



Surrender To The Wild

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Chapter 6

“Resuming the Grind”

The warm sunlight shining through the open window of Mike’s room brought an almost serene way to greet the day. The loud beeping of Jason’s alarm clock, though, immediately dispelled any peacefulness. Groaning as he squinted, Mike fumbled his hand around the nightstand to quiet the device. *What time is it?...*

The foggiest of last night started to lift as Mike’s brain woke up. *Mouth’s dry... Headache... Definitely not the worst hangover.* He remembered coming in quite late, getting Vic to bed, then lying down as he tried to quell his racing mind. *Must’ve sweat a lot of it out of me,* he thought as the bedsheets stuck uncomfortably to his skin. He lay there for a few moments, silently, as Jason rolled out of his bed to begin his morning routine.

“Time to get up, Mike, we start together today.”

“Yeah... Gimme a few...”

Images of his dream from the night flashed through his head. He’d never been one to remember his dreams in explicit detail, but this one seemed to leave some claw marks in his memory as his conscious mind roused. Mike rolled to the side of his bed, cracking his back as he swept his feet across the floor to find his sandals. *Coffee first...*

As he turned the pot on, Mike yawned. *So... Dream... I was on the island. Same place as we actually were yesterday.*

The island in his dream had been just as serene, but Mike had been the only one there. The sloshing of the water hitting the rocks at the shore, the gentle whooshing of a breeze passing through the trees. The stars looked much the same, albeit even more brilliant in his mind’s idealized recollection. He stared up into the cloudless sky, watching as the Northern Lights danced across the horizon. The sky moved before his very eyes, almost like a hyperlapse.

Then, the meteors started. Not like they were the night prior, a few streaks of yellowish-white, but *thousands*. Enough to drown out the stars, enough to make it appear as if the sun was high in the sky. He brought a hand up to his brow in a vain attempt to shield his eyes, squinting as if he was staring into a lightbulb. The blinding light ceased, replaced by inky darkness.

Mike's eyes tried to adjust, but *any* source of light was gone. The stars, the Northern Lights, the moon; There was nothing in the sky. He stepped back, more confused than scared, but a severe gust of wind knocked him off his feet. The gentle sounds of the water grew louder as he felt wet along his back; The waves were growing in size, beginning to break over the island. Coupled with the howling wind, it seemed as if the largest storm he'd ever seen was forming right on top of him!

Mike tried backpedaling from the encroaching water, stopping as he butted up against an impenetrable wall of trees. Lightning flashed high in the sky as a massive, pitch black cloud rolled ever closer to him. Its tendrils moved with insane speed, additional bolts of lightning revealing a massive wave that loomed only a few hundred feet from the shore. Mike screamed in terror, unable to move, unable to stop what was no less than a tsunami from killing him. As the cold water crashed into him, his mind blanked. *I must be dead.*

He awoke. The storm, the endless night, the deadly water, it was gone. A perfectly clear, blue day greeted him. He was lying on his back in some kind of clearing, the trauma of his "death" forgotten. *Birds... Breeze... Warmth...* He looked around, calm rather than confused. He knew that he was somewhere on Isle Royale, but this scene was more peaceful than anything he'd seen so far. He rolled over, standing up... Then remembered hitting the snooze button on Jason's alarm clock.

What a dream... I've never had one that crazy, and I've been waaaaay drunker before.

The pot of coffee was halfway full. Mike had been standing in front of it, zoned out as he recalled his dream. *Just as I remember it, it fades...* The last part, though, stuck for a few moments longer. When he rolled over to get up, he felt... Different. Like he was walking on his arms and legs. For how real his fabricated memories were, he

could scarcely recall them. *I'm gonna say that I may have been more drunk than I thought I was.*

Retrieving a mug from the cabinet, he poured himself a cup of the coffee before walking back to his room to begin dressing. Thankfully, he'd been given a midday shift; That meant starting at 9 AM. *Should be easy*, he thought. No boats were scheduled to come in, and a majority of the other Rangers would be working off hangovers, too. *As long as nothing bad happens, I can make it through the day.*

* * *

The office in the Ranger Station was serenely quiet, only broken by the occasional cough or shuffle of papers. Mike had come in the back door, as usual, setting his backpack in a corner as he hung up his hat. *Gotta talk to Jeff*, he reminded himself as he took the final sip from his mug. Weaving through the maze of desks, he found the Senior Ranger paging through a packet he'd recognized from the Drs. Hudson.

