

CHAPTER 01: HEALTHY EXERCISE OR RUNNING FROM HELL

"Shit, shit, shit, shit, damn, shit, shit, damn, damn, damn ..." he panted under labored breath. A slightly-smaller-than-average human was sprinting through an abandoned underground bunker, with a powerful suspicion that someone—or something—was also interested in what he had found. The intelligence he received from the scribes said there were no inhabitants as the bunker had been sealed for nearly one hundred-fifty years. It was clearly incorrect. Erik thought to himself, "Damn mainframes, their security's such a joke, even a deathclaw could take a swipe at it." He made a mental note to laugh at that later.

His duster fluttered behind him as he threw himself around a corner and raced into a nearby storage closet, his worn boots echoing through the hall. Sighing a low "damn it," he silently slid to the floor into an Indian-style sitting position and began fiddling with his Pip-Boy 3000. He hurriedly pressed the buttons, trying to get some sort of communication out to his team, or in the worst case, leave a message for some other unlucky scavenger to find. Someone had to know about what he'd found. The first was unlikely as he was currently five levels underground in a metal-lined sarcophagus.

"This is Erik, trying to reach Delta two, Delta two please copy!" There was nothing more than a bit of static and the hum of distant machinery to offer him a response. He tried again. "Delta two...damn it Jenkins if you're beating off to a pinup instead of doing your radio duty again, I'll kill you dead! Look, I've found a lab down on level five..." He stopped his message abruptly as the heavy footsteps he'd been avoiding were getting closer.

As Erik pulled out his weathered 10mm pistol and checked its clip, his Pip-Boy began to squawk. "Erik, th...s is Del... s...ion ...o, what's...twenty? Repeat, whas... your t..." Erik panicked and placed his hand over his Pip-Boy in a feeble attempt to silence it. Whatever was out there was dangerously close as the heavy, labored footsteps had halted outside of his door. A new overwhelming scent that clashed with the stale air and rusty metal—a mixture of sour leather, sweat, blood, rotting flesh—appeared with a squishy **thud** and was gagging Erik with his every breath. It was revoltingly overwhelming. He held his breath for a few precious moments, waiting and wishing for whatever it was to leave him alive.

After nearly half an hour of putting a strangle-hold on his 10mm while sitting behind a storage crate, surrounded by cleaning supplies and excessive amounts of dirt and dust due to decades of neglect in the storage closet, whatever had been

following him finally decided that Erik wasn't worth the trouble; its heavy footsteps sounded as if their owner were heading back around the corner and down the long, dusty hallway. Erik wished the new, god-awful smell that was burning his eyes would have left with the heavy footsteps.

With a half-hearted sigh of relief, Erik tried to contact the brotherhood detachment again. "Delta two, this is surveyor Erik. Please respond." He paused for a response then retransmitted, "Delta two, this is Erik, for the love of a nuclear winter, please copy." Again, silence punctuated with static was his response. He hung his head, and put his Pip-Boy into record mode.

Recording 003:

This is Erik Rade of the Brotherhood of Steel - Southern Commonwealth - Delta Chapter. Serial number 4217. If anyone finds me, or this message, please bring it to the nearest Brotherhood of Steel detachment. If I'm dead, grab my dog-tags too, it'll help to convince the commanding officers that you're not insane. What I'm going to tell you is of the utmost urgency.

We'd thought the remnants of the Master's army had been defeated ...

Well, we were wrong again. Surprise! This isn't about the Master or his army of god-awful greenskins, this is something else—more human experimentation, but this time it's different. The lead military scientist from Mariposa, Robert Anderson, had this team of scientists working on a side project that has been accelerated by the FEV. Rather than forcibly evolving humans like the Mariposa facility, this team was focused on mixing the human genome with...something else. Whatever they are, they're damn smarter than those greenskins. For all I know, that's where these scientists disappeared to...maybe they weren't all destroyed by the Colonel. Maybe they became test subjects as well. I don't really know. The mainframe's pretty busted, all I got was bits and pieces.

