



Surrender To The Wild

jg4297

Chapter 6

“Wishing Upon a Star”

The mood had improved significantly when the sign, clearly stating *Rock Harbor, 1 mi*, came into view. Almost as if by magic, the sore muscles, heavy packs, and quiet griping had been replaced by new found vigor and cheerful discourse. Three days in the wilderness without the creature comforts they were used to was trying for the inexperienced interns; The Drs Hudson knew that the temporary discomfort would pay dividends in removing said inexperience. Mike was walking side by side with another individual at the front of the column, chatting away about past experiences as Dr. Max wormed his way forward.

“Almost there, guys!” He tried to state in a reassuring manner.

“That we are,” Mike paused his conversation to reply. “But you don’t have to worry about us. Those stragglers in the back could use your *enthusiasm*, Dr.”

Dr. Max seemed to short-circuit for a split second. A wide, blank stare, heavy blink, and a hearty nod later, he was headed to the back of the pack.

“What’s with him? He’s seemed a bit off today,” Mike commented to the intern. “Think the fatigue is finally getting to him? He disappeared the last two nights...”

“Eh, I don’t see why it would,” the intern responded with a shrug. “He’s got some method of tracking he uses to find stuff at night. Don’t ask me how it works, he refuses to take any of us with him. Something about ‘the danger of a dark forest.’”

At least he didn’t twist his ankle like that girl... Whatever. Won’t be my problem in a few minutes.

Turning back to the original subject at hand, Mike resumed. The trail became increasingly well-groomed as the group pushed forward to their objective. Signs of civilization started to pop up by the wayside; Brightly colored tents in sandy open

areas, enclosed outhouses, even small wooden bridges spanning drainage ditches that the trail cut over. The consensus was clear from the multiple conversations: *I'm glad to be back*. Nature was beautiful, something to be respected and admired. The conveniences of man were welcome, though.

Stopping at the back of the Ranger Station, Dr. Max ordered his team to set down their packs for a brief reprieve before moving to more permanent lodgings. He needed to check in with Jeff again before taking residence in the screened huts that they had reserved weeks before. Holding the back door open, Mike waved the Dr. in with a mimed bow. *God, I haven't missed these*, Mike thought as he stared into one of the fluorescent lights on the ceiling. He waved to his coworkers as he trailed Dr. Max to Jeff's desk.

Dr. Max began by slamming his hands on the desk, the metallic thud spooking the Head Ranger, who was turned around searching for something in a banker's box behind his desk. "Are you the guy in charge here?!" the Dr. loudly complained with feigned anger, a sly look painted on his face. Jeff spun around with lightning speed, the shock on his face dissipating as he recognized the man in front of him. "Holy... How many times do I have to tell you to stop scaring me like that, Max?!" Rising from his seat, he came around the desk to briefly embrace the Dr. and extended a hand towards Mike afterwards.

"Great to see you guys back! We got Mike's call on the radio when you passed Mount Franklin. Record time for a trip back from Pickerel, eh? You might've beaten the record you set last time!"

"Oh, we were just encouraged by the promise of warm showers. How's Anisha?" his tone shifted after the pleasantries were completed.

"Fine. She's in good shape now, definitely a sprain. She's been keeping your hut occupied- Oh, she can tell you herself. How about you guys go get those warm showers and some hot food in you over at the Greenstone. You know... I knew you guys were coming back. You have a certain scent of ripeness that just carries across the wind-" Jeff cringed jokingly as he waved his hand in front of his face.

Laughing, the Dr. retorted. “Alright, alright, anything to keep the head honcho happy. You know where to find us. Hey, Mike,” he turned. “Having a cookout later to celebrate a job well done, want to come by around 7?”

“Oh, sure. Gotta get me one of those showers first. And Jeff probably wants to talk.”

Jeff nodded his head as the two turned to him. “We’ll see you then,” the Dr. ended as he walked to the door.

“So, how was it? Good time?” Jeff enquired as he motioned for Mike to sit opposite of him. “No calls over the time you were out there *must* mean that it was good.”

“Yeah, it was all good. Camp was good, they got a lot of data, and they even let me handle the tranquilizer rifle!”

“My my, they must’ve trusted you quite a bit then. Good data?”

“Yup. Hit my mark. They got everything they needed from the wolf, as far as I know. F-192...”

“Ooh, one of the imports. I’ll read all about it once they get to drafting the synopsis notes for this excursion. More importantly,” his tone became a tinge concerned.

“How’re you doing? No issues-”

“Nope,” Mike curtly responded. “Nothing bad going on here.”

Can’t. Can’t talk about Amanda. Think of the job, Mike.

