

CHAPTER 21: A NEW DAWN OR PUT SOME DAMN CLOTHES ON!

Rush was the first to awaken that morning. He was quite grateful as that gave him the chance to escape everyone's gaze: he had a severe case of morning wood. Rush silently cursed Jenkins, his hormones were affecting Rush. He'd decided to distract himself by reading through his copy of *The Wasteland Survival Guide*. Rush awkwardly stepped over Jenkins and carefully folded back the flap of the tent to escape. After he was free of the tarp's confines, he methodically unzipped his bag and fished out his book. His rummaging had alerted Jenkins, who was now wide awake. Rush was sitting on a log when Jenkins emerged from the tent. They stared at each other for a moment before Jenkins noticed Rush's temporary affliction. He turned beet red and spun around to avoid staring any longer. Rush found Jenkins' behavior humorous. He laughed aloud at Jenkins as he covered himself with the book. "Did I scare you," Rush chuckled. Jenkins shook his head, but refused to look at him.

"I...no. Just wasn't expecting to see...anything like that...this early in the morning. Rush shook his head and said, "Medics should not be ashamed over normal biological processes." Jenkins didn't like being scolded, but would have felt better if he'd had the gall to face Rush.

"We jus'...uh, we like to keep those things private," Jenkins explained with a gulp. Rush shrugged in response and picked up where he left off in his book. "I am not ashamed. You may look. *If you like*," he said with a wry smile. Jenkins' jaw dropped and he blushed before he bolted off into the woods out of embarrassment. Rush laughed to himself, "I see why Erik thinks this is fun."

Jenkins was angry at himself: both for being attracted to the furred behemoth that was Erik's brother, as well as his own insecurities. "Stupid idiot," Jenkins thought aloud and angrily to himself, "he's not gonna go for a guy like you. The hell're you thinking? Can't be actin' like that..." He carried on berating himself for the better part of ten minutes. After Rush decided he was presentable, he went to retrieve Jenkins before something happened. He also figured that they weren't exaggerating about their trip, they still had quite a bit of land to cover.

Rush tracked Jenkins down with ease, between his scent and angry muttering, he could practically see him through the near-solid wall of trees. Rush snuck behind Jenkins and tapped him on the shoulder. Jenkins slowly turned around to find Rush staring at him. He stared back, "what? I just want some alone time." Rush shook his head, "we must begin travel." Jenkins continued his stare, "why're you in a hurry?" Rush

shrugged, "want to see new things. Tired of trees." Jenkins smirked and chuckled, "yeah. Pine trees." Rush sensed something was still bothering Jenkins, "problem?" Jenkins declined to answer. "Problem," Rush questioned more forcefully.

Jenklins exhaled and shook his head, "nothin'. I jus' need to sort out some stuff on my own." Rush nodded and continued to stare. Jenkins stared back, "tha's a nice way of sayin' 'go away.'" Rush shook his head, "there is more?" Jenkins winced at the question and quickly dodged it, "no, no. Just. Yeah, I guess. I don' really wanna talk' 'bout it though." Rush shrugged after realizing he wasn't going to get anything useful out of Jenkins. "Apologies," Rush grumbled as he turned and left, leaving Jenkins alone in the pine trees with his thoughts.

A thin, winding trail and forty yards of thick underbrush got Rush back to their camp where he was surprised to find that Erik was still asleep. It was still early, if Rush was pressed, he'd guess it was about seven or so. Dawn had broken a short while ago and the day was getting started. He began to gather their things into a neat pile before rousing Erik. Rush entered the makeshift tent and nudged his younger brother who was covered in pine needles from their tent's floor. "Wake up, brother, we must leave." Erik offered no response except for a sigh and rolling over from his left side to his right. Rush knelt down and shook his shoulder, "wake, brother!" Erik grumbled something as he rolled over to see who was irritating him.

"Ugh," he groaned in pain, "what Rush? It's too early." Rush shook his head in response, "we must prepare, we have a long way to go today." Erik sat up, holding his head, "how'd you know that? An' where's Jenkins?" "Jenkins is," he paused, "relieving himself. Will return." Erik nodded, uncaring. He stretched before standing up and fishing around for his clothing. Rush left the tent to give him a few moments to get situated. Rush continued his conversation from the other side of the tent. "spoke with Jenkins last night, brother." Erik nodded to himself as he struggled to find the necessary holes in his shirt to place his head and arms. "Good. That's good. What'd you talk 'bout?"

"He is homosexual." Erik coughed in surprise, "uh. Yeah. Is that a problem?" "No. None of my business who he mates with, nor you." Erik was buttoning his pants as he walked out to meet Rush. "That's good of you, some folks don' take kindly to those kinds of people." Rush nodded, "Jenkins showed me." He reached out with his mind to meet Erik's and said, "he showed me this." Erik gasped silently as Rush bombarded him with Jenkin's memories. "Stop, Rush. Please," Erik complained, "I was there. I know. I don't need to relive it again." Rush nodded and stared at Erik.

"I'm pretty surprised that he told, er, showed you that, Rush." Erik threw his hands up and shrugged his shoulders, "took 'im years to get over it." "Then why do you poke fun?" Erik paused, "dunno. I guess it's 'cause he's my friend. An' I guess, sometimes, I'm a bit uncomfortable with it." Rush nodded and replied mentally, "I think it hurts him, brother. He appears to be in turmoil. I found him in the woods this morning. He was quite angry, cursing himself, nearly to tears." Erik looked down, ashamed for some reason. "He uh, gets like that sometimes." He doesn't know how to deal with himself when he finds someone he *likes*."

Rush squinted and questioned him mentally, "what do you mean, brother? Who?" Erik laughed aloud, "If I had to guess, big guy. You." Some of the foggier events of last night were coming back to Rush. He sighed and stared at the small patches of sky that peeked from between the tall pines. Rush grumbled, "could smell it on him. Told him about my ex-mate." Erik patted Rush on the shoulder, "it's not a big deal. Jus' tell him you're not interested," Erik stopped patting as he mumbled, "unless...you are..." Rush shook his head, "not interested in a mate right now."

Erik chuckled awkwardly, "good! You're not gonna have time to do any of that when we get home. You got plenty of trainin' to do. Gotta learn how to get along in society, handle yourself, guns an' weapons..." Rush grimaced. Erik nodded. "Everyone does." As they were chatting, a red, puffy-eyed Jenkins emerged from the woods opposite them. His eyes darted between them, down to his feet, then back to them. "Hey, uh. Y'all ready to go? We got a ways to go today." Erik stopped counting off Rush's future training on his fingers and quickly decided not to ask why Jenkins looked like he'd been crying. "Uh, yeah! We need to get goin'. Been waitin' on you, slowpoke," Erik prodded in hopes to cheer Jenkins up a bit.