There's plenty of tech down here too, I think a lot of it could be put to use in the wasteland: water purification, advanced radiation resistant plants, laser-based weaponry, and lots of complicated science-y things down here that I can't explain but probably need to be put to use anyway.

I know that I said it was abandoned here, and I hope like hell I'm wrong, but I'm positive I'm being hunted by something down here. Something much smarter than it should be.

Paladin Erik out.

After completing his dialog, he pressed the "stop" button on his Pip-Boy and saved it. He checked his pistol's clip again—a nervous habit—and activated the door to make his way out of the storage closet.

"FUCK!" Erik shouted, falling down and scrambling backward, slamming his back on a metal storage shelf, knocking down ancient cleaning supplies and more dust. As the rusty pneumatic steel door had slid open, a bloody mess surprised Erik near the threshold of the door. Was this an offering or a horrible sign of his future? It definitely explained why the smell didn't leave with the footsteps, as he was now crying from the awful stench. The bloody mess appeared to have previously been a mole rat or some other large dog-sized critter. Whatever it was, its head was caved in, its innards flowed out of long, jagged gashes on its underbelly leaving its fluids to pool around it. "Who the hell kills something then just leaves it lying around?" Upon closer inspection, Erik supposed the damage done to the underbelly could have been done by claws. Erik shook his head and stepped over the body of the deceased critter and began to look around for an exit to get the hell out of this claustrophobic place. I sure hope there's not deathclaws down here ...

"Even if it was a deathclaw, was it just tired of carrying the carcass...or marking the storage closet for some reason? Who knows what in the hell's down here, or how it thinks? There must be another exit around here somewhere." Erik shook his head as if to rid himself of the smell and bad thoughts. "Gotta get back to the surface, where the hell am I now?" Unfortunately, the intel he'd gotten from his commander, as well as what little data he was able to scrape from the failing mainframe did not include much of a map of the facility, nor was the power particularly reliable. In fact, he was fairly sure that the mainframe was infected by a prewar virus. Damn thing's probably floating around in my Pip-Boy somewhere...the scribes'll be pissed. Maybe. They're weird.

Regardless, shitty intelligence once again got him into another awful predicament. He was only supposed to make a cursory investigation of the two subterranean floors to see if the Brotherhood could use this bunker— a prewar military facility—as

another medical and storage facility They'd already decided that the two aboveground floors would a great defensive position It seemed that not much else of the old Naval base was of use Unfortunately seeing as how his scouting mission wasn't complete the base was to remain abandoned The Brotherhood's numbers had been steadily growing since the attacks from the Master's army began eons ago Despite the historically flaky information he had the damn cargo elevator he instructed to find had decided to ignore his request for floor two and went all the way down to basement floor five all while locking the doors and wailing a siren He didn't even know until then that there was five floors. If there was anything alive in the bunker it certainly knew this shrieking box had a hot meal or something that needed some lead forcefully inserted into it Thankfully he had his trusty crowbar handy to pry his way out and persuade the elevator to stop it's wailing Failing that he had his dad's old 10mm pistol. It wasn't good for much but it sure did put a hell of a hole in radroaches and mole rats.

Well, he thought, there was no sense in dwelling on the past any longer; he was fairly sure he was heading in the right direction. At least it was a *better* direction. As he slowly made his way North from the storage closet, the air began to clear and the electricity seemed to be a bit more stable here, causing the lights to flicker less. He pulled up the map on his Pip-Boy, but quickly began scowling at it.

Pip-Boy error 0x503: FILE CORRUPTED, UNAVAILABLE.

Please contact your administrator for further assistance.

He shook his head again and sighed, "Damn thing hasn't had a proper administrator in at least a hundred years," he thought to himself. Well, as they say, there was no use in crying over spilled Brahmin milk. He put his Pip-Boy's map module into record mode and let it generate a new map for him as he walked. "Guess north should be okay, anything's gotta be better than that horrible blood -bath and whatever else was behind me."

