

CHAPTER 12: PAYING RESPECTS OR I SEE DEAD PEOPLE

While Jenkins and the pups were playing with the ancient toy car that Jenkins had recovered for them earlier, Franklin stood near the front door to the apartment he and the elder were in just ten minutes ago. He refused to venture further, as he was within reach of any weapon he wanted. If the deal looked like it was going to turn sour, he'd have enough time to nab his new bozar and mow those mutts down like he should have in the beginning. He regretted not killing Rush before he had a chance to betray them.

He stared with a scowl at Rush and Elder Elena. He didn't trust them. He didn't even trust the innocent pups as they laughed heartily with Jenkins' toy and attention. "Gotta be plannin' something," he thought to himself. "Nothing with that many teeth could be up to any good. Prolly wanna turn us into Brahmin or some shit with somethin' they're hidin' in this place. Human cattle." He shook his head and continued his vigil as he leaned back on the door frame and stroked the butt of his pistol that hung from his hip.

Elder Elena noticed the strange man staring at them from her dwelling. She turned to Elder Redding, "Why does he stare?" Elder Redding shook his head and turned around to meet Franklin's icy gaze. "Oh. Well. His name is Franklin, and he seems to be pretty unsure of what to think of you and your clan. He should be harmless." Elder Elena frowned at that and asked, "should be?" Elder Redding chuckled lightly and continued. "I assure you, he won't cause any problems. He's just overly protective of us—his clan—as you are with yours. Surely you understand." She nodded slowly and turned to Rush. She addressed him and Erik jointly, "I am ready. Let us take care of the fallen."

The duo paused their mental dialog and faced their elder. Erik opened his mouth and paused momentarily; "Yes ma'am. What do we need to do?" She glanced to Rush quickly, silently ordering him to explain. He proceeded to do so, "We will help the elder send the deceased off to their final hunt. She will perform the ritual for each member. After she's done, we move them to the incinerator and return them to the world." Erik figured something like that was going to happen but asked "what about her? After what she said to us earlier, I'm worried. Something doesn't *feel* right." Rush ignored the last part and ordered verbally that they follow orders, as good clansmen should.

Erik looked down and nodded. He glanced over from the concrete under his feet to Jenkins and the pups who were still racing around their blue wooden car. He smiled to himself and asked that Jenkins take the pups inside of their apartment. He followed his request to Jenkins with a whispered one to his adoptive father. "I'm not sure what's going to happen, but...if something goes down, take the pups and raise them like you did me."

Elder Redding furrowed his brow but quickly nodded with a smile, "Don't worry son. Nothing bad will happen. Now hurry, your elder and Rush are getting away." Rush had followed his elder immediately after she'd turned to leave, affording Erik a quick moment of private time. He muttered "shit" under his breath then took off with a jog to catch up with them. A moment later, Jenkins and Elder Redding were heading toward the apartment with the children in tow while a fierce Franklin stared daggers at the pups from a distance.

Just as Erik had caught up with them, they'd found the first fallen member of their clan. Erik recognized what was left of the creature. He was one of the ones that Erik had met the first night he had been in the facility. Erik looked up to Rush who simply stared at the dead; he was beginning to suffer from rigor mortise—his limbs were askew at odd angles, his fingers had curled into his palms and his face was twisted with agony. Presumably due to the massive, gaping hole in his chest, due to a plasma rifle. Erik could clearly see the singe pattern on his camel-colored fur and directly into his chest cavity. Given the amount of blood and viscera around the guy, he'd been unfortunate enough to have survived the direct blast, if only for a few extremely painful moments.

Erik could only stare. It wasn't the blood that bothered him. It wasn't even the fact that the creature had a gaping hole in its chest, it was his face. It was a kind face that was twisted into more horror than words would adequately be able to describe. Erik shuddered. The elder noticed his suffering, but said nothing. She needed to start her rituals.

She thought to Erik, "check your pockets. There should be a knife in your overcoat." Erik obeyed and searched his pockets, his trusty trench knife was inside his trench coat, as always, just as the elder had predicted. He pulled it free and shakily handed it to his elder. She accepted it with her long, graceful fingers and then proceeded to carve a deep laceration into her opposite palm. Was quite shocked and would have intervened if not for Rush's growled warning of "do not interfere."

Erik stood to the elder's left, and Rush to her right. She knelt down next to her dead family member and placed her bloodied hand on his forehead, smearing her blood down his face and muzzle, closing his green eyes one last time. After she had left her mark, she stood up and began to shake drops of blood from her hand onto the rest of the dead man's body. As she did so, she muttered a blessing and request to him. She thanked him for his loyalty to the clan, for his kindness, for his unwavering obedience, and for his life. She also asked that his spirit watch over her and the clan. She even introduced him to Erik, oddly enough. She referred to him as the "lost one."

When she had finished, she nodded to Rush who nodded to Erik with a mental note; "she has cleansed him and thanked him. It is our duty to move him to a better place before we return him." Erik nodded confusedly and replied, "oh. We have to move the bodies." Rush nodded as he knelt down and said a silent prayer to the dead clansman. Rush stood up and nodded to Erik, "move. To center." Erik bent down and helped Rush move the twisted frame of a werewolf-man to the center of the complex. They gently laid him down and went back to the elder who was waiting by the next victim of unforeseen violence.

They performed the same dance eight times in total: the elder lacerated her hand, said her words, Rush said a prayer, and they moved the body to the center of town. By the time they were done, there were seven dead clansmen in the center of town. The last one they went to get made Erik quite ill. The poor creature had been hit by he guessed was a grenade launcher and was scattered over a portion of the area. He and Rush were tasked with finding what was left and returning it to the others. Erik had found an arm and most of its adjoined hand behind some rubble. Rush had found most of one of the poor being's legs. Their elder was still talking to was left of its head. They were unable to find any bits beyond those, they'd been blasted into a thick red paste on the walls and floor.

The elder herself helped move the last set of remains to the center of town. Eight of their twelve had perished —the elder's mate among them. Two had died due to extra holes being blasted into their squishy bits with plasma-based weaponry. One had been blown to bits. Another two had been sniped in the cranium. Two had been crushed by rubble, and the eighth had died protecting the elder and the children.

Erik stared at the seven and a half clansmen that he would never get to know, nor they him. As he was jointly admiring and grieving over the dead, the elder had handed Rush the knife. He accepted it unenthusiastically. Elder Elena nodded to him and laid down next to her mate on the concrete floor, taking his twisted claw of a

hand in hers. Erik found this all very strange. Rush knelt down next to her as she began to shakily recite the kind words she had given to the dead to herself. Erik went wide-eyed as he figured out what was fixing to happen—she had to die for Rush to take over as Alpha. Just as Rush had finished his kind words and the elder thanked Erik for returning to them, Erik tackled Rush who was millimeters away from plunging the bloodied trench knife into her still-beating heart. "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING," he screamed. Rush replied in a deafening war cry of his own as he attempted to throw the squirming human off of him so he could perform his duties as beta-soon-to-be-alpha. The two rolled around on the ground as Erik fought to pry his knife from Rush's determined hands.

"Let. GO," Erik struggled to yell. Rush only snarled in reply. Erik didn't care, he wouldn't let Elder Redding do something like his, nor would he let her. Erik and Rush tumbled over and over one another for a few minutes more before one of the Brotherhood came to see what the fuss was about. Jenkins heard Rush's cry and was gone like lightning. Erik was on his back again when he kicked Rush in the gut and knocked the wind out of him. While he was gasping for air, Erik wrangled the knife away from him. Jenkins showed up at that moment, panting from the sprint.

"What the hell's goin' on here? Why's your knife bloody? Were you two fighting? Are you hurt?" Jenkins would've continued if Rush hadn't regained his breath and was lunging after Erik again. "Knife! Must finish!" Jenkins stepped out of the way and pulled his pistol from its holster. The two quarreling brothers ignored his threat of shooting them. Erik and Rush again rolled around with one another, Erik taking a swing at Rush's muzzle. Jenkins threatened them a second time. A second time, he was ignored. Jenkins was getting frustrated and wanted answers, so he decided to act instead. He sighted up his pistol and shot a warning shot at the two wrestling men, nearly missing Erik's hip. They paused momentarily and continued their struggle. "Oh, for fuck's sake!" Jenkins lamented as he sighted his pistol again and shot in their direction a second time. Unfortunately, he thought he'd grazed one of the two of them. He wasn't sure who, as they were both busy howling threats at one another.

After they'd rolled wrestled their way back toward Jenkins, he decided to jump on top and hold the pistol to Rush's right temple while holding Erik by the neck. "HOLD STILL GOD DAMN IT!" Jenkins screamed over the two men. They both took this threat more seriously. Erik and Rush both went board-stiff and stared at Jenkins with full attention and wide eyes. "Good. I'm glad I have your attention," Jenkins said with a brisk tone. "Now. Does anyone wanna tell me what the fuck you two are fighting for,

or do I need to install some new..., " he paused and poked Rush gently in the temple with his 10mm pistol a few times, "hardware?"

Neither Erik nor Rush said anything but glanced at one another then Jenkins. The three men stared at each other in silence for a good minute before the elder behind them cleared her throat. "Medic. Come here." Jenkins grabbed the knife from Erik, got off of Rush, and walked over to the elder who was calmly lying next to her dead mate. She blinked up at him as he knelt next to her. "Thank you. Now, please kill me." Jenkins shook his head in shock. "What?! No. I'm no Doctor Kevorkian. Unless you've got some sort of cancer, we can fix whatever's wrong with you." She smiled and gently shook her head. "Can't fix clan. We are all dead." Erik and Rush untangled themselves and joined Jenkins at the elder's side.

"If you say so, but I see at least two here that are alive, and I know where two more are. They all seem pretty alive to me..., " he glanced across the elder at Erik and Rush, "unless I need to shoot one of these idiots." She ignored Jenkins' threat and instead turned her head to the left where Rush and Erik were. "Erik. You must take Rush's place and he mine. This is how it has been and must be."

Erik shook his head violently in protest. "No! That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. There's no reason for you to die! Who would raise the pups, not to mention Rush needs you. I need you. How are we supposed to carry on traditions if we don't know what they are? Who will teach the children the clan's culture?" He paused as he took a shaky breath, "who...Who will teach me about...me? I don't know anything about my parents, or who I was supposed to be. I don't anything about the clan and next to nothing about Rush. I can't learn anything if you're dead." Erik took her bloodied hand at this point and spread some of her blood on his forehead. "I...I won't let you die. It would mean that both Rush and I have failed in our duties...I think." She smiled and patted him on the head, smearing a bit more blood on him.

"Perhaps you are right, Erik. You and Rush are not ready to lead the clan. You both have much growing to do. Together and as men in your own right." The elder stopped to look over at her mate and whispered, "I will join you one day. Today is not that day." She kissed his cheek and sat up. "I will continue as Alpha of the clan. Rush, you are relieved of your duty as Beta."

Rush collapsed to the ground when she said that. He thought to her in panic, "Elder! I know I've not been a very good Beta, but I can do better, I promise! I'm sorry! What can I do?! You can't...please" She replied aloud so that Erik and Jenkins could hear; "It is time you grew up Rush. You've been separated from your brother for far

too long, it has done damage to you both. Neither of you are complete without one another." She paused and smiled as she patted her mate's twisted, grotesque hand. "We were designed as social creatures—to care and love one another. We were designed in pairs. Some were siblings, some were destined to be mates, others, life-long friends."

Rush stared at her in desperation. "But, elder," he groveled. "No!" She growled back. "You will go with your brother. You two must grow together. The pups and I will stay here with the grace of the Brotherhood. Now, help me up. We have a job to finish and I need to work out the details of our arrangement with our new friends."

Jenkins extended a hand to help her up, as did Erik. Rush stayed on the ground with his fallen brethren, silently wishing he was one of them. The elder thanked Jenkins for his intervention and hugged him. She let him go and hugged Erik as well. As she did, she thought to him, "take care of your older brother. He needs you now more than ever." He nodded as she let him go. She looked down at Rush, "Come now. This is no way to honor the dead. Get up and help us get them on their way." Rush nodded and stood up at her behest, although he wasn't in any hurry.

A depressed Rush and bruised Erik began to move the dead from the center of the town to the Northern side, near the cargo elevator. Jenkins had gone back to explain what had transpired. "In here," the elder motioned. There was a large metal door with accompanying sign that read "MEDICAL WASTE ONLY." Erik scowled at the sign and thought, "they look like more than just waste to me. I guess it's not like they have room to bury their dead like we do..." The elder depressed a large red button nearby, causing the door to slide up, revealing a hatch with a conveyor belt that lead to a very hot oven. "They will be cremated then their ashes will be used to feed our crops. We continue to serve our clan, even after death."

As they loaded each mangled body into the chute, the elder mentioned a bit about them.

The first to go was her mate, Leopold, or Leo for short. It was for him that she learned German. He was the prodigy of a pair of German scientists that defected to America prior to the Great War. He was also one of the best microbiologists she'd ever seen—he was second only to Doctor Hawthorne. He may have looked like a werewolf, but he had the grace and skill of a Harvard-schooled scientist. She kissed him one last time on the cheek as they did their best to gently load him into the chute.

The next was the most disfigured one of them all; the one that had been blown up. The elder held the corpse's head in her hands and kissed its forehead with a sigh. It was her only child. Her daughter, Sophia. The elder had hoped that she and Rush would grow to love one another and have a bunch of beautiful pups. Sadly, they never took a liking to one another. She turned out to be disinterested in males. She and Rush argued quite often about various things like the outside world and the general direction the clan should take in the future. She was fine with keeping them isolated from the outside, Rush argued that they would eventually die out without introducing new genetics into the clan.

The third and fourth were found together, crushed under the rubble of an explosion caused by the Enclave. One of the gas lines to the complex had been ruptured by the Enclave's attack, causing large concrete slabs and fiery debris to rain down. They were still embraced, even in death. First to go was Benjamin, Rush's contemporary. They were of the same age and had grown up together. They weren't terribly close. Unlike Rush, he was quite jovial and outgoing. In fact, Erik reminded him of Benjamin a lot. The fourth was Benjamin's mate, Marie. Rush couldn't think of one bad thing about her. She worked daily with the Alpha to educate the clan. The alpha focused on science and mathematics while Marie focused more on humanities. Rush was sad to see her go, she'd become a close friend of his over the years—the only one he really had.

The fifth and sixth had both been sniped individually by one of the Enclave soldiers. The first of the two was a lean, young man. Erik figured he was no more than sixteen or so. The elder looked him over and shook her head, "gone too soon. Mikael, you were going to make Dr. Hawthorne very proud." He, along with Harmony and Dorian, were the latest generation of their clan. Dr. Hawthorne had been tweaking their genetics since he finished up Rush and Erik. They were just as smart as those two, but had been designed to be better integratable into human society.

The second of the sniper victims was Alto, the father of Dorian and Harmony, and Rush and Erik's uncle. Technically, he was a distant cousin. He ran the hydroponics garden that reliably fed the clan for a few decades now. Alto was also their doctor, although he was rarely needed outside of typical playground injuries and pregnancies. Rush was quite sad to see him go; he was a kindhearted, gentle man. Rush spent much of his childhood and adolescence with him in the quiet gardens, learning the intricacies of feeding a small army of carnivores only with vegetables and how to breed stronger, healthier plants and clansmen.

The seventh victim had perished the same as the first—a plasma rifle blast to the gut. Erik thought it was odd that she was one of the only ones with defensive wounds. Erik actually smiled when he saw her, instantly knowing that she had fought until the end. She was Alto's mate and the alpha's sister, Alexis. As fierce as the alpha was, she was doubly so. She was in charge of teaching the clan to defend themselves and how to use what weapons were available. Unfortunately, she'd been unable to lately as she was preparing for the early stages of pregnancy. She was due to introduce a new sibling for Dorian and Harmony in seven months or so. That wouldn't happen now. The elder kissed her forehead and gently rested a hand on what was left of her abdomen—the hole through it didn't help.

The last victim of the Enclave's unannounced attack was a young female, about Rush's age, maybe a hair less. The elder looked up from her to Erik and said, "Young one. This is who I'd hoped you mate one day. In fact, you remind me much of her—Amanda. She was headstrong and righteous, much like you. She had a second sense of what was right and wrong. She died protecting me and the pups." The elder kissed her forehead and patted her cheek with a smile, "you would've liked her." Rush nodded at and agreed with the elder's words. "Kind, gentle," he grumbled sadly. She would've made a great sister and an even better mate he thought.

After they had loaded the last body onto the conveyor, the elder shut the door and pressed the red button again. A motor somewhere groaned into service. Jets of flame could be heard, turning the dead into ashes as the trio walked away toward the elder's apartment. The three walked back in silence, reflecting on the lost. Erik, however was filled with just as many questions about the clan as he felt grief. If there were only twelve before he got here, how many were around when he and Rush were born? How'd they die so quickly? None of the deceased were old enough to be either of his parents, was it possible that they still alive somewhere?