

CHAPTER 03: STARTING A NEW LIFE OR RESUMING AN OLD ONE

It was 0600 hours when the Pip-Boy's alarm went off, as usual. The problem was that it was behind a closed door and under soiled clothing, muffling the native song of its people. Fifteen minutes later, it made the executive decision to give up its daily ritual and return to sleep itself. Had anyone seen them, they would've claimed it was a precious sight. Overnight the large furry humanoid had become the "big spoon" of the bed's occupants; gently cradling and protecting his new-found friend.

About two hours later, Rush woke up, pleased to find that his new friend was warm, safe, and sound. He licked the human's face to wake him up as well. They had important work to do today, or so the doctor told him. After a few moments of wet slurps to the face, Erik pried a lid open and stared at Rush through slit eyelids. All he managed to get out was "Really? How that any way to wake up?" Rush tilted his head inquisitively. Erik shook his head to free himself of slumber's hold on his brain and reached up to scratch Rush between the ears.

He started to get up, but quickly stopped and tossed the covers over his lower half. Rush began licking him again, in attempts to nudge him out of the comfortable bed. Erik frowned at Rush again and told him to stop trying to lick his face off. Rush stopped and stared at Erik. Why wasn't he moving—it was time to go. He was done being nice.

Rush got up from his side of the bed and physically drug Erik out of bed by bear-hugging his midsection and lifting him off and out of the bed. Erik complained loudly the whole time "Just give me a few more minutes!" Rush looked the human over and noticed an odd protrusion from his flappy green skin covering that was not there the night before. Rush pointed in its direction. "Damage?" he grumbled to Erik. Erik covered himself in embarrassment and stuttered "No. I'm, uh, fine. It's fine. It just means everything's working properly. Besides, you're one to talk."

Erik pointed back at Rush. His furry sheath was sporting a case of morning wood as well, although Rush wasn't constrained nor concerned like Erik was. Rush was confused as to why Erik was causing such a fuss. Not wanting to continue aggravating Erik, Rush decided to go to the restroom and retrieve Erik's things.

He'd had enough of the human's strange embarrassment over his own body. If he kept up like this, they'd both be late to meet the doctor this morning. As Rush gathered everything up, he paused to take a prolonged whiff of Erik's dirty clothing. He

didn't know why, but the human's scent was still familiar. The smell rattled something loose in the back of his mind. An old resident memory. A memory of a time long ago littered with past pack mates and stories long lost.

Mom.

After making his way back to the main room, Rush unceremoniously piled Erik's belongings on the table near the door that lead to the office proper. Erik's trusty crowbar dully clanked against the dark-grained wood. After returning, Rush noticed that Erik's embarrassment seemed to solve his problem. Erik muttered a quiet "thanks," to which Rush slowly nodded. "We work" Rush said as he was making his way to the restroom, watching Erik don his itchy-looking clothing in the mirror. Erik stopped and nearly fell over as he was trying to simultaneously put his second pant leg on and turn around completely. "Work? What work? I've got to get back to my detachment. They're waiting for me. Hopefully they're looking for me by now." Rush shook his head vigorously, narrowed his eyes, parted his lips into a snarled, threatening growl, and even slammed a fist onto the desk.

"We. Work!" Erik stood there, still holding the waist of his pants, and stared at Rush. His eyes dilated a bit in fear to Rush's sudden change of conduct. After Rush caught a whiff of fear on Erik, he immediately changed his demeanor. "Please. Important." he grumbled while removing his hand from the now dented desk and walked back to Erik. Upon reaching him, he began to scratch his head as Erik had done for him. "Apologies," Rush grumbled. Erik removed his hand and patted him on the forearm while nodding an acceptance to Rush's apology.

Whatever work would make him act like this, it was clearly important. The tense atmosphere was cut when Rush's stomach started grumbling to be fed. Erik's stomach soon followed suit. Rush began to wag his tail. "Well, let's see if I have anything left in my pack from yesterday." Erik picked up his bag from the foot of the bed and placed it on the desk. Upon inspection he saw that there were five Nuka-Colas, some 10mm clips, one-and-a-half boxes of 10mm ammo, three bags of chips, and a bunch of dirty clothing.

