

CHAPTER 19: STRANGER DAYS OR SHADOWS HAUNT THE MIND

Jenkins gently guided Erik back into the country club. It was nearing 10 o'clock in the morning, far too early in Jenkins' professional opinion for this kind of absurdity. "Hey, Rush, c'mere." Rush stood up from his seat behind the bar and saw Jenkins supporting Erik. His eyebrows raised in mild alarm, "what is wrong, brother?" Erik looked up from his boots to Rush and opened his mouth in horror. His eyes literally melted away, leaving a slimy trail down his face and t-shirt. Hollow sockets took their place. Rush knew what was going to happen. Erik started screeching at the top of his lungs, causing Jenkins to push him away with fright. Erik began tearing at his own face, peeling strips of flesh away. Streams of blood were gushing forth from the new holes. His jaw unhinged and a wide beam of light shot out. Rush stared in shock, Jenkins was screaming and clawing for Erik's gun. "No, brother! STOP! STOP IT! You will destroy everyone! Don't leave me!," Rush screamed at the top of his lungs. His pleas went unanswered as Erik exploded yet again; turning Jenkins into a fine red paste, and leaving Rush alone. Again.

Rush awoke with a start. He blinked away the horrible daydream as he remembered what he was doing: helping Jenkins and Erik trap some game. They'd gone on a hunt to replenish their food stock for the next few days. They'd stayed out the entire morning and were now well into the afternoon. Rush was perched in a tall pine tree, making good use of his excellent vision. He was still trying to sort out reality from the dream when he spotted a buck similar to the one they'd nearly ran over with the car yesterday. "These mammals are strange, what do they do with the large horns on their heads," he thought to himself before notifying Erik, "meal in sight, brother. West of your position. About three hundred yards. Time to go?" A static, range-deteriorated reply came through, "go for it!"

Rush did as instructed. He was downwind of the buck and had all the skill to silently creep up and snag the large mammal. Rush gingerly climbed down from the tree and took another sniff of the air before heading off through the thicket of pine trees. Rush was so excited, he ditched running on two feet for four wheel drive. Rush had closed the distance in no time and exploded from the thick undergrowth. His razor-sharp claws and teeth glistened in the thin beams of sunlight as he sank them deep into the buck's side and neck respectively. The buck bellowed as Rush tore at the flesh and fur: the buck had no idea Rush was coming. The buck attempted to jostle and throw Rush at a nearby pine tree, but to no avail: Rush had the upper hand. Rush tightened his grip on the huge buck and adjusted his vice-like

bite from a muscle group to clamp down on the buck's jugular; puncturing it and roughly tearing it loose from its fleshy home. Rush held on until the buck had run the last of its adrenaline out and finally collapsed another twenty yards from their previous position.

Rush howled loudly, making his dominance of the creature known to all creatures in the pine forest. Erik smirked to himself as he tapped Jenkins on the shoulder, signaling that they should move West toward the howl. Had Erik not recognized Rush's howl, he would've been perfectly in his right to piss his pants; Jenkins almost did. They trekked through fallen pines and thick undergrowth to reach Rush and his fresh kill. A short trip later, and the two men had arrived at Rush's position. He sat cross legged next to his kill. Jenkins was a bit shaken at the sight: the buck, now sans jugular vein, and a bloodied Rush. His lower jaw was coated with thick, warm blood. "Rush, this is your first kill as a member of the Brotherhood. As *our* brother," Erik solemnly said as he wiped up some of the buck's blood from Rush's soaked jaw and smeared it across Rush's forehead, then some mirrored the markings across his own face. Jenkins repeated the same motions by smearing some of the blood across each of Rush's cheeks and his own. He also added at a whisper, "may you never have to kill except for survival. Take no life unless absolutely necessary."

The unexpected pageantry took Rush by surprise; it seemed out of place for a group of people whose motto seemed to be "bettering the world by hoarding pre-war technology." He looked up to Erik, then to Jenkins, then to the buck, then again to Erik, slightly bewildered. "You wiped blood on us?" Erik smiled, "it's a thing we do for our initiates on their first hunt. Makes for good memories and to remind them that we cherish every life, even the ones we have to eat." "We only kill to survive," he continued. "Some folks out here, like the gangs of raiders or slavers, don't worry about the lives they take."

