

CHAPTER 08: WHERE'S THE SAFETY? OR PAST DAEMONS RETURN

Jenkins and Franklin paused to stare at each other in disbelief. They both started in on the elder. "You can't!" "What if he tries to eat us?!" "He's a freak of nature!" They continued their arguments for another minute or two. The elder got up in the middle of their dispute to go deliver the good news to Rush.

The pair of soldiers followed him to watch the scene unfold. The elder sat next to Rush on the bed—he was still stroking Erik's head with worry. Rush paused his ministrations to look back to the elder. "Doing better," is all he said, with a nod to Erik. "I'd thought so, friend," the elder started gently. "Look, I know you don't really have a reason to trust us aside from our patching you up, but I'd like for you to join us as an initiate into the Brotherhood of Steel," the elder paused and smiled at Erik's still-unconscious form, then back to Rush.

"I know he'd like for you to. We both would. I think I see a good medic in you." If Rush didn't have fur on his muzzle, the elder could've seen him blush in embarrassment. "Yes. Thank you," was all he said with a curt nod. He'd have Erik handle the details later—they'd have to find his clan and grandfather before they went anywhere.

Franklin nudged Jenkins in the doorway with an elbow to the arm, "I guess you've got competition now, eh?" Jenkins shook his head in disbelief. "Now I've got to work with a giant fuzzball? What's next, super mutant dentists and deathclaw nurses," he muttered aloud. The elder shot a furtive glance back at Jenkins who immediately stopped sulking. "Jenkins here will take you. Under. His. Wing," the elder said pointedly. Jenkins scowled at Rush, then sighed, "the elder's never been wrong about these sorts of things..." He tapered off as he looked back at the elder, defeated. He was clearly worried about his newly-gained honor of becoming third best medic in the battalion behind the elder and the major.

Rush looked at the three men, then back and Erik, "rest now?" The elder nodded. "I think that's a good idea," he said after glancing at his Pip-Boy—it was a quarter after nine. "Franklin, that goes for you too. You can take the next room. You deserve a bit of shut-eye." Franklin opened his mouth to argue but quickly shut it, for fear of angering the elder. "Aye, elder." The elder put a hand on Jenkins' shoulder and smiled, "let's go make a few rounds while they rest. I'm curious to find out what the Enclave left down here."

Franklin rolled over and sighed—he was uncomfortable with Rush in the next room, but was quite pleased with the reprieve of duty. He glanced around at the sparse room. There wasn't much to speak of, a bed, a nightstand with a severely faded pre-war book, and a dresser with a picture frame on top. A restless Franklin laid in the bed, staring at the paint that was peeling from the ceiling. "The fuck was the elder thinking," the thought aloud. "I can't believe we're keeping that damn freaky dog thing. It looks like a fuckin' man-eater At least it speaks English. Kinda."

He drifted off to a fitful sleep on top of the covers. He tossed and turned for a good hour until he heard something at his door. He called out, "who's there?" There was no response. He called a second time, "anyone there?" Again, there was no answer. Franklin ignored what he thought was his imagination and rolled over to continue his slumber. Just as he was closing his eyes, he saw his door creak open and a pair of glowing yellow eyes peer through the gap. He grabbed the knife at his belt and held at the ready as he leaped out of bed. "The hell do you want, furry?!" Rush failed to enter the room, but continued to stare. He spoke through the door to Franklin, muffling his voice, "Apologies. Wish to speak." "Who the hell do you think you are, bustin' into someone's room," Franklin exclaimed. Rush shrank back at Franklin's yelling. Rather than push the issue, lowered he ears as he gently closed the door with another, "apologies," and went back to his room with Erik. He had clearly trespassed on the human, and felt terribly guilty for it. Not only that, but he was just afraid of the human as it was of him, if not more.