Erik grabbed two Nuka-Colas and two bags of chips. "Well it's not very nutritious, but it'll get us going." After they both sat down at the desk, He popped open both sodas and handed one to Rush. After Rush took it and sniffed the sweet-smelling stuff, Erik realized that he'd probably never had soda, let alone an irradiated one. "Here, see it's okay," he motioned as he took a quick swig. "It's called Nuka-Cola. Or Nuka, for short. It's by far the best soda in the Wastes!" After what was

arguably the best short sales pitch left in America, he took another good swig and motioned that Rush do the same. Rush was suddenly hit with a rush of slightly-fizzy liquid unlike nothing he had. The bottle's fading paper label was right, it really was "Fruity, with an extra kick for long- lasting refreshment." It was quite delicious. Rush, who found that one swig simply wouldn't do, decided to chug the rest of the bottle, placed the empty on the wooden desk top, and stared Erik down, psychically demanding another. Erik paused in the middle of his Nuka and handed it to Rush with a warning.

"They're good, but you gotta be careful. It's not good to drink too many. You'll get sick, your teeth could even fall out." Rush chugged the last of Erik's soda, and shortly realized that Erik was speaking from experience. It was tasty, but his stomach was already cramping and complaining from all of the nucleated sugars. Erik noticed Rush's discomfort as he began to cradle his belly. "Here, have some chips. They always makes me feel a bit better after too much Nuka. It's the salts, I think." He tore open a bag for each of them. They both crunched down their chips in silence. Well, near-silence. Large wolven creatures aren't exactly known for their table manners. It was at their quaint breakfast that Erik finally realized that Rush reminded him of some mythic creatures that the Elder had told him stories about as a child. He said they were from some place far away called "Germany". If he remembered correctly, they were called Werwolffen. Werewolves.

After finishing their meager breakfast, Erik tossed the caps in his bag, zipped it up, checked his clip in his 10mm, holstered his crowbar and looked over at Rush. "Let's get a move on, then. I think you wanted to get some serious work done?" Rush stood up and nodded, his tail wagging vigorously. "Yes. Work. Important." Erik looked surprised and smiled up at Rush, "I that's the first time you've said more than two words." Rush performed his gruesome approximation of a grin to equal the one Erik was wearing and walked through the door, off toward the center of "town." Erik followed suit. The pair made their way past the other cargo container apartments and reached the RobCo Robot repair pods. They were empty, but there were tread tracks in the dust and dirt on the concrete floor leading back to the entrance that Erik had come though yesterday afternoon. Erik looked at Rush "aren't we supposed to meet with the /Doctor/ Hawthorne this morning?" Rush nodded and began to walk along the faint tracks. Erik followed by his side, his trusty crowbar in hand, just in case something wanted to ruin their stroll.

After walking back past the first two apartments that Erik had rummaged through yesterday, they finally caught sight of the doctor robot. Rush yipped happily at seeing the robot, causing him to turn around from the control panel he was

interfaced with. "Good morning, Erik. Rush." he nodded to each in turn. "I'm glad you two seem to have gotten plenty of sleep. There is much to do today." Erik shrugged and asked "So, doc, what's so important that I couldn't return to my detachment?" The robot slowly tread its way to within a foot of Erik. His mechanical voice came slowly, "You need not worry about them. The Elder has this day planned for a long while now." Erik scrunched his eyebrows and squinted in confusion. "The Elder? Elder Redding? Of the Brotherhood of Steel? What?!" The robot waited patiently for Erik's brain to stop exploding. After leaving Erik to his own thoughts for a good five minutes, the robot turned to Rush "Well, Rush my dear boy. Are you ready for your journey?" Rush stared intently at the robot and nodded slowly. "Yes. Ready." The robot turned back in Erik's direction, "Time to move, son. Let's go." He promptly spun back to the panel he was working with as they arrived. A few noisy button presses and a few sparks later, the lights and ventilation had been restored further down the hall.

Within mere moments, the lights were at full strength and the air was circulating again. The doctor began to tread down the hall, back toward where Erik had started yesterday. The trio traveled in silence, with the exception of Rush's occasionally snuffing. After about ten minutes of their slow trek, they reached the security room and storage areas that Erik pillaged yesterday. The robot halted at the storage room and turned back to Erik. "Did you find anything interesting here?" Erik nodded and replied "Yeah, some holotapes and a few documents. One looked like it had a sequence of some sort." "Good, good" the robot replied. "Did you also find anything from a woman named Penny?" Erik nodded again. "I found her photo and some stuff I think was meant for you." The robot paused and replied shakily "Y... yes. It was. She spent her last moments in this world protecting me." "The holotape ..." Erik began, but the robot was already ahead of him. "Yes, it was her footsteps you heard. I had been fatally shot and was bleeding out. She and some colleagues performed an emergency encephalectomy and placed my brain in one of the worker bots here," the robot gestured to itself. "She wanted more than anything for us to continue our work." The robot turned slightly and gestured toward Rush. "Our children." "After the procedure was complete and I was, ahem, /rebooted/, we continued our experiments in secret. Our general had a screw come loose when he lost his only daughter to the experiments we were running. The robot shook its gel-filled brain case solemnly. We did everything we could, but the poor child was already too far gone by the time we figured we could save her with our treatments." Erik stared wide-eyed at the floor. "Why? Why experiment on people, let alone children?" he wondered aloud. The doctor pretended not to hear him and resumed their agonizing trip back through the halls.