Rush looked between the two of them, and before he could ask, Erik thought to him, "don't pester 'em. Jus' let 'em be." Rush instead opted to query about what sort of weather they were expecting today. Erik shrugged then looked to Jenkins who shrugged back. "Dunno, Rush," Jenkins mumbled. "Summers down here're normally hot and humid durin' th' day an' wet an' humid at night. We caught a break yesterday, but I'd be willin' to bet we get wet tonight." Erik nodded in agreement. Rush nodded and asked, "do you not have weather observations?" They shrugged in response.

Rush shook his head and shrugged as well, slightly irritated at their lack of environmental intelligence. "Can we begin our travels?" Jenkins and Erik nodded to one another. They quickly tore down the tent, folded it up, packed it, and met Rush at the center of camp to pick up their fair share of the load. Erik was interrogating his Pip-Boy for directions. "Okay, we got, what six or seven days left

here?" Jenkins nodded affirmatively. "How many caps you got?" Jenkins thought momentarily, "a few hundred. Five maybe?" Erik nodded, "I think I got two left in my stash. Should be enough to room and board the three of us, right?" Jenkins shrugged, "hope so, or we're doin' odd jobs again."

"Alright then, let's get out of the here," he paused to poke the glass screen and spin the dial of his Pip-Boy, "an' head East. We should get to here," he poked another section of the screen, "before nightfall. We stick to the shade an' I think we'll be fine. We won't sweat to death that way." Jenkins got an screwed-up look on his face as he shouldered his bag and asked Rush, "do you sweat?" Rush shook his head affirmatively, "sweat from under arms and pads on hands and feet. Panting helps."

Jenkins pestered Rush with questions ranging from the biological makeup of his species to what his expectations of his new home well into lunchtime. Rush's and Erik's stomachs grumbled nearly simultaneously at high noon, crying for sustenance. They all decided to stop on the hairline trail and have a small portion of the previous night's venison. Rush was slowly chewing the dried meat when he was distracted by something in the thick woods behind them. He ignored Erik and Jenkins' conversation as he focused on the sound.

It was familiar, but he was having trouble placing it. He looked to his brother and friend then shushed them, placing a finger up to his muzzle. They looked at him in amusement as he turned his back to them. He swiveled his ears every which way to get more sound in. He squinted in concentration, then it hit him. It was the yao guai that wandered into their camp last night. He grinned to Erik then thought, "it's just a friend. Met her last night." Erik was concerned, "what friend, Rush?" Jenkins looked at them, "friend?" Erik shrugged at looked back to Rush for an explanation. He offered none, "wait," he mumbled.

Erik didn't like surprises, he pulled his 10mm pistol from its holster and prepared it. Jenkins did the same with his plasma rifle slung around his shoulder. Rush panicked slightly at their preparations, "she will not harm us," he assured them. As soon as the words escaped his muzzle, the large female appeared at the far end of the trail. "Shit!" Erik hissed. "That guai's huge! We can't sit here an' wait for it to eat us..." Jenkins agreed with Erik's sentiments.

Rush grumbled that she had wandered into camp and he'd helped her feed her cubs by offering the carcass of their kill — she even gave him a kiss before she left. Erik was still unsure. "You better be damn sure. We ain't got the kit to fix the kind of

damage a full on mama 'gaui can dish out, Rush." Rush nodded slowly and turned to await his friend.

Rush took a quick sniff of the air and smirked, she'd brought her cubs too. He reached out to her, to welcome her, and let her know the men behind him were his friends and would do no harm. She failed to reply, but continued to lumber toward them at a relaxed pace. Three short minutes closed the gap between the three men and the small yao guai convoy. When they finally arrived, her two small cubs fell over themselves, wrestling in boredom. Rush held out his hand to the mother, who sniffed it and ducked her head under it, requesting to be scratched. Rush smiled and obliged. "She wanted to thank us for helping them," Rush explained.

Jenkins and Erik stood five long feet behind Rush, both with a look of shock on their faces. Neither could say anything, they'd never encountered a yao guai that wasn't trying to murder them. "Rush," Erik whispered, "does she understand us?" Rush gently shook his head and whispered back, "not English. I think to them, like we do." Erik tried his hardest, but was unable to initiate contact like he could with Rush, so he quickly abandoned the trials and stood quietly, hoping they would leave soon. The female looked up to Rush momentarily before grunting at the cubs to cut their visit short. She looked back one last time then left just as quickly as they came.

The two grown men were shell shocked; they'd never seen anything like it. After the mother and her cubs were well out of sight, Jenkins asked, "can you talk to them or somethin'?" Rush thought before nodding, "do not speak English, share feelings, emotions, pheromones, things beyond speech." Erik asked, "so you *understand* them without talking to 'em?" Rush nodded, "close enough." "Did she, uh, say anything?" Jenkins queried. Rush nodded again, "gave us thanks. Wanted to show cubs not all men are bad. Also said it would rain later. Recommended a cave to stay in if necessary."

Erik and Jenkins continued to stare at each other in disbelief. "So, you can talk to animals?" Jenkins asked again. Rush sighed, "yes. We are animals, too." Jenkins blinked without response. Erik shook his head decided that it would be easier to get back on the road than try to sort out what he just witnessed. "We'll, uh, sort this out. Later," he mumbled to Jenkins as he donned his packs and led them Eastbound.

After that, no one spoke for nearly three hours until Rush started quietly whining. "What's the problem?" Erik asked. Rush thought to him, "I need to relieve myself, brother." "We're surrounded by trees." Rush shook his head. It took Erik a second to realize what Rush meant. "Oh. Uh, here." Erik dug around in his backpack for a small

roll of toilet paper. "Go easy, don't much if you can. Dig a hole, shit in it, wipe up, and cover it back up." Rush took the paper and looked disgruntled. It didn't occur to him that there was a severe lack of plumbing in a forest.

"We're gonna take our time headin' this way. Catch up quick, okay?" Rush nodded as he watched Erik and Jenkins continue their Eastbound travels at half speed. "So, 'bout earlier," Erik mumbled. "How much earlier?" "Well, let's start with you this mornin'. What was that all about?" Erik was playing dumb, he had a good idea of what had occurred, but he wanted to hear it from Jenkins' mouth. "Nothin' really. Think it was just my allergies or somethin'." Erik gave him a "I know you're lying" look that persisted and irritated Jenkins until he spilled the beans. "Alright! Alright. Okay. Fine. I uh, well," Jenkins fidgeted, "it's jus' been a while's all. Since I uh, you know, got laid."

Erik shrugged, "you're not the only one. What'd you do to get your eyes like that? Fuck a nest of hornets or somethin?" Jenkins sighed, "okay. Fine. It's not all just that. We were all drunk last night, and I did somethin' stupid." Erik shrugged again, "couldn't be any worse than the time you almost got us killed spakin' your meat outside of the men's steamroom of the ol' bathhouse." Jenkins chuckled and shook his head, "no, but I did the mind thingy y'all do, told, no *showed* Rush that." Erik nodded, "he said anything?"

