

CHAPTER 20: PIT STOP OR REST FOR THE WEARY

What would have taken them a day, nominally, was going to take them two at best. The deer was slowing them down too much. Erik was getting tired and cranky, much to everyone's chagrin. They'd gone eastbound for two hours now and he was quite done. "Okay," he huffed and panted as they'd wandered into a small clearing, "let's...let's set up camp here." Jenkins immediately dropped his quarter of the deer and his bags. Erik followed suit. Rush was quite happy to drop his bags, but soon found himself tangled in the rope he used to pull the deer. He struggled for nearly a minute before he found himself face-first on the hard ground. "Ouch!" he barked as his jaw landed on a pine root with full force.

Erik laughed as he hastily began to untangle the man from the rope. Jenkins hurried over to assist. After they'd disentangled Rush, they silently agreed to set up the pup tent. Each took an end and strung the long rope between two strong pine trees. Rush watched the two men compose their makeshift camp. Jenkins retrieved the tarp from his bag and they silently performed the same actions; taking opposite ends and stretching the tarp up and over the rope. The tarp was just big enough that the three men could put their gear and themselves under with a bit of room to spare.

Rush rubbed his sore jaw as he thought to Erik, "temporary shelter?" Erik responded aloud, "yup. We're roughin' it tonight, big guy." Jenkins looked over at Erik, then back to Rush, "y'all doin' that brain talkin' again?" Rush looked over to Erik, unsure if he should answer; he couldn't remember if he'd actually told Jenkins about that, or if it was part of his dream from earlier. "Yeah, sorry 'bout that," Erik apologized. "I keep forgettin' that you can't do that." Jenkins shrugged and chuckled, "just makin' sure you're not goin' crazy or something."

Erik chuckled wearily in response, "nah, not yet anyway. If my grandad's any clue, I may just yet one day." Rush found the comment in bad taste was let Erik know as such. "That's not funny," he thought to Erik. "You try living inside of a glass container, no sensory organs or any way to physically experience the world." Erik scowled as he walked over to Rush to offer him a hand up. "I know that, Rush. I'm just dealin' with it my own way." Rush accepted his apology, but still found it in bad taste. "What now," Rush questioned his companions. "Well," Jenkins thought aloud, "I reckon we'd better get this guy cooked up, then turn in for the night. We still got a good twelve or fourteen hours from here 'til we get to the town in the East. What's it called, Erik? Do you remember?" Erik shrugged, "nope. Greenbriar maybe? Green-something I think..."

Rush immediately set off to collect dry wood; he'd worked up quite a hunger from the trek. Mere minutes later, they'd gotten a roaring fire started in the desolate woods. Their thirty-foot clearing was just enough space for the makeshift tent and their fire. Erik pulled his knife free of its holster and began skinning the deer. He expertly separated muscle groups, trimmed the excess fat, and silverskin before handing it over to Jenkins. Jenkins was taking the chunks of meat and hanging them from a makeshift rack he'd composed from bits of trees: this would ensure they had enough smoked meat for quite a few days and plenty to eat tonight.

Erik and Jenkins worked in tandem until the buck was only bones, fat, and flesh. Erik then took his grizzled knife and cut out a four-by-four foot patch of skin from the back of the animal. "C'mere, Rush," he called. "Got a job for you." Rush put down the book his copy of *The Wasteland Survival Guide* and padded over to his blood-stained brother. "Yes?" "We're gonna make you some clothing, buddy. Can't have you runnin' round naked when we get home. I don't think most folk's would appreciate it." Rush glowered, "makes me itch, brother. Would rather not." Erik shrugged, "I know, I know. You told me earlier. See, I figured if we made you a Indian-style sorta thing, then you'd be covered enough and still be comfy." Rush shrugged, "That sounds...acceptable." "Good," Erik responded, "'cause it's a lot of work, but somethin' you can be proud of." Rush sighed unenthusiastically.