“It can be a bit difficult for new Rangers like yourself to get used to the tempo and seclusion of things here. Giving you a few days away from the monotony of office life was one of my goals when recommending you. I just... Want to make sure that you’re doing alright on a personal lev-”

“Hunky-dory over here. Hey, do you mind if I go get that shower? I’m a bit too sticky for comfort now that I’m back in a climate-controlled building.”

Jeff nodded kindly as he relented. “Sure, Mike. I’ll be here until 6 tonight. Just make sure you see me again before then.”

“Thanks,” Mike quickly complied as he jumped from his seat. *Get this grime off of me and go relax with a drink. Work. The Island. That’s all that I need to be worried about right now.*

God, why am I in such a rush? Slowing his pace down as he came into view of the barracks, the forgotten thoughts began to resurface in Mike's head. *Of course, my mind goes right back to her... Nothing's wrong, I'm fine. I need to relax a bit.* Reaching for the doorknob, the door unexpectedly swung open and Mike reactively took a step backwards.

"Oh, hey Vic..." he greeted sheepishly as the Ranger stood in the doorway, his heart skipping a beat. *I don't feel surprised by her. It's just the door...*

"Mike! You're back!" she beamed. "How was it?!"

"Good, good. Hey, can I talk to you later? I'm filthy."

"Yeah, I need to get to the office anyway. Stop by before you turn in! Night shift gets sooo boring... Probably see ya later, then!"

Watching her walk away, Mike's thoughts shifted yet again. *Feels like I haven't seen her in months. Talking to someone that isn't so much a high-strung professor type would be KILLER right now.* Catching himself, he slammed his eyes shut as he realized that he was staring at her posterior. *NOPE. NOPE. SHOWER. NOW.* Hastily pulling the door back open, he jogged back to his room. Jason, his roommate, laid on his bed, comfortably swaddled in a blanket as he watched a movie on a portable DVD player. "Oh, Mike! What's up?" he asked as he paused the movie.

Come on, just leave me alone... "Oh, nothing much. I gotta get in that shower real quick, I've got sand everywhere."

"Hell yeah, man," Jason murmured as he unpaused his entertainment.

Fumbling with his shower bag and towel, Mike slammed the bathroom's door behind him. He rotated the faucet's dial, allowing the water to come up to temperature as he stared at his reflection in the mirror. His vision sharpened, jaw clenching as he couldn't make sense of his thoughts.

GOD. First, I'm a wreck about Amanda, now I get all worked up over Vic! What the fuck is going on with me?! All I need to do is take a shower. Give Jeff my after-action

report. Go unwind at a barbecue. THEN I can actually talk to Amanda. It's not as bad as my brain is making it out to be... Everything is alright...

Taking a step into the stream of steaming water, he scrubbed the grime from his body as he sighed to himself. *Everything is gonna be alright, Mike. No need to worry. Just let your mind run blank...*

* * *

Clean and dry, he patted the excess water from his hair as he rounded the doorway back into his room. Jason was in the same position he was before, but had thankfully put in a pair of earbuds. Groaning as he crossed his arms, Mike's eyes landed on the pile of gear he had messily left on the floor of his room. "Alright," he spoke to himself under his breath as he dumped the contents of his pack out. "Now to find my cleaning brush."

* * *

The slight breeze that carried away the dirt brushed off his pack brought with it a slight hint of burning charcoal. "Damn, what time is it?" Mike asked himself as he looked at his watch. *Six thirty. Shit.* Jogging back inside, he threw his pack down. Jason coughed loudly, trying to get Mike's attention.

"Where you going, man?" he inquired.

"Oh, I was supposed to meet Jeff half an hour ago. I'll be back after!"

"Cool, cool. You'll put your stuff back when you return, right?"

Mike looked at him blankly for a moment, nodding as turned to leave the building.

Not like you just hiked 25 miles in a few days, Mike burned internally. *Cut me some slack.* He flung the door open, running towards the Visitor Center as the faint shafts of sunlight poked through the western trees. *Shit, shit, shit! I really hope Jeff isn't angry-* He skidded to a stop a few feet from the back door, catching his breath as he gently opened the door. "Heyyy..." he carefully waved. Jeff and Vic were conversing at the back of the room.

"Ah, Mike! Get your gear cleaned?" Jeff greeted.

“Yeah... Sorry, totally slipped my mind to get back here by six. I’ll go over it now if you want-”

“Ah, you’re good,” Jeff interrupted with a dismissive wave. “I talked with Max for a few, saw you cleaning your pack on my way back here. Just come in a bit early the next day you’re working.”

Relief flooded over him. *Thank God. Jeff is understanding.*

“Well, I gotta get home. Wife’s making dinner. Have a good night, guys!”

Leaving the two alone, Mike tried leaving as Vic sauntered over. “So, how was it?”

“...Great! It was a nice getaway from the office shit.” *I gotta get home before Jason has an aneurism over my stuff.*

“Were they still assholes for a minute? I couldn’t get over that last time.”