"Morning, Jeff."

"Good morning, Mike," he responded, setting down the booklet. "Get some good rest after last night's antics?"

"You could say that..." *Weird dream, but I don't feel all too bad.*

"Well, I'm glad 'ta hear it. Please, take a seat."

Mike acknowledged, sitting in one of the plush office chairs as he pulled the notebook from his pocket.

"So," Jeff began. "I've already got a general understanding of your outing with the Drs. There were a few parts I wanted to talk to you about... Again, nothing bad, I just want to get your perception."

"Sure, sure. Where do you want me to begin?"

"How about camp selection?"

"I can presume that you gave some suggestions to the Drs. when they told you they were headed up towards Pickerel. The spot was a clearing on the south side of the isthmus. Tent went up without issue..." *Shit, I can't tell him we had a fire...* "No issues with the camp stoves. Left it just as clean as we found it."

“Good... They’re always responsible guests. Now, I understand that Max gave you the rifle?”

“He did, seemingly adamant I handle it after hearing of my experience.”

“No issues there? It’s unorthodox, but I can understand why he handed it off.”

“Nope. Dart went into the wolf without a hitch.”

“They took good care of it, too, I presume?”

“As professional as they could be.”

“Good, good... No injuries, barring the girl on your hike out?”

“Nothing severe. A few scrapes from the foliage and a few cases of overexertion, but that was it.”

“Well,” Jeff gently clapped. “I’d say that you contributed to a resounding success for their first outing of the year!”

“Oh, it was nothing,” Mike blushed faintly. “Just happy to get out of the office. I’ve never been one for sitting indoors too long.”

“*Is that so?*” Jeff asked in a rising tone as he reclined, bringing his hands together. “I have a proposition for ya, then.”

“Really?” Mike blurted with a tinge of confusion.

“You see, Carol has been the liaison for researchers that come here for about the last decade. She’s getting close to retiring, and is looking to pass the torch. With your commendable performance, I offer you her position.”

“*Really?!*” Mike exclaimed. *Doesn’t a more experienced Ranger normally handle that stuff?*

“You’re capable, and it’d get you out of the office more. I think you’d be a good fit.”

“Of course!” His excitement could hardly be contained.

“Just a word of forewarning, though... You don’t get any extra pay.”

“*Haha*, I don’t expect that!”

“It’s settled, then! Here, take these,” Jeff instructed as he pushed a twine-wrapped bundle of magazines across his desk. “These are the last 12 years’ worth of Wolf-Moose studies. You’ll be dealing with more than those, though; there are a few botanists, geologists, and meteorologists slated to show up this season.”

“I’ll get to reading them right away! *Wow*, you have to realize how big this is for me, Jeff!”

“Glad to see that you’re enthusiastic. Get with Carol at some point soon for an official turnover of duties. Of course, my figurative door is always open as well.”

"I'll touch base with her some time. Speaking of... Aren't I supposed to do something today?"

"Yes... You'll be working the front with Jason."

"Oh, *duh*," Mike chided himself. "Sorry, a lot's been on me lately."

"Same offer as before," Jeff reminded, "Door's always open."

Mike nodded before heading back to his pack, pulling the top two pamphlets free of the twine before stowing the remainder. *I can't believe he's putting so much trust in me... I'm still so new... Can't let anyone here down, then!*

Pepilly walking through the door separating the office and store sections of the Ranger Station, he waved to an exhausted-looking Jason who was slouched behind the till.

"Long time no see!" Mike greeted.

"Awfully upbeat for having a hangover, eh?" Jason yawned back.

"Oh, come on. You have one too. No reason not to be in a good mood."

"Yeah... What's got you all happy?"

"Jeff just asked me to take over Carol's position as liaison to researchers!"

"Good for you," Jason lazily responded. "Mind watching this for a sec? If I don't get some more coffee in me, I'm gonna pass out..."

"Sure, mind getting me a cup too?"

