

CHAPTER 09: HIDE AND GO SEEK OR WHO TOLD THEM TO GO PLAY IN TRAFFIC?

The elder smiled again, quite relieved. "Well, that's great news. I guess he can stop sleeping now. Let's get this kid up, you two still have a lot of work to do." Rush nodded and began to gently shake Erik. He was greeted with a sharp inhale then more snoring. Rush shook harder. Erik continued to quietly snore. Rush scowled and shook even harder. Rush was now shaking both Erik and the bed quite vigorously. After a quick minute of this and no results, he leaned down to lick Erik's face as he'd done days prior.

Erik eased his eyes open and turned to Rush with a groggy smile. "Heeey Rush, how are ya?" Rush gave him a quick smile then turned to look at the elder for further instruction. The elder cleared his throat authoritatively, "Paladin Erik Rade, I'd like you to meet the newest initiate into the Brotherhood: Rush Hawthorne. I believe you've met." Erik pushed himself upright in the bed and beamed at Rush. "So, you're one of us now, huh?" Rush nodded.

"Elder," Erik yawned, "who's squad will he be training under?" The elder smirked and replied, "not yours, Rade. I think he'll do best under Major Artie and Paladin Jenkins." Erik lost a little bit of enthusiasm, "If you think's best, sir." "I'm sure you'll make a fine medic, initiate. If you train hard enough, you could even rival Jenkins," the elder finished with another smirk. He silently thought to himself, "I'm sure Jenkins could use the competition."

"Enough of the formalities, then. Let's get you out of bed and get you briefed on your next mission with our new recruit here." Erik and Rush nodded in unison. Erik uneasily slid out of bed, still a bit woozy from the long sleep he'd had. Just as he started to jam his left foot into its boot, there was a slam and yelling at the entrance to the apartment.

Jenkins and Franklin had returned from their walk. They were currently arguing who would win in a knock-down-drag-out fight, a yao guai or a deathclaw. "I'm telling you Frankie, it'd be a yao guai. You ever seen one of those take on a deathclaw? It's insane!" "Hell no, the deathclaw'd rip that thing open from stem to stern." They both stopped as soon as they noticed that there were three men staring at their sudden intrusion. "Uh, sorry elder," they both said in near tandem. Jenkins spoke up first, "How're our two patients?" The elder replied, "Well, Rade seems to be well patched up, thanks to your fine needlework. Our new initiate here has also benefited

from your skill." Jenkins and Franklin exchanged sideways glances. "Initiate," Franklin replied. "Sir, you were serious about letting *him* join up?"

"Indeed I was, Franklin. In fact he, Erik, and Jenkins have some work to do. You and I have a little mission of our own as well. Y'all take a seat and we'll get everything sorted."

All five men sat in the main room, all facing the elder who took residence in the leather chair near the RobCo terminal. Jenkins and Franklin sat on the couch, Erik sat in the recliner and Rush stood by his side. "Now then, boys. We've had an interesting day so far. We've had to clean up some Enclave scum, performed emergency triage on three of you, and even brought a new member into the Brotherhood of Steel. Let's give our newest member a warm southern, introduction." Everyone in the room turned to face Rush.

The elder started, "Okay, son, I'll start. I'm Elder Marshall Redding of the Brotherhood of Steel, Delta detachment of the Gulf Commonwealth. I run our little detachment of forty-five members or so, and have for over forty years now.

I strive to keep the men and women of our detachment, and those areas we protect, safe from wildlife and undesirables. The Brotherhood itself stands to protect men and women of the wastes by collecting and protecting pre-war technology. We're a bit different than most other detachments though, we serve more of a protection and service function rather than just cataloging and hoarding old tech." Jenkins, Franklin, and Erik were all nodding. They'd all heard this before. "It boils down to taking care of your neighbor, around here. That's what we aim to do best."

Jenkins was next, and slightly distraught as the elder was always hard to follow when he was making speeches. "Ah, well, I'm Axel Jenkins," he paused, "Paladin medic in the Brotherhood of Steel. It's my job to make sure everyone is healthy and patched up when necessary. I answer to Major Artie. He does most of our outreach work; working with those that are less fortunate. The homeless and the like. I've, uh, been in the Brotherhood as long as Erik and a bit longer than Franklin here. We all kinda grew up together. Seems like forever now."

Franklin was next. He grumbled a quick blurb. "Second Captain John Franklin. Lead the first regiment gunners into battle when necessary. I handle most of the firearm training at Delta." He sat silent and stared at Erik with crossed arms. "Your turn. Go." Erik shook his head at Franklin. "Not much else you do, eh chef?" Franklin scowled and if glares were lasers, his would have burned clean through Erik's skull.

"Okay, fine. I'm Erik Rade, Paladin of the Brotherhood of Steel, Delta detachment. I answer to Captain Cole Johnson. Or did until he passed last year.... I'm the lead scout for our detachment. Given that Delta's on the small side, I typically get sent out to do scouting by myself, for long periods of time into possibly hostile territory. Been pretty lucky so far. Oh, also I am the adopted son of the elder here." Erik took a short breath, "now, it's your turn Rush."

Rush looked at each of the men, so important in their duties, and was at a loss of words. He grumbled to himself for a moment before he gathered his words. "Ich bin Rush von Hawthorne. Beta of Magnolia Clan." He paused and took a shaky breath. "Charged with protecting clan. Failed. Now, initiate." He sat silent after that. He had nothing else to say, he hurt too much inside to continue.

They all sat silent for a few moments, reflecting on the tumultuous day. Rush put a hand on Erik's head and looked at the Elder. "Rest now?" The elder nodded and followed, "please address me a 'sir' or 'elder' when we're around other members, okay Rush? It's a sign of respect among southerners." Rush nodded, "Rest now, sir?" The elder nodded again with a smile and began to dole out arrangements. Erik, Rush, you two can take the room you were in earlier," he paused. "Find some clean sheets, if you can."