After walking about thirty yards, Erik saw a few doors. Both they and their surroundings were covered in blood, just like the entrance to the storage room. Actually, now that he had walked closer, he noticed these stains were much older, the blood had oxidized and turned brown long ago. Curiously, the blood stains appeared to be due to execution-style gunshots, not an animal bleeding out. As Erik moved closer to the doors, he involuntarily shuddered thinking, "Poor bastards—

probably some scientist doing the government's bidding, only to die due to another one of their cover-ups."

He stopped in front of the nearest metal door to his left, its placard read "Storage 1". Stepping up on his toes to get a better view, Erik peered through the dusty security glass mounted in the door to decide if he wanted to go in or not. After supposing that anything in there must have died at least a century ago, he tried the handle. It was locked. "Oh, good grief" he muttered while digging in his pockets for a bobby pin. After successfully locating one and twisting it into the lock, it took him a good five minutes, but he finally got the tumblers out of the way and the knob turned with a loud, rusty creak. Erik stepped into another room, full of dust, dirt, and neglect. Oh, and boxes. Loads and gobs of boxes. He rifled through them one-by-one, hoping to find anything of use. Unfortunately, these were full of scientific papers and research far above his understanding. Something about genetic mutations, DNA/RNA combinatorics, and trans-humanistic mutations that he assumed lead to the creation of the disasters he read about earlier that day. He also was lucky enough to find some holodisks, their labels all faded badly. Out of the four he located, only one was in proper working order. He tossed the others into his bag for the scribes and placed the fourth into his Pip-Boy. "Maybe the fourth time's the charm ..." As his Pip-Boy spun up the last holodisk with a **whir**, it immediately began to flash a warning message:

WARNING

Contained herein is **CLASSIFIED** United States Government (USG) information.

If you have accidentally placed this storage medium into your Pip-Boy or terminal, please remove both this storage medium and the device you placed it into from this area, then relinquish those and yourself to the nearest military base pending an official investigation. Failure to do so will result in punishment by death.

Additionally, misuse or unauthorized communication of this information will be punishable by death. Furthermore, by accessing this holotape, you agree to rescind all ownership of your brain, memories, DNA, and reproductive rights under Section 503 of the Canadian Annex and Social Reform of 2072.

Please see the User Agreement for further details.

"Hah! Finally some good stuff." Erik was pleased, as these were always the best holotapes to find in places like this. They always had some sort of secrets or cool projects that were underway, long, long ago.

This is John Hawthorne, lead scientist of Naval Station Magnolia. Project lead on project Maia. This report six in a series of seven.

My team has been largely unsuccessful in finding the catalyst we need to trigger the subject's DNA to split and recombine with those nucleotides introduced from indigenous species. We're missing something simple...perhaps the HR event is in the incorrect area to trigger a lesion bypass, or perhaps humans weren't meant to go back millions of years to claws and fur...

Regardless, Anderson is scheduled to stop by later this week and bring me some more FEV samples. The only thing he could tell me is that 'This is what will make us the top of the food chain again'. I don't know about that, I don't think Anderson knows what E. Coli is. These projects may very well make us stronger than our opponents, but I sincerely hope that we won't lose our humanity in the process.

** Doctor Hawthorn laughs hollowly **

I'm trying to splice *Ursus Americanus* and *Canis Iatrans* into the human genome. Hopefully we can get this awful work done quickly and without much more suffering on behalf of our subjects.

** A man's pained wail is heard in the background. Hawthorne sighs deeply **

Some of these poor folks look like they have a serious case of mange...and dear God do they smell. It seems that we successful with the hormone production. Now, we just have to figure out how to mask the scent, else the commies will smell us coming long before they see us.

