

CHAPTER 16: ON THE ROAD AGAIN OR CHANGES ABOUND

One after another, the brothers in steel stood up and gathered on the side of the table opposite of the furred clan. They all stared at Rush, waiting for him to join them. After a few moments, he got the hint and stood up, Harmony and Dorian followed. "Rush, are you really leaving for the aboveground? Are you going forever?" Dorian began whimpering, as tears began to well up in his large green eyes. His unashamed weeping soon spread to Harmony; she looked up to Rush and stuttered, "don't g..g..go, cousin Rush! What if you don't come back? Who will read to us and teach us about growing things, and, and..." Her inquires stopped as her tears choked her. He knelt down and hugged them both as tears threatened to well up in his amber eyes as well. "Yes, leaving, but to learn and to help. You both must be very good for the elder. You must do as she says. Help each other and help her as well." Rush snuffled, fighting not to cry, "Do not fight. Do not argue. Do not be afraid." He looked up to his ex-alpha and smiled, "the elder loves us all. She will ensure you grow big and strong, then you can come up and join us one day." He stood up and placed a hand on each of their heads, trying to comfort both them and himself.

"Mr. Jenkins will visit, tell you stories, and keep you well. We will visit for your birthdays. Be sure to write down your adventures, we'll want to hear them!" The pups failed to reply but both nodded and sniffled in response. Rush left the pups and walked over to Elder Elena, "Surrender my post, elder." She nodded in response and surprised him with a strong hug. "Take care, mein kinder. You never were a good Beta, but you have always been a good son. Take care and grow well."

He nodded and broke the hug with mixed feelings. She had a hint of a smile as she kissed him on the forehead. "Now go. Enough of this sadness. You have much work to do and that much more to be thankful for." Rush nodded and slowly walked to the other side of the table to join his new clan. Elder Redding and Erik jointly clapped him on the shoulders with a smile each. Erik spoke up on Rush's behalf, "why don't we meet y'all on the first deck? I'm sure Rush's got some loose ends to tie up before we go." Elder Redding nodded and turned to leave as they all gave their thanks again to Elder Elena and the clan.

Erik thanked Elder Elena for her hospitality and graciousness after complimenting the pups on how proud he was of them and was pleased to have met his family. Just as Rush exited behind a beckoning Erik, Harmony called out. "Wait, Rush! We have something for you." Rush turned around on the threshold of the doorway and awaited his surprise; Harmony and Ian ran into their shared bedroom and just as quickly

exited with their most precious belongings in hand. Harmony gave Rush her favorite teddy bear and Dorian his blue toy car. They were both well-worn from play, but Rush didn't care. He beamed with pride and promised to take care of them.

He turned to leave again and met Erik a few short strides away. "Cute kids, huh?" he chuckled. Rush nodded with misted eyes, "very good children." Erik ignored Rush's lapse in manhood and instead queried him further, "need to get anything before we go? Got any other keepsakes or anything for your new home? Rush nodded, "not much. These and mother's urn." Erik nodded, "what about photos? Got any photos?" Rush thought for a moment then nodded. He started off toward his own home as he replied. "Yes. Photo of grandfather and our fathers. They were around our age at the time. Maybe older?"

A short jaunt got them from the Elder's home to Rush's. Erik opened the battered screen door to the single-width cargo container apartment and followed Rush in. They both stopped after entering and stared at Rush's modest but well-organized accommodations. Rush began to rummage round as Erik laughed at himself aloud. He saw his reflection in the mirror through the ajar bathroom door. "heh. I never woulda shared that shower had I known you weren't some overgrown, dumb dog on two legs," Erik muttered. Rush scoffed and replied mentally, "should be grateful I let you stay. Could have just let you starve to death, or let the elder kill you." "I am, er, was. You know. Was nice of you. Just don't like the idea that you'd be judging me or anything," Erik replied, flustered, "she wouldn'ta done that..."

Rush chuckled and nodded with a private grin as he dug around for a bag under his queen-sized bed. "Shouldn't be so ashamed of yourself," Rush noted aloud, "you are a healthy specimen for a human," he thought back, "and no, Elder would not murder a clan member unless necessary." Erik scoffed, "She didn't know me from Adam. An' you're jus' sayin' that 'cause we share half our genes." Rush nodded and replied wryly from under the bed, "grandfather gave me the better half."