"Jenkins, you and Franklin can have the other bedroom, I think I'll have that comfortable-looking couch that you two're keeping warm. Erik and Rush nodded to each other as Erik stood up. They headed back to bed without another word. Franklin and Jenkins, however had already begun squabbling again. "You can sleep on the floor, bullet boy." "No way. I don't think so scalpel jockey. I'll get the damn bed before you do!"

The elder shook his head, and said in a menacing tone, "share the bed, you two. We've got our work cut out for us in the morning." They continued to grumble as they walked into the small bedroom. The elder sighed, relieved that the day could finally be wrapped up. Tomorrow he'd planned to find that illusive doctor and see if he couldn't get some useful information out of him. Following that, he'd decided to follow up with Rush about the clan— maybe he could give them some sort of support. "We could use a little bit of help in these times the thought aloud to himself

Rush fell into the bed while Erik was busy fighting to get his feet out of the boots he's just finished putting back on not fifteen minutes ago. Rush stared at the ceiling and let out a low sigh. Erik paused mid-extraction of his slightly swollen left foot, sat on the bed and said, "hey Rush? You okay?" Rush shook his head

negatively and replied, "No. Hurt," as he rubbed his chest, presumably where his heart was. Erik nodded as he tossed his left boot at the baseboard and began to fight off his second boot. Erik paused to reach over and tousle Rush's head the way he liked. Rush smiled up at Erik and thought to him, "I miss them terribly, brother. Most of our clan was decimated by those horrible humans today. What did they do to deserve that?"

Erik shook his head and sighed, replying quietly, "existed. That's how those assholes are. If you're not a *pure* human, then they aim to make sure you don't exist. It's their idea of a perfect America. I think they're worse monsters than those they destroy." Erik paused as he threw his right boot next to the left. Rush flinched at the "monsters". Erik laid down on his side to face Rush, leaning his head on his left arm.

"I guess 'monsters' was a bit harsh. Creatures. The Enclave destroys creatures they deem unfit to live: wastelanders, experiments like us, yao guai, ghouls, mutants, anything that didn't come from their precious Vaults or left over from the government. Anything irradiated. Just about everything, actually."

Rush sighed again and thought to Erik, "But why? How could anyone harbor such hatred against so many? I don't understand. I dislike creatures that do harm to my clan or innocents, but I wouldn't hurt anything that didn't attempt to harm me first. Our brothers did no such thing, we've lived down here our entire lives. We've harmed no creature out of ill will, well except for radroaches. They started it..." Erik chuckled at the mention radroaches. "Yeah, they're a damn nuisance."

Erik rolled over onto his back and joined Rush's gaze to the dilapidated ceiling above. "Hey, Rush? Tell me about 'em. I want to know about their lives. Who they were, what they did, your clan's customs. Everything." Rush shook his head and grumbled aloud, "No." He paused then followed mentally, "not my place. The elder leads in honoring the dead. My job to finish the job."

Erik propped himself up on his elbow again, "Well, why don't we start now?" Rush turned his head to look at Erik, "elder gave orders to rest. Pack members are dead, wait for no one now," Rush grumbled aloud. Erik stuttered in reply, "Ye..yeah. But you said that you honor your dead. Shouldn't we try to at least make them as dignified in their death as we can?" Rush shook his head vigorously, he was beginning to get irritated with Erik. "No," he said aloud, "Died protecting clan. Just bodies now." "Okay, sure they're just bodies now, but they're your...our family. The Brotherhood doesn't leave our family in an undignified mess," Erik argued.

Rush was slowly growing cross with Erik's objections. "No," he growled. "They. Stay. Wait for elder." Erik shuddered at his scolding, Rush sure didn't have a lot of patience. "Okay, I'm...I'm sorry Rush. I just wanted to help." Rush swallowed a snarl he was preparing for Erik's next objection. Instead, he licked Erik's face and spoke mentally, relieved that Erik had decided not to argue further. "We leave the dead to be honored by the elder. It's her elder's job to help the souls of the fallen find their way back to the earth. If we disturb them, they could get lost forever. We honor their lives by helping them approach death with dignity. After the elder completes her rituals, we can collect the bodies and dispose of them. We'll cremate them and add their names to our songs to keep them in our memories."

Erik was saddened by the thought that, in Rush's beliefs, he nearly doomed his unknown kinsman to an eternity of purgatory. Erik apologized again, "Rush...I'm really sorry. I didn't mean any harm, I just wanted to help make you feel better. Try and help honor the fallen, I guess, I dunno. I just felt like I should do something to help." Rush didn't reply, but rolled over to find comfort in Erik's chest. Not long after they'd both, gotten to sleep, Erik woke up to Rush silently weeping and mumbling something he didn't understand. Erik pulled Rush closer into his chest mumbled, "Love you, brother, will do our best for them," and went back to sleep.

The following morning, Erik beat his Pip-Boy to the punch. In fact, he was up a full hour before his 0600 alarm was set to go off. He blinked the sleep out of his eyes and looked around: he was still in the dingy, tiny bedroom, sharing a double bed with a tear-stained werewolf. "Poor guy," Erik thought to himself. "I guess I'm a bit depressed myself, they were technically my family too..." He was interrupted by a soft knocking the door to their room. The door slowly swung open to reveal Elder Redding. He whispered, "Erik, you up?" Erik popped his head up and nodded affirmatively. "Good. How's the big guy?" Erik whispered back, "depressed, I think. But I think he'll be okay."

The elder nodded and said, "We should do something to help him with the dead." Erik grew wide-eyed and blurted aloud, "No! Don't touch them!" The elder was caught off guard, but played it cool. "Okay, son. We'll leave them be. You two go back to sleep. I'll wake you four up around nine. I think everyone can use the extra rest after yesterday's fun." Erik nodded as his adopted father turned to leave, "Thanks...dad." Erik laid back down and snuggled back into Rush, who opened an eye and grumbled, "thank you, brother." Erik chuckled and mumbled, "I figured you were awake, saw your ears twitch when we started whispering." Rush nodded as rolled over to get up. "Can't sleep. Want to walk," Rush asked Erik as he wiped his face.