Rush nodded, taking the words to heart. "What about those men you killed in our home? How do you honor them?" Erik glanced to Jenkins on his left and prayed he had an answer. "We think of them as monsters that have no sympathy for other creatures," Jenkins said slowly as the words came to him. "We, uh. We do our best to avoid them, but when shit hits the fan like it did, we do our best to protect everyone that needs protectin'. All goes back to survival, I suppose." Erik nodded, then thought to Rush, "we really do this to help some...less educated people realize that needless destruction is, well, wasteful. We kinda have to pander to the dumbest rock, if you catch my drift. I guess it's more a rite of passage more than anything anymore."

"You'll see what I mean when we get home, you gotta go through a 'basics of livin' with other people' type of thing. We gotta deal with folks that can't read, don't understand how to take care of themselves properly, that sort of thing." Rush slowly petted the dead buck's soft mottled fur, silently thanking it for its sacrifice so they could live another day. "Understood," he said as he stood up to meet Jenkins and Erik face-to-face. "What now?" he asked, as he looked down at the buck. "Well, you killed it, you gotta clean it," Erik said jovially with a wide grin as he freed his bowie knife from his boot and handed it to Rush.

Rush accepted and looked at the wicked thing, then at his own claws. "Is this necessary?" Erik and Jenkins nodded, "gotta learn to properly handle a knife and how to clean game. We'll help you out, don't worry," Erik stated. Jenkins picked up where Erik left off, "alright, I'm the medic here, so I'll break it down for ya. We gotta get the guts out without spillin' any contents: stomach, bladder, intestines, anything. You'll spoil the meat like that.

Rush continued to sit cross-legged, staring at the soft, white underbelly of the buck that he was gently petting, then at the grizzled and stained blade in his left hand. He put the tip of the blade to the buck's sternum and stopped after just piercing the skin, unsure of himself. "Should we move it closer to our camp? Would be easier to clean it there." Jenkins nodded and Erik shrugged, "gotta at least gut it here. Keeps the body temp down." Rush nodded and sighed aloud, he was a bit squeamish.

Erik was surprised at this response, "somethin' wrong?" Rush nodded and responded aloud, "this is different from when we intend to eat it." "What about that guy's throat you ripped out back at the facility?" Erik questioned. Rush looked legitimately surprised, "what?" "You don't remember? It was before you got shot, you saved my ass by leaping down an entire story and mangling that Enclave asshole," Erik explained. Rush shuddered and hugged himself stammering, "No. I couldn't."

Erik sat next to Rush and petted his head to calm him down, "we'll sort it out later, but for now, we gotta get this nasty business out of the way." Rush nodded again, gulped, and readied his borrowed knife. "What's first?" Jenkins and Erik rolled the deer over onto its back. Jenkins knelt down and flipped it's tail out of the way, "gotta cut the asshole out first, then make an incision from there, north up to the neck. Go just under the skin, or you'll puncture the organs." Rush nodded and did as instructed, creating a perfectly straight incision up the buck's white belly, staining it red with its own blood. The two men rolled the buck onto its side

and continued their instruction: "a'right," Erik said, "gotta scoop out the organs and stuff. Jus' take your time, an' don't. Puncture. Anything," Jenkins instructed.

Rush nodded then paused, "using what?" Erik laughed and said, "your hands, dummy." Rush took a deep breath and plunged elbow deep into the dark recesses of the deer, trying to coax out its entrails. "C'mon now, let's get those guts out of 'em," Jenkins coaxed. Rush mumbled something derogatory under his breath and continued to worm the slimy entrails from their protective housing. Precious minutes later, he had removed most of the buck's entrails and was himself covered in blood from his claws to his elbows. He attempted to sling it off, but quickly gave up, as his fur was slick with the sticky stuff. "What's next?" "Cut out the throat, let it bleed, then cut out the windpipe," Erik said.