As they walked along in silence, Erik was trying to take in everything he'd missed the day previous. He still saw no cameras, but on the ceiling there were sensors about every five feet or so. Erik thought to himself "Well, I'll be damned if those aren't motion sensors. That's how he knew I was here."

After another long ten minutes or so had passed with nothing interesting, they arrived back at the site that familiar, awful scent that Erik had been stuck with. He gagged, trying to keep his lunch down. Covering his nose, he queried "What was that?!" while pointing at the now fly-covered mess. He turned to look at Rush who was licking his chops. "An intruder that was keenly dispatched by your friend here." the robot replied. "Looks to be *Heterocephalus glabber giganteum*, if I'm not mistaken." Erik continued to cough while trying to ask "What now? Looks like it was a mole rat to me." "Precisely, young man. *Heterocephalus glabber giganteum*." Erik shook his head and asked, "Rush, did you leave this here?" Rush nodded again, wiping away a bit of drool from his maw "Smelled hungry." "Who, me? How could you possibly know that?" Erik was brimming with questions this morning. Rush shrugged.

As they neared a familiar corner, Erik began to notice that he was quite lucky. He'd missed a couple of traps yesterday while running for his life. A pressure-plate was attached to what looked like a cluster of prewar grenades, ready to blow him two hundred years into the future. "Whew, glad I missed those." Ahead of them, the robot replied "you wouldn't have set them off anyway. Made for bigger game." Erik involuntarily shuddered. Bigger game?

The group continued past a few offices and assorted broom closets on their way back to the lab. After the third restroom they passed, Erik asked the doctor to pause the tour. He hadn't yet had a chance to relieve himself that morning. Doctor Hawthorne nodded a silent "okay". Erik was in-and-out of the small bathroom in record time. His legendary curiosity could beat anything other than his bladder. They resumed their pilgrimage to the lab, which seemed miles away from the tiny cargo container village now. Thirteen more minutes of walking, and they arrived at their destination. A large set of heavy metal doors were a bit dented and rusted in a few small spots. The red and black paint was still looking good. It read:

" LEVEL FIVE LABORATORY
GENETIC ABBORATION & ANOMALY TESTING
 AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY"

There was a terminal that looked as if it had been angrily ripped from its position on the wall; its guts were strewn across the cold, stained concrete floor. The only thing that seemed to function here was the yellow spinning caution light with a lopsided rotation which made a slight scraping noise each time it made a full revolution. "Some entrance..." Erik scoffed. The robot ignored his comments as he began to roll toward the double doors. "Blasted travesty. I don't have hands!" Erik smirked at the robot's comment. "Need some assistance?" Erik inquired. "Why, yes. I would appreciate it. I could use a bit of your blood." Erik studied the robot, "Uh, no? Why do you need /my/ blood?" "You see, the lock on this door is biological." Doctor Hawthorne explained. "I would simply request a retina scan, but as you can see my terminal is in tatters." The doctor swept a clawed arm in the direction of the gutted terminal.

"This lab is locked down to only accept my DNA sequence, or someone related to me. Unfortunately, this piece of antiquated technology can only decipher the human genome."

Erik opened his mouth and shut it again a couple of times. "But, I can't be related to you. I was born to the Brotherhood. The Elder said my mum and dad died on the battlefield against a wave of the Master's mutants. They were holding a forward line to keep a small settlement safe. I believe it was Red Creek?" The robot chuckled mechanically. Erik didn't find it funny in the least. "Is that what Redding told you? I'm not surprised. It's not like the truth is any better, at least the story he told you sounds awe inspiring."