As per regulation, our results are both in digital and analog format. Currently our test results are in storage areas one and two on sub-floor five, as well as storage area three on floor four. Provided the lazy-ass maintenance workers around here have bothered to fix the leaks down there.

Hawthorne signing off.

** Static and distant humming on the tape, fading out **

"Wait, what? That can't be right. Anderson was working on the green skins over in California, but no one ever said anything about this," Erik thought. "So, that's what all of this paperwork's about ..." He began to dig deeper into the paperwork, but was unable to find anything of further use. Not that it would matter, there's no way he would be able to decipher it anyway. Erik's Pip-Boy was speaking again, surprising him, as he thought that was the end of the tape. A hurried Hawthorne was on it again, but his speech was being drown out by gunfire and screams, there was only a bit that was decipherable.

Heavy panting, and quick whispers are recorded

"This's Hawthorne, they're killing us. Scientists're dead. They're covering everything up, left samples on five, locked down the lab down there. They can live. They can live. They'll live. Live. Must survive. Future. Penny'll make sure of it."

** More panting, running, and muffled, gruff, angry voices **

"Where is he?! Hawthorne, you bastard! Get out here and take your punishment!"

** Muffled heavy breathing, followed by a door slamming and heavy footsteps in a running gait **

"GET HIM!!"

** Wind and more running, erratic, hurried footsteps followed by gun fire from a fully-automatic weapon. Following the clatter of shell casings on a metal floor, a heavy body and its attached Pip-Boy fall as well. **

"They...must...survive ..."

** Another gunshot, this time from a pistol, followed by a moment of silence **

"Take that, you son-of-a-bitch. That'll teach you to play God."

** Heavy footsteps trail away. Static and the hum of distant machines, clicking of computers and finally, silence. **

Erik's Pip-Boy reverted to its normally-silent state. "Well, shit," Erik thought aloud. Someone wasn't happy with what happened here, but why was it worse than the FEV experiments that Anderson was conducting? Surely it wasn't because the use of human test subjects, he'd seen some of the old footage from the Mariposa base. The work they were doing was absolutely disgusting. People stopped being people and were becoming super soldiers—much stronger, but they lost their humanity—and minds—in the process. Erik continued to contemplate the previous message while rummaging around for more information.

After another ten minutes of this, he gave up and decided to see what was in the third door, across the hall. He took the time to make a note in his Pip-Boy to investigate the lab at a later date. He'd initially tried that morning, but it was under some sort of computer-initiated biological lockdown and would only open for that Dr. Hawthorne guy. From the sounds of the holotape, he wasn't going to get it open any time soon.

As he crossed the hall, he noticed that the placard by the door read "Security." Erik chuckled as he opened the unlocked door. Looks like security wasn't doing their job. "Figures." The lights were out in this room. Before turning on his Pip-Boy's light, Erik noticed that a few of the RobCo terminals were still running! "Sweet, time to do some more rummaging," Erik thought to himself as he enabled his Pip-Boy's light and made his way across the file-littered floor and overturned desks to find one of the two active terminals.

"Let's see what you have to say" Erik cooed to the terminal. The terminal certainly didn't reply. Not because it couldn't speak, but because it was still locked by the previous user.

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- Security Terminal 2 -

Terminal locked - 38350 days. User JH please resubmit your credentials:

>_

Erik sat at the blinking prompt, deciding on whether to hack it or move on. He pulled out a bottle cap and flipped it. It landed Nuka side up: time to hack. Erik

rebooted the machine while holding the F1 key, hoping that it would dump the RAM's contents to disk like the scribes said it would.

After the terminal finished its self-check it was time to get to work. "Alright first thing's first, time to rewrite the password files." Erik began his routine that would let him into the operating system of the terminal, hoping to glean some more important information, or at the least who ordered the destruction of this facility and its members. "Okay, let's see what's left on the local disk. Old inter-office messages, a few pictures, humph. Not much around," he thought. "Let's see what was in that RAM dump." Erik decompiled the RAM dump to the terminal's screen and at first, wasn't surprised; it was a deleted message.