“Heh... Yeah. So high strung you’d figure they’d snap at any moment. Everyone calmed down towards the end, though.” *C’mon Vic, let me go!*

“Sick! How’d you like it? I hear you got to bring the wolf down!”

“Oh, it was great. I didn’t think I’d ever shoot something without killing it, y’know? Hey... Quick sidenote, would you mind if I used the office phone to call home? Later, of course. I have to get my stuff stowed back at the barracks.”

Vic nodded. “Yeah, sure! I don’t know why Jeff is so protective of that thing... Just swing by. I’d love to hear more about your time with the researchers!”

I really hope I don’t regret this... “How about tonight? Make a stop by their shelter on your rounds. I know that the Drs would like to see you again.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, Max mentioned you.” *I mean, he did mention you. Just not in the best of ways...*

“That sounds great! Yeah, I’ll try to swing by. Now, go do ya thang! I’ll catch ya later!”

“*Haha*, right. See ya later then!”

Mike went towards the back door, turning to wave at Vic as he exited. *I’m not misreading anything. She’s just being friendly.* Sighing to clear his head, his focus turned to the stronger scent of charcoal in the air. *It’ll be a good time tonight. Get my head nice and clear. First, my stuff...*

* * *

Complete with the most boring game of Tetris he'd ever played, Mike slung a small backpack over his shoulder as he went towards the kitchen. *Looks like some of my groceries are missing... Oh, sick! No one raided my beer!* The cold, blue cans almost had an aura about them as Mike greedily reached into the fridge to fill his arms. *May as well share a bit! Can't show up empty handed!* He cracked open a can of the beer as he stowed the rest in his bag, sipping the foam rising from the opening. *God, that tastes good.*

The flicker of the light over the front door of the barracks was noticeable, as was the swarm of moths vying for the illumination. The sun was gone, only a faint orange glow in the west; A few of the brighter stars were peeking over the eastern horizon, accentuated by the inky bluish-black of a pristine nighttime sky. Mike calmly began his walk towards the permanent shelters, humming a tune as he took in the sights and sounds. *I can never get sick of this place.* Mike's presence was noted as he came into view of the shelters, a few of the interns waving and cheering. *Fashionably late,* he thought as he looked at his watch.

A group of people stood merrily inside the lit shelter just down the trail from Rock Harbor. It was a simple structure; A gable-roofed pavilion screened in on all sides. It wouldn't do much to keep foul weather or the cold out, but it did an excellent job of keeping the roving swarms of mosquitoes away from their meals. With all of the gear occupying it, though, the research team stayed loosely huddled around the entrance.

"Mike! Long time no see!" Jon joked, waving his closer. "Hey, we were just talking about the new Elder Scrolls game- Have you played any of 'em?"

"No," Mike replied as he took another swig from his can. "Never been much of a video game guy. One of my buddies back home was talking about it before I got up here, though... What's it called? Ski Rim or something?"

"*Actually-* Oh, you probably wouldn't care, anyway. Say, want to take a look at the photos I took? I've got them loaded on my laptop!"

"Now *that* is something I'd be interested in. Let's see 'em!"

Jon beckoned to Mike to follow him into the shelter. Pulling a rugged laptop out from underneath his cot, Jon began navigating the file explorer. Hundreds of pictures, some old and some new, were meticulously organized into folders that tracked the progress of three years' worth of work.

"So, here's the first few test shots I took of camp. Had to make sure the camera was working before we set out for F192."

"Uh huh..."

"...And here are the photos of you and Dr. Max setting up. You can *just barely* see the bait pile down there. I say that because this camera is leagues better than the last one we had."

"OK..."

"Now, for the big reveal- Look at her!" Jon pointed to the wolf on the screen. "She's gorgeous, isn't she? What a fine specimen!"

"Indeed, she is," Mike replied softly. *It's almost like I'm right in front of her again. Such a great animal.*

Dr. Max loudly busted through the screen door as the boys continued to browse through Jon's photography. "Hey! There he is! Come on, boys, the burgers aren't getting any hotter!"

"Hey, Dr. This is for you," Mike offered as he thrust a can of beer forward, tossing another towards Jon.

"A man after my own heart," Dr Max heartily replied. "Oh, Mike, give your email to Jon. He'll shoot that photo of you with F192 over to you when we're connected to the internet again. C'mon, let's eat!"

Going back out into the night, they joined the group that was now gathered around the grill as Dr. Hudson doled out the goods. *Talking with Dr. Max again probably wouldn't hurt. Especially after I get some food in me.* Mike shook the now-empty can in his hand, swapping it for another full one from his bag.

“Isn’t this the life?” Dr. Max rhetorically asked as he nudged Mike with his shoulder.

“Nothing like a cookout and some brews after wandering around the woods.”