Jenkins shook his head. "Not really, I don't think it bothers him. He told me about his ex that dumped him for another lady." He paused and continued, "who could do that to such a sweet guy like him?" Erik continued his slow pace forward and shrugged, "dunno. Maybe he was bad in the sack." Jenkins laughed aloud, "that's what I said."

"Anything else, lover boy?" Jenkins gulped, "I uh. Nope. Nothing." Erik took a mock stern tone with Jenkins, "now, now young man you keep lying and your nose'll be ten feet long." Jenkins shook his head, "okay, well, maybe there's one more thing." Before he could admit to Erik how he really felt about Rush, the grown wolf-man himself came bounding from behind.

"Brother," he panted lightly, "thank you. Why are there no facilities here?" Erik paused and turned to face Rush and Jenkins. "It's...a forest. What do you mean? Nature don't have toilets. Or sinks. Or beds. Why'd you think we've been campin' out?" Rush shrugged, Jenkins chuckled to himself. "You'll learn, don't worry." Erik was getting ready to give Rush another lecture about how he had a lot to learn about their world above, a thunder clap rolled in the distance.

"Damnit," Erik muttered under his breath. He glanced down to the map on the green phosphorus screen of his Pip-Boy and shook his head. "we're not gonna beat that rain, I'm afraid." Jenkins nodded and thought, "we could go here," he poked at a clearing in the forest on his map, "that place's been abandoned for who knows how long." "Yeah," Erik scowled, "just like the camp at the lake was." Erik was beginning to get cranky, "the hell's wrong with our scribes? Has their intel always been this shitty? Started with me back at the labs, then the clubhouse, and, knowing them, an abandoned cabin that'll be full of deathclaws or psycho-heads or something else fun," Erik complained.

Jenkins only shrugged, he was stuck on a thought. "Rush," Jenkins mumbled, "didn't you say you knew where a cave was?" He nodded in response, readjusting his bags on his shoulders. "Yes," he looked around, trying to orient himself before leaning over Erik to read his map. He poked at the curved glass screen with a claw, "should be near here. By a creek." Erik nodded, "you trust 'er?" Rush nodded without hesitation. "Okay, fine, let's give it a shot, it's only a mile or so away from here.

Half a mile into their detour to the cave, the telltale patter of precipitation lead the three men to pick up their pace. They hoofed it over fallen trees, through dry vegetation, and the thick underbrush to the creek. As they began to search for the cave, rain surged from angry grey thunderclouds above. As they ran north along the creek, Rush pointed out the cave, its mouth nearly overgrown by gnarled and twisted oak roots.

The ducked inside the cave to find that it really wasn't a cave in the normal sense. It was a long-abandoned service entrance to a facility. The entrance's strong metal doors had been slowly ripped open and torn away by the roots of the trees. The entrance itself wasn't much to speak of: a typical rusted metal room with fancy painted lines on the floor surrounding some piece of machinery that was clearly out-of-order, a few workbenches, tables, and cabinets with scattered miscellaneous contents, and a door on the opposite side of the room that looked like it belonged in a submarine.

Erik poked at his Pip-Boy until its ghoulish green light flickered to life. "Okay, this isn't what I expected. Rush, are you sure this is the right place?" Rush, who was busy shaking dry, had to still himself to respond. "Yes," he mumbled, before trying to get the water out of his left ear. "Wonder what's in here?" Jenkins mumbled to himself as he neared the overly complicated door. He gripped the round wheel in the center and struggled against the rust. It refused to budge. He grunted

as he gave it another go. Erik and Rush both dropped their moist gear near the derelict machine and gave Jenkins a hand with the door.

All three men huddled around the rust-stained door and grunted and strained in attempt to break the frozen mechanisms. They strained, grunted, cursed, groaned, and Jenkins even flatulated. Erik struck the door angrily in disgust, "damn you, you piece of shit!" Jenkins kicked it lightly with a steel-encased boot. It clang dully. Rush rubbed his hands against his pelvis to get the rust off. Erik kicked it as well, thoroughly frustrated that he wouldn't be able to explore further into the abandoned facility.

Erik sat down in a huff at the threshold of the armored door. Jenkins turned to sift through wooden boxes under the benches. Rush stood near the derelict machinery and stared at it intently. "What are you?" he thought to himself. He kept staring at it intently; the cuboid machine had no distinct markings, but did seem to have a bundle of wires that led from a panel of some sort up to the ceiling and back toward the door they were fighting with a few moments ago.

"Brother," Rush mumbled. Erik ignored him. Rush grumbled louder, "brother!" Erik ignored him still. "Jenkins?" Rush queried. "Hm? Yeah?" Jenkins replied as he freed his gaze from a metal container with a stained and unreadable label. "What is this?" Jenkins hopped off of the workbench he was sitting on and meandered over to the other side of the room near Rush. "Wha's what?" Rush pointed up at the large machine. "Dunno. A generator maybe? Not sure," Jenkins replied with a shrug. "Why?" "Curious," Rush explained as he pointed above to the bundle of wires that lead West.

"Ah, I see," Jenkins muttered. "Hey, Erik? You think maybe that thing's locked an' not just rusted shut?" Erik got up to see what they were fussing over. "What, that door? Maybe, why?" Rush continued to point at the bundled cables. He shrugged in response, "dunno. I don't think we're gettin' this thing to crank though." Erik pointed at the dead control panel. "'s got no power." The panel's indicator lights had long been dark, a thick layer of grime and dust covered it. Erik stared at the dim bulbs and took pause, "y'know, I'll be we could try to hot wire it. You got any spare MF cells, Jenkins?"

Jenkins fished a spare from his nearby bag and handed it over. Erik quickly set off to working on getting some juice to the panel. He sent the other two to find miscellaneous bits of wire, and anything else he needed to force feed some energy into the panel. In ten minutes flat, he had the panel ripped open and its guts free for everyone to inspect. He grimaced after further inspecting the power delivery

circuitry, "damn boards're fried." After tugging on some wires and bypassing a couple of safety devices, Erik had successfully wired the microfusion cell into the door mechanism itself.

After he connected the last wire, the panel's various dials tweaked and twitched as the buttons and bulbs faded to life. After what Erik assumed was some sort of diagnostic test, the needle swept up and down once more before reading "0." "Well, we got juice," he mumbled as he closed the panel. A single green button pulsed with life, begging to be activated. "Here's to nothin'," Erik said as he activated the console.