Franklin sat back down in a huff on his dusty bed, resting his well-worn bowie knife on his lap. "Damn thing was sizing me up for dinner, that's what it was doin'" he muttered to himself. "I've gotta find the elder and get this thing taken care of. I can't imagine what he and that idiot medic-radioman of his are thinking." Franklin stood up and rummaged around for his gear. After finding his shirt, the top half of his armor, and his helmet, he threw the first two on and the latter under his arm left. He slammed the bedroom door on the way out, damned if Erik was asleep or not. For all he knew, Erik was just a quick meal for that damnable monster. He imagined the furry brute gnawing on one of Erik's humeri or ulnae as he slammed the front door, and stomped his way out to find the elder and his star needle pusher.

Rush started to sit back on the bed as he caught a reflection of himself in the cracked and dirty mirror on the wall above the dresser. He stared at the familiar, warm face, his amber eyes, and perky ears. He smiled sadly at himself.

To be honest, he was already having second thoughts about joining Erik, what if all humans were like this —defensive, angry, and dangerous? He only wanted to speak to

the young man, discover something more beyond a name, he certainly wasn't planning to be threatened with a knife. He slumped on the bed next to Erik who was sleeping soundly. Rush decided that would be the best course of action as well as he nuzzled into Erik's chest and fell into a troubled slumber.

Elder Redding and Jenkins had been strolling northward toward their original entry point when they saw the mysterious black box left by the now-dead Enclave members. "What'cha reckon' it is, sir" Jenkins queried. The elder shrugged. "No idea, hopefully not a bomb. I couldn't defuse one of those if my life depended on it," he said with a slight chuckle. Jenkins laughed nervously. He'd been a bit on edge ever since they lost contact with Erik a few days ago. He'd calmed down a bit since then, but he was still uneasy for some unfathomable reason. It was probably partially due to the fact that they were five floors underground, in the middle of a supposedly abandoned facility, in the middle of nowhere Mississippi, three days away from any backup or supplies. None of those things sat well with him —particularly how neither he nor Franklin received any forward notice about this mission until the last minute. It was out of the ordinary for the elder to go on scouting missions. Especially to such a dangerous place. Of course, nobody argued when he said, "I want to make sure *this* office has a view."

The elder clapped him on the shoulder as they arrived at the mysterious container. "Well, here goes nothing," Elder Redding said. Both men poured over the container, looking for some sort of lock, latch, or keyhole. After two quick minutes of searching, the only thing they found was an unfamiliar symbol on top of the container that looked like a ring of concentric circles with a bow-tie sprouting from the middle of them. "Huh, never seen a symbol like that, you?" The elder nodded at Jenkins' question. "Yeah, long time ago, similar to some of the tech they had in places like this. It's a proximity lock. We need to find a key for it. See any of the Enclave scum we took out?" Jenkins nodded as he spotted one man in a suit, slumped precisely where Erik had dispatched him earlier, about 20 yards away.

"Here's one," Jenkins called out after making a quick jaunt to the corpse. As he began to rifle through the corpse's pinstriped suit, he felt a little bit of guilt upon finding his wallet. There wasn't any cash, unfortunately, but there was a photo of a young woman with a pair of children, all with happy, smiling faces. "Damn it." Jenkins sighed a bit and continued his search. Surprisingly, the man had quite a bit of stuff on him: his wallet, a map of the facility, a holotape, a 9mm pistol, two extra clips, and a small blue plastic card that had the same logo on it as the cargo box.

"Think I've found it, sir," Jenkins called out. He gathered the man's belongings into a small pile nearby and ran over to the elder, adjacent to the cargo box. "Ready?" The elder nodded affirmatively. "Okay, here goes ..."

Jenkins took the card and slid it around on the top of the container, unfamiliar with the technology. After a few seconds of scuffing up the lid, the card finally activated the lock. The lid popped up a centimeter and steam escaped with a loud rush. Both men stood back as the gas escaped, unsure of what it was. It quickly dissipated. They both lifted on the lid to reveal a velvet-lined area with a shiny, new brain case for a RobCo RoboBrain model robot. "Sir, when'd the Enclave stop destroying robots and start repairing them?"

The elder furrowed his brow as he pondered that question. "Never mind that now Jenkins, what else is in here? This box's damn heavy to have only that in it." Jenkins nodded in agreement as he began to scour through the contents of the box. He recovered a pair of holotapes, a couple of small bundles of electronics, and a letter, addressed to "Captain Marshall Redding, c/o Delta detachment, Brotherhood of Steel."

