



Surrender To The Wild

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Chapter 8

“A Downward Chat”

Mike shuffled his chair closer to the desk as he waited for the laptop to make a steady internet connection. Carlos' setup was haphazard and *definitely* not up to professional standards, but everyone turned a blind eye to the jumble of wires strung through his window to a small satellite dish next to the barracks. The non-Park connection to the World Wide Web was a blessing for the younger Rangers, and Carlos was glad to share it for a pittance.

He's so nice for letting me do this... Mike thought. *He got beer and dinner out of me. Good deal.* Stroking his chin as he leaned back, thoughts of what he should say flowed through his mind. *She should be home at an hour this late... Probably got off of work a little bit ago. Quiet for both of us, no din in the background from over-amped speakers.* The Skype window flashed to life as the Internet connected, notifications pinging from the corner as Mike slid the cursor to the search bar.

Let's see... AmHersh1@hotmail.com... Alright... She's online... Here goes nothing.

After the computer thought for a moment, the call window popped up. Staring intently at the spinning wheel surrounded by black, Mike leaned forward as he double-checked that the camera was on. *Come on...* He glanced at the clock in the corner of the screen, watching the seconds tick by as the ringing continued. *I know this isn't my account, but pleaaaaase pick up...*

The screen flashed again as the call connected. Fuzzy at first, more like a fast slideshow than a smooth video, but Amanda came into clear-ish view looking confusedly into the camera.

“Hello?”

“Amanda?”

“Ye- Mike?!”

“How're you?!!”

"Oh, Mike! Fine- Wait, how are you calling me on Skype? I thought you didn't have internet up there."

"Oh," Mike leaned back, locking his hands behind his head. "I bribed my coworker who has some military-grade satellite internet. The things I do for love, right?" he chuckled.

"Well, good to see that you're making friends up there. How's work going?"

"Great! Tiring, but great. I've been doing a lot of fieldwork lately. Never thought I'd hike so much in my life! Other than that, it's mostly just office stuff and cleaning up after visitors."

"I understand that feeling," Amanda caringly replied as she looked down at her buzzing phone. "Only place in town that was hiring is some clothing resale store. The people may not be the best, and they give me too many hours, but it puts some money in the bank."

"Yeah... Still at your parents house? Looks like your room."

"It was more economical than renting an apartment- Hold that thought."

She furiously typed something on her phone's keyboard, sliding it back together before lazily dropping it.

"Yeah, stuff's not cheap. I've definitely cut back on a lot of my 'big house' aspirations..."

"*Finally*," Mike poked. "Now are you seeing why I want a small house?"

"Fine, fine, I concede," Amanda chuckled before looking to her side, turning on a lamp.

"So, what else are you up to that isn't *blah*?"

"Oh, just reconnecting with some high school friends. A lot of the girls haven't strayed far. We're actually going out tonight~"

"What's the occasion? 'Happy Thursday?'"

"It's Charlie's birthday," Amanda huffed as she started to brush makeup on her face.

"You know, the girl I ran track with?"

"Don't think I've met her," Mike raised his eyebrows. "How many of you are going?"

"She wants to keep it small, just a few of us and some plus ones."

"Well... Stay off of the hard stuff..." *Plus ones... Hopefully, there aren't any snakes in the bunch.* "Don't think I'm trying to sound controlling. You know my experiences with alcohol and parties..."

"Oh, no... I know. I can guarantee that I'm not doing anything dumb," she monotonously stated as she leaned closer to her mirror.

"I mean... We're college grads now. We may've mellowed out a bit in our senior year, but I just want you to know where I'm coming from... With my dad and all of his weekday... *Adventures*."

"I still have that photo you took of him passed out on your porch in broad daylight, *hehe!* You know me, Mike, I'm not like that. I just need to blow off some steam and let loose."

"What about the stuff I sent you? Did you get it?" Mike segued after a brief pause.

"Yes, I did, and thank you," she said through pursed lips as she applied lipstick. "The book looks really cool..."

"Got any letters in the mail for me, then? That chance I got to talk to you a week ago wasn't the best for you..."

"I've been thinking about what to write... Work, y'know?"

Mike leaned back forward and planted his elbows on the desk, his mind simmering as he allowed the pause to grow.

"So, it's just your girlfriends and their boyfriends tonight? Anything else fun planned?"

Only half of Amanda's face was in the frame, but he could see her eyes bulge a bit as her jaw slightly clenched. *She's thinking of what to say.* She forcefully coughed, grabbing a tube of mascara and mumbling something that her microphone didn't pick up.

"What was that? Couldn't hear you."

She looked at her phone again, turning to face the camera. "Yes, Mike, just my friends."

Mike stared blankly into the camera as Amanda turned to finish her makeup, trying to pick her last sentence apart. *I've seen that look on her face before. She's not telling me some important bit...*

"Amanda, I'm not trying-"

She turned back to the camera, looking at her phone's screen as it buzzed again.

“Sarah’s gonna be here in five minutes, and I still have to get dressed. Think you can call me back tomorrow? I’m off at 8.”

“I uh, *don’t*–”

With a longing look on her dolled-up face, Amanda mumbled “I’ll talk to you later” before ending the call.

Mike pushed his mouth into his arched hands as he stared at the screen. *7 minutes and 15 seconds. That’s all the time she could give me after I manage to VIDEO CALL HER.* That short call gave him hours of things to think about as he processed and overthought. *She already knew that I wouldn’t have the opportunity to call her, and I’ve done it TWICE now! What is she hiding from me?!*

Gently shutting the laptop after powering it down, Mike rose and put the chair back under the desk. *You know what? I don’t need this right now. I’m doing great here, and if she doesn’t want to talk, neither do I.* He strode into the hallway, beelining for the fridge to grab a beer before digging into whatever was left from the dinner he cooked.

“How’d it go, bud?” Carlos inquired from the couch.

“Let. Me. Tell you,” Mike responded as he gestured for a space. “So, how privy are you to what’s been going on with me?”

“I don’t really know... Got some family issues or something?”

“*Now I do,*” Mike hissed as he opened his beverage.

* * *

Mike continued to stew in the new light of his relationship with his fiancé. Work provided distraction during the day, but when the need for sleep overtook him, he laid in contemplation. He’d heard stories of people separated from their significant others, their bond straining. Amanda seemed... Distant. More distant than Mike thought she would be. He hoped that infidelity wasn’t the cause, but... The letters and gifts, physical signs of his affection, remained unanswered. The phone calls that he’d gone to such great lengths to make were tossed to the side like a piece of garbage.

That may explain my shitty mood lately, Mike lamented as he dried his face with a towel. He stared into the bathroom mirror, weariness clearly visible in his bagged eyes. *And why I've been sleeping like shit, too... Haven't had a single day off in the last two weeks.* He ran a hand through his beard, contemplating it. He'd put off shaving daily, trying to grow something respectable. *Only took a decade, but it's not patchy anymore... Not bad for half a month.* Tidying up the sink, he shut the light off as he tiptoed back to his room to find the day's uniform.

Slowly cracking the door, he snuck over to his dresser so as to not disturb Jason. *Clock says 4:55... Probably only got 3 hours of sleep last night. Definitely gonna pay for that...* Though the light in the bathroom had sullied his night vision, it had returned surprisingly quickly; The only illumination in the room was the glow of the alarm clock. *Fresh shirt, fresh pants, fresh underwear...* Stripping and redressing, he threw his pajamas into the laundry hamper at the foot of his bed before shoving his feet into his boots.

I can't make a habit of this. I feel way too awake for only having had a few hours of sleep... Closing the door behind him, he made his way to the coffee maker to start it up. *And why's this stuff smell so bitter?* He asked himself as he opened the metal can. *It's the same stuff we've been drinking since I got here... Must be a bad batch.* As the coffee began to brew, he pulled his backpack up to the table and made sure that everything was still in there. *Only one or two booklets left before I'm done with the stack Jeff gave me... I should really get my parents to send me some stuff.*

The machine beeped once, the strong scent of fresh java filling the air. Mike grabbed a travel mug from the cupboard, wincing as he opened the fridge to find a bottle of creamer. He sniffed the brew before tasting it, his face souring when the overpowering bitterness hit his tongue. *Either the coffee is going bad, or my sense of taste has been getting messed up by my worrying. I gotta get my body a break...* He dumped half of his coffee back into the pot, filling his mug until it was more of a coffee-flavored milk beverage. *"Sigh... May as well get to work early... Again..."* With his hat retrieved from the hook, Mike began his journey to the Ranger Station.

The sky had begun to brighten- Not enough to see without the streetlamps, but the clouds in the eastern distance were tinged with yellows and oranges from the horizon. Mike sipped from his mug, rubbing his eyes as he struggled to focus on some of the landmarks he'd walked past hundreds of times. *I know there's a trash can halfway to the office. I can see it, but it only looks like a trash can because I know it is...* Shrugging, he attributed the lack of visual acuity to the fatigue from work. He'd brought the glasses he was given a few years back; The optometrist had prescribed him some very slight lenses to correct any minute imperfections. *But rapid-onset nearsightedness over the last few days? This is weird...*

He gripped the door's handle, grunting at himself when the latch refused to budge. Fishing into his cargo pocket, he retrieved his ring of keys to unlock the door. *First one in again... Open sesame.* As the door squeaked open, a combination of acidic coffee and industrial cleaners assaulted his nose. *God, DAMN! When'd they start using straight bleach on the floors?!* Pinching his nose, he stepped over the threshold and closed the door behind him. *Lights are on... Someone's here. Probably Jeff again.*

Throwing his backpack down next to the temporary desk he'd been granted, he first began with going over the desk-sized calendar filled with meticulous scheduling notes. *Almost July now. April seems so far away, but I've only been here a third of a year.* He thought back to right before he started, a slight sense of nostalgia filling him. *Didn't figure they'd have me working like a dog.* His moment of recollection complete, he rotely opened the top drawer of his desk. *Let's see... Pencils, ruler, notepad... Thank God I was able to order new maps...* He ripped the cellophane from a packet of 10 full-color maps shipped straight from the USGS print shop. *1:24,000. Surprised they even had these in stock. Makes for some insanely accurate navigation, once I have everything plugged into the Garmin.*

Mike pulled the stack of books from his backpack, deciding that it was better to have all of the day's crap on his desk before bothering to organize it. *Now, let's see...* Mike stroked his bearded chin. *Get the notes from the studies finalized... Start plotting the trails for the botanist... I feel so bad for the animals here...*

He tried to recall some specific passages from the Wolf-Moose Studies. It was already a miracle that there was such a relationship on Isle Royale, but it became quite clear that it wasn't sustainable. Ice bridges form less frequently. Animals act like animals. Even worse, the latter can't be changed by humans. For every action taken to try and sustain things, it worsened another aspect. *Fresh wolf blood isn't bad- Wolves being wolves doesn't help them use it. And the people...* Some visitors to the island didn't share the same philosophy as the majority; They'd disturb things, leave garbage where they pleased, and even do the dumbest things for a picture.

Mike's pondering was interrupted. His head swiveled up as the door to the shop side briskly opened and slammed shut.

"Morning, Jeff," he rattled as his attention returned to his desk.

Jeff looked up, startled. "Jeez! You can't scare me like that, Mike! I might have a heart attack!" he chuckled with a claw motion towards his chest. "What're you doing in here so early, anyway? Only got here five-ish minutes ago myself."

"Oh, couldn't sleep anymore..." Mike sighed. "I've been feeling a bit beat lately."

"I could tell," Jeff blurted, wincing. "Oh- I don't mean that in a bad way. Sorry..."

"*Hehhh...*" Mike sighed. "No offense taken... It's just been... *Shit*. Day in and day out."

"What do you mean?" Jeff's head cocked as he moved closer to Mike. "I hope you don't have too much on your plate."

"No, no. Work is perfectly manageable. I've even gotten about halfway there with the plan for the botanist's visit. It's just... Personal stuff. I don't need to bore you."

Jeff halted and waved his hand dismissively. "*Nonsense*. We're the only two here for the next hour. Want some fresh coffee? Let's have a chat."

Mike inhaled, that terrible combination of coffee and chemicals almost making him gag.

"Nah, I'm good on coffee," he groaned as his mouth salivated. "Mind if we take it outside? I want to get some fresh air before being cooped up in here all day."

"Sure," Jeff kindly nodded as he topped off his mug. "Let's go."

The men left out the back door, walking around to the front of the building facing the harbor. "This bench's nice," Jeff motioned as he sat down. "So, what's on your mind?"

Mike fidgeted with his thumbs for a second. *Should I just lay it all out?* His jaw clenched, staring out into the water as he began.

"I'm almost two weeks ahead on work. I go to sleep at a reasonable time. I don't drink too much. I get plenty of sunlight, exercise, and interaction. Yet, I feel so worn out that I could probably go into hibernation. All of that's fine, but... *My family*. Mom and Dad have written... Sent me things... Hell, even my grandma's been sending me letters on an almost weekly basis. But the *one* person that I desire to be with the most has all but disappeared."

Jeff nodded, cuing Mike to continue.

"I've called her twice. I drop a letter into the mailbox at least twice a week. And yes, I know the mail only gets picked up weekly, but it's the thought that counts. I've just gotten... *No thought* from her. This is our first time being so distant. It's like she doesn't want anything to do with me!"

Looking into the pitch-black liquid in his mug, Jeff's eyes showed that he was thinking of what to say. Mike turned his head away, closing his eyes and holding back his inner thoughts as he waited for his boss' wisdom.

"This ain't my first rodeo," Jeff began. "Plenty of first-timers have had issues similar to yours over the years. Away from home, away from significant others, away from a lot of comforts. You're a well-adjusted guy; Strong character, good brain in your noggin, physically capable. You can pull weight much greater than what you're rated for..."

"That's good and all," Mike snapped, "But what good is it gonna do if I'm stellar at work and lose my fiancé?!"

"That's what I'm getting at," Jeff replied calmly. "You're caught up on work. Prepared to the end of the month. That botanist isn't set to be here for another nine days."

"And?!" Mike was at the end of his patience.

"I think you need a vacation."

"Wha-?" Mike was taken aback. "Can you even *do* that?"

"I'm the Head Ranger. I can *make* these things happen," Jeff confidently replied.

Money's not a problem, Mike thought as he weighed the opportunity. I won't get paid, but... I can make it home in, what, 8 hours? Stop for a day or so, make it to Tennessee... He felt a pit form in his stomach as he thought of how he could bring Amanda back into his grasp. Day or two there, come back up here through Kentucky, Ohio... Y'know?...

"I'll take it. My folks'll be ecstatic."

Jeff grinned as he patted Mike's shoulder. "*Ranger*'ll be docking tomorrow morning. Get this day done, and I'll see to it that you get the time off if you can guarantee that you'll be back in time for the botanist's arrival."

Mike nodded in agreement, his heart beating like a drum. Palms sweaty, he smacked dry lips as he tried to calm himself down. *It'll be fine, Mikey. Everything will be fine.*