Erik sat up and stretched, "yeah. I don't think I can get back to sleep either. A walk sounds good." Rush nodded and exited the bedroom with Erik shortly behind, still barefooted. The two passed Elder Redding who appeared to be falling back to sleep on the couch. The duo managed to creep their way toward the front door as the elder said, "I'm not asleep, nor asking questions. Be back before 0900." "Aye, sir," Erik responded. The young men left the apartment, on a walk to wake themselves up and to get their minds back in gear.

They began their walk by heading East, toward the entrance they originally came through. Their slow, somber pace allowed them to take in the full extent of damage from the fight between them and the Enclave yesterday. Many of the cargo-container apartments were now scalded and burnt in various places due to munitions fire. Most of the quaint porches, decks, and clothes lines were now gone, had gaping holes, were severely destroyed, or still smoldering. Even the artificial sunlight seemed sad today, casting flitting beams through the haze of the still-smoldering architecture. After passing the first set of apartments after the "deluxe" one they camped in, they looked up to the next set of stacked apartments. The easternmost apartment's deck was still in good condition. Erik looked up to Rush, "fancy going up and getting a better look?" Rush nodded, and so they did. The pair climbed up the rickety stairs, waving light smoke out of their eyes. They stood side-by-side on a wooden porch, ten feet above the floor, shielding their eyes in attempts to get a better idea of what to expect.

"Looks like there's not much of a fire, or anything. Think it'll be a problem," Erik queried Rush. Rush shook his head and said, "No. Ventilation is good here."

Erik nodded as he continued to squint around. They continued looking around for a few moments before Erik pointed out the black shipping container the Enclave had left near the RobCo repair stations, close to the middle of "town." "We gotta go check that out."

They descended the stairs again, and renewed their walk toward the center of the indoor village. Rush was happy to see that the repair stations were still in good shape; good news for the doctor.

They neared the black container the Enclave had left. Its contents were hastily piled next to it: a RobCo Robot brain case still in its protective plastic shell, half a dozen holotapes or so, a letter, miscellaneous ammunition, two fresh plasma rifles, and a small silver clamshell case. That's what grabbed Erik's interest first. The container itself was about seven inches by five inches by three. "Whatcha

think this is Rush?" Rush shrugged and picked up the small weather-tight box, shaking it. There was a faint rattling inside, as if it were full of small metal parts.

Rush inspected it closer, it had a logo of sorts on it. He'd seen it before; it was a set of concentric circles with three fingers extending from each side in black paint. Erik requested from Rush and looked at the logo. His eyebrows raised quickly, "This's vault tech. Gotta be something good inside." He began turning the box over in his hands, looking for a latch or keyhole. It had none whatsoever, just a handle, and another logo on the back left-hand corner —this one was similar, but instead of fingers, it was a bow tie that emanated from the center of the circles. "Huh, that's odd. I don't see any way to get in this damn thing..."

He scratched his head and continued to stare at the symbol. "Dunno what that is, do you," he queried Rush who had wandered over to the container's lid. "Yes," he grumbled as he pointed at the same logo on the lid of the box. "Well, okay then. We still don't know what it is. Whatever, we'll just bring it back to the elder when we're done." Rush nodded in agreement as they turned to leave with their shiny, mysterious new toy. "Wait," Rush said, as he turned back to grab the new brain case and the letter. "Fix grandfather?" Erik shrugged, "I dunno Rush, but we can surely try." "Uh," Erik paused, "why don't we just take the entire box back? There's plenty of goodies here, we should share." Rush shrugged and began to toss the items haphazardly into the black ballistics-proof case.

Though he did his best not show it, Rush was still quite depressed. Erik wasn't sure how he knew, but he could just *feel* it. He grabbed the brain case and patted Rush on the back. Guessing his depression and wanton behavior was caused by the loss of yesterday, he continued and said, "I know it hurts, but we'll make sure they're sent off right. You have my word" Rush turned to look at Erik and thought to him, "I know we will: you would have been proud to call them your family...I know I was." Erik nodded as they resumed their walk, "If they're half as good of a guy you are, I'm sure I would." Rush looked away and stared at the far end of the area where he'd found the elder and his young clan mates.

Erik patted Rush a bit forcefully on the small of his back and beckoned that he grab the other handle of the container. Rush nodded and the two initiated a trip back to the apartment housing the Brotherhood.

They stayed quiet for a few long minutes before Erik's mind began to wander. "Hey Rush, shouldn't this place be familiar to me? I don't remember living down here, but

it still kinda has a home-y feel to it..." Rush replied mentally, "we lived here as pups. With mother, grandfather, and the rest of the clan." He paused, drew a breath, then continued verbally, "fathers went scavenging outside when you left. Didn't come back. Grandfather explained, made no sense." Erik stopped walking and set his half of the cargo container down, followed by Rush. Erik turned to face Rush and asked, "fathers? Our fathers? Donald and Thomas?" Rush nodded affirmatively.

Rush sighed and picked up his explanation again mentally, "Father, was our clan's alpha. Our current Alpha was the beta..." The longer he thought about the past, the more depressed he got. Erik noticed the strain he was under as he was carrying his emotions into Erik's mind. "Rush, why...does it bother you being Beta so much?" Rush sighed, slumped his shoulders, and replied, "the Beta is the right hand of the elder. I was trained to be the Beta since I was a pup, to take father's place as Alpha one day. We're in charge of keeping the clan safe from threats, leading hunting parties, and sorting out anyone that deems it necessary to create issues. I've...failed in my duties. I wasn't here to protect them when they needed me most. I was...with you."