"What do you need?" Rush queried. Erik walked him through the first set of steps: scrape off the bits of gunk from the back of the fur, rinse it down, then stretch and dry it. Erik admitted, "we won't be able to stretch it here, but you can get started, then we can dry it over the fire tonight." Rush nodded and accepted Erik's knife. Erik patted him on the shoulder, "we'll make a man outta you yet," he laughed. Rush growled in response, catching Erik off guard. "What?"

Rush looked up from the grimy deer hide to Erik with his golden eyes, "should be more respectful to your elders, pup," he growled. Erik had a funny smirk on his face, unsure if Rush was kidding or seriously pissed. He hoped it wasn't the latter, as Rush still had his bowie knife. Erik looked down at his feet, then back to Rush, then at his feet again, unsure of how to proceed. "Uh, I'm sorry, okay?" Rush continued to stare though knitted brows, "do not forget who the elder brother is here, *pup*." He said the last part with heavy emphasis. Erik was instantly offended.

"Whadda mean '*pup*'? If anything," Erik gestured between Jenkins and himself, "*we're* more experienced out here than you. We've survived our whole life against the elements and monsters, and people, and, and..." He stammered in rising anger. Jenkins disliked the tension that was quickly rising, but knew how to fix it: Erik always

got cranky when he was hungry, and naturally assumed that Rush did as well. "Look here, *dog*, I'll be damned before I let you tell me who to..." Rush shot up and growled, curling up his lips to bare his wicked canines and accompanying sharp, white teeth, "take it back," he growled menacingly. His fur was rising on his neck. "Now! Take it back!"

"Okay, you two," Jenkins said calmly, "food's ready. Come an' get a bite before you decide to draw blood." Rush continued his death-stare; Erik matched him in ferocity. Neither moved nor blinked for nearly a solid minute. Jenkins sighed aloud, nabbed two large chunks of venison and made his way to the other side of the fire where the brothers were engaged in an epic staring contest. He waved the venison between the two. Rush quickly inhaled and blinked, taking the large chunk of meat into his gore-stained hands. "Thank you," he grumbled as he turned away from Erik and nibbled on his meat. Erik did the exact same thing as Rush, turning his back to them both before sitting on a nearby fallen tree and munching on his own.

Jenkins retrieved a piece for himself then sat between them on Rush's log, quietly enjoying his fire-cooked meal. After the brothers finished their portion, they both sheepishly turned toward Jenkins then asked for another. He popped the last of his own into his mouth before retrieving three more pieces. He turned back from the fire and said, "I'll give y'all more when you settle down and make up." Rush looked down at his lap, ashamed at himself for his behavior. Erik, however, wasn't quite ready to apologize, "I'll get my own damn food then," he said as he stomped over to the fire and ripped a chunk of venison from the rack.

Rush looked up to the gentle medic handing him another portion and thanked him again. "Apologies," Rush grumbled loud enough both Jenkins and Erik could hear him. Jenkins smiled and roughed up his head fur, "s'okay big guy, you and the idiot over there are th' same: you get hangry." Rush squinted at the new word. "You get cranky when you're hungry. I've been dealing with this Nimrod," Jenkins hiked a thumb over his shoulder, "for years. You learn not to take offense." Erik grumbled something to his meat in response. Jenkins shook his head, "he's the closest thing I've got to a brother, you know. We grew up together. Us an' Franklin an' Chase."

Jenkins stopped mid thought and asked, "you grab any booze, Rush?" Rush nodded rather than reply through his mouth full of venison and pointed to his bags near their tent. Jenkins got up and rooted around, pulling out the fullest bottle of whiskey. He walked back to his previous spot and turned to nudge Erik with the bottle, "let's have a drink, whatcha say?" Erik slowly turned around and sighed, "yeah, sure, fine, whatever." "Good boy," Jenkins cooed like he would to a dog,

"who's a good boy? Who's a good boy, dogmeat?" Erik glared at Jenkins then slowly cracked an imperceptible hint of a smile. Jenkins knew he'd won. He handed the bottle to Erik and said, "you start us off *elder*."