"Sir, is your first name Marshall?" The elder was taken aback. "Yes, Jenkins it is. How'd you know that, and why?" Jenkins shrugged and handed him the letter. "Just a wild guess sir." Jenkins turned back to the cargo box and began to unload its contents on to the ground as the elder ripped open the letter.

August 28

Station Magnolia: Supporting the American Warfighter, with Science!

Capt. Marshall Redding of the Brotherhood of Steel,

I hope this letter finds you well. As you no doubt know, my facility and its contents are not to be trifled with lightly. Stored within these walls are secrets that must never be allowed to leave—secrets that should be kept locked far away from the eyes of the world to keep us, and everyone else, safe. It's time one of my belongings was returned to me.

In the twelve years since you took my grandson at my behest, I trust that you have nurtured him into a strong and intelligent human being. He is quite special, as I'm

sure you've discovered. He's not a typical child.

Erik's thirteenth birthday marks his coming of age. He is starting his transition into manhood and I think that he should be here with his family, at least to start his journey. That is not to say that you are not his family, but, simply put, he will soon need us to guide him through this transition.

Please make arrangements to have Erik here by the 17th of next month. It is of utmost importance that he arrive prior to his birthday. You are welcome to join us in the marking of this joyous occasion.

Expect further communication as the 17th approaches.

—Doctor John Hawthorne, Lead Research Scientist Magnolia Naval Research Station.

The elder stared at the acid-streaked paper. "Well, shit. I've been celebrating that boy's birthday nearly two months early every year." He continued to stare at it in mild disbelief. "A bit presumptuous of that doctor to think that I couldn't raise Erik. Better still, why this letter is just now showing up, ten plus years later and why did the Enclave have it? Did the doctor have this planned out?"

The elder sighed and continued his mental monologue, "surely not. I haven't heard from him for at least fifteen years. There's no way this is the 'special day' he had planned." Just as Jenkins opened his mouth to ask the Elder about his mysterious letter, the sound of a slamming metal door and furious yelling from the apartment that their three companions were in. "Damn it," the elder said breathlessly. "C'mon Jenkins, let's go see what's the noise is all about."

Both men made haste back toward the double-wide apartment. About 30 yards back toward the apartment, they ran into Franklin. He was visibly agitated, pale in the face and shaking. "Damn it elder, wh..what the hell are you thinking," Franklin shouted at him, his voice breaking. "That damn thing's a menace! It ate Erik and nearly did me in too!" The elder paused and stared at the man, "Wait now, what? That big teddy bear attacked you," the elder questioned with a broad stroke of worry in his voice. Franklin stammered, "Yeah! Well, kinda. Well..no. But he was gonna if I didn't scare him off with this!" He brandished his bowie knife and waved it around.

The elder paused to stare at the knife-waving maniac then looked to his left at Jenkins who shared the elder's confusion. "Okay...so. You're saying that the big guy

almost, but didn't attack you. What'd he say? Was he bloody or anything?" Franklin stammered again, "No, didn't attack me, I stopped him remember? He was starin' at me all creepy like through the door...I saw him and ran after him with my knife. No way in hell that damn man eater was gonna eat me! Not after what happened last time." The elder shook his head in confusion. "Right, well let's go get this sorted out. Jenkins stay with Franklin, give him something to calm down...forcefully if you need to. I'll go see what's going on here." Jenkins nodded at the elder's order and slowly made his way toward Franklin in an attempt to disarm him. If Franklin tried anything funny, Jenkins shouldn't have a problem dealing with him—if need be, he'd shoot Franklin, then take the bullet out later. The elder chuckled to himself at that thought. "Hell of a medic, that kid is."

As the elder waked back toward the apartment, Jenkins was finally talking Franklin down. He'd never seen Frank like this. "Hey Frankie, you're okay, man. Let me hold on to that knife for you and we'll go get a drink okay?" "But..but..no! I'm not gonna be defenseless when that monster comes out," Franklin exclaimed. "Hey, heeeey, it's okay man. Let's just go take a walk and talk about what's got you so excited." Jenkins was doing his best to keep a calm, soothing tone the whole time, which is slightly difficult when a full-grown man is busy losing his damn mind. "Here, let's see," Jenkins cooed to Franklin as he slowly neared Franklin. "Come now, let's have that knife."