As he actuated the button, a boom of thunder resounded overhead. A flash of lightning followed within seconds, notifying them that the storm had finally settled in. The rainfall's intensity increased; it was being driven in through the battered stainless steel doors by gusts of wind. Lightning flashed a second time, then the giant machine roared to life. It coughed and sputtered as it shook off the decades of neglect. The gages on the panel swept to and fro, reporting some statistic that Erik had no idea how to interpret. Within a few minutes, the equipment quieted down and assumed a relaxed, steady pace. The florescent lighting in the corners of the room flickered to life and a loud, grinding **ka chunk** marked their success.

Jenkins whooped and Rush clapped Erik on the shoulder. "Good job, brother," he grumbled in his usual way. Erik proudly nodded and thanked him before turning to investigate the new area. "Thunderstorm be damned," Erik thought to himself. "We'll at least be dry here, and hopefully there're no nasty surprises through here."

Erik paused to ready his silenced 10mm pistol before walking through the freshly opened door. "Let's go see what we found, guys." Jenkins readied his plasma rifle and Rush stood nearby, unarmed. Both Brotherhood officers stared at him, "you're gonna need somethin' to protect yourself with, aren't ya Rush?" Jenkins pondered aloud. He shook his head in response, "can protect myself." Erik shrugged and led their unexpected expedition into the new facility.

The dark industrial hallway, full of pipes and conduits that ran in every direction made Rush feel like he was back home. They kept pace through the short hallway and past another piece of machinery. This one seemed to be in much better shape, it even had a bit of shine left to some of the metal pipes and areas that were scratched free of paint. The short hallway they were in ended abruptly at the nearby stairs that Erik and Jenkins were currently creeping up. Rush was busy staring down the mysterious contraption as the other two breeched the first floor.

Erik was quickly underwhelmed. He took a quick look around, then holstered his pistol. "Rush!" he yelled. "Come on up, would ya?" Rush bounded up the stairs two at a time. "Yes, brother?" "You recognize any of this stuff?" Rush looked around at the various equipment, terminals, and miscellaneous detritus that was scattered in the small room. He wandered over to the center console in the room; it was chunky blue console with a RobCo terminal protruding from the top. There was a familiar logo of a man throwing yellow bolts in a rope circle painted on the panel. It had faded a bit over time, but was a much better representation of the Station Magnolia symbol.

Rush poked at the keyboard and was quite surprised to find that the still functioned.

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- WXOBS Terminal 2 -

<!--WARNING: network connection unavailable-->

Loading local sensor data

> Current Observations

> Historical Observations

> Current Forecasts

> Establish Network Connectivity

>_

He selected "Current Observations." Rush frowned at the terminal's complaint of no connectivity to external sensors so he checked all of the cables leading from the terminal. Rush tightened some of them, but still got the same error. Erik and Rush worked on the terminal and its connections for a solid twenty minutes. During that time, Jenkins took it upon himself to create a bit of order for them, as he assumed the rain would have them pinned down for the night.

Jenkins went down the stairs to fetch their bags. The second he stepped off onto the diamond-plated landing, he heard someone behind him. Rush had followed him down. "Not safe to be alone," Rush muttered to Jenkins. "Oh, I'd like to be alone with *you*," Jenkins thought lewdly to himself. He turned to meet Rush and ask for a hand with their gear. Rush accepted.

Erik was still above, but was quickly growing frustrated with the ancient technology. "Stupid terminal, you're fine. Gimme some data or somethin'," he grumbled to himself. After slamming his fist on the metal casing numerous times, he felt sufficiently calm enough to continue. "Oh, shit. Maybe that last command will fix it." He selected "Establish Network Connectivity." Sure enough, no sooner had he struck the return key, did a nearby rack of equipment turn on and get to work. Erik assumed the oscilloscope-looking item had something to do with radio. His terminal beeped numerous times before returning to its previous display of commands.

"Okay you, how 'bout some observations *now*?" He selected that item and waited. More machines were coming to life around him. A nearby terminal flickered to life, booted, then began to run numbers across its green phosphorus screen. A reel-to-reel tape unit spun up and began clicking away. Rows of metal mainframes with red blinking lights woke up from their two hundred year slumber and began to run its batch processing job, just as it had hundreds of millions of times before. Erik was proud of himself, he'd never had this much luck getting ancient equipment up and running.

After slumping into a nearby chair, Erik began to stare at the bright green letters flash by on the terminals. Before he knew it, he'd dozed off. Jenkins and Rush had gathered their now-moist gear and were lugging it up the stairs. Erik jolted awake, not wanting to be caught sleeping on the job. He quickly assumed a busy-looking position in front of the second terminal that had activated. As he stared at the nonsensical information, Rush gasped. "Live data." "I, what?" Erik responded.

"Weather observations," Rush mumbled as he carelessly threw his portion of their gear into a corner near Jenkins and scrambled over to Erik. He stared at the numbers as they whizzed by on the screen. He tapped on the keyboard with excitement. Jenkins wandered over behind Rush and bent over him to see what was happening. He couldn't make sense of what he saw, but was enjoying himself too much to quit.

Rush was too busy crunching numbers to notice the grown man that was nearly on his back. His furious typing rewarded the trio with a set of happy beeps from Erik's terminal. Erik jumped in surprise when the terminal rang. "What's all this?" Erik queried. Rush answered with a grin, "connected to weather satellite." "A what, now?" Erik "Satellite, brother. Spacecraft. Sends and receives data from land stations like this." Erik rolled back in his chair, slightly skeptical. "What's that do, exactly?" Rush typed some more then pointed to the screen. It generated a fuzzy picture of their current position on an outlined map, then slowly overlaid the current satellite images on top.

Rush pointed at a particularly dark green portion of the grainy picture and tapped it with a claw. "Band of storms. We will have precipitation into morning." Erik stroked his jaw and its resident stubble in curiosity, "you think we can use this sorta thing back home, Jenkins?" Jenkins would have responded if he wasn't so busy being creepy. Erik had turned away from the terminal to catch him in the middle of sniffing Rush's neck fur. Erik squinted, uncomfortable with the sudden awkwardness he'd just created. "Down boy!" he yelled at Jenkins.

Erik's outburst caught both Jenkins and Rush off guard. Rush looked to Erik then back to his terminal. "What is the matter brother?" Erik glared momentarily at Jenkins then coughed some lame excuse. "Uh, nothing, sorry. I just got excited about the prospect of some useful technology that we can bring home." Rush didn't completely buy the bluff, but assumed Erik had a valid reason. Rush paused, chewed on Erik's answer, and then decided to avoid whatever it was. "Brother?" Erik turned back to Rush in his squeaky swivel chair, "yeah, sorry." Rush shook his head.

Rush pointed at Erik's Pip-Boy. "Yeah, just take care of it," Erik replied as he began to unbuckle the metal clasps that held his wrist-mounted computer in place. He handed the heavy thing over to Rush and rubbed his bare forearm. Rush sniffed the leather lining and wrinkled his muzzle, it smelled strongly of Erik's sweat. "You dummy, what'd you expect, mint and roses?" Rush shrugged as he took the Pip-Boy and began coaxing it to replicate the programs from the terminal and nearby mainframe. Erik decided this would be a good time to give Jenkins a talking to.