Erik physically slumped with the new layer of guilt thrown on his shoulders. It hadn't occurred to him that the joy he'd experienced of finding long-lost family could potentially cause others pain, or even to perish. Rush pondered on the new feelings he was feeling from Erik and then joined him in his renewed guilt. "Apologies," Rush grumbled aloud. "Not your fault. Mine. Should have hurried us." "Yeah, but...I was holding you up, being sick and all," Rush shook his head firmly, picking up his half of the cargo box again, "Enough. Work." Erik picked up his half and without another word; the duo slowly made their way back from whence they came.

The two downtrodden men were slowly walking toward the apartment when the door swung open. It was the elder. "I was beginning to get worried about you two. Shouldn't've taken you so long...", he paused as he saw the look on Erik's face.

"What's wrong, son?" Erik and Rush sat the black container to the left of the entrance. "Uh, nothing. Sir. Just, thinking about yesterday," he replied quietly. "Ah, I see. You too Rush?" He nodded in reply. "Right then, lets get in and we can talk about it over some coffee. How's that sound?"

They followed the elder into the double-wide apartment and sat at the small square table near the kitchen while the elder dug around in the cabinets. The apartment was nearly silent aside from the snoring coming from one of the bedrooms and the elder's rummaging. "Grab my bag, would you," the elder asked Erik. He said nothing, but

nodded Rush-like and got up to grab his bag from near the couch. "Look in the big pocket, should be a bag of ground coffee in there." "Oh, is it real coffee or the other stuff?" The elder scowled and replied, "you know as well as I do that we can't get the *real* stuff any more. It's chicory."

Erik groaned under his breath as he removed the container of ground tree bark from the elder's bag as requested. The elder had finally found a pot to boil the coffee as Erik made his way back to the kitchenette. "Here, sir." "Thanks, Erik."

Now, cheer up. You've always liked my coffee." Erik nodded. The elder took the small box and added its contents to some water from the tap in the pot and put the concoction on the stove to boil. "Ten minutes to feeling better, boys." He gestured to Erik to resume his seat at the table as he himself took the third chair. The elder looked at Rush and Erik, each of which were staring at the table blankly. "Alright now you two. Enough of this moping. What's wrong?" Neither said anything for a moment, then Erik started. "Well, sir," Erik paused to look at Rush who didn't reciprocate the gesture, "we lost a good portion of our family yesterday. We haven't gotten to find the elder of the clan to put them to rest..." Rush looked up at this point and said, "Must find elder. Must care for dead— my failures sir

The elder asked, "failures? What failures? I heard how you handled yourself during the battle. You certainly have no reason to think you've failed in battle—even if you did take a bullet, we all do now and again." Rush shook his head, "Not battle. Failed clan." "What, the Enclave attack? Did you know they were coming?" Rush shook his head again. "Then how the hell were you supposed to prevent something you didn't know was going to happen?" Rush stared down at the table again and muttered, "don't know. Dead don't care." The elder started to argue back, but the "coffee" had started to boil over. He excused himself, pulled the pot off of the burner, and divided the pot's murky contents among three mugs. He grabbed one in each hand and handed them over to the boys before turning to grab the last for himself.

"Drink up. It's stiff, but it'll have you feeling better in no time." Erik nodded, picked his up, and blew across it. Rush stared at his, unsure if he wanted anything to eat or not. His spurt of depression was doing a number on his metabolism. The elder looked at Rush, "Drink up, son. That's an order," he said gently. Rush conceded and mimicked Erik's motions. The drink was pretty damn hot. And quite bitter as Rush found out. He grimaced as he sipped on it. Erik saw Rush's discomfort and noted, "it's not that bad once you get used to it." They all sipped in silence for a bit before the elder started in again. "So, boys. I'm gonna send you two and Jenkins out to find out what happened to the rest of your folks, and the doctor—if

possible. I've got some old business to sew up with 'em." Neither said nothing, but both nodded in the elder's direction. It's what they'd planned on, and the elder knew it, although they weren't planning on having Jenkins along.

When they'd all finished their "coffee," the elder collected the mugs and set them aside. "Now then, let's get this business of the dead out of the way," the elder paused and sighed, empathizing with their situation. "I know it's tough. I've lost a lot of good men and women under my charge over the years—Johnson being our most recent loss." Erik nodded somberly. "We've all got to help each other to be strong and persevere. It's the only right thing to do in light of their deaths—make them proud that we're still alive and kicking. And we can't do that by moping around. They wouldn't want that, and I certainly don't either." With his peace said, the elder got up and began washing the mugs, leaving Rush and Erik to mull things over.

They sat at the table for a few moments more before the elder gave them their orders. "Erik, don't you two get the other two knuckleheads up and we'll get our day started?" Rush stared at the elder as Erik replied, "Aye, sir." "You," he said toward Rush, "come here." Rush stood up uncertainly as Erik walked across the apartment to awaken the other two Brothers in Steel. "Sir," Rush asked. The elder looked up at him and said in a low stern voice, "you have a great responsibility in your clan. You now have one with us as well. I will do whatever you need me to, in order to keep your family safe. You are my family as well now, and you will be treated as such. Do you understand?" Rush paused and smiled lightly at the older man and hugged him. "Thank you sir." The elder smiled and patted him on the back. "Enough of that initiate, go with Erik and Jenkins and find your family. I'll take care of everything here."

Rush nodded again and padded over to Erik who had already entered the bedroom and was violently shaking Jenkins. "Get up, you lazy bastard! We've got shit to do, radioman." Jenkins rolled over to shake himself free of Erik and began mumbling something about cranberries in response. "No, I'm not cranberries. Now. Get. UP!" Erik punched him square in the kidney, electing a groan of pain out of Jenkins. "Oh, God! Okay. Okay! I'm up. I'm up you son-of-a-bitch. Why the hell'd you do that?!" Erik smirked in response, and said nothing. Rush was a bit shocked to see Erik act violently against someone who wasn't shooting at him. Rush thought to him, "why did you strike him? Is that show I should wake you?"