Erik's smile broke free as he uncorked the bottle, "yeah, yeah." He held the bottle aloft and said, "here's to you two. My only family in this fucked up world. I'm glad to have ya." he took a long swig of the searing liquid before handing it back to Jenkins to simply said, "here, here," and chugged a bit for himself. After his portion, he handed the bottle to Rush who stared at it momentarily before grumbling, "apology accepted, *pup*." Rush turned the bottle up and swallowed three portions-worth. He handed the now half-emptied bottle back to Jenkins. "Damn, son. You plan on havin' a party by yourself, or you gonna share?" Rush belched in response.

Jenkins laughed heartily as the whiskey was already taking hold. He took another swig, "so. Like I said, it was always me, and Erik, and Chase, and John." Rush squinted in question, "John?" "Yeah, Franklin. John's 'is first name. Anyways, us four were always up to no good." Erik nodded in agreement as he moved next to Jenkins on their log and groped for the bottle, "yeah. Remember that time we got drunk when we were out campin' in the forest back home and found those weird old folks?" Jenkins erupted with laughter, "yeah! Those were some weird hippies." Erik continued, "so. We're supposed to be out scoutin' and stuff, but that didn't pan out so well. Didn't find anything worth callin' in home for. So, we decide, we only got two days left before we go back, so we get belligerently drunk. We'd found an ol' moonshine still in the middle of nowhere and decided to sample the goods. Best damn whiskey we'd ever had."

Jenkins took another swig before he picked up the story, "so all four o' us are in this little shack, not a one of us more than nineteen, and wholly smashed on corn whiskey. We were drunk off our asses when they showed up. We thought we were completely screwed, 'bout to be drunk *and* dead. Ol' man, his ol' lady and their dog bust through the door expecting raiders, found four drunken soldiers. Rather than kick our asses, they invited us up to their cabin and proceeded to get drunk with us!" Rush turned up the bottle and handed it back to Jenkins. "Yeah, we don't remember much after goin' up to their camp," Erik said, "but the best part was when we all got up the next mornin': we found Franklin outside, naked, covered in mud, and fast asleep with the folk's dog.

Jenkins and Erik both renewed their laughter at this point. They both took a quick swing in turn and gave the bottle back to Rush who quickly finished it off, tossing the empty bottle in the general direction of his bags. "So, what happened?" Rush

slurred. "Dunno. We never got a straight answer outta 'im." "I know one thing," Erik said, "that damn dog was sure sad to see us go!" Rush howled with laughter, but mostly due to the whiskey, truth be told, the story wasn't really that funny. He eased himself up from the tree he was sitting on and wandered over to the to retrieve another bottle of whiskey from his bag.

He popped the cork out and took a short swig. He swerved past the fire and handed the fresh bottle to Erik. Erik took a short swig himself and got up to relieve his full bladder. Rush stood up and followed Erik into the thick woods. "What're you doin'?" Rush patted his full bladder and said, "same as you." "Yeah, okay, fine. Go over there and do it then." Rush ignored him and began relieving himself on the nearest tree they were facing, "this is *my* tree," he mumbled drunkenly. Erik laughed aloud, "do you lift your leg, too, dog?" Rush replied mid-stream, "sometimes." Erik then urinated on Rush's spot and drunkenly roared, "THIS IS *MY* TREE!"

Rush laughed at Erik, "are you territorial now, brother?" Erik was still emptying his bladder as he replied, "I'm half mutt too, why not?" Rush faked a sophisticated British accent, "we have grown to be above such things." Erik shook with laughter as he shook himself dry. "Where'd you learn an accent like that?" He playfully shoved Erik and slurred, "holotapes of grandfather and his brother." Erik returned the shove and then quickly tripped over his own feet. Jenkins, who was mid swig, turned in time to see him eat dirt, and was now expelling whiskey through his nose.

Rush laughed heartily at Jenkins who was laughing at Erik. Erik was laughing at himself. Rush bent down and bodily picked Erik up around the midsection with little effort. "Wooah!" Erik drunkenly exclaimed, "Careful there, buddy!" Rush giggled as he hoisted his drunken little brother up onto his shoulders. "Hey! Put me down!" Rush shook his head vigorously. "No! Pups like to be high," Rush replied. Erik grabbed Rush's ears and started directing, "okay mutt, go left." He pulled on Rush's left ear sending him to spin circles, making himself and Erik dizzy. "No, no! Right," Erik commanded. Rush was two cycles around before he fell over, dropping Erik and landing at Jenkins' feet.

Jenkins was dying of laughter; all he could do was hold his abdomen as he laughed at the two grown idiots in front of him. The drunken Rush decided to end his cackling by tackling him from the log. "Augh!" Rush held Jenkins down and licked his face until he cried for the wolf-man to stop. "Laugh at my little brother and suffer." Jenkins begged, "okay, okay! I'm sorry, stop! Ugh, your breath is awful!" Erik pulled himself up and stumbled over to see what the fuss was about. He saw his huge brother sitting on Jenkins' abdomen, bent over, licking his face. His bushy tail was

wagging furiously left-to-right, it was a blur to Erik. "'K Rush, that's 'nuff," Erik slurred. Rush stopped and whined pitifully at Erik. "No, c'mere." Rush got off of Jenkins, helped him up, and did as he was told.

"Atta good boy." Rush pinned his ears back and fake-growled at Erik. "Okay, okay, sorry. You jus' look like a big damn dog's all." Rush nodded and licked Erik's cheek, leaving a whiskey-scented wet spot. "Yeah, you too," Erik mumbled as he tried to smear the saliva off. He stumbled over to where Jenkins had dropped the whiskey bottle, took a long swig, then handed it to Jenkins. He too took a long swig then handed it to Rush. Rush finished off what little remained in the bottle then threw it toward the other one.

Rush was wobbly on his large feet. He looked at the other two men then to the tent. Without another word, he lumbered over to his bag, past the dying fire, produced four pillows, then crawled into the tent. Jenkins looked at Erik who shrugged in response. They joined Rush under the brown and blood-stained tarp, listening to the last of the crackling fire and scores of crickets chirp. Rush shuddered, "what is that?" "Wha's what?" Erik slurred. Jenkins rolled over to face Rush between the two of them, "crickets." Rush shrugged, "okay?" Erik continued on for Jenkins, "little bugs, they chirp and sing lookin' for a mate." Erik sat up and began to rid himself of his sweaty clothing.

Jenkins chuckled at Erik's odd timing, "you lookin' for one too, stud?" Erik was fighting to get out of his undershirt as he replied, "no. Well, yeah, but you're not my type, Axel." Rush sat up and helped Erik get unstuck. After he was free of his shirt, he started on his pants. Jenkins responded as he began to strip down to his boxers as well, "how d'you know?" "How'd I know what?" "You never know 'less you try, right?" Erik didn't like where this conversation was going. "Yeah, thanks man, but no. That's not my thing. You can go talk to Willis when we get home, I'm sure he can take care o' that for ya," he chuckled awkwardly.

Jenkins replied awkwardly, "I'm jus' jokin', you know that." Erik replied sarcastically, "yeah, *sure you are*. I've seen how you eye th' grown men 'round our parts. Jenkins stuttered, "I.... Nu uh! You know how well I do with the *ladies*." Erik laughed heartily, "yeah that's just 'cause they wanna be friends wit' ya. Not do bad things to ya." The two argued over Jenkins' sexual preferences until Rush interrupted. "Does it matter up here?" Erik stared at him, unsure of how to answer. Jenkins quickly said, "it doesn't!" Erik agreed quietly, "yeah, it doesn't matter. I just like to poke fun at 'em for likin' boys is all." Rush looked over to Jenkins, "you do?" Jenkins sheepishly nodded.

Rush nodded, "Explains your scent, was familiar." Jenkins furrowed his brow and asked, "whadda mean?" Rush felt like this was something he shouldn't have to explain: every pup knows this. "Everyone has a unique scent. Tells everything: health, stress... More than they say." Rush paused, "can you not smell it?" Jenkins shook his head, as did Erik. "Thought everyone could." Erik patted Rush's head, "only you. I sure can't." Jenkins' interest was piqued, "what else can you smell?" Rush sniffed the man's torso thoroughly before responding, "you are attracted to males of your species, and mine. You have not mated in about seven weeks." Rush patted Jenkins with a kind, appreciative smile. It made Rush happy that a full-blooded human would find him attractive, even if it was another male.

Jenkins was speechless. Rush added, "you also need more vitamin C and potassium." With that he rolled over onto his stomach, fluffed his pillow, tucked his tail, and cuddled into a snoring Erik for a good night's sleep. Jenkins stared at the roof of the tent, contemplating his thoughts and chances for a while before he rolled to his side and snuggled into Rush's warm, thick fur. Just before finally drifting to sleep, Rush thought he heard something near their tent.

He carefully extracted himself from the others and crept out to see what was making noise. Rush immediately wished he hadn't. He'd read about them in the *Wasteland Survival Guide*: it was a fully-grown yao guai. Rush guessed it had followed the scent of their venison. He stared at it with a combination of wonder and fear: he sincerely hoped he could reckon with it rather than kill it, or get maimed himself. He slunk out from under the tent and squatted down and cooed to the 'gaui. "Hello, friend." The yao gui lazily turned its huge head to Rush's direction and continued chewing on the bones of the buck they'd cleaned earlier. "You can have the carcass if you like, but please leave the meat. We must eat as well," Rush thought to the massive creature. He even gave her directions back through the forest where they left the entrails. The huge female stopped gnawing on the bones and padded over to Rush. He was frozen on the spot, quickly regretting his decision to speak to the creature.

She sniffed him, licked his muzzle in thanks, and turned back to drag the carcass off into the woods to her hungry cubs. Rush exhaled with relief and thanked her for her kindness. After the yao guai lumbered back into the inky black forest, Rush decided to relieve himself again before returning to rest. He urinated on a nearby pine, shook off, then lumbered back to the tent. He paused before entering the tent, he heard what he was sure was sniffing.

He poked his head in and saw that both of his comrades were sound asleep, but Jenkins seemed to be having a tough time. He was fighting something: tossing and turning violently. Rush gently shook him, "Wake up, Jenkins. You are okay." He stopped struggling immediately and pried open an eyelid, "eh? Who's that? Oh." He blinked Rush into focus, "hey big guy. What's up?" Rush shrugged, "you look distressed." Jenkins rolled over from his stomach and sat up to face Rush, "just a bad dream," he muttered, embarrassed.

Rush placed his hands gently on Jenkins' head and pulled him close, bumping his forehead with his own. "Tell me," he thought to Jenkins. In moments, Rush rose from the inky darkness and was standing in the middle of a street he'd never seen before. He saw four children run by for their lives. Six or eight grown men were in their wake, screaming obscenities. Rush couldn't understand them, but knew that the children were in some sort of trouble. He effortlessly jogged alongside them.

A young Erik, somewhere between the ages of twelve and fifteen, was yelling at a Jenkins of the same age. Rush noticed that Jenkins didn't have the sickle-shaped scar on his left cheek he'd grown used to. "What were you thinking?! Are you insane?! We're gonna get killed 'cause of you!" A fire-headed young man echoed Erik nearly word-for-word. The third young man, Rush assumed was the now deceased brother of Franklin, was trying to yell back to the grown men to calm them, it wasn't working. They sprinted for a quarter mile before turning down an alley in attempt to throw them men off of their trail.

Their plan immediately backfired. The alleyway led to a dead end.

They skidded to a halt, spun around, and had just enough time to realize they were completely screwed. The mob of grown men had caught up to and cornered them. "We don't take kindly to *your* kind, boy!" one yelled as he palmed his two-by-four repeated with a ***thwack***. Another man yelled something incomprehensible about abominations, but looked very threatening as he wrapped his fists in chain. Jenkins tried to apologize for his behavior, but it fell upon deaf ears: the mob was out for blood. One of the seven men screamed a war cry, initiating their sprint toward Jenkins. The Franklins and Erik were able to divert three of the seven.