“Yeah,” Mike answered in between bites of his burger. “We haven’t had one of these with the rest of the Rangers yet. Kinda been a ‘fend for yourself’ type thing. How’d you keep the burgers fresh?”

“Jeff lent me some of his fridge space. Pays to have friends, right?” Taking a sip from his beer, the Dr. let out a restrained belch before continuing. “Thanks for coming, Mike. You deserve this just as much as the rest of my crew.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. You guys gonna be around here for long?”

“Nope. Heading down to Windigo to check out a new-ish pack that’s been taking territory around Washington Harbor. We’ve only just started making them a distinct group from the Middle Pack this past winter.”

“Oh, now that’s interesting!” Mike exclaimed as his expression glowed. “Tell me about it!”

“Only a bit, I’d be glad to share more once we start drafting for our yearly report.”

Flipping open his pocketbook with his free hand, Dr. Max cleared his throat before his impromptu lecture began.

“We first spotted what appeared to be a group of wolves distinct from the Middle Pack on January 18th via aerial photography. This group, which was originally described as a far-wandering offshoot of the Middle Pack, was revealed to be a new family unit via positive collar signal from a female transplanted from Ontario. First analysis and comparison of the individuals to those of the Middle Pack show promising results: It appears that at least one wolf, possibly from the Middle Pack, had dispersed with the transplanted female, who was a loaner at the time. As evidenced by the presence of two wolves in addition to the breeding pair, it can be assumed that at least one litter had been born.”

Flipping his notebook closed and wetting his mouth with another sip of beer, Dr Max grinned. “So, how’s that for you?”

“Wow,” Mike’s mouth gaped in awe. “They aren’t doing too bad then, eh? More wolves is more better!”

“Isn’t that the truth... We’re doing *something* right here.”

“In this case, correct,” Dr Hudson interjected. “Great summary, Max. I’m glad to see that you’re interested as well, Mike.”

“I’ll *definitely* have to bother you guys when you come back up here. Say, need a guide getting down to Windigo? I might know a guy...”

“*Heh*, thanks for the offer, but there’s a Ranger up here that needs to make his way down there. He’ll be going with us.”

“At least I tried,” Mike resigned with a shrug. Looking towards his watch, his eyes bulged slightly. *10 PM*. “Well, it’s been great, but I have to get going. Gotta make a call before it’s too late. Thanks for having me!”

Dr. Max patted Mike’s shoulder with an empathetic grin on his face. “Best of luck, buddy. We’ll see you before leaving.”

I’ll need it, Mike thought as he clenched his jaw, waving at the group as he hurried back to the trail. As the Ranger Station came into view, so too did a figure dressed in the telltale forest green of an NPS employee. *Must be Vic, telling from the silhouette. Keep cool*, Mike calmed himself. Waving with a quick “hello”, he didn’t bother stopping. *Once I make this phone call, I can stop being so worried over nothing. It’s going to be fine*. Cracking open the back door, he stepped into the harsh lighting as he wormed his way through the combination office and storage room to the door of the store side. The lights were off, but the soft glow of the under-desk mess of power strips gave off just enough for Mike to find the phone. *Alright, let’s do it*, he shakily committed.

Amanda’s phone number was simple muscle memory by now. Picking up the handset, the dial tone was music to Mike’s ears. Pressing the sequence of numbers the same as he had hundreds of times before. A brief silence preceded the call’s connection.

One ring. Two rings. Three rings. Four rings.

Maybe she isn’t near her phone.

Five rings. Six rings. Seven rings. Eight rings.

Maybe she's in the shower?

Mike sighed again, resigning as he dropped the handset back to the receiver. Just before it could seat, though, he heard a familiar voice.

“Hello?”

Smiling, he brought the handset back to his ear. “Heyyy, honey!”

The sounds of muffled music and background conversations rang tinnily from the handset, a voice responding barely louder. “Sorry, who is this?”

“Mike! How're you doing, Amanda?”

“Ohhh- Hi baby! Do- good! How's isl- life trea- you?”

“Hon, you're hard to hear. You aren't at home, are you?”

“No, ou- w- friend-. Cal- yo- later-”

The line terminated, leaving the din of civilization still ringing in Mike's ears. He glared out of the windows of the building, returning the handset as he stared blankly at the softly rippling water at the end of the dock. *She's... Out. I call her after over a month of no conversation, and she takes a rain check I didn't even give her.* Resting his knuckles on the hardwood counter, Mike's shoulders drooped as his heart raced. *Gotta be FUCKING KIDDING ME!*, he screamed internally as he slammed a clenched fist down.

Leaving the otherwise serene storefront, he took a moment before leaving the Ranger Station to think of his next action as he clutched the sides of his head. *I just need to go to sleep. No way to drown my sorrows, now that all my beer is gone. I'll try again tomorrow... Yeah, I'll try again.*

The door swung open, the smell of the barbecue strong in the air again. Vic was back from her visit, eager to sit down for a, hopefully, quiet night with no issues. Instead, a very distraught-looking Mike stood on the opposite end of the room, staring at her with wide eyes and a puffy face.