Erik went pale and started to shout in a quavering voice, "HOW CAN YOU KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ME?! I'VE NEVER MET YOU. YOU CAN'T HAVE KNOWN MY PARENTS. YOU'RE TOO OLD. THERE'S NO WAY. NEVER. I...I...You...Parents're dead..." Rush lowered his ears against his skull and began quietly whimpering. As he did, Erik caught himself and halted his shouting with a deep sigh. "Doc, look. I've never...how do you know Elder Redding? What do you know about my past?" The robot wheeled back around to Erik and plainly stated "Shed some blood and you shall have the answers you seek." Erik snorted "Fine. Have you got something sharp?" The robot turned to Rush. "Would you mind giving us a hand? If you could gently puncture one of his digits, we can continue on." Rush unfolded his ears and stared at Erik. "Not hurt. Much." he grumbled as he extended a razor-sharp claw and began to twist and dig it into Erik's left index finger. "Yeowch!" Erik squealed with a tear in his eye as he tried to pull away from Rush's strong grip. A pearl of blood quickly began to form as Erik held his hand palm-side up.

After he glared up at remorseful Rush, he turned back to the robot. "Well, here it is. Where do you want it?" "Wait one moment, please." the doctor said. "I've got to get to the sequencer behind this panel." The robot pried the last vestiges of the terminal off of the wall to reveal a small aluminum panel behind it. He pushed some of the buttons on the panel and it swung open. "Over here, please. Insert your finger into this device." "Am I going to get to keep this finger? It's one of my favorites" Erik queried sarcastically. The robot didn't reply, but did take his bloody digit with metal pincers and guided it into the dark receptacle. Something inside put a vacuum on his abused finger and drew more blood out. The machine inside clicked and whirred for a while and finally stopped with a loud **ding**. After its announcement and release of Erik's finger, the lazy yellow caution light above them went out with a groan of relief. The large doors slid open with a prolonged squeal that made Erik and Rush jointly cringe.

What was behind the doors was not awe-inspiring. There was yet another hall ahead. The doctor led the way into the dusty hall. A quick five minutes and they had already reached a containment area. A buffer zone, Erik deduced from a placard above the sliding door. "Inside, all of us," the doctor said as he pushed a button on a nearby panel. After they all entered, a familiar yellow caution light lit up and began rotating. Pressurized gases quickly filled the chamber and left just as quick as they'd come. A buzzer sounded the completion of the cleaning cycle and they were led into another set of double-doors. They were metal as well—a continuing theme from before.

Inside the huge room, there were a couple of drafting tables, some large metal tables with scattered coffee mugs and chairs, and a few chalkboards haphazardly arranged with complicated chemistry and physics scrawled across them. Off to the back there were more doors leading elsewhere with the same sort of warnings painted on them as before. Amidst the chaos of the scattered paperwork, books and furniture, and glowing large cylinders that were covered with sheets, something stood out. A sliver tea service set. The robot looked around his old lab and noticed that Erik was staring at the tea set. "Ah, my dear Penny. Always insisted on a proper cup of tea when working on her equations." Erik stopped in front of a chalkboard that was along the southern wall. "What's this doc? It's a list of names or something." The doctor rolled over and scanned the board "Ah, yes. I'd almost forgot about this. We drafted potential candidates for the experiments over here." He pointed to a couple sets of names from the long list:

James Hawthorne, Penny Stewart	→ Gale Hawthorne, Thomas Hawthorne
John Hawthorne, Jenny Royale	→ Aaron Hawthorne
General Moseley	→ Miranda Moseley
Jacob Holiday, Pat Hughe	→ Olivia Holiday
Colin Rade, Rhonda Tysdale	→ Donald Rade

"These were the only some of the trials that were successful. We were able to tame their genome and integrate *Canis dirus* and *Canis lupus rufus*. The idea was to introduce the girth from the *dirus*, speed and enhanced senses from the *lupus rufus*, all while keeping the human knowledge and higher reasoning intact." The doctor paused and spun back around to face Erik. "Well, I suppose the trials were marginally successful. Poor little Miranda died of complications. The poor little dear had a heart defect, we were hoping that our treatments would help. Sh..."

Erik had lost his focus as the doctor got more detailed in his scientific explanation of heart defects and splicing genomes. He was transfixed on the last name on the list. "Donald". After his mental pause, Erik interrupted the doctor.

"Doc, who's Donald?" he questioned, pointing at the board again. The doctor halted his explanation of the finer points of DNA combinatorics. "Is that name familiar to you?" he asked Erik. After only receiving a shake of his shaggy-haired head, the doctor turned to Rush who was standing to his left. "Rush, do you remember either of your parents? My daughter Gale, her mate Donald?" Rush somberly shook his head and replied softly "Very little. Mostly you." The robot wheeled over and put a cold metal claw on Rush's shoulder. "Well Rush, not to worry." The robot turned to Erik and gestured at Rush and himself. "We're all family here."