"*Mhm...*" Jason grunted as he rose from his seat

Mike took his spot, spending a moment to get settled in before focusing on the cover of the first pamphlet. *Beautiful photography*, he admired. Two wolves, one sporting a GPS collar, tread across a featureless, snowy plain. Looking closer, Mike studied the animals. *Wait... I think that is F192!* He felt a sense of relief as he flipped to the table of contents, reading the annotation for the cover. *This is the issue where they dropped her here... After she stopped being a loner?*

He parsed through the text, occasionally slowing to read the myriad charts spread throughout. He knew that he'd be reading these in much more detail down the road, but the pictures were more than enough to sate his curiosity for the time being.

Chippewa Pack rolling around in the snow... Middle Pack eating a moose calf... Heh, a ballsy fox fighting one of the researchers for a bone...

* * *

The rest of the morning was almost torturously boring with how little there was to do. Jason had left to refill his coffee on a regular schedule as the two men sat blankly behind the counter of the patronless shop.

“Shit,” Jason began. “I’m too wired now, and I can only rearrange the map display so many times. What’ve you been reading?”

“Oh, just the Wolf-Moose things Jeff gave me,” Mike replied, trying to sound uninterested.

“Sick... Mind if I read ‘em? It’s about lunchtime. You should go first.”

“I guess...”

Crap, Mike admonished himself. *Forgot to pack lunch today*. Before he asked Jeff for permission to go back to the barracks, he stopped at the communal fridge to see if there was anything he could pilfer. Thankfully, there was a piece of paper taped to the door: “Free food, 2nd shelf”. He cracked the door open, finding a massive pile of 2 day-old hamburgers and 1 day-old sausages from the cookouts.

Luuuuu-cky me! Mike took a paper plate from the nearby cabinet, loading it up with the grilled delicacies before placing it all in the microwave to heat up. As he browsed the fridge’s door for some condiments, he heard footsteps behind him.

“Hey Mike! Yeah, please eat those. They may be a bit well done, but they’re still edible!”

“Oh, Carlos. Hey! You know I’ll never say no to free food.”

Carlos stopped himself as he walked by. “Our deal’s still on. I haven’t forgotten!”

“Dude, it’s been less than a day since we made it.”

“True, but I *will* forget. Just keep on me about it.”

“*Heh*, alright. What’re you doing tonight?”

“Jack shit.”

“How about after we’re off, then? Think you can spare 20 minutes?”

“Say less! Gotta go now, I’m already pushing my luck for the history presentation at 1.”

“See ya, then.”

Carlos jogged through the exterior door, leaving Mike with a fresh reminder of the task he was reluctant to undertake. *Amanda... We'll get it worked out tonight. It'll be so good to see your face...* The microwave beeped, the scent of greasy meat filling the air as Mike opened the door. *Better than not eating*, he thought as he picked some char from the sausages. Picking up a stale-bunned burger, he remembered to season it before taking a bite. *Still better than not eating...*

With lunch complete, Mike went back into a surprisingly busy shop. Jason was just finishing checking out a customer who had forgotten *all* of her food for a three-day hike, clearly angry at herself as she muttered “...highway robbery.”

“Good, you’re here,” Jason jokingly poked. “I’m *starving*. Mind taking over?”

“Not at all. Carlos put last night’s leftovers in the fridge.”

“Be back in a bit, then.”

Mike remained standing behind the counter, going through the till in an attempt to look busy. There were four other customers browsing the shelves; They wouldn’t require much attention. An older man set a pile of goods down, placing his hands on his hips as he waited for Mike to notice him.

“Oh! Sorry, Sir, how are you today?”

“Fine, young man. Just fine.”

Mike began scanning as he thought of what to say.

“Just getting some extra stuff before you head out?”

“Yeah... I always forget something.”

“I’m gonna presume it was fuel this time,” Mike shook a can of propane before sliding it back across the counter.

“You’re pretty smart,” the man replied. “Been coming here for 30 years, and it’s the first time I forgot gas.”

“Well, hopefully you don’t make a habit of it. Will that be all?”

"Ooh," the customer remembered. "I'll take a pack of cigarettes. Doesn't matter what kind."

He doesn't sound like a smoker, Mike thought as he picked the closest pack off of the display bolted to the wall. "ID, please."

The man laughed, flashing a "really?" look as he slid his driver's license across the counter.

"Thank you, Mr... Greyhat. It's policy, y'know?"

"Flattery gets you nowhere," he chuckled.

"Just a reminder, don't leave any of your butts out there. 'Pack in, pack out.'"

"These aren't for smoking," he patted his breast pocket after tucking the pack away.

"Seems I remembered to forget an offering as well."

"Offering?" Mike confusedly blurted. *How do I go about this without coming off as an asshole?*

"Oh, yes. I leave tobacco as an offering to the Creator for giving us a land as beautiful as this. This isn't the kind we normally use in ceremonies, but the sentiment is the same."

"Uh... Sorry. I'm a bit ignorant..." Mike averted his gaze with an embarrassed look.

"No offence taken," the man dismissively waved his hand. "Always good to educate you *young'uns* on our culture."

"Right, right. Thank you... Uh, your total is \$84.80."

Fishing a \$100 bill from his wallet, the man continued. "I still can't help but think how blessed we are to have this island. And you get to *live* here! Tell me, what's your favorite part?"

"That's tough to single out," Mike replied as he counted change from the drawer. "It's my first year. So far... *Hmmm...* Seeing Mount Franklin? Once I have a day off, I'm gonna go hike it."

"Good views up there. Great place for reflection, too." He took the money from Mike's hand, stowing it in his wallet before shoving his purchases into his backpack. "Well, young Ranger, make the most of your time here. There's more to see than the inside of your barracks."

"I'll keep that in mind, Mr. Greyhat. Stay safe out there!"

The man waved in response, lugging his pack by the top strap as he left the store.

Mike turned his attention back to the pamphlet he had bookmarked, ready to keep his mind occupied. *Eh, not many more pictures or charts*, he lamented as he took a peek at the remainder. *May as well start reading the content. Not that the stack Jeff gave me isn't going to keep me entertained...*

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The end of the day came surprisingly fast. Despite the relative monotony of running a store, Mike and Jason had managed to ignore the allure of catnaps with the help of a slow stream of customers. The boys tried to look busy as the clock ticked down to 8 PM- *If we're done in here*, they thought in unison, *Jeff will let us go home*.

As the clock struck, the door to the office swung open.

"All done in here, boys?" Jeff asked.

"Sure are," Jason waved a stack of bills from the till he'd finished counting.

"Lock the doors and get outta here, then! This is the slowest day we're gonna have all week, and I don't want to keep you guys on longer than I need to."

"Amen," Mike quipped.

Meeting on the office side to check with Jeff one last time after securing everything, Mike absentmindedly stared at the fridge. *Man, I'm hungry. Wonder if there's any leftovers left...* They started towards Jeff, but he waved them off once they realized that he was holding a phone handset to his ear.

"Guess we're good for the day," Jason shrugged. "See you at home?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna take a bit of a walk before heading back. Want to relax a bit."

"Suit yourself... Hopefully the water's still hot when you get back."

Jason left immediately, but Mike pondered the fridge again. *May as well help get rid of anything left...* With the door open, he was relieved to find that there were a few things left. Stacking the remaining three burger patties on a bun, he shoved the plastic container with the sausages into his pack. *Throw these in some spaghetti for everyone else.*

The crisp breeze blowing through Rock Harbor helped to relieve some of the cooped-up feeling from being stuck inside all day. Mike hummed to himself as he casually strolled back to the barracks, occasionally taking a bite from his triple-decker burger. *It's a nice day. Didn't have to pay for food, work was easy... Now to get that Skype call with Amanda.* His heart fluttered for a second, his resolve steeling. *Everything's gonna work out alright.*

Once he came into view of the barracks, he took in the almost painting-like composition of the scene. The building and trees weren't noteworthy, but the faint aura-like glow of the light over the front door was just barely visible as the sun dipped below the horizon. There was already a swarm of various bugs attempting to crowd it. He looked further down, settling on the figure reading a book at the picnic table to the side.

That's Vic...

The memories of the last night came back to him in an instant. She'd stopped a few dozen feet behind him, mistaking his hand for something to hold on to. Stumbling through the door... Passing out as soon as she hit her bed. *She was goooone*, he chuckled to himself. He'd been eager to find a way to try and rid himself of the treasonous feelings he'd had the night before. *She was shitfaced. Nothing wrong with making sure she makes it home safe. Let the past be the past, man...*

He stopped for a second, cognizant of why her hand was clutching her forehead as she read.