“Uh... Heyyy, Mikeee... What’s up?”

Oh, GOD, I can’t let her see me like this. Just make a quick exit.

“Oh, nothing. Gonna go get some rest now,” he quickly peeped as he tried to skirt past Vic.

“*Whoa there!*” she exclaimed as she caught Mike by the elbow. “Something’s up, I can see it. What’s wrong?”

*Really? Should I talk to her about relationship problems? Y’know... She’s offering...
Fuck it.*

With a trembling voice, he began. “Why don’t we sit down?”

“You seemed pretty determined to make that phone call. Is something wrong with your family?” she asked as she pulled a swivel chair from beneath a desk.

Mike pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to conceal his wet eyes that could burst into tears at any moment. “No, my family’s fine. You remember a few weeks ago when I told you about my fiancé?”

“Yeah...”

“I *needed* to call her tonight. She hasn’t responded to any of my letters; I’ve been getting worn down by work... I figured that talking with her would help fix what I thought was wrong. That’s how we’ve always done it. One of us was the voice of reason for the other, we worked through everything. *Together*. Now that I need her, she just drops it because she’s ‘out with her friends’. I can understand asking to call back later... But I haven’t heard her voice in over a month, and vice versa!”

Vic crossed her legs as she nodded. “I feel ya... It sucks, doesn’t it?”

“...Y-yeah... I feel like we’re drifting apart, and I can’t do anything about it...” he replied, trembling.

“Just call her back tomorrow. Jeff told me that he’s going back to the mainland on the noon boat, and I have night watch again.”

“That c-could work...”

“See? It’s not that bad. You’ve already been up here a month, and you’ve been taking it like a champ. If it makes you feel any better, I was way more of a wreck when I reached this point in my first season.”

“*Heh...*” he feebly chuckled. *She’s trying to lighten the mood. I should take the hint.* “It can’t be that bad... Thanks. I needed to get that off my chest.”

“I’m *always* here for you, Mike. Just find me if you need me, you know where I’ll be tonight! Go get to bed.”

“Thank you, Vic...” he ended as he rose to exit.

Instead of a nod or wave, though, Vic rose with him. Spreading her arms, Mike looked at her with wide eyes as he thought of his next move. *It’s a “brotherly” hug... Nothing weird about it...* Reciprocating, he stepped closer. He barely embraced her, patting her back twice as her arms and upper body squished against his. *She’s going a bit too tight*, he thought as he patted her once more, pulling away. “Thanks... I’m gonna head home now.”

“See ya round!” she cheerily replied as she smiled widely, staying in place as Mike left.

He kicked a rock down the graded trail, the light of the moon and stars more than enough to let him see clearly. *She doesn’t seem like the physical kind of person when trying to console... She’s normally pretty kind and cheery, though... Maybe she just thought I needed an embrace? I must’ve looked like a wreck, losing myself like that.* Letting out a pent-up sigh, he looked longingly to the sky as images of the hug replayed in his head. *What am I gonna do?*

* * * One Week Later * * *

Work.

That was the only word on Mike’s mind. The last week and some change had been hectic; The park was starting to receive the beginnings of its busy season. The *Ranger III*, along with private vessels, had dumped over three dozen visitors into Rock Harbor every day since Mike had returned from his guidance excursion. They weren’t going to check themselves into the park, nor was the mounting list of other tasks

going to work itself out. He had started by talking to the maintenance staff about the mineshaft the researchers had come across; It was easy enough to give them the geographic coordinates and a description of what needed to be fixed.

Then, everything else began to pile up. Paperwork for visitors, educational talks, basic maintenance, and even campsite inspections. Those had kicked up as campers rotated on and off the island. That meant tiring, drawn-out hikes between tiny patches of sand dotted around the northeast portion of the island. *It's almost time*, Mike thought as he emptied the visitor center's garbage can for the umpteenth time that week. *The night where we get to relax.*

Since Vic had told him about it, Mike had been looking forward to the meteor shower. He wasn't able to get much more information, but the promise of a party coupled with something he'd never seen in person was more than enough to look forward to while trudging through the monotony. *Wonder if we'll drink everything the boat brought over yesterday. It'll be worth it!* Hefting the bag up to his chest, he threw it into the dumpster. *End-of-the-day meeting is last on the docket.*

The emotional experiences he had weathered were distant, yet branded into his mind. He got his second phone call with Amanda, catching her as she came home from work. *Distant*. That was the only way Mike could describe her. The normally caring, interested tone she had was replaced by a hasty desire to end the conversation as quickly as possible. *I'll have to see her face to face. Maybe it'll be different than just hearing my voice. No use worrying about it.*

The assembled staff of Rock Harbor were chatting as they waited for the last few stragglers to come back from whatever they were doing. Reading the room, Mike could see that everyone was just as beat as him. *They're probably just as ready for tonight as I am*. Silent compilations aside, the room's chatter died down as Jeff strode in from the back door. *Almost like he's late for a press conference...*

"Alright, team, I won't take long. To start, great work this week! You're all vital components of the machine that processed... Let's see... 295 visitor permits this week! With no errors, either! The Superintendent has expressed his utmost satisfaction to

me. If we keep this up, we'll all be walking away with medals for "Best Park" at the end of the year!"