Franklin was shaking severely and quite pale. However, he did concede and hand over his trench knife. "Th...thanks. Ax," he stuttered quietly. "Let's get out of here ..." Jenkins threw an arm around his shoulder as they began surveying the remainder of the area. "So, tell me what the matter is. Do I need to go check up on Erik, Frankie?" Franklin sighed deeply and replied sheepishly, "I dunno. Man, I dunno what I was thinking. But, uh, no. I don't think so. I didn't hear him yell or anything ..." "Hey bud," Jenkins started, "it's okay. I think I know what's wrong. He reminded you of what happened a few springs ago?"

Jenkins paused mid-stride as Franklin began to shiver violently. It was an uncontrollable shudder that made his teeth chatter as he replied. "Ye..yeah. I dunno why I was the on..ly one to make it. Can't remember" Jenkins nodded, he was part of the rescue effort that found him under the bodies of his teammates. They'd been ambushed by Enclave soldiers with mind-controlled deathclaws. The scouting party had been handily decimated, except for Franklin. Franklin had begun silently weeping as Jenkins was remembering the broken young man they'd taken in. Jenkins and the other medics thought he wasn't going to make it. They'd even prepared a plot for him next

to his brother at the chapel. Fortunately, Elder Redding, Major Artie, and Jenkins had spent all night working on his wounds to save him —despite his best efforts to bleed out due to severe lacerations to his abdomen. They were so severe, in fact, that his entrails were nearly visible behind mangled muscles.

As the elder watched Jenkins and Franklin walk toward the rear of the area, near the cargo elevator, he sighed and turned away to walk back to the apartment. "Poor kid...," he muttered as he re-initiated his trek. Shaking his head, he continued his line of thought. "I'm surprised he even made it through the surgery, let alone the attack. I guess it's a good thing he doesn't consciously remember any of it."

The elder took his time walking back to the apartment, taking in the stale air, and doing his best to enjoy the artificial sunlight that was streaming in from the lamps high above.

Upon his return to the apartment, he noticed that the only sound aside from the soft click and hum of the refrigerator was a quiet, rhythmic snarling sound. No, it wasn't snarling, it was snoring! He grinned to himself as he turned right and peered into the ajar door. Erik was still out, but his color had returned; he appeared to be doing much better. Rush was looking a bit better himself, curled up by Erik's side, his giant, shaggy head rested upon Erik's chest.

The elder cleared his throat, in an attempt to gently wake the two. Erik, who failed to stir, continued resting easy. Rush, however perked his ears up and blinked the elder into focus. He leaned up from his protective position and greeted the elder with a simple nod. "Hello, son. How are you feeling," the elder asked genuinely. Rush glanced at Erik then back to the elder. He attempted to whisper, "well, elder." It came out resembling a grumble.

Not wanting to wake Erik, Rush gently slid out of bed and stared at the elder, darting his eyes to the door. "Ah, yes, lets not wake the boy," the elder agreed. The two men walked into the main room and sat on the couch where Jenkins and Franklin had been only a short time ago.

Rush, who looked up to the elder with great respect, asked, "something wrong?" The elder nodded subtly and replied, "Ah, well. I suppose so. Your and Erik's physical wounds seem to be healing quite nicely, but I'm afraid that Franklin's psychological wounds have not yet been mended." Rush cocked his head at an angle and furrowed his brow, then dipped his head in shame. "Frightened him," Rush grumbled. The elder

patted Rush on his left forearm, "yes, well that's true. You did. But not for reasons you are aware of."

Rush picked his head up a bit and beckoned the elder to explain with his regular, piercing glance. "Well," the elder paused to gather his thoughts. "Franklin and Jenkins have been a part of the Brotherhood for a long time now. Although, not much longer than Erik. They all grew up together. Regardless, a few years ago now, The Enclave, the same people that attacked here today, attacked the squad that Franklin was a part of. His entire squad was cut down by terrible creations called 'Deathclaws.' They're bigger, angrier, stronger, and have sharper claws than you. They've been known to completely render a grown man to shreds in a minute flat."