Erik chuckled and looked back to Rush, "No, no. Don't do that. It's just a thing we do. We've always been hard on each other. He'll pay me back later, don't worry." Rush was perplexed, but said nothing further. Erik patted Jenkins stiffly where he

punched him, "come on now. We've got a job, got civilians to find." Jenkins groaned as he leveraged himself up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Fine. Who's on the beat?" "Me, you, and the greenhorn." Jenkins groaned again. "Ugh, fine." He looked up to Rush, "not gonna try and eat me or anything are you?" Rush looked at him confusedly and shook his head. "Humans are bitter." Erik laughed aloud at that, Jenkins didn't think it was terribly funny. "He doesn't eat anything that doesn't try to eat him first, right Rush," Erik asked with a gentle jab to the ribs.

Rush didn't reply—he was quite confused. Erik noticed the awkward look on his muzzle and told him mentally, "Rush, it's a joke. I know you won't hurt Jenkins. I think he knows that too, he's just trying to break the ice—get comfortable being around you. You should try to laugh a bit." So, despite how he was feeling, Rush tried to laugh aloud for Erik. His laughter came out as a train wreck of short barks through nervousness. "Ah, hah. Haah. Haaa," Erik chuckled awkwardly. "Right, get some clothes on Jenkins, we'll be ready to roll out in a few."

"Good, " Franklin growled, to everyone's surprise. The cranky sharpshooter rolled over and glared at the other three. "Get out. I'd like to get some more sleep before more giant freaks start popping out of the woodwork." He rolled back over and fluffed his pillow before closing his eyes. "You may as well get up too, chef," the elder yelled from across the apartment. Franklin sighed deeply and growled an "aye sir" before literally rolling out of bed.

Rush followed Erik outside, each taking a seat on the large cargo container they'd brought back earlier while waiting for Jenkins. Only a few moments had passed before they heard an angry Franklin complaining about the lack of coffee.

They couldn't make out what was being said, but they could tell he was quite unhappy, he'd even mentioned the three mugs that were on the kitchen counter. Erik chuckled a bit at his childish behavior. Rush looked over to Erik and inquired mentally, "is he always like a pup?" Erik grinned and nodded. "Yeah, he's a good guy though. Some days he's just insatiable. He'd put his neck on the line for a fellow brother though, no questions asked."

Rush mentally noted the drastic differences between the four humans he'd met only the last forty-eight hours. Erik: typically calm, but excitable and quite easily embarrassed; the elder, a kindhearted man with a determination of steel; Jenkins: jovial, but a bit skittish; and Franklin: well...he was Franklin. Erik patted Rush on the shoulder to break his silence, "don't worry. They'll warm up to you." Rush

nodded in agreement as Jenkins exited the apartment, complete with helmet under arm and pistol in hand.

"Hey Rambo, going on a hunt?" Jenkins shook his head and replied, "no, but I don't like surprises either. Where's your gear?" Erik dipped his head, "shit. One sec, lemme grab my bag." "Alright, hurry up. Oh, watch out for Frankie, he's in quite a mood this morning." Erik nodded to the caution and walked back inside to find his bag. Jenkins took Erik's spot on the cargo box and stared out across the expansive apartment complex. "Hey, big guy. You live here?" Rush nodded and replied aloud, "Twenty-five years. Twenty-six soon." Jenkins nodded and asked, "you ever leave?" Rush shook his head negatively.

"Ah, well. If you stick with us, you'll get to see some neat stuff. Get some good training too. Anyone tell you what we do?" Rush half-way nodded. Jenkins explained anyway, "It's our job to scour the wastes and collect pre-war tech. Keep the world safe from misusing it. Well, that's what the Western Brotherhood's all about. Down here, we don't really have much tech to scavenge, so we focus on helping the locals as much as we can; farming, first aid, protection from the Enclave, that sort of thing." Rush nodded again, "humanitarians." Jenkins chuckled, "yeah, I guess."

Erik walked out to see Jenkins and Rush chatting. Well, it was more like Jenkins was chatting at Rush, but that was normal for Jenkins. "Okay needleboy, ready?" Jenkins stood up, Rush followed suit. "Yeah, let's get a move on." Rush shot up an eyebrow in Erik's direction. He responded, "we've all earned nicknames. Rush nodded and thought to himself, "why have extra names for each other, aren't your birth names good enough?"

He put that thought aside for later discussion as they began to flesh out their plan. "Okay," Erik started, "Rush where'd you take everyone to after the Enclave came?" "Infirmary." "Okay, fine. I guess a better question would be if you think they'd still be there." Rush pondered for a moment and replied, "no, would find grandfather." Erik nodded, "I figured as much. He's should still be down at the lab...Let's look there first." Rush and Jenkins nodded, Rush added, "infirmary on the way."

The trio began to make their way toward the western exit of the apartment complex. Just as they were squeezing through the half-open door, the elder and a cranky Franklin were exiting the apartment. "That's quite enough, Franklin. You're going to make yourself useful by helping me rummage through these apartments. We're looking for anything useful: food, ammo, weapons, clothing, holotapes, notes, files,

anything. Franklin failed to respond but did nod curtly as he stormed past the elder toward an apartment to the South.

Erik tugged at his Pip-boy, its light wasn't putting much of a dent in the darkness that was surrounding them. For some reason, the lights that the robot-doctor had enabled days prior were off. It also seemed quite stuffy, maybe the air circulation had failed too? He shifted his backpack and led the group forward into the unknown. Well, actually the well-known; Erik had the updated map on his Pip-boy.