A few of the more personable Rangers clapped a few times.

"Thank ya, thank ya," Jeff poorly mimed an Elvis impression. "Now, that wouldn't be without the blood, sweat, and tears of you guys. So, to that point, I need to hurry up. I hear there's a... Meteor shower, or something, tonight? Thanks, Zach, for the invite, but I have some housekeeping tasks that'll keep me from joining. To everyone that's going tonight, I am ordering you: Have fun. Don't do anything stupid, don't flip the canoes, and don't *overindulge*. Cool?"

The silent stares of the room were broken by a few enthusiastic "Yeah!"s. Clearly, his time was up.

"Cool! I'll see the day crew on the morrow. Now, go have some fun tonight!" With a wave of his hand, the crew was dismissed.

"You excited, Mike?" Vic asked. She had worked her way through the group, standing directly behind Mike.

"Oh," he replied with a startled jump. "Yeah, this is what I've been looking forward to all week. What's the plan?"

"I'll tell you on the way back to the barracks," she retorted. "Walk with me?"

"Sure..." *We're going to the same place. She's not coming on to me.*

* * *

"...So, we need to grab the canoes from the maintenance shed ASAP. You'll help, right?"

Huh, Mike blankly stared after zoning out. "Uh... Yeah, yeah. Just let me drop my stuff off." *Damn, maybe I need tonight more than I think. Better get my bag packed and get back out here.*

"*Siiiick*, I'm gonna do the same. Let's meet back out here in five after I round a few others up."

Vic opened the door of the barracks, pushing it a bit further as she entered so it didn't slam on Mike. Both filtered back to their rooms, along with the stream of other Rangers that were getting ready for the evening festivities. *Damn, when'd someone get a speaker?* Mike heard reverberating bass through the thin walls. *Almost like I'm in the dorms again...* Dumping his backpack onto his bed, he reached under his bed to feel around for some of the non-perishable groceries he'd ordered. *Alright, snacks 'n beer. It's warm, but someone's bound to bring some ice...*

Zippering up his pack, Mike traded his campaign hat for a baseball cap as he walked through the barracks door. It was still a few hours until the meteor shower was to start, but Vic was oddly adamant about getting the transportation ready before twilight came. With the help of a few others, they had little issues pulling the canoes off the racks behind the maintenance shed. Only a few strenuous moments later, they were at the water quayside in Rock Harbor.

"Easy!" Mike reassured his coworkers. "Now what?"

"Let's go over to the group, I think Zach is taking command this year," Vic replied.

The canoe haulers joined the larger group, an almost eerie silence coming over them as Zach motioned for silence.

"Alright, guys, this'll be easy. All we have to do is go about 900 yards *that way*," he said, pointing towards Raspberry Island, a small landmass east of Rock Harbor. "...And for the love of God, please don't flip your canoes. The last thing you want to do is spend the rest of the night wet and miserable. The water's calm. We're all looking forward to a night off with a more scenic backdrop than we're used to. Just remember, all of our guests pay a *lot* for what we get *paid* to see on a daily basis! Let's get over there, nice and dry, so that we can relax for a change!"

Time to saddle up, I guess!

Mike got selected to be one of the paddlers who ferried the group across the water. *Of course, pick the new guy*, he griped. *Whatever*. Upon completion of his last trip, he beached the canoe and started to search for the trailhead. "It's not far," the

other rower mentioned. "Follow me." The sky was beginning to darken as twilight came to an end, the full moon already prominent in the sky. Thankfully, the walk took less than a few moments. Mike was amazed at the industriousness of his coworkers. *They've got a grill, lawn chairs, and lanterns set up already! This is feeling pretty bougie for a party.* Dumping his alcohol contribution into a cooler, he pulled a cold can out of the ice, cracking it open as he sighed. Looking east, over Lake Superior, he zoned out.

"You good?" asked Vic, a tinge of concern in her voice.

"Yeah, yeah... I guess I've got a little fatigue from all the running around I've been doing..."

"*Don't we all.* Let's just get our minds off that. Hey, how about that second call you made?"

Mike glared at Vic, trying to silently remind her of the private nature of the subject of the heart-to-heart they had shared.

"Fine," he hissed. "We're gonna work on it."

"Uh... Sorry..." she sheepishly responded as she averted her gaze. "Sooo... Meteor shower, eh?!"

At least she gets the hint. I don't need to think about anything other than the right here, right now.

"Hey! About time y'all got here!" Carlos welcomed, slightly spilling his beer as he stumbled over. "I see you already have drinks, hungry for some sausages? I've got chorizo, brats, and hot dogs on the grill!"

Saved by the Carlos, Mike thought to himself as he grinned. "Yeah, I'll take one once they're done!" *Oh shit, almost forgot.* "Yours is the blue cooler, right?"

"...Yes?"

"I've donated a six-pack to you. Mind if I use your laptop sometime? I want to video call some people."

“*Shit*, man, say less! You know just how to twist my arm,” he replied jokingly. “Just hit me up whenever. Now that you two are here, let me ask-”

Carlos’ attention was drawn back to the grill, someone shouting for him as a thick plume of black smoke rose from it. “Crap, I’ll be back guys.” Looking at each other, Mike and Vic both smirked.

“He *always* does that,” she giggled.

Gesturing to a row of lawn chairs facing the water, Mike replied. “Want to take a seat while we wait for our well-done food, then?”

Nodding, she moved to take a seat on the end. “So, let’s change the subject. Take a look at the stars!”

Night had swept over the island almost unnoticed by most. Without the consequences of light pollution, it was almost bright enough to see unaided. Thousands of stars shone brightly, slightly obscuring some of the constellations that Mike began to look for. *Let’s see... Moon’s pretty low... I think Saturn’s above it...* “Hey, Vic, look above the moon. Pretty sure that’s Virgo.”

“*Ohh*, I think I see it!” she searched with awe. “You like astronomy?”

“I had an interest when I was a kid, I only remember a few things from it now. *Oh*. Look left,” he turned in his seat, pointing to the north. “You can see Polaris there, attached to the end of the Little Dipper!”

“Those are the only two I know, *haha*. Saved me from getting lost a few times.”

“I wrote a note to look for something, let me see...” Pulling his notebook from his jacket’s pocket, Mike flipped it open. A wrinkly sheet of paper fell into his lap, piquing his interest. *What’s this?* It took a moment for his eyes to focus on the writing.

Dear Amanda,

NOPE. Crumpling the sheet, he shoved it into his pocket as he turned his attention back to the notebook. “Yeah, yeah... Uh, Big Dipper’s right above that. Kinda looks like a bear if you squint hard enough.”

“I think I see it...” Vic replied.

Just focus on the stars, Mike. The show's gonna start soon.

After a few additional drinks and some lighthearted conversation with the other Rangers that joined them, Mike was feeling much better mentally, albeit a bit tipsy. He was trying to remember some details to an off-handed question when Zach's shrill voice alerted the group: “It's starting!” Instantly silenced, the Rangers craned their heads to the sky to watch as a few fleeting streaks of yellow appeared high in the blue-tinged darkness. *I never imagined it would be so pretty in person*, Mike thought to himself. *Mom always told me about these- Wait...*

For some reason, his mind pulled a quote from her that had stuck with him throughout his childhood. “Make a wish!” Though it wasn't exclusive to him, his Mom had always made a point to remind him when she saw any shooting star-shaped object fly through the sky. *May as well...* Closing his eyes, he tried to pull something meaningful from the depths of his brain.

It'd be nice to be with Amanda and work things out.... But I don't want any Monkey's Paw business to get me back to her... The memory of his first encounter with the existence of Isle Royale in grade school flashed in his mind. *Man, Dan and I talked about that documentary for weeks. Now that I think of it... I helped a lot. They're doing good work. If only...*

Wish I could do more for the wolf study. “No...” he not-so-silently muttered to himself. *I wish Amanda and I will get through this. I'll get to talk with her, we'll work it out, and we'll live happily ever after. There, that's a good one.*

“Mike, what're you doing?” Vic asked inquisitively. “You're missing the meteors!”

“Oh...” he tried to downplay it. “I was... Uh... Making a wish.”

“Really?” she incredulously blurted.

What, too childish?

“That’s a good idea! One of ‘em’s bound to come true!” Vic exaggeratedly squeezed her eyes shut, giggling to herself as Mike reeled from her reaction. *Whatever! Gotta have some fun, right?*

“Hey, everyone,” Vic spoke up. “Make a wish!”

Mike’s embarrassment died down a bit as the small crowd mumbled their wishes to themselves. *Man, wouldn’t it be funny if it actually came true? I wonder how everyone spent their golden tickets...* After what seemed like hours, the streaks in the sky became less frequent. A few people yawned, spurring most to look at their watches.

“Damn, it’s almost 1:30!” Mike exclaimed.