Erik hastily got up, grabbed Jenkins by the ear, and forcefully led him down the stairs that lead down behind them. "The hell d'you think you're doin'?" Erik angrily hissed. Jenkins whined loudly. Erik roughly guided him behind the generator to mask their conversation from Rush. "I'll ask again, the hell you think you're doin', Axel?" Jenkins replied ambiguously while rubbing his sore ear, "What're you talkin' bout?" Erik furrowed his eyebrows and took a sterner tone, "you know damn well. I've seen that look before. That damn look almost got the four o' us killed. 'Member that?" Jenkins scoffed defensively, "Erik! What d'you mean?"

Erik was quickly losing his patience. He lowered his voice to a deadly whisper and was slightly pale in the face, "let me put it like this. You fuck him up, an' I'll put you in the ground with my two bare hands." Jenkins was taken aback. He'd never seen Erik act like this, or speak to him in such a way. "Erik, I really don't know what's wrong." Erik shook his head, "You better not fuckin' touch 'im. He's new up here and he's not ready to make that sorta decision. Damn it Axel, you don't even know him. Just...," Erik sighed, "try to behave."

Jenkins closed his gaping mouth then let his gaze drift to his boots. "Sorry," he muttered. "I jus' got carried away's all." Erik took a deep breath to calm himself and clapped his best friend on his shoulder. "I know you wanna just squeeze him to bits, or whatever, but jus' don't. Okay?" Jenkins freed himself from Erik's grip and took a seat on the nearby bench. Erik left him to his own devices and wandered back up the stairs.

"Find anything good?" he queried Rush as he roughly shook and kneaded the wolf-man's shoulders. "Is something wrong, brother?" Rush asked to Erik's reflection in his terminal. "Ah, no. Why?" Rush winced and replied, "you are hurting me. Why?" Erik immediately let go of Rush and apologized. "Sorry, Rush. I didn't mean to. Just wanted to loosen ya up's all." Rush shrugged and continued to analyze the picture on the small CRT. "What're those green globs on there?" "This," Rush pointed to a squiggly thick green line that ran south from an even thicker line, "is where we are. This," he pointed at a huge mass of green moving southeast, "is incoming weather. Moving slowly. Will be here until past morning." "Those're what, clouds?" Rush nodded, "satellite imagery."

"How d'you know what all that is?" Erik inquired with genuine curiosity. Rush turned to answer and saw Jenkins quietly skulking up the stairs, melancholy and confused from his verbal berating. Rush looked the man over then looked up to Erik, "brother, what did you do to him?" Erik looked away from Rush and replied evasively, "uh, nothing, Rush. We were just getting our things together for the night." Rush instantly knew he was lying; he could see the nearly imperceptible tremble in Erik's corneas. The slight increase in blood pressure gave him away.

Rush stood up and growled gently at his younger brother, "do not lie to me." Erik opened his mouth to argue, but looking at Rush's threatening gaze, he knew there was no point. "Fine," Erik muttered flatly, "I gave him a talkin' to. About...stuff." Rush blinked twice, unimpressed with Erik's answer, "try again." Erik heaved a sigh, "okay, okay. Fine. I was, uh. Tellin' Jenkins to hurry up an' get over his crush on ya. I don't... approve and didn't want you thinkin' we're all like that up here." Rush shook his head and responded verbally with a vicious growl before berating him mentally, "How dare you treat him like that!? You know how he has been abused. I will not have a pup making decisions like that for me!" Rush snapped his jaw in anger before continuing, "we are all adults, and if he feels that way, let him."

Jenkins stared at Erik and Rush, they were close enough to butt heads, and yet the air between them was thick with an impenetrable tension. Erik inhaled sharply then began yelling back at Rush, "Oh yeah?! I'm a pup, huh? Well, well, you're just a

overgrown dog that's been cooped up all 'is life. You don't know nothin' 'bout nothin', do ya? You don't have a clue about the shit we put up with up here. Tell me about abused, Rush. Tell me you can even begin to understand what being abused is." Rush renewed his growl, this time baring his teeth, "insolent child! You cannot protect me!" Rush snapped his jaws sending droplets of warm saliva onto the face that was mere millimeters away. He then did something he would immediately regret, Rush raised his hand and struck Erik in the face with full force.

Erik heard the strike but never felt it, he was on the ground before he knew it. Jenkins gasped and yelled something that neither of them understood. Erik didn't remember the next few minutes or so either. He blacked out in anger. Something in Erik clicked, he paled and began yelling nonsense. Rush ducked in time to avoid a fist flying at his face. He dodged twice more and jumped out his chair in time to take a haymaker in the gut. Rush gasped for air, the flurry of blows from Erik was completely unexpected, as was Jenkins' quick intervention. Rush had curled his lips, howled, and, now that he had his breath back, was ready to come to blows. Jenkins ran over from the far side of the room to place himself between the two quarreling brothers.

"Enough!" Jenkins yelled. He yelled at both of them for their rash behavior and quickness to fight. Unfortunately, Erik was having trouble comprehending English. Erik's left hand swung out to jab Jenkins in the face, but Rush caught the fist in time. He yelled something in gibberish in response. Rush fluidly nudged Jenkins out of the way before sweeping Erik's legs out from under him. "What the hell's his problem?!" Jenkins yelled. Rush ignored him as he caught Erik and softened his descent to the ground before sitting on his stomach and pinning his arms down.

"Apologies, brother," Rush pleaded. "Should not have struck you. Please stop." Erik thrashed like he was still fighting for his life. Rush trapped Erik's arms under his knees and grabbed his face with his large paws. Rush fought to make a mental connection to him, "Brother! You must calm down." Erik failed to respond. Rush didn't like what he saw in Erik's mind: a thick red haze. There were no coherent thoughts for him to latch onto. Rush quickly pulled back and looked up to a shocked Jenkins. Erik was making a concerted attempt to impale one of Rush's kidneys or lungs with a metal-encased shoe. "The hell's gotten into him? Why'd you him 'im like that? He doesn't deserve to be treated that way, Rush," Jenkins said.

Rush nodded in agreement as his younger brother was now trying to bite anything he could get his mouth near. "Yes. Overreacted. Have been very tense, but Erik is not well." Jenkins furrowed his brow, "what d'you mean?" Rush yelped as Erik struck his

tail between a foot and knee. He replied with a tear, "Do not know. Do you have anything that will calm him?" Jenkins flew down the stairs without replying. Moments later he returned with his metal first aid kit. "You think we should sedate 'em?" Rush struggled to reply; Erik was putting up a dedicated fight and now seemed to have the desire to gnaw off Rush's knees. "For now...yes."