Rush's ears perked up at hearing this, his eyes grew wide in shock. "Why make such terrible things?" The elder sighed and replied, "well, son. Some could say the same of you." Rush lowered his ears at that, saddened that he could be compared to what sounded like absolutely bestial creatures. The elder continued his explanation, "Anyway, Franklin's squad had been ambushed by the Enclave. They'd figured out how to control these deathclaws and were using them to run attacks on us and anyone else they deem unfit. Franklin had been hit hard, and was left to die under the corpses of his own brethren. He was lucky we had a backup patrol on the way. We found him, worked on him for hours. After nearly 12 hours of surgery, a couple of pints of blood, and some luck, we'd had him back into one piece."

The elder paused to look at Rush who was visibly saddened by what happened, and was reminded about what happened to his own brethren today. The elder began to wrap up his explanation, "So, the poor kid hasn't been quite right since. Understandably. He's been a bit spooky about missions that require extensive handling with the local wildlife –yao guai, deathclaws, and the like. I suppose that when he saw you, he started to relive those experiences that he'd been blocking out subconsciously. It's not really your fault, son."

The elder reassuringly patted Rush's forearm again. "Apologies, elder." The elder nodded and replied, "none needed. You didn't do anything wrong." Rush was still saddened and replied quietly, "We were created. Not controlled. Only want to help." The elder continued to pat and brush Rush's forearm, "Who all were created? Do you mean by some greater being?"

Rush shook his head negative. "Me. Erik. Our clan. Designed by grandfather." The elder paused petting Rush's arm and responded, "clan? There are more of you?" Rush nodded affirmatively. "Was twelve, now four," he finished with a small quiver. The

elder wrapped an arm around Rush's broad shoulders pulling him into a half hug, "I'm sorry for your loss son. You're welcome to come back with us. I'm sure that Erik would want to you. I think it'd be good for the both of you."

Rush nodded slowly. He'd certainly wanted to get out here for some time now, this kind man and Erik have agreed to take him in; Rush wanted more than anything to leave the facility and make a life for himself, but how could he abandon his elder and two young clan mates? Rush was silent while pondering his next actions. The elder tightened his hug and said, "Son, I don't know you very well, but I'd like to. As far as I'm concerned, any kin to Erik is kin to me." Rush looked up from his lap and gave the elder a small smile.

"First thing's first, son. I can't get to know you without knowing your name." Rush blinked and quickly became embarrassed. "Rush," he replied in his typically gravel-y tone. "Rush von Hawthorne." The elder furrowed his brow and replied, "So, Rush Hawthorne?" Rush nodded. "Well Mr. Hawthorne, welcome to the Brotherhood of Steel. You will henceforth be known as 'Initiate Hawthorne' until you either move up in rank or leave. Your choice."

The elder released Rush from his hug, got up, and made his way toward the rightmost bedroom. "Let's go see how Erik is doing." Rush nodded, rose from the couch, and followed the elder. They crowded around the bed to see a battered Erik. His grey jumpsuit was blotched and stained with blood and sweat in various places. The left leg of his jumpsuit had been cut away and his boot tossed to the floor so Jenkins could better work on the wound, which was healing at a surprising pace. So quick in fact, that it caught the elder off guard. "Huh, that's odd," he muttered as he moved to take a closer look. Erik's calf had completely clotted, scabbed, and was nearly back to normal.

The elder was quite curious. "Initiate Hawthorne, let me see your left forearm please." Rush obliged. The skin and fur that had been scratched away by Erik the day previous was well on its way to being back to normal. "Bend down please, initiate." Rush move to the elder's side and obliged him a second time. The elder was inspecting Rush's shoulder. "It shouldn't look this good, this quick." He looked again, it was as if someone had taken electric clippers to the area. The skin and underlying structure looked almost as healthy as his other shoulder. "Well, I'll be damned," the elder muttered. "I knew you two were special, but this takes the cake. You always heal this quickly?" Rush stood up and nodded in response then looked at Erik. "Grandfather's work."