They were currently walking westward at a slow pace. Erik and Rush were pretty calm, but poor Jenkins wasn't handling the darkness and random industrial noises too well. He fiddled around with his Pip-boy, forcing it to flash on its light as well. "How far've we gotta go, Erik?" "Dunno, a fur piece. This place's like a damn Vault. Nothing but shifty hallways and dust for the most part. Cool stuff's waaaay in the back." Jenkins sighed as they continued at their slow trek through the murky, dark hallways toward the lab annex. Rush asked Erik mentally, "is he always this nervous?" Erik replied, "he'll be fine, he doesn't handle the dark too well." Rush noted man's fear of the dark as they continued to plod westward past abandoned offices and restrooms.

Franklin had just finished kicking in another apartment door when he heard the elder calling. "Hey Frank, I think I found something you'd like." Franklin turned away from the now dented door to see what the elder was going on about. He walked next door to a ground-floor apartment that was yellow at one time. "Ya rang, sir?" The elder turned to face him and pointed Franklin in the direction of the single-wide apartment's bedroom. "Tell me what you think of what I found."

Franklin shrugged and made his way into the bedroom. To his surprise, the elder had laid out a well-kept bozar on the bed, complete with three full clips of 5.56mm rounds. "Sir, it's...it's beautiful. Where'd you find her?" The elder smirked to himself, "under the bed, of all places. Surprising firepower for a science installation, eh?" Franklin nodded, speechless. He'd never seen a bozar in such good condition. He picked it up and armed it, staring through the nearly-pristine scope, nearly drooling on his stained T-shirt. "I'm glad you like it. Now you need to find one of your own," the elder said with nearly undetectable sarcasm. Franklin knew better though, the elder was a plasma man, always would be. "I guess sir, but how to do you plan to retrofit it to shovel toroids of hot plasma down that barrel rather than five-point-five sixes?" The elder shook his head in amusement and replied, "I'm not. Enjoy your late birthday gift, Franklin," as he left to rummage through more of the apartment. Franklin took his new baby, slung it on his back as he pocketed the

clips, and walked back to his own apartment with a fresh air of excitement as he stroked the aluminum butt of the gun.

Another twenty minutes of plowing steadily through the darkness rewarded the trio with no more than they'd started with. "Okay, seriously guys, how much farther is it," Jenkins queried in a whiny tone. "Told you I don't know Jenkins.

Rush any idea?" His nod was invisible in the darkness, he replied verbally instead. "Yes. Right ahead, seven doors, two lefts, twelve offices, then another ten minutes." Jenkins sighed exasperatedly. "This place is ridiculous. Who needs an installation this big?" Erik replied, "You've not been filled in? This used to be the lead naval research facility down here. They were doing all kinds of stuff from genetic experimentation to advanced robotics. Supposedly had," Erik paused to wipe a cobweb off of his face, "a full-time staff of a couple hundred scientists and engineers. That doesn't even include the military staff on board." Jenkins nodded in awe. "Shit, no wonder the elder wants it."

"Whacha mean," Erik asked. "Well, I assume he didn't send you down here for your health. You know damn good and well he's been looking to expand our presence down this way for the past few years now. I think he wants to get in good with the traders between here and home. Whatsit...uh...Millard?" "You think so? Millard's like a day-and-a-half north-northwest of here. Hell of a trade route if you ask me." "I didn't but thanks anyway," Jenkins quipped. They'd just passed their fifth door after the right and were nearing door six when they heard a strangled yelp. All three men paused to strain their ears for the sound again. They did, but it was a bit weaker than the first cry. Whatever was making the sound, it was further down toward the lab and it sounded like it was in pain.

They picked their pace up into a light run. Two offices went by, they took their left, quickly followed by a second, then halted as they heard the sound again. It was much closer. Rush feared that it was one of the pups, lost and endangered. Unfortunately, he was right. Three offices down the hall, they heard another strangled yelp followed by the strange sounds of a monotone robot rambling about cabbage. "Shit," Erik yelled as he broke into a sprint. Rush joined him, shortly followed by Jenkins. "What's going on," Jenkins queried. His question was ignored as Erik rammed through the wooden double doors. The scene wasn't what they were expecting.

The doctor was deftly disregarding his Hippocratic Oath of "do no harm." He had one of the clan's two remaining pups by the throat in attempts to strangle the poor

child. The other was slumped across some rubble near a wall, a thin stream of blood was running from its head into a small pool nearby. The doctor was adamantly interrogating the pup about its whereabouts two weeks ago and why someone named "cabbage" hadn't reported in yet. The pup was easily two feet above ground, struggling for every breath. It couldn't reply or even defend itself. "LET 'EM GO," Erik screamed as he and Rush jointly tackled the robot, causing him to drop the pup to the ground. She fell hard, grasping at her throat, trying desperately to regain her breath. Jenkins rushed to her side, ignoring the fight that was quickly escalating between the doctor, Erik, and Rush nearby.

She looked up to Jenkins with icy blue eyes and gasped a plea of assistance. Not for her, but for her brother that was off to the side. "Please," she repeated as she continued to struggle catching her breath while simultaneously dragging Jenkins toward the other pup that was sprawled on the rubble. "Okay, okay. Hold on. Let me check you first, okay?" She shook her head violently, forcing her into a coughing fit. "Him," she pointed in her brother's direction. Jenkins pulled his pack down from his shoulders and ripped the zipper open. He removed his doctor's bag and grabbed the stethoscope. "He looks rough, but hopefully it's only superficial," Jenkins thought. He glanced at the boy a second time then quickly changed his superficial diagnosis. He had defensive wounds on his hands, arms, and chest. At least one of his legs were fractured, if not completely broken, and he had head trauma of some sort.

"Poor guy," he said aloud. "Let's see if we can do something about that bleeding first. Jenkins slowly leaned over the boy to see if he was breathing properly; he was quite surprised when the little fuzzball levered an eye open amidst the waterfall of blood from his head and even managed to growl a bit. Jenkins smirked at his determination and said, "don't worry son. I'm a friend. I'm here with Rush to help take care of you and yours." The boy's sister nodded at Jenkins then back to her brother to validate his statement. The boy relaxed a bit. Perhaps a bit too much as he let down his guard, he also lost consciousness. As his eyes rolled back in his head, Jenkins sighed. "Damn it."

Fortunately, the boy's breathing was steady, albeit a bit shallow.

Erik and Rush were doing their best to detain the doctor, but he certainly wasn't making it an easy task. The doctor's brain case had turned a sickly, pussy, yellow-green. His speech was much less refined than before, as evidenced by the strings of obscenities that were flowing from his speech box. "You son-of-a-bitch tell me where the cabbage is or I'll kill this flea-ridden mutt's whore of a mother!" The doctor's

threats only served as fuel for Erik and Rush. Erik, who was hanging off of the top of the RoboBrain, was doing his best to avoid the doctor's treads while fiddling in his control box. Rush was playing as a distraction, deflecting the doctor's flailing arms with his own clawed defenses.

Jenkins gently held the boy's head up as he was blotting away the blood stemming from a deep laceration on his forehead. It needed stitches something fierce and Jenkins was afraid they'd used the last of the ketamine on Erik yesterday. He looked to the girl, "dear, what's your name?" She looked shocked for a second, surprised by the niceness of this stranger. "Harmony," she replied. "Okay Harmony, what's this fellow's name here?" He glanced at her older brother and said, "Dorian. Ian for short," she offered. "Okay, good. Thank you. Can you do me a favor and look in my pack here," he motioned to his backpack on his back, "and look for a small glass jar with a label of 'ketamine'? It should be brown with an orange label on it." She nodded and went to dig through his bag as he turned back to Ian. He pulled a brown bottle of iodine, opened it, and began to apply it liberally to Ian's forehead. The gash wasn't actually as bad as it had first appeared. It was about four inches or so long and maybe a quarter inch deep, what worried him the most was that it appeared to originate from near Ian's left eye. It was so swollen that Jenkins couldn't tell if it was damaged or not. "Better safe than sorry," he thought as he saturated the wound with iodine.

"You find it hon?" Jenkins asked Harmony. She said nothing but handed him a small glass vial of Ketamine. It was still about half full. "Oh, good! This'll help him a lot. Thank you." She nodded and sat next to Jenkins. He handed her an old T-shirt, "hold this on his forehead, keep a lot of pressure on it. We wanna get that bleeding slowed down so I can sew him up." She nervously took the shirt and did as she was told.

By this point, Erik and Rush were having a hell of a time with the doctor. They'd manage to break through the thin wall into the next room. Rush was doing his best to keep the doctor distracted but it wasn't going so well. The doctor had managed to rip Erik off of his back and threw him back through the wall into the previous office, leaving him and Rush to tango. Rush screamed a war cry that would have given a deathclaw goose bumps as he charged. He took hold of one of the doctor's flailing arms and ripped it completely off, throwing it to the side. The doctor began screeching, as if he were a wounded animal, enticing Rush's rage even more. Rush leaped over the doctor, using his brain case as a pivot point, landed behind him and managed to rip open the control panel on the back. He didn't know what he was looking for but, Erik did. He thought hard and quick to Erik's mind, "Which one

brother, quickly!" Erik was still stunned from being thrown like a rag doll but was able to reply. "Rip out the two big chips and the blue cable. Should kill his motors but leave his brain working." Rush quickly did as he was instructed, deftly removing the servo controllers and the uplink from the doctor's brain to his body, isolating him to his speech centers.

Rush tossed the chips in Erik's direction, assuming he'd want them later.

Jenkins was making progress with Ian. After administering the Ketamine to the gash on his forehead, he was able to start stitching up without much issue. The wound was still bleeding badly and needed constant mopping, but the boy should have no issue recovering from it in due time. After about thirty or so stitches, he'd finally closed up the gash across most of Ian's forehead. He was still very worried about his left eye. Since it was swollen and the bleeding had gone down, he took a quick breath, smiled at Harmony, then hollered at Rush. "You get that damn clown taken care of yet?"

Rush was bodily dragging the doctor back through the wall when Jenkins cried out. "Yes, settled." Jenkins nodded and replied, "I think I found some of your kind. One's banged up real bad, the other seems okay. Rush's adrenaline pumped back up when he saw how damaged Ian was. He ignored Erik as he leaped over him and took position at Jenkin's left. Jenkins could damn near feel the worry exuding from Rush. "Don't worry big guy, I've got 'em covered. Go make sure Erik's okay" Rush paused to glance at Harmony who nodded at him before he went to Erik's side.

The doctor, who was silent following the scuffle, started rambling again. "Cabbage, cabbage, who's got the cabbage. Has Colonel Mustard called in with the plan for Professor Plum yet? They've got to meet in the billiard room for their plan. Their plan, their plan, for the candelabra. The candelabra so sweet, so innocent, very dangerous to play with fire." He went silent again aside from the sound of his brain's suspension gel's sickly bubbling.

Jenkins shook his head at the rambling as he worked on the deeper lacerations in Ian's hands. This kid was damn lucky. None of the lacerations had damaged any tendons, as far as he could tell. Stitches upon stitches, bandages and iodine, and fifteen minutes later, Jenkins had Ian pretty sewn up. Literally. Jenkins hollered over to Rush who was sitting with Erik. Erik had managed to catch his breath and was now letting Rush pick splinters out of his back. "How's weasel?" Erik replied for Rush, "I'm no worse for wear, Jenkins, thanks. How's your new patients?"

Jenkins paused to sit up and turn toward Erik. Surprisingly well, actually. They make you guys out of stiff stuff down here. The pair are doing good, he paused to remember their names, "Uh, this one here's Harmony, and the bloody one here's Dorian." Rush nodded and looked at Erik, "our cousins." Erik chuckled sadly, "I'd sure like to meet my family without having the hell beat out of me every damn time we have a reunion."