Rush did as instructed. He continued the incision he'd started with his fanged canines and cut clear through the buck's neck, half way to the vertebra. Erik took his canteen and emptied its contents onto Rush's arms to help him rinse off. He gestured for Jenkins' and gave the carcass a very light splash of water. "Done! That wasn't so bad, right?" Rush grunted in response rather than be rude. They stood around momentarily before Jenkins produced some rope from his bag. They used it to tie up the deer and create a makeshift harness for Rush to drag the buck with. Rush donned the harness before licking his claws clean. As he was pruning himself, Jenkins and Erik took their position behind him, helping hoist the deer off of the ground.

The dead weight was bearable between the three of them, but the buck's huge rack—and lack of solid support musculature to hold it up—snagged on every branch and root along the way back to the club through the pine forest, making progress painfully slow. It was nearly four o'clock when they arrived at the tree line surrounding the country club. Erik halted just before the clearing, causing Jenkins to stumble and Rush to jam the buck's antlers into the ground. "D'you see that," Erik whispered to Jenkins. They crouched low and neared the edge of the wood line. He pointed to the western horizon. Rush didn't see the big deal about people walking around, but knew that Jenkins and Erik didn't like the looks of it. Rush thought to Erik, "is there a problem, brother?" Erik responded in whisper, "looks like we've got company comin' this way. Dunno who they are; could be Enclave, could be raiders, could be anyone." He glanced over to Jenkins, "we have any reports of any folks down this way?"

Jenkins shook his head in reply. "No, not really. Jus' drifters and such. Nobody's really lived here since the scorpions razed the whole town, what twenty-something years ago? They ain't any of our folks. They changed their name years later. They're

the 'Red Skulls' now." Erik nodded and muttered, "Shit." The smudges on the horizon seemed to be getting bigger. Rush squinted through the bright sun overhead, was one carrying something like a flag? "Brother," he whispered, "I think they have a flag." Erik turned around with a look that Rush had never seen, it was an intriguing mix of astonishment and shock. "That's no good," he hissed, "flags an' banners are never good."

"Jenkins, we gotta go get our shit outta there then get to a proper town. See if anyone knows anything about these folks. This ain't good." Jenkins nodded and agreed with Erik's assessment. They dropped the dead weight and sunk close to ground, using the tall grass in the clearing as cover. Erik thought back to Rush, "C'mon! Stay low and keep an eye out, we don't know who they are or what they want. We don't wanna engage them unless necessary." Rush neglected to respond, but did as he was told. They left their kill and slowly made their way back to the country club. The trip was agonizingly slow, but well worth it, at least in Erik's opinion. They'd had little in the way of protection: Jenkins wasn't in his armor, nor was Erik. Rush had no armor at all and they only had two guns between the three of them. Not the kind of odds Erik wanted when going blind into a fight.

The sun started its descent toward the horizon a while ago, but it would be a long time to go before they had the cover of darkness to keep them safe. Erik was beginning to get nervous: the shadowy figures they'd seen earlier had solidified into four adult humans, one of which carried a makeshift banner. Erik couldn't make it out, but was more worried about what he guessed was a large, muscle-bound man holding it aloft.

The four strangers were a now handful of hundreds of yards from the lake to the North of the club. If he guessed right, they'd probably had the same idea as Erik and his crew: use the country club as a safe haven. Rush thought to Erik, "Why must we hide? Are they dangerous? Can't we just tell them to leave? What if they're friendly or need help?" Erik sighed internally; he grabbed Rush by the ear, pulled him close, and whispered into it, "Dunno, Rush. We're just being cautious. We've never seen these sorta folks before. If they're nice, then fine. Otherwise, I'd rather have access to my armor and weapons if they try to make a move against us."

Rush didn't particularly like having his ears roughed up, but decided that Erik's reasoning was sound and that he'd let it slide this time. He rubbed his sore ear and continued to skulk near the ground. It seemed like forever to Rush, but they'd finally made it from the woods to the last stretch to the club: the gravel driveway. Their unknown visitors were easily within reach of the lake: only two hundred yards

away now. Erik stared them down, waiting for the chance for them to run into the club. Finally, when the group reached the lake, they stabbed their banner into the ground and appeared to be making camp at the shore. Erik sighed and visibly slumped with relief.