After a few more moments of rummaging around amongst dust bunnies, discarded notes and holotapes, Rush reappeared from under his bed with a faded blue camouflage duffel bag. He quickly tossed it up on his bed and unzipped it. Various items were shoved into it: Harmony's teddy bear; Dorian's blue toy car; their grandmother's urn wrapped safely in his pillow; a stack of unlabeled holotapes; a handful of his favorite books; some notepads and sketch pads; a handful of pens and pencils; and lastly, the framed photo of their grandfather and his life's work—their clan. He then stared at his small bag of worldly possessions and decided to search through his dresser for anything that could be of use.

Erik picked the framed photo up and knocked some of the dust off of it. At first glance, there were four lab-coat wearing scientists surrounded by an additional six creatures in various stages of becoming what Erik saw digging through a dresser. Erik walked over to Rush and badgered him, "who's everyone in this photo, Rush?" Rush continued to rummage while he answered mentally. "Top row is our grandfather, his brother, our grandmother, our great-aunt. They're still human at that point." Each time he mentioned a person, a hint of emotion flew through the air and affected Erik. His feeling for them, superficial at first, quickly deepened due to Rush's leaking emotions. "Second row," Rush continued mentally, "is Jacob, Pat, Colin: your grandfather, and Rhonda: your paternal great-grandmother. They were the first generation to successfully take the trials without becoming mentally or physically damaged." Erik nodded as he stared into the face of each, wishing that he could hear their voices. "Last row is the beginning of the second generation of our clan. Grandfather took them in when they were fleeing a country across the ocean. They're the parents of our Elder's mate, Leopold, Graham, and Suzanne. The other is Elder's father, Aaron Hawthorne."

"Aaron? Are we related?" Rush stopped his search and closed his open drawers to turn and shrug. "Not sure," he replied verbally, "family tree isn't clear. Lots of experiments from lab. Not all direct descendants. "Is there a name for your, er, our species?" Rush shook his head negatively. "Don't know, would have to dig through grandfather's notes." Erik nodded absentmindedly as he continued to stare at the photograph: these were the first generations of his family, their clan. "What about our parents? Your grandparents?" Rush shrugged, "only photo I have." Erik carefully tucked it next to the pillow-encased urn.

"Maybe we'll find something in that stuff we made copies of. You need anything else, Rush? It'll probably be quite a while before we come back." Rush shrugged and turned to dig through his desk. "Think this would be of use," he questioned Erik while shaking miscellaneous stray cabling from a nearly pristine Pip-Boy 3000 Model A.

Erik's face screwed up with surprise, "how the hell'd you neglect something important like that?!" Rush jammed it into an external pocket on his bag and shrugged. "Never used it, needs work. Makes my arm itchy, too," he lamented while unconsciously rubbing his left forearm. Erik sighed and waited as Rush made one final inventory through his small apartment. "No clothing or anything? We do have different seasons up there. Spring, summer, a bit of fall, winter..." Erik questioned. Rush thought momentarily, "may have grandfather's lab coat." Rush walked from his bed to the bathroom and quickly located his lab coat. He held it out to Erik with pride. "Grandfather." Erik gently took it from Rush and held it, unsure of how to

approach it. Erik inspected the black stitching above the left breast pocket; it read "Dr. Hawthorne" in faded and fraying black thread. Raising it up to his face, he took a deep whiff of the garment, it smelled of sweat and dirt with a hint of something feral, but simultaneously calming.

Erik looked at it one more time before neatly folding it up and handing back to Rush. "Weird," Erik muttered. Rush cocked his head, silently questioning Erik. "It's like I could almost remember him. But it doesn't make sense. He would've been a 'bot by the time he made us, right?" Rush nodded affirmatively. "I swear I could've seen his face when I smelled it..." Rush answered mentally, "Sometimes, we remember things from previous generations. You were remembering someone else's memory. Probably one of our great-grandparents, or even parents." Erik stared at him skeptically, but since he didn't have an alternate theory, he let it go for now; his heritage seemed to have a surprise every day. Rush placed the garment into his bag and zipped it up. Satisfied, he gestured Erik through the door and they both set off for the cargo elevator to the surface on the North side of the underground complex.