“High time to get back to the barracks and catch some sleep,” Zach agreed. “Let’s get the stuff loaded up. Grill should be cold by now.”

Leading the column along the trail with the help of a lantern, Mike began to neatly stack the equipment in the canoe. He felt a tap on his shoulder, spinning around to see a slightly more sober Carlos. “Hey, I can take you back. You’ve had your share of rowing today.”

Isn’t that nice? Not looking to turn down an opportunity to weasel out of manual labor, Mike loaded himself into the canoe after pushing it into the calm waters. *Carlos is doing a lot for me now... Maybe he liked the beer I gave him?* With elegance, the vessels silently glided into Rock Harbor, settling at the quay leading to the Visitor Center. “You guys just go back and get some rest,” Carlos ordered. “I’ll get everyone else to carry this stuff back to the barracks.”

Mike didn’t pay mind to the others that were with him. The paddlers from the trip to Raspberry Island, Vic included, thanked their replacements before starting the short walk back to the barracks. It was serene; Without the din of a boat’s motor or herds of fresh visitors, Rock Harbor almost felt like the wilderness. The rhythmic sloshing of water beneath the dock, the quiet chirping of crickets, even the occasional ‘hoot’ of an owl high in the boreal trees.

“Man, what a night...” Vic quietly slurred as she tried to restart the conversation.

“Yeah... Thanks for telling me about it,” Mike replied.

“I’m just surprised...That I was the one... To tell you about it...”

“I don’t get around much, I guess. I’ve been a bit of a loner since I got here...”

“Mhmm...” Vic lazily grunted. As they reached solid ground, she bumped into Mike.

“You good?”

“Yea-hic”

“Bit too much to drink?”

A satisfied smile spread across her face, eyes squinting as she nodded. “*It’s a good night~*”

“Right...” Mike switched into chaperone mode. He’d dealt with people much more inebriated in school, feeling like it was his duty to get them back to their beds. “C’mon, your room’s waiting for you,” he waved his hand.

“*Ohkaaaay~*”

At least she’s a happy drunk.

Thanks to the shining stars, along with the muscle memory of walking the same path daily, the trip back to the barracks was simple. Keeping track of drunk co-workers was a challenge, but Mike had done it plenty of times before, often in states far worse than the one he was in now. *I’ve got just the right buzz...* Glancing to his side when the sound of footsteps stopped, he could see that Vic had stopped a few feet behind him, rocking in place. “Almost home, come on,” he tried to encourage.

She looked at him, taking baby steps forward as she looked at the open hand he was using to gesture back to her. “Okay...” Mike expected her to catch up, perhaps coming abreast. But as he tried to put his hand down, he felt hers wrap around it. *Um... Um...* His mind was telling him that he was just trying to guide her home, but his heart was telling a different story. Feeling a sudden flush in his chest, he nervously laughed. “Almost home, Vic. C’mon.”

Coming into the cone of light projected by the lamp above the door of the barracks, he swung the door open, looking back at Vic as he corralled her into the

doorway. His demeanor was calm, almost sober-looking. But... He couldn't take his eyes off of her. She had that same, dumb smile plastered on her face, but even larger than it was when they started walking! He tried averting his gaze, ordering her as if she were a child. "Watch your step, the doorway's here. Your room is right down the hall." She grunted something unintelligible in reply. He was going to ask what she said, but the lump in his throat caught his words.

Butterflies in my stomach. I should NOT be feeling this.

Stammering a few additional instructions, he let Vic flop down on her bed and then he started untying her boots. She snorted loudly, seemingly asleep as soon as she hit the mattress. *Oh, thank God. Get these boots off, put her water bottle on the nightstand, then get the hell to bed.* He flipped the lightswitch, gently closing her door before finding his way to the bathroom. Adamant to rinse off before going to bed, he stripped his clothes and turned the faucet on. Staring at his hands as the warm water ran over him, he couldn't stop thinking. *That felt... Good... What am I, 12 again? The simple act of holding a hand is enough to make me feel this way? That was only because she's drunk, and I was escorting her home. That's why it feels good. It can't be...* Tears began to swell in his eyes, unnoticed, as he turned the faucet off.

* * *

After drying himself off and changing into his pajamas, Mike lay on top of his sheets, staring at the ceiling as moonlight streamed through his window. He put all of his focus on trying to fall asleep, trying to silence his thoughts. The sound of other Rangers coming home for the night distracted him; not long enough, though. The first image that would flash back in his mind was that of Vic, the soft, yellow glow of a lamp illuminating her face, exacerbating her grin as she wrapped her hand around his with an air of something more than satisfaction. Resignedly closing his eyes, he attempted to use the quiet sounds coming through his window to lull him to sleep. Rustling trees... The mechanical hum of a generator... For a second, he thought he even heard the distant howl of a wolf.