Jenkins tossed his kit onto the console, flipped open its metal latches, and rooted around for a sterile syringe and a familiar little bottle of clear liquid. "Good 'ol ketamine," Jenkins mumbled to himself as he withdrew a 5cc dosage. "Okay Rush, I've gotta jab him where it'll take hold quick. Flip 'im over an' I'll drop 'is pants." Rush gave Jenkins a funny look. "What?" "He's gonna get a shot in the ass, then he'll be out in a few minutes flat. It'll take nearly ten if I go in the arm, an' I don't wanna go for the neck. Could kill 'em." Rush sighed and complied with Jenkins' assistance. Erik struggled violently the entire time. After taking a boot to the face, Jenkins was quickly becoming frustrated. They finally got Erik flipped over and Rush sat on his back. Jenkins yanked on his khaki pants and quickly jabbed the needle into his buttock.

Erik howled when the needle entered his flesh and every muscle fiber along the way. Jenkins quickly depressed the plunger and yanked the needle back out. Rush yelped again as Erik was trying to chew through his tail. Jenkins massaged the injection site and in no less than two minutes, Erik was successfully sedated. After Erik ceased thrashing, Rush got off of his back and turned him back over. He looked up to Jenkins who was wiping sweat from his brow. "How long?" Jenkins shrugged before responding, "he's pretty tolerant of medications, I'd hazard ten minutes at best. Why?" Rush gently stroked the paw print he left on the right side of Erik's face.

"Leave us, please," Rush grumbled to Jenkins. "No. I don't think that's a great idea, sorry." Rush started to intimidate him with a growl, but Jenkins cut him off, "that's enough of your bolstering. I'm his best friend and, more importantly, his doctor right now. I'm ain't goin' anywhere for the moment." Rush nodded and placed his hands on either side of Erik's skull. "Come on, brother," Rush muttered under his breath. Rush concentrated and found Erik's consciousness floating in a drug-induced sea of tranquility. Erik's mind was flitting from subject to subject without a care: his crush at bathhouse, how weird it would be if Rush and Jenkins got together, the nice yao guai that helped them find this place, and his adoptive father, Elder Redding. Rush felt himself flying through the blurry images of those thoughts and even chuckled to himself when he bounced off of the second one. Erik was imagining he and Jenkins strolling down a dusty road hand-in-hand. Rush

appreciated the sentiment but made a mental note to remind Erik he was not interested in males.

Rush tried to call out to Erik, but was unsuccessful. He felt that his imaginary muzzle was somehow sewn shut. He didn't like that. More images whizzed by of various places that Rush didn't recognize. He kept flying through the hazy imaginings of Erik until he saw something familiar. He was back in their old home, Station Magnolia. Rush watched Erik remember bits and pieces of his childhood. Tiny Erik was scared that day for some reason. He couldn't find his father, nor his brother. He was all alone and weeping in some forgotten corridor. Rush wasn't really sure where he was, but was happy to see himself round a corner to locate young Erik.

The tiny, fuzzy Rush was dragging his own father by the arm to Erik's location. Erik's uncle hoisted him up, patted him on the head, and said something in a reassuring voice that he couldn't understand. Rush thought that Erik was weeping again, but instead it was something else causing interference. Something was casting a green hue across his mind's eye. He immediately went to seek it out. Instead of gliding along like before, Rush was now sloshing through some watery area. Rush felt his maw and found that it was again freed. "Brother? Please speak to me," Rush pleaded. "I'm sorry for striking you." Erik's mind was eerily quiet now, there was literally no sound that Rush could perceive. Rush called out again, "brother?" His gravely timber echoed into nothingness.

On the outside, Jenkins was getting worried. Rush had been linked to Erik for more than ten minutes, and both of their pulses seemed to be deteriorating. He didn't like where they were heading, health-wise. Jenkins sat on the floor near them, readying his medical kit in case it was necessary. If this kept up for much longer, he'd have to intervene.

Rush found this place to be quite strange, it wasn't anything like he'd experienced Erik's mind to be. He was in- and-out of it daily. It was always comfortable and familiar; this place was cold and strange. He called out a third time to Erik, "brother! Please! Let me help you. What is wrong? Why are you acting so strange?" A tiny directionless whisper threaded through the mist to play around Rush's head. "Rush? Where...are you? I...I'm sorry. I can't see you." Rush's ears perked up in excitement, "brother! I am in some wet place, it is very cold here. I saw father, do you remember seeing him? Do you remember his voice?"

The tiny whisper was quiet for a moment. It then replied, "yes. I miss him. But where are you? Why are we here?" Rush turned in every direction to find the origin

of the voice, "I do not know. You must tell me why we are here. What is this place? Why are you acting strange?" Silence was the response to those questions. Rush picked a direction and began sloshing through muddy water and waist-high weeds. "Erik," a voice said, "why are you weeping?" Rush stopped cold in his tracks. He'd not heard that voice for nearly twenty years, it belonged to his uncle, Erik's father. A child's voice responded, "Where is Rush, daddy?" The older man's warm voice responded, "he is at our home. Uncle Aaron is out with the pack, remember?" Rush felt the pit of his stomach drop—Erik was remembering the last time he spoke to his father.

"Why daddy? Don't go!" His father shushed him gently and replied, "son, we all play an important role in the clan. Even you." "Me?" little Erik asked. "That's right. Uncle Aaron's job is to help find food for all of us. Mine is to keep the pack running, and your job, my pup, is to grow up big and strong like your big brother Rush. You two must care for one another. You will lead our clan to the surface one day, and make the world much better." The voices faded from the misty bog that Rush was still standing in. "Brother? Please, come out."

The bog slowly faded from existence, leaving Rush wet from his belly button down to his toes. He shivered, as the bog drained, the temperature disappeared with it. Rush was suddenly freezing; his teeth chattered and he wandered around in the darkness to find Erik. The tiny voice that flitted around Rush's head was back, it kept repeating "you left me, Rush." "You left me. You left me all alone. You left me Rush. You hated me. You left me all alone. In the dark. Alone. Dark." Rush covered his ears and howled as the environment surrounding him went pitch black, slowly driving him mad.

The pained howl woke a part of Erik that had been fighting to awaken for a long time. Rush howled for so long his throat was hoarse. When Rush couldn't howl any more, the tiny voice returned again. "Why? Rush? Why are we here? Why were we created? Why do we have to fight? Why must we love? Why do we hate? What are we working for? Why are we us? Why are different? Why are we the same?" Rush's head was pounding.

"Do not know," he whispered hoarsely. The voice grew in strength with irritation, "tell me. Tell me!" Rush thought his sight was tricking him; there was a faint green glow to his four o'clock and a white one of the same strength to his ten o'clock. The lights were blinding in the darkness. The voice now had direction, it originated from the white light "Rush! You're here! Can we go home please? I don't like it

here." The same voice emanated from the green light, "go! Get out of here, freak. You and that fag go run away together and abandon me like just father did."

Rush could feel surges of emotion as each light spoke. The white light was the innocence Erik had lost long ago. It was the last remainder of his connection to the clan. The green one opposite of it was the fear and discontent he had earned living in the harsh wastes for twenty years. The problem soon became apparent, Erik was changing. Not only physically, but mentally. This was an internal struggle between old Erik and the new one, tempered by loss and hardship. This was a struggle that Rush knew well.

Rush felt powerless. "We will not abandon you. Why must we remind you? Are you afraid being alone? You seem alone in here, and this is partially your doing." The voice from the white side spoke up again, "we are blood. We will never be separated. We are kin to others. Axel, John. Promise me Rush. You will not abandon them. Us. You will not abandon us." Rush felt himself nodding in response, "would never abandon them."

The angry voice from behind him spoke up again, but it slowly changing to something more metallic, something that soon reminded him of their grandfather. A primal, instinctual fear overcame Erik's mind momentarily as their grandfather's voice echoed through the darkness, "Colonel Mustard was here today, dear Rush. Did you see him? He had a candlestick. Said he was looking for cabbage. We don't have that here anymore, do we Rush? DO WE, RUSH?"

Just as he opened his maw to answer, the inky black that separated the two sources of light gave way and was soon replaced by a blinding white light. Erik was finally coming around from the ketamine. He saw Rush in his mind and welcomed him as he had become accustomed to; he waved to him like he was across an empty room. "Why're you in my head again, Rush? Did you ask first?" Rush shook his head and stared at the imaginary Erik. "no, brother," he grumbled through his sore throat, "we...fought. Do you not remember?" Erik shook his head. "We argued, may have punched you in the face. Should not have," he explained with shame. "I'm sure you had a good reason, big brother." Rush shook his head again, "you are not well, Erik."

Erik sighed and nodded, "yeah. I've not been feelin' quite right since Doctor Hawthorne shot me up with that serum. You think it's bad?" Rush shrugged and shook his head, "Do not know. Grandfather said it would reawaken your latent abilities. Help you remember. Perhaps these are side effects?" Erik shrugged to the imaginary Rush that was quickly fading from his view.

Erik opened his eyes and squinted at the worried faces. Jenkins had to fingers against his neck, checking his pulse and Rush's heavy frame was beginning to become a burden on his bowels. Erik tried to reach up and pat Rush, but quickly found that he was pinned onto the cold metal floor. "Ugh, Rush get off. I think you crushed a kidney. Rush quickly leaped off to Erik's left. Both Rush and Jenkins continued to stare at him. Erik grunted as he slowly sat up and rested against the cool metal of the nearby control station.

Erik reached up and rubbed his sore face. "How about some warning next time, eh Rush?" Rush nodded and immediately apologized, "shold not have struck you." Erik shrugged it off, "I'm sure you had good reason. Why does my ass hurt?" Jenkins raised his hand, "that would be my fault," and held up the used needle. Erik knitted his brows and massaged his temples with the heel of his hands. "The hell's goin' on?" Jenkins shrugged and turned to Rush for answers. "You were in there. Any idea?" Rush nodded as he replied to Erik, "you are struggling. In your mind. The part of you that belongs to the clan is waking up." Jenkins dawned a confused look that matched Erik's. "What's that supposed t'mean?"

"Clan members go through two puberties. Hormonal and mental. You have been away from for so long, your second was latent. It has begun, now." Erik knitted his brows again and asked Rush, "That really doesn't tell me anything, Rush. Am I gonna be okay?" Rush nodded and gently patted Erik on the head, "yes. You will have violent mood swings. Be angry at everyone for no reason..." Erik didn't like what he was hearing. "Am I going to hurt people? What if I keep fadin' out an' forgettin' stuff?" Erik whispered with a quiver of fear. Rush shrugged, "early clan members had bouts of rage ending in their death. Some suffer very little. Harmed myself, nearly died."

Erik shook his head vigorously, "no. I can't be hurtin' people. Did I hurt y'all? Is that why you clocked me?" Rush shook his head and grumbled, "We argued. You struck me a few times. You have an impressive swing." Erik smiled awkwardly at the compliment. "You said you nearly died," Erik muttered. "others've died before. I'm gonna to go insane and kill myself, aren't I?" Rush wanted sorely to tell him that everything would be fine, there was nothing to worry about, but instead continued with the uncoated truth. "Possibly, brother. Was angry at father for leaving, mother for dying, punched concrete walls until my hands bled, broke bones. Ripped fur out by the fistful." Rush paused to take a breath, his throat was killing him from all the talking.

"Leopold found me one day. Both of my hands were shattered, removed most of the fur on my torso and legs. Had a knife, prepared to use it. Planned to cut out the pain and hatred from being abandoned by you and mother and father." Rush rearranged the fur on his torso to show a long, jagged pink scar that ran from his left pectoral down to his short ribs on the right-hand side with his right clawed index finger. "Was nearly successful." Erik stared at it with fright. "You tried to gut yourself?" Rush nodded. "We are designed as pairs. Without support, we do not have good chances of surviving the changes."

"Leopold found me, stitched me up. Cared for me when no one else would." Rush smiled in remembrance of the kind man, "saved me. Almost never left his side afterward. Learned everything from him, genetics, medicine, science." Erik nodded somberly. Jenkins stared aghast, "that's terrible," he mumbled. Rush nodded in agreement. "Those that survive are stronger for it." Jenkins asked, "what about those that don't?" "They are well remembered," Rush grumbled sadly.

Rush sat next to Erik in shared silence and scratched his head the way he liked. "will save you, brother." Rush looked up to Jenkins, "*we* will." Jenkins felt now like Rush did fifteen minutes ago: lost and wanting for words. Instead of dwelling on the gruesome possibilities, he turned to busy himself. "Hey Rush, you check out any of these other rooms up here?" He shook his head in response. "I'ma go take a gander, maybe there's some cots or something 'round here." Rush continued his best to comfort Erik who stared at the diamond plate pattern in the floor, absolutely sure he was going crazy like his grandfather.

Jenkins took one last glance at them before leaving to explore the remainder of the tiny facility. He hoped it was just as abandoned as the first two rooms they'd encountered. He yanked on the wheel in the center of the door to the East. It whined and complained, but gave way with minimal effort. Jenkins fished his flashlight from his pocket and used it to illuminate the room: he hated the green glow on his Pip-Boy. It was nearly the same size as the one they were in previously: about twenty-four feet square. The flickering fluorescent lights overhead made him a little nervous as he crept around on the prowl for something interesting.

The square room was lined with mainframes, tape reels, and filing cabinets. A solitary terminal sat askew in the middle of a desk that faced the entrance. Jenkins was surprised that most of the mainframes were in such good condition. Nearly all of their square red lights were pulsing. One in the center was still off, or at least burned out. He continued in and saw a wooden door book-ended by more filing cabinets. The door's rectangular safety glass has taken an impact, the long-dried

blood spray on the wall gave him a good idea of what. Jenkins shined his light through the jagged remnants and was pleased to see what he thought were bunk beds and another door. He reached for the door handle but was quickly disappointed to find it was locked.

"If Erik were feeling well," Jenkins thought to himself, "he could pick the damn thing himself." Jenkins gave a swift kick to the door to no effect. Turning his back to the stubborn door, he scanned the red-hued room for a clue. "Maybe there's a key in that desk." Jenkins wandered over and sat in the leather swivel chair and began sifting through the drawers. The top one proved to be of no use, it was completely empty. The bottom drawer housed a set of keys and a handful of 10mm hollow-point rounds. "Oh, sweet. Erik'll like these," Jenkins thought to himself. He stood each one on its end on the surface of the desk like a small platoon of brass-jacketed soldiers before nabbing the keyring and trying his luck with the door.

Jenkins sorted through the keys: three house keys, two office-type "do not duplicate" keys, and an odd one like he'd never seen before. The last one had some sort of logo on it. He shrugged and tried both of the office keys. The second one opened the door to a smaller room. Jenkins toggled a light switch near the door, but since that did nothing, he assumed the lights were malfunctioning. At Jenkins' best guess, he guessed the room was twelve by twenty feet and had just what they were looking for: a place to rest. The small room held three sets of bunk beds, plenty of storage, and a desk with accompanying bookshelf overhead. Jenkins was quite pleased, this little remote facility could be pretty useful in the future as a way station for the Brotherhood. Jenkins took his time to walk the breadth of the room to the last door.

The last door awarded Jenkins with a deluxe tile-lined restroom. Unfortunately, the lights seemed to have completely failed here. After glancing around with his flashlight, Jenkins left to deliver the good news to his two compatriots. Jenkins quickly made his way through back through the server room and back to the operations floor to find Rush still consoling Erik. The younger brother had his face buried in the elder's chest. Rush looked over as Jenkins exited into the light. He had a hopeful look on his face. "Anything good?" Rush queried.

Jenkins nodded with a grin. "Yup, some computers, beds and a nice bathroom back in the back. I think we should tell the folks back home about this place. We could use it as a stopping point between your place and The Burg." Rush nodded and stroked Erik's head. "Come, let's rest." Erik nodded but refused to move. "You will feel better after some sleep." Jenkins wandered over to them and offered Erik a hand,

"c'mon. Let's go." Erik took his hand and grunted as he stood up. Erik started at his shoes and grumbled an apology to Jenkins and Rush for his previous behavior. Rush got up and threw an arm around Erik's shoulders, guiding him toward the room that Jenkins just exited.

Jenkins led the way with his flashlight through the red mainframe room, then to the small barracks. Jenkins pointed them toward the bunks on the Eastern wall. "Why don't y'all get set up in here, I'll get our stuff and get us a bite to eat. Okay?" Erik slowly nodded as he and Rush sat on the bottom bunk. Erik seemed to be in shock. Jenkins gently smiled at them before leaving them in the darkness.

Jenkins took his time to gather all of their things from the first deck. He had six duffel bags, an armload of weapons, and other miscellaneous items to retrieve. After his fourth trip down and back up the stairs, he was unsurprised to see that Rush was awaiting him at the entrance to the mainframe room. The wolf-man was sitting in the swivel chair behind the dummy terminal, illuminated in an eerie green light that contrasted with the red glow from the mainframes. Rush was bent over the keyboard, only his ears crested to the top of the terminal.

Rush heard Jenkins walk in and whispered, "he is asleep." Jenkins sighed and replied likewise, "what...what do we do? Can we do anything to help? How long will he be like this?" Rush tapped his claws on the keyboard momentarily before replying, "not sure. Varies from one to another. Took me a few months. Others a week, some longer still. He is strong." Jenkins readjusted the duffel bag he had slung across his shoulder and set it next to Rush on the desk. "How 'bout a bite before we turn in?"

Rush noisily licked his chops and nodded in agreement. Jenkins produced a portion of dried venison for both of them and a pair of water skins. "Here, take it easy, we've gotta make what we have last 'til we get to town." Rush nodded as he slowly chewed on a bland piece of meat. Jenkins sat on the unoccupied portion of the desk and stared into the dark barracks beyond the reel-to-reel tape units and filing cabinets. "I think he'll be fine," Jenkins mumbled half to himself. "He's been through worse."

Rush raised an eyebrow at the comment, "worse?" Jenkins nodded, "relatively. He took it pretty hard when we lost Chase. He was supposed to be scoutin' for Chase's squad. Got tied up with some swampers down south. They were tryin' to eat the poor kid, he had to shoot his way out. Never really forgave himself, I think, for not bein' there when it all happened." Rush continued to savor his bite of meat. He paused

masticating to scratch his stomach where his scar and Erik's earlier haymaker intersected.

"Swampers?" Rush asked. Jenkins swallowed his fresh bite to explain, "well. They're cannibals. They live out in the swamps 'round these parts. They live out there, off the wildlife and whoever's unlucky enough to cross 'em." Rush asked, "they are human?" Jenkins nodded, "mostly I guess. They've been out in the irradiated swamps for so long and inbred that they're insane and pretty disfigured." Rush slowly nodded, taking another bite of the smoked meat. "What else lives there?" Rush asked through a full mouth.

Jenkins thought momentarily before counting them off on his fingers, "well, we got swampers, mirelurks, swamplurks, lizards an' snakes the size of grown men. Uh, yao guai, bloodbugs the size of Henrietta, and probably fifteen other things I'm forgettin'." Rush shook his head, unable to wrap his mind around the giant things that mutated their way into existence. Jenkins took a swig of water then remembered, "oh, yeah. Got molerats up here too. Pretty good eatin'." Rush smiled and nodded, they were his favorite.

Rush ate in silence after that, shifting his gaze between the green glow of the terminal, Jenkins' silhouette from the mainframes, and the dark room beyond. After eating his fill, Jenkins offered the remainder of his dinner to Rush. He politely declined, having lost most of his appetite due to the earlier excitement. "How 'bout a drink, then?" Rush gladly accepted. Jenkins leaned across the terminal to produce a bottle of whiskey. He uncorked the top and took a short swig for himself before handing it to Rush.

Rush took a long draw and handed it back to the young man. Jenkins downed two quick gulps before reinstating his interrogation. "So, Rush. What'd you see in there? In 'is head, I mean." Rush gestured for the bottle then took another hit. "Anger," he replied immediately. "Fright. Sadness. Confusion." Jenkins nodded, "sounds like a normal day." Rush sighed, "apologies." "What d'you mean?" