins nodded, "yeah, pretty well. Had to learn the theory behind my trade somehow. Why?" Rush responded just as they'd resumed their trek to the kitchen.

"Just curious." he replied meekly, "didn't know how...educated your clan was". Jenkins mumbled, "pretty well, considering we fight to stay alive every day," as he dismissed the conversation. They rounded through the jumble of furniture, discarded scraps of burnt venison, cleanly gnawed bones, soiled drinkware, various articles of clothing, and empty bottles of alcohol before Jenkins paused in front of the cold hearth and heaved a tiny sigh. "Was hopin' there was some venison left from last night. Y'all finish it all?" Rush nodded in response. "Large appetite," Rush said as he patted his slight paunch. Jenkins shook his head, sending his headache into overdrive.

As Jenkins continued to wander around the great room, Rush set off to reexamine the kitchen. Two sets of grand oaken doors and one mud-and-pine needle-slicked foyer granted him access. Rush reached for the first refrigerator and remembered that he and Erik had emptied both refrigerators onto the nearby island. He turned and took stock of their edibles: 8 Nuka-colas; a bowl of something that seemed to be long, thin worms in broth; a jar of some yellow paste; and something skewered. "Guess this'll have to do for breakfast. It's sure not toast though," Rush thought to himself. After digging in various cabinets, Rush found a serving tray to dump the leftovers onto. Carefully balancing it on his left hand, he slowly made his way back to the great room. As he fought through the second set of double doors, Rush saw that Jenkins was biting the dog that bit him yesterday: he was mixing up another drink to ease his hangover. This time, he was mixing it with something else from his bag.

With careful concentration and footwork, Rush met Jenkins at the bar with his tray. "Found some food," he said with his cheery grin. Jenkins nodded in response as he choked down his second shot of whiskey and finished with a belch. "Good boy, Rush," Jenkins said. "What'd you find?" Rush gestured to the jumble of food on the tray. "Alright, got some noodles, *that* looks like barbecued squirrel, and lotsa Nuka. Is

that mustard? That ain't gonna be enough for the three of us, I'm afraid. Rush turned his ears down in his self-disappointment. The gesture was lost on Jenkins as he was busy opening a bottle of flat Nuka-cola. After wrestling off the bottle cap and shoving it in his pocket, Jenkins looked up and finally noted Rush's demeanor. "Don't worry, big guy. Go dig 'round in my other duffel. I brought rations for two before I left home. That'll get the three of us through another two days. We'll just have to hunt an' gather to make up for the rest."

Rush's ears perked up at the thought. "What do we hunt?" Jenkins popped the top off of a second soda then handed it and its cap to Rush before replying, "whatever we can. It's still July yet, so we prolly won't find much larger game. Lotsa small stuff: squirrels, coons, mole rats, rabbits, turkey if we're lucky, uh wild dog" Jenkins paused after counting out wild dog on his fingers, "uh. Is dog a problem?" Rush looked legitimately surprised. "You eat canines?" Jenkins nodded, suddenly feeling guilty for some reason. "Yeah, they're not too bad if ya boil 'em enough I, uh. Can you...eat. Them," Jenkins stuttered.

Rush quickly realized that people above wouldn't have the luxury to keep pets, contrary to the books he'd read about cultures from eons ago. "No problem," he answered. "Are they not pets?" Jenkins replied, "no. Well, yes. Uh, it depends. So, back home, we've got a kennel where we keep huntin' dogs. They're not really pets, but not food either, tools more like. Some folks like to take up dogs as travelin' companions, but the Brotherhood normally doesn't. I guess you'd be the first." Jenkins squinted as the words left his mouth. "Uh. I'm not sayin' you're owned by anybody or anything. You're just a bunch o'firsts is all. Sorry." Jenkins quickly put the bottle of Nuka up to his mouth to stem the flow of embarrassment leaving his mouth.

Realizing Jenkins' awkward tension, Rush laughed aloud to help out his new friend. His loud, barking laugh, while strange to Jenkins, was enough to cut the awkwardness. Rush clapped him on the shoulder and turned up his Nuka-cola. Jenkins visibly became more relaxed. "Uh, yeah. So, that's not gonna be some sort of cannibalism or anything for y'all, right?" Rush shrugged, "we do not eat our own kind. We are only half canine." Rush paused to lick his chops and stare at Jenkins with a hint of mischief, "but you humans looks tasty. Would be good grilled." Rush licked Jenkins' face to show he was just teasing him before stealing another Nuka-cola for himself.

Jenkins shuddered and groaned as the long, rough pink tongue left a thick trail of soda-scented saliva across his cheek. "Damnit, boy. Quit that," Jenkins yelled with

a smirk. He quickly swiped the saliva off with the bottom hem of his stained wife beater. "Why d'you do that all th' time?" Rush was fighting with his bottle of soda as he replied, "Showing. Gratitude. Appreciation. Intimacy, friendship." Jenkins leaned over to take the soda from him and show him a trick. "Like this," Jenkins mumbled as he placed the edge of the cap on the top of the bar, then sharply struck the opposite edge of the top. It cleanly popped off and spiraled into the air for a split second before falling back onto the bar.

Rush stared with a small smile. "Thank you," he replied as Jenkins handed him the flat soda. "So, you're sayin' that instead of using words like normal people, y'all go 'round licking each other all th' time? An' what d'ya mean intimate?" Rush blushed under his fur and replied, "not like that. We rely on body language and pheromones between clan members. Can also communicate mentally with one another. Very efficient." Jenkins' flat soda came exploding from his nose. He coughed and choked, "you what!? Mentally? No way!" Rush nodded calmly. "Easy to tell how others feel just looking at them. Better to share our entire mental outlook with others: thoughts, feelings, knowledge and wisdom, dreams..." Rush trailed off as he was getting a disconcerting stare from Jenkins. "What'm I Thinkin' now?" Jenkins asked as he squinted and leaned closer.

Rush silently wondered to himself if this was going to happen every time he explained how these things worked. He sighed to himself, as he gently placed the padded heels of his large hands on Jenkin's temples and wrapped his fingers around the back of the man's skull: syncing his heartbeat and tuning into his brainwaves. Rush brought his head in close and bumped his forehead against Jenkins' before closing his eyes. Rush took a deep breath and began concentrating on the brain that was mere millimeters away. Jenkins shuddered as he felt something strange happening; the thought he saw a misty Rush-shaped shadow floating into his mind. Rush kept working on the link, strengthening it little by little. The misty figure that Jenkins saw in his mind was becoming clearer with every breath. Three long minutes later, Jenkins had a complete picture of Rush. It wasn't a true image, it was warped by Jenkins' perceptions of him. The image in his mind wasn't tall, muscular, and threatening like the real Rush, but was smaller than a grown man and fluffy, just as Jenkins thought Rush actually was on the inside—a cuddly over-grown puppy.

Now that the link was fully established, Rush began to speak to Jenkins mentally. "Can you hear me," he questioned. Jenkins struggled to reply to the warm, dark voice in his head. Rush's words seemed to melt in his mind like chocolate left outside in the sun. Jenkins shuddered again and replied softly aloud, "yeah." Rush smiled and

continued, "see, this is much better than all the talking you people do." Jenkins whispered back, "yeah, but you gotta bang other people's foreheads all the time, right?" Rush chuckled mentally, "no, just with those that are not gifted this ability naturally." "Okay, what now," Jenkins thought aloud. Jenkin's mental image of Rush shrugged to no one in particular and gestured to himself, "ask any question you like. Will *show* you the answer."

Jenkin's mind churned for a useful question. Rush answered it before Jenkins even knew he had it ready. The small Rush created was weaving a laboratory of mist that slowly solidified in Jenkin's mind, but the perspective was strange: it seemed as if he were viewing the scene from multiple angles at the same time. He blinked furiously to bring it into focus. He finally saw that there was a RobCo robot, two scientists, and a cooing, furless child occupying the perfectly white laboratory. The scientists were in garbed in long, flowing white lab coats but the forms they hid were larger than normal humans. Jenkins realized they were the same beings as Rush, whatever they were. They were performing a routine checkup on the noisy child, and they all felt very worried about him. Jenkins was confused about how he knew how they felt; he could feel their emotions like he was experiencing them himself. He shuddered again as a cold sweat began to bead on his forehead. He saw as the two furred scientists turned to each other with mixed expressions of worry and astonishment as they finished up their procedure. The larger of the two picked up the babe and cradled it gently in his strong arms, brushing its coffee-colored cowlick from its grey eyes. Jenkins was again confused, how did he know this thing was a he? Where had he seen those eyes before and that stupid cowlick?

The answer came crashing down on Jenkins: the babe was Erik and the overgrown wolf-man holding him was his father! After this realization, the disembodied memory dissolved and shifted scenes. He was watching the memory through someone else's eyes. It was a single viewpoint this time. Whomever it was must have been quite small: everything looked like it was fifteen feet tall. Rush smirked to himself. Another wolf-person, a different one, picked up the body housing the eyes and licked its face. When he watched the tongue make contact, he knew this was one of Rush's personal memories. He heard a similar warm, comforting voice in his head, but not in *his* head. It was Rush's father, inviting him to see his new baby brother. Jenkins could feel Rush's excitement: he'd been waiting to meet his new brother for quite some time now.

The tiny Rush took his father's gentle giant hand and was led a short way into the back of the pristine laboratory. Tiny Rush was again hoisted into his father's arms as they neared the swinging double doors. They entered into the back and saw little

Erik. He was fast asleep in a makeshift cradle in the center of a stainless steel table. Erik's father was gently rocking it when they came in. He didn't show any physical signs that he noticed their arrival, but Jenkins could *feel* that he felt them come in and was quickly washing them over with his own feelings of elation and excitement. In that quick burst, Jenkins could feel that Erik's father was relieved to finally have a child of his own, and that he instantly knew that Erik would be special, just like Rush. Jenkins also felt an undertone of worry about Erik's being so different from his clan mates. He was afraid that Erik would be shunned or killed by his them for being so different.

Jenkins inhaled sharply as the memory faded before him, leaving him feeling empty as his Rush floated in the murky confines of his mind. Jenkins then felt something warm and wet drip onto his face as he watched his approximation of Rush fade away. Rush released Jenkins' head and pulled away, feeling both ashamed at himself for getting overly emotional and proud that he was able to share that moment with Jenkins. Jenkins rubbed the sweat from his forehead and blinked as he looked up to a watery-eyed Rush. "How'd you know that was my question? How'd you know that I wanted to know if Erik was really one of you?" Rush wiped his eyes then sweat-moistened forehead with his left forearm then replied, "could feel it." Jenkins was a bundle of mixed feelings at the moment; "uh, thanks. Rush. That was, uh. I dunno. Different."

Rush decided to imitate Jenkins' earlier trick and open them both a bottle of soda. As Rush handed it over, Jenkins thanked him again then followed with another question. "Can all o' y'all do that?" Rush nodded, "it varies. Some can read people from yards away. I cannot." Jenkins took a steadying swig of soda, "what 'bout Erik? Can he do that?" Rush thought to himself for a second, then decided the truth would be best. "Yes. He has not always been able to, but he can now." Jenkins squinted, "What do you mean *he can now*?" "Ability was latent. Was re-awoken when he found us underground. He forgot that he knew how." This made sense to Jenkins for some reason. Perhaps it was the lingering connection from Rush, but he knew that Rush wasn't deceiving him.

Jenkins slowly got up and stretched, glad that his hangover was nearly gone. Rush stayed seated and opted to finish his soda before asking a question of his own. "Did I...make you uncomfortable?" Jenkins paused, unsure how to answer. Rush could already feel the answer, but wanted to hear it for himself. "Uh, no. No," Jenkins lied. Rush squinted as he saw through Jenkins' attempt to placate him. "Try again," Rush said with a hint of aggression. Jenkins shrugged, "okay, yeah. It was really weird. How the hell 'm I supposed to just be okay with something like that? We're talkin'

supernatural kinda shit here. Ya can't expect a typical man to go through something like that and jus' be okay." Jenkins paused and took a breath. "Sorry, Rush. It's just weird. Rush nodded and silently accepted Jenkin's apology. "Do not lie to me, I can see through it." Rush warned softly before clapping Jenkins on the shoulder.

Jenkins nodded and sipped the last dregs of his soda, making a mental note to never make that mistake again. Rush stood up and queried Jenkins, "do the showers work? You stink." Jenkins laughed aloud at Rush, "that's rude, buddy. That an' I don't know. Why don't you go find out? I got some cleanin' up to do out here." Rush nodded in acceptance and set off to find out. As Rush wandered back into the library, Jenkins decided to think as hard as he could, "CAN YOU HEAR ME?" Rush's fur stood up momentarily on the back of his neck and arms as he felt the whisper of Jenkins' mind. Rush stood amid the stacks of books, then turned to poke his head through the ajar doors. "Yes," he yelled aloud. "But it will fade in time." With that, Rush ducked back into the library.

Jenkins shuddered involuntarily before distracting himself with cleaning up from their mini party from the night prior. Rush continued on his quest for hygiene. He swerved through the towers of books and opened the door into the small, dingy bathroom. It had clearly been neglected for quite some time. Rush looked at his reflection from the streaked medicine cabinet above the pedestal sink, he saw a young furred man with brilliant golden eyes staring back and smiling. Why was he smiling at himself he thought. "You are happy, idiot," he replied to himself under his breath before investigating the taps on the tub. He was quickly disappointed to find that turning them did nothing other than cause the attached pipes to groan, shake, and spit out small bursts of rust-colored sludge. He sighed to himself and thought, "I hope everything is not in such poor shape aboveground. How do they keep up with regular hygiene?"

Rush turned to leave the library and instead of hounding Jenkins more, he decided to rouse Erik. Rush rounded into the hall and through the second bedroom to find his younger brother sprawled out on the floor; it appeared Erik had gotten into a fight with the bedding and it had won. He chuckled to himself as he gently padded over to Erik and knelt down to lick his face. "Wake up, brother. We must begin our day," Rush grumbled with love. Erik groaned and turned over. Rush licked him in the ear this time, purposely letting some saliva leak into his ear canal. Erik groaned louder this time in complaint, "ugh. Why in th' ear, Rush?" Rush smirked to himself and nudged Erik in the ribs with a clawed toe, forcing laughter out of the ticklish Erik. "Heh, damnit Rush!" Rush repeated the action, forcing more laughter out of Erik. Erik finally gave in and smiled up at Rush who returned the kind gesture after

extending a hand to help him up. Erik accepted; Rush hoisted him up without effort onto his own two feet. In fact, he yanked Erik up so quickly, he nearly lost his boxers in the tangled sheets.

Rush barking laugh echoed in the tiny country club as Erik turned beet red. He was trying to simultaneously hold on to his boxers and avoid falling to his doom due to the tangled bed sheets. Erik yelled at Rush and quickly made his way across the bedroom to the chest of drawers. He quickly donned his reinforced pants and was jamming his feet into socks and boots when they both heard Jenkins holler. "Y'all two're having too much fun in there to be workin'! They looked at each other and smirked. Erik decided it would be too hot to use the rest of his armor, so he left it where it lay. He and Rush quickly left to see what Jenkins was yelling about. They were both impressed to find that Jenkins had rearranged the breakfast nook near the western windows to something resembling normalcy. In the short time Rush was gone, Jenkins had the table set for three: plates, glasses, even some silverware he'd found in the kitchen. "C'mon, now. Growin' boys gotta eat." Rush noisily licked his chops as he and Erik strode to join Jenkins. He pulled their chairs out before taking his own.

"Alright, we got nuka, some left over venison from last night, an' some rations of potted meat and crackers from my stash. Dig in," Jenkins said with pride. Erik and Rush took their seats and aside from some noisy smacking, everyone ate in near silence. Seven short minutes later and Rush had gobbled down his entire portion. He sat in silence, pondering what their next move should be. Erik noticed Rush's silence and offered some of his stale breakfast to Rush, who gladly accepted it. Rush munched on one of Erik's crackers when Jenkins spoke up through a mouthful of dry venison, "So, Erik. That weird brain talk you two do, that's a cool trick." Erik choked on the Nuka he was using to force down the stale saltines. "Wha...what?! How'd you...? I mean, uh. What are you talkin' bout?" Rush waved him off and pointed at himself, then at Jenkins, then bumped his forehead with a fist a few times, then imitated what seemed to be an explosion with both hands. Erik stared. "So, you did the 'I'm in your head' thing with 'em," Erik thought to Rush. The wolf man nodded as he struggled to swallow his own dry cracker down.

"Yes," Rush responded verbally, "why are you alarmed?" Erik wasn't sure, but that sort of knowledge just seemed like something to be alarmed about. "I. I, uh. Dunno. Seems like somethin' that we shouldn't be tellin' folks. That's the sorta weird shit that'll get ya killed out here, Rush. Anything out of the norm, really." Rush nonchalantly shrugged off Erik's warning, "you trust each other with your lives. Can't he be trusted with that knowledge?" Erik glanced down, slightly ashamed, and

murmured, "yeah, I guess so. But don't go tellin' anyone else. Y'hear?" Rush grinned to his brother, then to Jenkins who was idly picking at his own cracker with aggravation over it's awfulness, "what do we do today?"

Erik sat without an answer. As far as he was concerned, they were on vacation. Jenkins had an idea. "First off," he said between bites of cracker smeared with what he hoped was mustard, "there's a safe behind the bar over there that could use your touch." Rush pointed to himself in question, Jenkins shook his head and nodded toward Erik as he was stuffing the last portion of his cracker into his face. "Yeah, sure, I'll take a look." Erik paused after answering Jenkins and turned to ask, "Hey Rush?" "What's that called? When we do the mind thing? There a name for that?" Rush raised an eyebrow toward Erik and choked down the last of his dry cracker before responding, "geistlink. Spirit link." "Oh, okay," Erik said in a strangely solemn tone. He quickly looked up from his crumb-covered plate and nodded to Jenkins, "let's go poke that safe."

Erik stood up and stretched, then wandered over to behind the bar. Rush stood near the northern entrance and watched as Jenkins walked out in his undergarments, stretching in the morning sun. Rush called after Jenkins, "leaving?" Jenkins yelled back from under the porch, "gotta a tree to water." Rush stood on the porch and watched him walk to the tree line. "Water trees?" Jenkins sighed with relief as he went about the business of emptying his bladder. Rush quickly got the hint when he smelled Jenkins' scent on the breeze. Rush was quickly getting frustrated with all of the little sayings and terms he wasn't familiar with. He walked back inside from the porch and picked up their soiled plates and ferried them to the kitchen. Rush made an attempt to wash the soiled dinnerware, but was quickly thwarted. The kitchen sink was displaying the same symptoms as the tub earlier. Rush grumbled to himself in frustration and left the dirty dishes in the sink as a punishment to the malfunctioning plumbing. Rush returned to see if Erik was faring any better.

He wasn't, or so far as Rush could tell. Erik slammed his fist into the small floor safe. Rush heard Erik sigh, then the soft clack and clank of bits of metal in the tumble. Another minute, and Erik successfully penetrated the metal container. "Hooyeah! What ya got?" Erik was anxious to see what wonders the metal box held, but was again underwhelmed. "Eh, what's this?" Erik pulled out a bag of white powder, a thick roll of old-world currency, a 9mm pistol, and a box of ammo. "Damnit," he muttered. "Hey, Rush?" "Yes, Erik," Rush said as he knelt next to Erik. "Any idea what this is?" Erik handed Rush the mysterious pouch of powder. Rush gave the exterior of the bag a good sniff and shook his head, "don't know." He popped it open and dug a finger in, swirled it around, and against his better judgment, licked his

finger clean. Rush immediately regretted that decision as he tried his best to spit out the bitter substance.

Erik was immediately worried, "what is it?! Are you okay? Do I need to get Jenkins? Is it poison?! ARE YOU GONNA DIE?!" Rush shook his head as he squinted and scrambled to find something to cleanse his palette. He thought to Erik, "No, I think it's some sort of drug though. Should have known better than to put strange things in my mouth..." "You sure you're gonna be okay? We don't know what that stuff is." Rush nodded, but was surprised to see Erik in such a fit. He snatched the bag back from Rush and ran through the ajar exterior door to find Jenkins.

"Jenkins? Jenkins! Where'd you go? JENKINS?!" The twenty-five year old man groaned as his nap was being violently disturbed by a young man screaming his name. "WHAT?!", he yelled back as he stood up from the base of the pine tree he was relaxing under. "What's the big deal?" Jenkins saw Erik running toward him with some sort bag in hand with a hint of panic on his face. "What's all the racket about?" Erik panted slightly as he replied, "I don't know what this is, and Rush ate some. He could die!" Jenkins looked at him suspiciously before accepting the bag of powder. He pinched some between his fingers and rolled it around before putting a bit on his tongue. "Oh, ew. Yeah. No, he'll be fine. It's just snuff. Really old snuff, but still relatively harmless. You afraid he'll start pinchin' or something? Why're you freakin' out? Are *you* okay?"

Erik was again, at a loss to explain his strange behavior. "I...I. I dunno. I, uh, guess I'm just bein' overprotective? It's not like he really knows the kinda messed up shit that happens up here, ya know? He's never seen a grown man trip on psycho and rip another limb from limb, or watch, helpless, as someone you trust backstab someone —literally." Jenkins was getting visibly worried, "what're you talkin' about? *You've* never seen anything like that either, Erik. As far as I know, the worst you've been through was when you helped us get Franklin back from when they got ambushed. You sure you're okay?" Erik stared at the bright green grass between them and started trembling. "I dunno, man. Something's wrong, I think. Something I can't explain. It's like I can see stuff before it happens. Weird stuff. But I'm not sure if it's gonna happen, or already did, or even will."

Jenkins gently took the bag from Erik and dumped its contents unceremoniously on the ground before putting an arm around Erik's shoulders. "Let's go back inside and have a nice chat. Me, you, an' Rush." Erik nodded, clearly confused about what was happening.