Rush and Erik took their time walking through the artificially sunlit apartment complex. Each apartment they passed seemed to be sucking life out of Rush. He slowed down after each set of apartments. Erik opted not to complain, as Rush was surely full of trepidation. After what seemed like ten long minutes to Erik, they trudged through the pot-marked center of the complex near where the Enclave previously ambushed them. Rush paused to look at the scorched RobCo maintenance bays and sighed. He'd probably never get his questions answered now that grandfather was gone, he thought. Erik gently tugged at his tail in boredom, pulling him out of moment of sadness. "We really need to get on the road before dark, Rush. We'll be back, don't worry."

Rush nodded and set forth with renewed energy. In a few short minutes they were both staring at a well-worn cargo elevator door. Its blue paint was proof of the machine's age; the thick coating had been scratched away by misalignment of the door: long streaks of orange rust peeked through and bubbled the paint. Erik called the elevator into service and waited patiently for the ancient contraption to make its way five floors below ground level. Each level it descended, it signaled with a ***ding***. Each time it signaled, Erik noticed apprehension slowly growing in Rush.

By the time the elevator arrived and the doors slid open with a painful squeal of metal-on-metal, Rush was visibly shaking and losing color. "What's wrong?" Erik questioned with genuine worry. "Never been aboveground, not even above second sub-basement. Forbidden by clan." Erik patted Rush on the back reassuringly, "you'll be

fine. You've got me an' the Brotherhood to protect you." Rush nodded and gulped as they entered the gaping maw of the tired elevator.

The elevator sounded its arrival at each successive floor with a metallic ding, just as it had when it descended. Ding! Fourth subbasement, paperwork and media storage. Ding! Third subbasement, hydroponics, water filtration and secondary power generation. Ding! Second subbasement, backup operations center and primary security center. Rush could swear that the elevator was slowing down.

A final floor reminder marked their arrival at the first subbasement and yet another hallway. For some reason, the door was taking its time sliding open. Erik stood patiently, but Rush was having difficulty. He was so nervous that he'd begun to panic: the elevator felt like it was closing in at an agonizingly slow pace. Rush began looking around frantically, "Want to leave now. Want out. Out, please. Out!" He started weakly pawing at the door, wheezing as his throat began to constrict. Erik tried to placate him with further petting, but it was of little use. The door finally groaned open much to Rush's relief as he stumbled out into the dusty and derelict hallway, and fell to his knees.

This particular hallway led off to a set of three doors. The one farthest from their current position in the elevators contained a single set of stairs that stood between them and the entrance of the facility. Erik bent down to meet Rush. "Hey! We're almost out now, just a bit more to go." He patted and rubbed Rush on his upper back. "C'mon now." Rush took a couple of deep breaths before attempting to stand up. He was woozy, but couldn't pinpoint why. Why was he sick to his stomach? He'd never been claustrophobic before. Was it the surface radiation? Was it a rush of adrenaline from the anticipation of seeing the upper world for the first time? His mind was in a whirl, as was his vision.

Erik looked over to see that Rush was much paler than he remembered. "Hey. No need to be getting sick. Not far to go." Rush nodded and took a few deep breaths; he couldn't tell if it was adrenaline or trepidation that was giving him pause. Erik hoisted Rush's duffel bag onto his shoulder and took his time to lead them through the dingy hallway. This portion of the facility, just like other portions, had fallen into disrepair over the years: florescent fixtures hung by remnants of cable, some still flickered with life; the white and blue tiles on the floor were chipped, broken, and outright missing in many places; the walls were severely damaged by fire or stained with some unknown liquid, one could see the wooden supports behind damaged drywall in some places, and mold behind that. They didn't have far to go until they came to a set of stairs labeled "To Lobby."

Rush stared up through the shafts of orange afternoon sunlight that bounced off of the dirty drywall as Erik ascended the final set of stairs. He could feel the warmth from where he stood. It wasn't anything like the artificial light they had down below, but real sunlight. Something about the gentle sunbeams instantly calmed him. Erik turned around to see Rush at the bottom of the stairs and beckoned him, "C'mon Rush! Everyone's waitin' on us." Rush bounded up the stairs two at a time with a new resolve. Erik hastily joined him as they made their way up the stairs, through the entrance of the facility, and into the wastes above.

Rush spun around immediately after exiting to see the entrance of the facility he'd been born and lived in all his life. He was a bit disappointed, he expected a more grandeur building for some reason. The two floors that comprised the external fraction of the building were made of sun-bleached concrete with ground to roof horizontal ripples that resembled gentle ocean waves. Unassuming bubble windows protruded from the second deck at regular intervals. Rush then noticed the faded blue lettering at the top of the building that was etched into the concrete. It read "MAGNOLIA WEATHER OBSERVATION AND RESEARCH FACILITY."

Under his furred feet was more sun-bleached concrete. He was looked down to see that he was standing in the center of a large seal: it was 30 feet in diameter, and had a rope edging that encircled a man hurling bronzed lightning bolts from billowing storm clouds. The bronzing had oxidized and turned green long ago, making the god-man look like he was throwing bent eels from above the clouds.

Erik watched as Rush took everything in with excitement. He quickly became amused as he realized that Rush had forgotten breathe. Rush quickly remembered, then couldn't stop sniffing and huffing the air. After a few silent minutes of observing, Erik called to Rush's attention. "Hey! You can smell stuff later. We've really gotta get on the road while we've still got daylight left." Rush stopped mid huff and turned to Erik. Rush filled his lungs with as much air as he possibly could, expelled it, then smiled. "Ready."

Erik nodded with a smile and bade Rush to follow him to the road where a careworn vehicle sat running in near silence. At the helm was Elder Redding, Franklin sat in the front passenger seat and Jenkins was standing by the open trunk. "Toss your goods in here and we'll hit the road." Erik quickly hefted Rush's bag over to Jenkins who threw it on top of his and Erik's own. "Oh, good. Thanks for grabbing that," Erik said to Jenkins. "Yeah, no problem." Erik turned to enter the rear driver-side door when he realized Rush was staring again. "What's wrong?" Rush shook his head in awe, "Beautiful," he whispered in response.

Jenkins laughed in response, "you keep lookin' at Henrietta like that an' she'll start blushin'." Rush blinked confusedly, "who?" "The car," Jenkins replied with a chuckle. "She's a Chrysler Highwayman. Her an' her sister's me and my dad's pride and joy. Worked on 'em for three solid months before they'd run right. Now they won't stop. Not even a minigun could put Henrietta here down," he boasted proudly as he gently caressed a hail of bullets holes punctured by a fiend's minigun. "She rides well too, c'mon." Rush followed Jenkins into the back bench seat and filled in between he and Erik.

After what seemed like hours to Erik, the men had finally gotten underway. It was hard to predict what wonders the wastes held in store for night time travelers. The ride North on the remnants of Highway 59 were fairly uneventful: Franklin was busy snoring, and Erik was suffering through Jenkins' painfully detailed explanation of the Highwayman's intricate electrical systems and how "nothing can stop a Highwayman." Erik thought he'd be sick if he heard that line again. "Yeah, nothing," he thought to himself, "except for that stupid fuel cell controller. But you'd never admit it," he mumbled under his breath. Rush was amazed by the technology that was available, and even more so that it was still viable after two centuries of neglect.

As they rounded an interchange Eastbound, the elder sighed and said, "Jenkins, I know you love this car, but I would appreciate a break from the technical seminar." Jenkins sighed and complied, "Aye, sir." The elder thanked him and followed with some questions, "you still have the gear for the recon at Red Creek?" Jenkins nodded affirmatively, "yes sir. Packed enough for three. I figure it's just me, Erik, an' Rush now, sir, since you're taking Franklin back." Elder Redding nodded, keeping his eyes on the road, silently hoping their trip northbound would continue to be non-eventful.

"Very well. You three are granted permission to do a cursory reconnaissance of Red Creek. Get a good lay of the land. See if anyone's repopulated it, or if it's just grown up in weeds. Hopefully you won't have to worry about fiends." The elder paused, "haven't heard of the Red Skulls since around August before last or even the Swampers since before that. They've been awfully quiet." Erik and Jenkins nodded jointly. Erik chimed in, "aye sir. We'll be fine. I'd be willing to bet those crews have moved West, considering that hurricane season's comin' on. How long've we got for recon, sir?"

The elder blinked away a hint of sleep as he replied, "ah. We don't have anything pressing for a couple of weeks before we start hurricane prep. Major Artie'll probably be back before we are. I'd give y'all ten days out." Erik perked up,

"really, sir? Do you want to put off prep that long?" The elder nodded, "we can wait. Scribes say it shouldn't be bad this year. Y'all could use the break anyway. Try to enjoy yourselves. Our initiate has a lot of work to do once we get home. That and I've got to get our folks ready for his arrival. Remember how long it took for them to warm up to Willis?"

Rush's pointy wolverine ears sprung up to full attention. "There are others? Sir?" The elder stifled a yawn, "Mmmhmm. We've got six or so ghouls and a super mutant that lives in town with us. Mostly farmers 'round our parts, aside from the Brotherhood. One of the ghouls up there was a professor at the old university where we made our home, believe it or not. She handles most of the teaching in The Burg. I wonder if she knows anything about the good Doctor Hawthorne. Whatcha think Rush?" Rush shrugged in response.

"Who else is there, sir?" "Ah, let's see. There's Andy that works with Axel's daddy, Tom, in the garage, the super mutant, Willis, came to us from somewhere to the Northeast, he's a pretty well-educated, kind beast of a man. Takin' a liking to the scribes. He spends most of his time holed in the lab, soaking up every bit 'o knowledge he can. There's a few more ghouls around town, a few are traders, one's even a barber. Funny thing too, seeing as their kind don't have a lot of hair to be cuttin'."

Rush wasn't sure what "ghouls" and "super mutants" were, but he decided to hold those questions for later. "Are any members of the Brotherhood," Rush instead queried. "No, not really. The Brotherhood's not well known for taking in non-humans. You're the first I know of down here, unless you count Willis and Ida." He thought on that for a moment then followed up, "why, sir? Is the Brotherhood like the Enclave?" Rush's innocent question garnered him instant disgruntled looks from Jenkins, Franklin, and Erik.

Elder Redding, rather than reprimand Rush, explained the careful differences: "no. The Enclave's the remnants of the old Government. They've grown bitter an' hate everything they think's keepin' 'em from rebuilding the old America. We started off as a detachment of the US Army. We decided we didn't like how they were doin' things. They'd thought it was easier to kill their problems. Wanted to change everything back to the way it was, we want to make what we had better. The old Brotherhood decided that it would be best to hoard technology to keep it out of reach from folks that don't know how much damage it'd cause. They were probably pretty paranoid at that time, afraid some ignorant dolt'd set off another nuclear war, I suppose."

The elder paused as he slowed down Henrietta, the road had taken a turn for the worse: pot holes the size of a small elephant and rusty wrecked vehicles had forced him to take a well-worn path parallel to the highway. "All that said, our Brotherhood detachment in The Burg isn't much like the Brotherhood out West, where we all started. We still collect and repair old world tech, but we're much more willing to use it to help folks in need. I think Willis said there's a detachment like us up near old DC. Helpin' folks make the best of it."

Rush nodded, appreciating that his adoptive clan had such noble goals. "How do you decide who is worth keeping?" The elder gently shook his head, "whatcha mean, son? 'Worth keeping'." "You can't keep everyone in your clan. It would be too big. How do you decide who is a member of your clan?" "Well Rush," Jenkins interjected, "we look out for strong and capable folks that'll help aid us in our goals." The elder nodded silently. "Oh," Rush noted. "Will you be able to use me?" The elder nodded again, "yeah. I try to see th' good in everyone 'round here. Even ol' Franklin," he finished with a nearly invisible smirk. Franklin snored in response.

Rush fell silent in thought as Erik and Jenkins chatted across him about various sundry things: upcoming plans, supply runs, trade routes and such. Rush piped up again, "sir? How did you, ah, the Brotherhood, get down here?" The elder neglected to answer, but instead sent the heavy highwayman into a nosedive as he slammed on the brakes to avoid a fallen pine. The screeching halt sent the three men in the back into a confusion of limbs and goods and sent Franklin into the hard dash, awakening him with a loud **thud** and splitting headache. The elder sighed audibly; the tree wasn't going to move by itself, and the giant buck poised behind it didn't seem like he wanted to move either. "That's no good," the elder muttered. He elbowed Franklin, "hey, get your rifle. Dinner's ready." Franklin shook his head and complained, "Yeah, why'd you jam the brakes?!" The elder pointed out the tree and the massive deer that felled it, "Oh! That guy's huge!"

Franklin's appraisal of the deer was correct. It was huge: deer in the pine forests were mutated by the background radiation over the course of numerous generations, and were commonly six or seven feet tall. There were rumors of some growing up to fifteen feet tall. The particular buck had a 10-point rack that easily spanned five feet. "Why's he not movin'," Franklin whispered. The deer responded with a snort as it stamped and pawed at the tree. Rush stared at it from the center of the rear bench seat. "Amazing," he thought aloud and noisily licked his chops, "does it taste good?" Erik nodded and whispered in reply, "best meat we can get next to Brahmin." Franklin quickly retrieved his plasma rifle from between his legs and leaned out of his passenger-side window. After taking a quick breath, he squeezed the well-worn

steel trigger and blasted the deer square between the eyes. The torrid of green plasma fell the giant mammal precisely where he stood, partially melting its skull.

All five men exited the vehicle as they inspected both the fresh meal they caught and the pine tree that was preventing their forward progress. "Never seen one do that, you?" Erik questioned Franklin who shook his head in reply. Elder Redding shook his head as well, "odd behavior. Never seen one just stand around like that, let alone drop a tree like that. See all the bark on his rack? Huh. Well, best not to look a gift horse in the mouth. Jenkins, you and Rush divvy up the game, we'll sort out the tree. Take enough so y'all can eat on your trip." Rush and Jenkins nodded affirmatively.

Rush was practically leaving a thick trail of saliva as he hurdled the pine on his way to the giant buck. "Ever seen one before, Rush?" He shook his head at Jenkins' question sending drops of spittle to each side. "No. Are they always this size?" "No," Jenkins replied, "this one's a bit on the short side. He's nice and fat though. Let's get to work." Jenkins drew his bowie knife from his waist, Rush followed suite and readied his claws for work. They dissected the buck with impressive medical precision. In ten minutes flat, the two men had the entire deer skinned, gutted, and were slicing through the last remnants of tendons and cartilage when the elder beckoned them. "Ya'll bout done?" Jenkins stood up, as he wiped his gore-stained knife on his thigh, "Aye sir". Rush licked his fingers and claws clean of blood. "We're ready to move this tree here, if y'all don't mind."

Jenkins and Rush made their way back across the fallen pine to assist their comrades. The four young men hoisted the tree up a few scant inches for the Elder to toss a chain underneath. After he was done, he threw the chain back over and attached it to Henrietta's brush guard and put the car in reverse. "Y'all get over in the median in case this goes wrong. They obliged just as the elder put his foot to the floor. The ancient tires squealed angrily, but Henrietta grunted, then lurched backward. She'd moved the trunk a good four feet without much hassle; just enough to drive around. After the Elder had disengaged the car, the four young men quickly undid the work they had previously done. While Erik was packing the tow chain back into the trunk, he looked at the emergency tarp and said, "we could probably put that meat in here, huh?" The elder nodded in Jenkins' direction who quickly nabbed Rush and finished portioning the meat.

Their bloody work done and meat wrapped up in the tarp, Jenkins and Rush filed back into the car. Rush was disappointed to find he couldn't eat the meat immediately and instead compromised by noisily licking his bloody and grime-covered claws and

fingers until they were perfectly clean again. Erik thought Rush's predatory methods were humorous, but Franklin found them distasteful. "Hey, mutt. Quit the shit. You best not eat like that when we get home, or else Erik's gotta teach you some damn table manners." Rush narrowed his eyes in response and continued to groom himself, taking extra care to make as little noise as possible while mumbling something about how he was quite proficient with tableware.

The crew continued on their way North without much hassle. It was getting close to eight o'clock and the sunlight was quickly fading when they arrived near Red Creek: Jenkins' home town. Elder Redding pulled off of the highway onto a pot-marked gravel-and-dirt road. Half a mile in, he stopped at a crossroads and announced their arrival. The three men in the back bench filed out and retrieved their goods from beneath their feet then the trunk. Jenkins wisely opted to retrieve the meat, keeping it out of a drooling Rush's hands. He left the other two to handle their bags, goods, and weapons. As the elder made a u-turn, he paused to wave them off as he drove off North, back toward their home.