Erik stared at him blankly. "What? Are you serious? My family's been dead for a good twenty-two years now. We discussed that already. It's like the Elder told me, they died protecting a settlement from the Master's..." The robot cut him off prematurely. "Yes, yes. That's the fiction that you were told. The truth is that you and your companion here both share your father's DNA. You two are half-brothers and my grandchildren." Erik paled again. "There's no way. It's impossible. You're too old! I can't be related to this!" He hiked a thumb back in Rush's direction. Rush flinched at the rude gesture, but was more relieved that Erik wasn't shouting again. He had wondered how well the human would accept the reality that he had already sorted out on his own.

Erik continued to ramble and mutter in the doctor's direction, making little sense by this point. Rush took a few steps in Erik's direction and began to gently scratch his head. "Brother" he grumbled. Erik snapped out of his rage and stared at the giant, then at the doctor, then back at Rush again, his eyes threatening to betray his manhood. He continued to stare at Rush with a multitude of feelings running through him and a tear in his eye. His emotions were mostly comprised of confusion, relief of no longer being alone, and the fact that he had some semblance of family beyond the brotherhood to speak of.

The doctor started on his lectures again. "I'm sure you know, but sometimes DNA combinatorics and re-sequencing aren't exactly precise. We were more-or-less throwing genetic material into a blender and hoping for the best. We were so pleased that we had successful results, we didn't take the time to figure out why you didn't turn out like the others." The doctor paused in thought and continued: "Have you been able to communicate with Rush?" Erik wiped away the tear that previously leaked out and replied, "yeah, a bit. He doesn't say much though." The doctor shook his brain-case "No, dear child. With your mind. Telepathically." Erik shook his head vigorously. "No doc. Just English. I'm not psychic or anything."

The doctor nodded a response "All in good time then, I'm sure. Most of the other subjects were able to communicate telepathically to some degree. The children even showed a heightened sensitivity to hormones and emotions of their fellow creatures. However, most were infertile, deformed, or a touch mentally unstable. Well, some were more than just a touch unstable, unfortunately."

Rush and Erik looked at each other quizzically, as if to say "You're not crazy, are you?" The doctor resumed, "Fortunately, you two seemed to have the best time of it. I don't see any obvious physical defects, you don't seem to be suffering from any mental illnesses aside rudeness. Although, I can't speak to your reproductive capability without samples, but we can sort that out later. You two are quite lucky, with the exception of you two and the small pack that lives here with me, the others fought to the death for mating rights or committed suicide in their lunacy."

Erik's demeanor saddened quickly at the notion of lab-crafted creatures that were so deformed or mentally unstable that they preferred to take their own lives than suffer. "Regardless, young man. You've always had a family in the Brotherhood. You're family has just simply been expanded." The robot followed as sweetly as his mechanical voice would allow, "as a good grandfather should, I assumed that your development would be better overseen by a seasoned human rather than have you grow

up with a robot and a litter of pups. Elder Redding has clearly seen to your growing up as a well-adjusted and skilled adult. Albeit a touch loud."

Erik nodded somberly, but his mind was reeling: was all of his history a giant falsification?

"Doc, if this is all true, when did all of this happen? Surely not just twenty- six years ago. I know the government was doing experimental work like this before we fought with the Chinese in the Great War. These experiments must've stopped two hundred years ago. Right?" The doctor failed to reply immediately, but instead turned away and rolled his way toward the double doors at the back of the room. "Back here, please."

Erik and Rush followed the doctor into the next room. They both stopped near the threshold and stared, wide-eyed at the odd beings suspended in tubes of fluid. Each of the long walls were lined with large five-foot wide cylinders, each bubbling with a cyan or chartreuse liquid that suspended what appeared to be creatures in various forms of development. Most chambers were covered with dusty sheets, their contents shadowing their covers and casting eerie shadows across the room. It was a bona fide genetics laboratory.

Erik stood slack-jawed, staring at the visible bobbing abominations. Many of the beings appeared quite dead, one on the left wall twitched sporadically. Some looked like they could have been human at one time, others looked like wolves, some were somewhere in between, some were missing limbs, and some tubes were empty all together.

One looked as if it contained some sort of radioactive stew. Erik suddenly found himself short of breath as he started to hyperventilate. His eyes went hazy as he began reliving vivid flashbacks.