"John, Ji|n he|0#.

Haven't heard from v/our team in some +ime, Anderson want's a re|oort 0f project M@ia—you're almost a week lat& He's getti|\g antsy, but I |)on't think he'll give you a|\v/ he@t for it. Our army (-eneral ov&r here made mention that your four-star there w@s making some ``dras+ic" chang#s do(v)n t#ere. I hope thev/ |)on't ax& your project. You've had some interesting reports so far! +he l@st I heard w@s that y0u got +hem to @c+ual|y grow claws! |0eal, ac+ual (law5! Someone el\$e said something about a heavy increase in night-vision! Just thi|\k of the plat0on\$, two kind\$ of super soldiers ready to |oro+ect Americ@!

P.S. Jenny sav/]s "#i". Sh& and I miss v/ou, +he kids mis\$ their Uncle Johnny." Mum's still d0ing we|l, proud of her 'twin scientists'".

- Jim"

"Hmm," Erik gulped down a knot in his throat. Messages like these were always touching, they always made Erik wish he had parents and a family of his own to miss him. "Guess the Brotherhood'll always be mine." Erik dumped the message to his Pip-Boy for later work. He left the first terminal and walked to the next RobCo terminal. "Ugh...that's not good." Erik said, grimacing. The terminal's keyboard looked as if something had bled out onto it...none of the keys were working. He looked at the screen, it was burned in with the message:

"Don't worry Johnny, they'll be fine. They're just as strong as their father. I left you a package in the back.

"Haven't I already read that name today?" Erik made a mental note of the name and decided that the destroyed terminal wasn't worth fighting. He instead decided to rummage through the storage lockers here, if he was lucky there was some beef jerky or ammo lying around. After three containers full of nothing but dust and one crunchy porno, he was surprised to find some 10mm ammo and a silencer for his pistol in the fourth. In the short time he needed to screw the new silencer into his pistol, a four-foot long radroach had scuttled out of the adjoining room, curious as to whom was invading his territory. Erik didn't answer with his voice, but with his pistol's. Two rounds was enough to put the giant roach down. "Well, dinner's up" Erik said, wiping his brow. Good thing he found this silencer, or he'd have a terrible ringing in his ears right now.

"Right. Now, let's see if we can find that Penny lady's maps," Erik muttered under his breath. After rummaging through the discarded boxes on the floor and through the overturned desks without success, he decided to see if there was any luck to be had from where the radroach had come from. Erik walked into the adjoining room, finding a restroom, complete with a military-style shower and leaky urinals. Oh! He hadn't had a shower, let alone a bath, in ages. Beyond the constant drip of the urinals and the work it was doing on his bladder, there was something else, a faint rustling noise. He poked around the restroom, searching for the source of the noise. "Aha!" he exclaimed as he found a few loose screws in an air intake near one of the stalls. "What do we have here?" Erik unscrewed the loose screws by hand and pried the rest out with his trusty crowbar. After finally getting the intake grill off, he was pleasantly surprised by a stash of goods: two sealed packages of beef jerky, a pair of Nuka-Colas, a Manila envelope complete with loose papers poking out of the top, and another holotape.

The running water behind him was making him grit and grind his teeth. He decided to put the stash on hold momentarily to relieve himself. He made his way over one of the nearby urinals, unfastened his leather belt and relieved himself with a long, shuddered sigh of relief. He shook off and packaged his equipment, cinched his belt, and went back to the mysterious stash.