"How're you holding up, Vic? Wild night?"

"Heyyy... Yeah... Thank God I had today off..." she exhaustedly rattled as she pointed to the last word she read.

"Drinking water? Aspirin? Eaten anything yet?" Mike rapidly fired his questions, not caring if her mind could keep up with them.

"Yeah, yeah, and yeah... Even got a solid three-hour nap. I haven't been that plastered in... Years, *hehe*..."

"I could tell... You get a bit *physical*..."

Vic's face turned red as her eyes bulged behind her sunglasses.

Oh shit... Mike's heart sank. *Wrong words...*

"What did I do?" Vic whispered. "The last thing I remember is getting off of the canoe-"

"Nothing bad, nothing bad!" Mike tried to salvage the situation. "You were out like a light when we put you to bed!"

"Did I..." Vic's head fell into her hands. "I didn't do anything bad, did I?"

"Uh..." *Was I really entranced by her holding my hand? No... Just play it off. Try and reinforce that there's nothing more than a friendly relationship.* "No, no... We just had to keep you on your feet, *heh heh...*"

Vic kept her head in her hands as Mike stammered a way out of the conversation he didn't want to have.

"Well... Uh... I'm making spaghetti for everyone tonight with Carlos' leftovers. Get some if you want it... But... Er... See you round..."

"I might..." Vic peeped.

Mike shuffled past her, getting inside before he said anything else that could damn him. *I didn't want to make her feel bad... Damnit...*

Gently closing the door behind him, Mike grumbled to himself as he hung his hat up. *Great, now I'm gonna feel like an asshole. What was I thinking? God...* He threw the plastic container of leftovers onto the counter, rummaging through the cabinets for the noodles and sauce he was going to cook later on. *Get out of this uniform first...*

Jason was already in his normal position: Comfortably reclining on his bed, watching a movie on his portable DVD player. Mike nodded to him, receiving a wave in return, before quickly changing into some loungewear. He pulled the stack of pamphlets from his pack, dropping them on the top of his dresser as he took a moment to plan the rest of the night.

"Jeff gave you homework?" Jason asked as he pulled his headset from his ear.
"Kinda? He didn't order me to read these, just thought it'd be good for me."
"Huh. Mind if I check out some more of 'em? I'm almost through all of the movies I brought with me."
"Sure? Just don't crumple 'em or anything."
Jason responded with a thumbs up, going back to his movie.

Time for dinner, then. Mike grabbed the next issue as he made his way back to the kitchen. After waiting for the trickle of water from the underpressured faucet to fill a pot, he set it on the stove, turning the dial to full blast. *This is gonna take forever,* he frowned. *At least we have a stove and running water, though. Could always be worse.*

Grabbing a beer from the fridge, he cracked it open as he sat at the table, taking in the cover of the pamphlet before diving into it. *More wolves, more moose. This is gonna be a major part of my job now... I really need to get with Carol tomorrow and pick her brain.* Flipping through the first few pages, his mind began to wander as he fondly recalled his time with the Drs. *Only three days... And it was the best three days I've had here so far. I wonder how they were doing in... What year is this issue? 2009?*

His question was answered with a bold headline a few pages further: **Food Scarcity**. He read the column as intended, referencing the multiple charts provided. So, *more moose equals more wolves. But more moose also equals less moose... They picked the island damn near clean of greenery a few years back. Started to die from starvation... But the wolves took the weak ones. Inverse relationship... Shit, there's the drop when Grey Guy's effects started to be seen...*

"Pulling a 'me', eh?"

Mike jumped as someone talked towards him. Looking up, he saw Carlos turning the burner down as boiling water rolled over the top of the pot.

"Oh... Sorry... Got a bit into this booklet," Mike apologized with a tinge of embarrassment.

"Ts all good, man. Say, don't I..."

"Yes," Mike recalled. "You owe me a video call!"

"*Right!* Told you I'd forget. Want to do it after you're done cooking?"

“Sure!”

Carlos left the stove, leaving Mike to himself again. *Get the food done, finish this reading, and get right with Amanda. Everything’s gonna be fine.*