Unfortunately, an unlucky Jenkins was at the mercy of the remaining four grown men. They attacked him relentlessly after smashing him in the head and forced him down to the ground: punches and kicks to the ribs and kidneys, someone was kind enough to repeatedly stomp his crotch with full force, and another kind man tried to stab him in the face with a switchblade. Jenkins was lucky enough to have rolled away in time

to suffer a deep laceration. The sharp knife left a crescent-shaped scar across his face. Blood was everywhere. Jenkins was pretty sure he was going to die.

A kind soul managed to report the strange sight of seven grown men chasing down four young ones. The local sheriff arrived in time to break up the beating with a gunshot to the air. Three of the men took off at first glance, the other four that were beating the stuffing out of Jenkins didn't stop until he fired again across the skull of the man with the two-by-four. The boys gathered themselves and tackled the grown men attacking Jenkins.

Jenkins, in absurd amounts of pain from his broken ribs and what he assumed was completely destroyed organs, was extremely grateful to the sheriff. He mouthed a "thank you," then blacked out. The sheriff had the other three boys ferry him back to the sheriff's office so the local doc could work to fix them up. All four were quite battered, bruised, and broken. Rush saw the strong man in the classic sheriff's hat and duster lead them from the alley and onto the street.

The scene faded from Rush's sight and was quickly replaced by another. Rush was watching Jenkins talk with his three friends. Jenkins was bandaged nearly from head-to-toe. He was severely beat, and was sure he'd feel better if he were dead. Erik was nursing a fractured left ulna, John had managed to break a couple of fingers and knuckles on each hand while punching people in the face, and Chase had his left shin fractured when an overweight man landed a powerful swing with a lead pipe. Jenkins was at a loss, he started silently weeping in front of his friends and the sheriff. No one spoke for some time. The sheriff gave them an hour alone before he returned to start his investigation.

"Alright, boys," he stated in a kind-but-firm tone, "who wants to tell me what that was all about?" They all looked at various things: the jail cells, each other, the ancient desk lamp, the dirty tiles comprising the floor, anything but the sheriff. He stood up from behind his desk, cleared his throat, leaned on his desk, and tried again, "anyone?" Erik opened and closed his mouth repeatedly, like a fish gasping for air. "Look boys, if you were up to no good, I think you learned your lesson. You're all damn lucky those wraps're an' splints are the worst you got.." Jenkins shook his head and replied softly, "no sir. We weren't doin' anything bad. Not...stealin' or anything like that." The sheriff looked down at the most-battered young man and asked, "well, what'd you do to deserve that kinda beatin'?"

Jenkins looked to his friends then back to the sheriff, hoping for some way out. There wasn't one. "I uh, sir. It was my fault. I, was, uh, sir...uh," he heaved a

sigh, "they, uh. Caught me peekin' into the bath house." The sheriff stifled a chuckle and resumed his serious face, "now son, you oughta know you can't go peekin' at naked ladies," Jenkins involuntarily shrunk a bit when the sheriff said "ladies." The sheriff noticed that and cleared his throat, "you weren't lookin' at the uh...*ladies* were ya, boy?" Jenkins was mortified, he paled as his gaze fell to his lap and shook his head. The sheriff continued, "an' I'll bet you weren't just lookin', huh?"

Jenkins' eyes welled up, "no...n...no, sir," he replied to his lap between sobs. The sheriff collapsed into his leather chair and sighed. "How old 're you, son?" Jenkins stuttered as he replied, "th...thirteen, sir." Jenkins thought for sure he was going to be jailed forever or sentenced to death, or just plain turned over to the guys who tried to kill them not a few hours ago. "Look, son," the sheriff started, "it's not my business what ya do or don't like, but you gotta more thoughtful of what you're doin' and when. Can't be polishin' your rocket in public." Jenkins looked up to the kind man. "Wh...what? You're not gonna lock me up, or have me hung or something?" The sheriff sighed, "nope. I think you learned your lesson pretty well, son. Now y'all get outta here. I got real problems to deal with, like those idiots who're beatin' up on four kids. Just be happy I'm not throwin' you in the cell for indecent exposure."