Jenkins chuckled at that and turned back to Harmony. "I've got everything handled here, why don't you go visit with your long-lost cousin, huh?" Harmony nodded and tousled Jenkin's short black hair, "thank you," she said sweetly before making her way to Rush and Erik. He shook his hair back into shape after she finished and went back to work on Ian. All that was left was to figure out if this was a clean break or not before splinting it up. He began to feel around Ian's damaged shin as he came back around.

Jenkins was just as surprised as Ian was, as he didn't remember meeting a doctor, let alone a human. He went wide eyed and began to whimper in fear. Rush left Erik momentarily and thought to young Ian, "worry not. I am here Dorian. You're quite safe. Doctor Jenkins is a friend of mine, he's taking care of your wounds." Ian immediately stopped stared at Rush. "Rush!" Ian exclaimed excitedly before initiating his rapid-fire question mode. "You've been gone so long. And then grandfather went crazy. We were getting worried. Can you fix grandfather? Who are these guys?"

Rush glanced back at the suspiciously quiet robot and replied, "Yes, possibly. Cousin Erik will assist." "Is cousin Er.," he stopped mid-inquiry to wail in pain as Jenkins had taken the liberty to re-set his broken shin. "Sorry buddy, had to be done or it won't heal right." Jenkins got up to find something to splint the boy's leg with. "Don't. Move. I've got to restrain that leg of yours or I'll have to reset it again. You hear?" Ian nodded nervously. "Good."

Harmony, who had been cringing at Ian's cries, resumed Rush's work of picking splinters and debris out of Erik. "Cousin Erik," she paused to sniff his hair, "you smell like Rush." He chuckled a reply, "I suppose so, we've spent the past few days together, and I could probably use a shower." She shook her head as she gently pried a particularly long splinter out of Erik's shoulder. "No, smell like Cousin Rush. Like family." "Oh, well. Yeah. I guess I would, we are family, right Rush?" He nodded from nearby the debris pile that Erik had made as he flew through the wall. "Yes, Ian and Harmony, our uncle's children." "I have an uncle too?"

Rush nodded, "Did. Until yesterday." The pups looked at each other at the reminder of their father and both cried a tiny heart-breaking howl. Rush joined them in a moment of remembrance of their fallen family. Jenkins paused to be grateful that he had his parents and the Brotherhood. After his short intermission and a quick scan of his surroundings, Jenkins found a few pieces of rebar, along with some of the wiring from the robot's arm, and the bloody T-shirt would make a great splint.

"Hope y'all are done, I've still got work to do," Jenkins said with a sense of urgency. Rush stood up from his kneeling position and nodded to Jenkins. "Please, continue." Jenkins said nothing further, but took Rush's position kneeling next to the boy. "Alright, now this isn't going to be comfortable, but it'll keep your leg in one piece while it heals. Okay?" Ian nodded in a Rush-like manner and said nothing. Jenkins laid the items down next to Ian as he began to make a splint—rebar on each side, recycled wires to keep everything steady, and the T-shirt to keep the whole conglomeration from chaffing too badly. Ian didn't even wince as Jenkins was tying everything down.

"Okay, let's get you up, now," Jenkins said as he stood up. He held out a hand to Ian, who ignored it. He struggled for a few moments with his newly-bound leg, but was able to use the wall behind him to get up and lean against. "Well, okay then," Jenkins scoffed. Ian winced a bit as he put more weight on his fractured leg, but overall he was pretty sturdy. Rush looked over to Ian and smiled. "You will heal well. Thank Jenkins." Ian looked away, then mumbled, "thanks," to the wall. Rush shook his head and asked aloud, "where is elder?" Ian failed to reply, but Harmony answered, "dunno. Haven't seen elder since she and grandfather were talking in the lab. Then...we came here." She paused and rubbed her neck, "Rush, are you sure you can fix grandfather?" Rush shook his head and said, "Don't know. We will try."

With that, the conversation died as they all turned to look at the doctor. He'd been too quiet for too long, considering that not twenty minutes ago he was screaming about vegetables and some colonel. In fact, he'd been perfectly quiet.

Eerily quiet. Erik was so unnerved by the sudden silence that he got up and walked over to the robot to inspect him. "Doctor? Doctor? Doctor...doctor!" The doctor failed to respond. His sickly and congealed bio-gel didn't even bubble as it had during their previous encounter. Erik shook the robot violently in anger at what he'd done to the young'uns. "Why. Won't. You. Respond?!" His query was punctuated by his repeated strikes on the doctor's panels and brain case.

Erik stopped and huffed. Then he heard a sound that was familiar at first, then grew quickly into something he'd hoped to never hear again.

"Unrepairable damage detected due to external aggression. RobCo Self-Destruct-Intellectual-Property-Protection Protocol 47b Initiated.

All organic lifeforms should evacuate to a safe distance of 360 meters or greater. Protocol 47b will commence in thirty seconds.

Please contact your local RobCo administrator or local authorized RobCo technician for assistance."

Thirty.

Twenty-nine.

"Wh..what," Erik stammered excitedly. Get out! GET OUT!!"

Twenty-six.

He and Jenkins hoisted up Ian.

Twenty-five

Rush snatched up Harmony, and the three men sprinted out through the collapsed wall and down the hall toward the bio lab. Erik and Jenkins had hoisted Ian up by his armpits, both sprinting madly and ignoring his wails of pain. They made it past two offices.

Eighteen.

They continued to sprint as fast as their legs would carry them, Harmony was whimpering loudly into Rush's left ear as he huffed just in front of Erik and Jenkins.

Ten.

Two more offices, a couple of forgotten bundles of cables, and a bathroom zoomed by.

Five.

Just as they swerved left into an ajar office door numbered five-zero-eight...

Zero.

There was strong vacuum of air followed by a deafening blast and a sweltering wave of heat, punctuated with sparkling plasma that followed the robot's detonation, knocking them down as Erik reached to close the door behind them.