While digging through the stash, his mind began wandering to the long day he'd had—fourteen hours so far. He hadn't had a bite to eat since breakfast, too long since he bathed, too long since he had time to care of other *concerns*. He sighed again and

began digging through the stash again. "What have we here?" he muttered as he grabbed the Manila folder and turned it upside-down. Three documents and some prewar cash fell out. One of which was a photo of a woman, probably in her late twenties. She was stunningly beautiful in her lab coat with what he imagined was auburn hair in a bun and a pen in her mouth, clearly thinking of something brilliant. It was signed in indelible ink: "To my Johnny, Love Penny" and was finished with a lipstick kiss. "Oh, wow." Erik stared longingly at her soft, warm face. Johnny was a damn lucky guy. After saving the photo to his Pip-Boy, he folded up the hard copy and stuck it in his bag. After day dreaming about the beautiful scientist momentarily, he continued his review of the documents. One appeared to be nothing but columns of letters. Four letters to be exact "A, T, C, and G" in varying patterns. "Must be a sequence of some sort." He shook his head, unable to decipher the mystery, and saved them to his Pip-Boy as well. Luckily, the last was a map—a map of the facility! Smiling broadly, Erik scanned this last document with his Pip-Boy and let it integrate the new data into its previous map recordings.

Erik took the remaining documents, \$100 in cash, as well as the snacks left behind, shoved them into his bag and walked back into the previous room. "Well, I guess now is as good a time as any to eat two-hundred year old food," he thought to himself as he grabbed an overturned chair and sat at an incredibly dirty table. Swiping away some of the dust, he tossed his bag on the table and pulled out the old bagged jerky and Nuka. He grunted while prying off the cap. He smiled as he gulped down the flat radiation-laced drink and tore into the jerky. He slowly gnawed on the awful beef, trying to enjoy every morsel of the ancient meal. As he finished the last chunk of shriveled beef, he thought he heard more sounds. These were whisper-y, breathy noises. Noises that other living things make. Living things that aren't supposed to be here, and that sound *much* larger than his previous friend, the radroach.

He choked down the last of the Nuka-Cola and dropped under the heavy metal table, straining his ears while readying his pistol. He wasn't sure if he was hallucinating, but he could have sworn that something was breathing heavily, nearly snarling, and at the same time. It was almost as if someone was whispering. He hoped he was wrong. A familiar, terrible scent that wafted through the slightly ajar door told him he wasn't.

Just as quickly as the new sounds and familiar smells came, they vanished. Erik was again surrounded by nothing dust, debris, and silence punctuated with the click and occasional hum of the old terminals. He involuntarily shivered. Was that just his

imagination? He thought he may have even seen some sort of yellow lights just through the door and its frame.

Erik slowly shook his head and ran his right hand through his short, shaggy brown hair. Surely he'd been hallucinating. Maybe it was the old Nuka? He sat at the table, trying to decide what to do next. He fiddled with his Pip-Boy and decided to load up the latest holodisk he found. At first, the disk didn't want to spin up, but with a little persuasion and a liberal blowing on Erik's behalf, it lurched with a dull whir in his Pip-Boy.

"Hawthorne. Station Magnolia. This's report seven. I don't think there will be any, uh, any...more.

I...I can't remember. What...what day it is. Fifty-four? No. Two thirty two. No. Damn it. It doesn't matter.

The point is that, I'm out of. Subjects. And food. Food would be nice. That's not the point though...I uh.

I figured it out. I got the sequence working, I think. But at great...cost. I had to start testing. On me. The DNA sequence was a success, but it required FEV as a catalyst. We'll have...something. Ugh.

** Doctor Hawthorne retches and dry heaves **

There were...unforeseen side-effects from the Maia serum. The super soldiers that ...

** Doctor Hawthorne pauses and grunts in pain **

Anderson wanted aren't coming from this experiment. I don't think my children can ...

** Doctor Hawthorne pauses, pants and begins breathing shallowly **

handle the environmental radiation, let alone live in a normal society. They're smarter than any typical human I know, show extreme capacity for...empathy toward others, very intelligent, but too fragile. Maybe later. They're much better than I ever could be.

** Hawthorne fades in-and-out of lucidity, accompanied with heavy breathing, and*

*the occasional dry-heave **

Dammit. I don't think I'm going to survive this last round of doses. Blood pressure...wrong. Can't...brea ...