"Let's wait for it to darken up a bit, then we'll go in, grab what's good, then get the hell out of here," Erik commanded via whisper to his compatriots. Rush nodded, but Jenkins started to object. "What're we gonna do for shelter? We're a good day and a half from Delta, and the nearest town after that's another day's trek to the East." Erik thought momentarily, then replied, "we'll make do, like always. We got our bags, and the tarp you brought the venison in. We'll make a pup tent, just like the ol' days." Jenkins didn't particularly relish the thought of having to sleep outside amongst the insects and wild animals. Rush thought it was an excellent idea.

The three men waited and whispered to one another for a long two hours as they waited for the sun to begin its descent. While they sat and did nothing, Rush decided to study the banner. His excellent eyesight allowed him to make out a white banner, bordered by black stripes, surrounding something green and circular. He stared at it for quite a while; until the sun had started to set. After it had met the horizon, Erik nudged a sleepy Rush and they all crept up the gravel driveway to their previous abode. "Okay, everyone remember what they gotta do?" Jenkins nodded, "bags and tarp." Rush nodded affirmatively as well, "more bags, food, and alcohol." Erik nodded and replied to his own query, "and I'll grab the guns and anything else I can think of." With that, they all slunk into the still-ajar doors of the country club to assume their respective duties as the gravel crunched under their feet.

Jenkins folded up the tarp as Rush nabbed Erik's bag near the door and began stuffing what was left of their bar into it. After loading three bottles of whiskey and another two of wine into the bag, he felt it would be best to peruse the library for any literature of use, "would be a shame to lose knowledge," he thought to himself. Erik was scraping together the sparse ammo they had, and was getting a sinking feeling. He wasn't sure exactly what was causing the pit of his stomach to rise, but he was sure he didn't like it. Jenkins noticed his hesitation as he went to grab another bag to fill. "'sup?" Erik shook his head and shrugged. "Just anxious to get a move on. Those folks out there worry me for some reason. Can't place it." Jenkins shrugged and shouldered his bag.

"Let's get a move on, then." Erik felt out for Rush with his mind, "where are you? We need to get outta here." Rush was leafing through a book when he responded, "sorting through the library. Lots of good books in here." Books were the last thing

on Erik's mind as important, "drop 'em. Grab our gear from the bedrooms, and let's go!" Rush gently closed the book and thought back, "No need to yell, brother." Erik sighed to himself and decided to drop the conversation after an abrupt apology.

Rush jammed a fistful of books into his bag before visiting the bedrooms. He'd grabbed two copies of *Dean's Electronics*, a worn copy of the *Boyscout's Handbook*, and a near-perfect copy of *D.C. Journal of Internal Medicine*. Rush was more than pleased with his haul. After wandering to their bedroom, Rush shoved his copy of *The Wasteland Survival Guide* into his bag with the others and cleared the chest of drawers of Erik's armor, he gave the room a cursory once-over. Digging through the various drawers didn't reward Rush with anything important, so he decided to swipe the pillows.

His investigation of Jenkins' room was just as unfruitful. Again, he stole the pillows, as if he was spiting the club for not rewarding his efforts. His bag quite full, Rush returned to Erik and Jenkins. They were anxiously waiting for Rush's return. "Okay, got everything," Erik questioned. Rush responded with a nod and handed Erik the remainder of his armor. "Good, thanks. Let's get out of here." Rush nodded again and looked over their temporary home one last time.

The sun had rapidly sunk below the overcast horizon. Erik was thankful: there wasn't much moonlight to expose them. The three men had an easier time leaving than they had arriving. They were back at the tree line in mere minutes. Rush was surprised to find their buck was still in place; he'd assumed that some scavengers would have taken it by now. He asked Erik aloud, "Why is the mammal still here?" Erik shook his head and shrugged, "well, he's not gonna get back up and run away, that's for sure." Rush scowled and replied, "Why have scavengers not taken it?" "I. Don't. Know. Rush," Erik replied with a timber of aggravation. Rush cued on his temper and abandoned his line of questioning.

Rush instead turned to Jenkins, who was patiently waiting for their next move. "Is it safe to take this mammal with us? To eat?" Jenkins shrugged, "should be okay, so long as we cook the thing." Rush nodded and strapped himself up to the buck as he had earlier; this time it was much more cumbersome as he also had two large duffel bags to carry. Erik and Jenkins both donned their respective bags and took their positions around the deer. Without another word, they set off to the East with their uncooked meal to find some sort of civilization.