The all stood up as quickly as possible and nearly ran out of the sheriff's office. The sheriff sighed to himself as they rushed out, "damn, kids an' their damn hormones." Rush watched as they spilled onto the road from the entrance to the sheriff's office. Jenkins' three friends stared him down: they were pissed at getting the shit kicked out of them at his expense and confused at what they learned about their best friend." Erik was the first to console him, "hey, uh. It's whatever, Axel." John remained silent as his elder brother spoke for both of them, "Erik's right. Let's just go home and get some rest. I'll sort it out with the elder, and your parents later." Jenkins looked up to Chase and nodded his thanks.

With that, the memory faded and Rush was left in the inky darkness of Jenkins' mind; feelings of shame and embarrassment swirled around Rush's imagined feet. Rush grumbled aloud, "anything else, Jenkins?" Jenkins sighed after pulling his face away then looked up to Rush and patted him on the head like one would a dog. "Well, there you go," he whispered. "People in the wastes don't take kindly to folks that're different, not just the way *I'm* different, but for any reason. Super mutants, ghouls, y'all, whatever. It's not *normal* and you're gonna catch shit from someone for it. People tend to care for their kin and themselves first, everyone after that's just a hassle they'd rather kill than deal with." Rush nodded, he saddened by

Jenkins' turmoil and general outlook on his fellow man but grateful for the shared experience.

Rush stared at Jenkins for a moment, making him slightly uncomfortable. Jenkins quickly averted his gaze, fighting off mixed feelings about the giant man-wolf in front of him. "So, uh. You said earlier that my scent was familiar. What'd you mean?" Rush's gaze got shifty as he failed to respond. His whisky-soaked mind wasn't sure if it wanted to go down that path. "My mate turned me down for another female. Had a familiar scent. Supposed to be the next alpha and beta. Stole my chance to reproduce." Jenkins blinked, "so, it was like an arranged sort of thing?" Rush nodded silently. "Were going to have lots of beautiful pups," he said with a slight quiver of frustration.

"Were you that bad in the sack?" Jenkins asked, trying to inject some humor into Rush's quickly darkening mood. He raised an angry eyebrow in response, "what?" Jenkins chuckled and clapped Rush on the shoulder, "it's just a joke. Some folks say that gals go gay 'cause their guy can't satisfy them." Rush shrugged, "Not very experienced. Told you, at the place near the lake." Jenkins shrugged, "I don't remember, but I do remember drinkin' a lot." Rush nodded, "yes. You did. Erik did too."

They sat silently for a few moments before Rush asked, "is it like that for you too?" Jenkins shrugged, "like what?" "No female could satisfy you," Rush explained. Jenkins choked on his own saliva in surprise. He hacked for a bit to clear his throat. "Uh, well," he stammered, "I guess so. I jus' want someone to care for me like I care for other folks, ya know? Someone strong, muscular." Rush nodded, "you would have made a good mate," Rush sighed, "for an old friend. He's dead now, too." Jenkins surprised Rush with a hug of sympathy. Rush patted Jenkins on the head like he was a pup, "Benjamin – brother of my crush." Rush chuckled as he roughed up Jenkins' hair, "he found out my plans and became angry. He wanted to be my mate instead. Didn't know he was interested in me or being the clan's beta."

Rush continued to pet Jenkins' head in a brotherly way until Jenkins nestled into his chest fur and began to lightly snore. Rush grunted and grumbled softly, "you have cared for my brother, I will do the same for you." Jenkins mumbled something under his breath as Rush gently freed himself and laid Jenkins down to rest. He did the same for himself: he cuddled up to Erik, tucked his tail, and quickly fell to sleep.