A choking, gurgling gasp escapes Hawthorne followed by a dull thud, as if a body collapsed, a wavering, gargling whisper of "Penny..." leaves his lips. A long period of silence follows.

** Scratching, as small creatures amble across a concrete floor, faint whimpering, rushed footsteps, silence **

Erik's Pip-Boy spat out the holodisk as if it was a bitter medicine and refused to re-run the disk. "Children?" Erik thought as he slowly turned the holodisk over in his hands and stared blankly toward the entrance to the Security room. "This is no place for kids. Surely they weren't experimenting on children. Surely this Hawthorne guy wouldn't do that, not even Anderson would stoop that low." After pausing for further reflection on the holodisk, he began to wonder. What was that last thing? It sounded like a bunch of small mole rats or something were near him...but I haven't seen any of them down here either. Maybe it was a dog or something? They're still thriving in the Wastes. Although, he hadn't seen any kennels or, well, anything to point toward any 4dogs here. Erik sat silent for a few moments, then he remembered. "Maybe back in the locked lab?"

Erik halted his thoughts as the hair on the back of his neck raised up to full height. As he was staring through the ajar door, through to the metal door across the hall when he noticed a quick, shadowy movement and the bright yellow lights again. Then it hit him again. The smell. He was nearly nauseous, the Nuka-Cola and old jerky were trying to make a reappearance as the adrenaline from his survival response was kicking in. It turned out that the sounds he heard earlier weren't a Nuka-induced hallucination. The damned thing, whatever it was, had tracked him down again.

Erik threw on his pack, readied his 10mm, and slowly made his way back to the door. As he stepped over littered papers and evidence boxes, he kept both hands on his pistol, trying to steady his shaky grip. He slowly crept toward the steel door. Each step he took felt like an eternity, but he eventually made it. He turned his back to the nearby wall and peeked through the door. There was nothing but dust in the hallway. No mole rats, radroaches, or yellow lights. He let out a small sigh of

relief, moved back into the room, and began to rack his brain to sort out his next move.

"What to do, what to do" he worried to himself as he poked at his Pip-Boy. "Oh yeah! That Penny lady's map." He pulled up the map interface and began to plan his next move. It seemed that there were a few more storage rooms on this hall, but the hall itself led into a very large, open cargo area with stairs and another freight elevator at the far northeast corner. He decided he'd try his luck with the stairs, given his previous run-ins with freight elevators today.

Erik made his way into the hall, peering both ways through the dust and flickering lights. He slowly made his way past the other storage rooms, but paused to look into them. There was no way in. The rooms looked as if they had collapsed in on themselves. "Shame...", he thought to himself. He sure would like to find some more notes about his place or at the least some more supplies. The hall seemed to go on forever. As he crept closer to the heavy metal doors that led into the cargo area, he noticed the air smelled different. It was fresh, clean, and a bit sweet. "Well that's odd" he thought to himself. It smells like a fresh spring day, but I'm five stories underground..."

As Erik leaned on the heavy metal doors to the room listed as cargo storage on his Pip-Boy, he was taken by surprise. It wasn't so much a cargo room as a makeshift apartment complex made of cargo boxes, complete with a warm, strong light. The storage room itself had to be at least three stories tall and easily four-hundred yards long each way. Each cargo box, he figured, was arranged well enough to house at least twenty or thirty small one- or two- bedroom apartments. He naturally assumed these were homes as there were various clothes lines running between them, complete with prewar dresses and such, still fluttering in the artificial breeze. The nearest one even had a deck, complete with a coffee table. As he walked to the nearest "apartment box", he kept an eye out for signs of other life. He chuckled a bit to himself as he got closer, he realized the home boxes were pretty colorful at one time, although their paint was now peeling and rust was showing through. "Must've been for the scientists?" he wondered as he was reaching for the door of a shipping container that was previously Robin's Egg blue.

Erik opened the door on the south side of the container, releasing ages of dust with a great rusty squeak. He coughed and sputtered as he accidentally inhaled some. He peered into the darkness, the electricity to this container appeared to be shut off. Instead of going in, he walked around back, looking for a breaker to rectify the power problem. After poking around without success, he decided to active his Pip-

Boy's light and continue inside. The green light that radiated from his Pip-Boy made shadows dance across the inside of the container. It looked like it was quite nice at one time, complete with a couch, carpet, a small kitchen, a work table, and a partition leading to a queen- sized bed. He began by looking through the cabinets in the kitchen. Running for his life always made him hungry. Unfortunately, all he could find in here were a few boxes of Abraxo. He thought of opening the refrigerator, but if the apartment hadn't had power in a long time, the food within would be an awful sight. He decided to take a chance and take a peek. He slowly opened the heavy door to the refrigerator while holing a sleeve over his mouth and nose. Inside he found absolutely nothing aside from a six-pack of Nuka-Cola. "Sweet!" he exclaimed as he reached inside and removed the cardboard container and its contents. After popping the top on one, he put the rest in his bag, carefully wrapping them with some of his dirty clothing.

Feeling energized by the slight radiation of the flat soda, he restarted his search in the bedroom. "Not much to speak of here." He searched all around the apartment but was unable to find anything else of use. As he began to make his way back through the entrance, a dim green light caught his eye. It was behind the desk, near the entrance. Erik bent down to take a closer look. It was a switch. A pretty nondescript one at that. He pressed it. Nothing happened. No lights, no explosions, no shocks, not even a click or whir. "Well that was anti-climactic" Erik muttered dejectedly. He picked up his pack and left to search another home. The one above this one with the deck was his target. Some time ago, it must've been a beautiful emerald green, but was now mostly covered in rust.

Erik left around the blue container and went up the stairs on the East side, arriving at the wooden deck he saw when he came in. It was actually pretty nice up here, as one could view the entire tiny settlement from the couch. He decided to test that theory. After sitting on the dirtied, once-white couch, he confirmed that one could indeed see the entire settlement. He noticed something else too, there was a few bags of chips on the coffee table in front of him. He thought it was a bit strange that someone would leave a bunch of snacks out, but then again, this entire day had been a bit strange. Maybe someone was keeping an eye out for him? Surely it wasn't whatever had left that carcass for him this morning. He *had* been hungry all day, but that would just be weird. Who leaves carcasses and chips and Nuka lying around? He nabbed them as he walked inside.

He shook his head, clearing his mind and walked in the door leading from the deck. The layout was pretty similar to the apartment below: one bedroom, a kitchenette, a work area, and a restroom. This one, however was much more of a home than the other.

There were photos hanging from the walls of various people, all smiling in white lab coats. Some even had pocket protectors. Erik noticed there was a few people that kept reappearing in all of the photos. Upon closer inspection, he noticed one of them. It was that beautiful lady scientist, Penny. There was another scientist with her in nearly all of them—an older man, probably a good fifteen years older. He had thinning blond hair, parted over and to the left in a futile attempt to hide his growing bald spot. They both seemed very happy. "I'll bet that was Hawthorne."

After surveying the snapshots of times long past, he decided to dig around for anything useful. He moved toward the desk, which happened to be covered by stacks of papers and envelopes. As he sifted through them, he noticed a pattern: they were all survivor subjects that had failed Anderson's tests in DC. These must've been the subjects that Hawthorne was talking about..." It seems that they were mostly from the concentration camps located around the US as well as other war criminals and even members of their own Army! As best as he could guess, Erik supposed that they had failed to respond properly to the FEV treatments. Maybe they were immune? That's as far as he got. As he was sifting for further information, that all-too-familiar, thick, musky, scent came through again. Erik froze in his tracks. He knew there was something behind him. It was so close, he thought he could reach out and touch it...or shoot it. He opted to try for the latter.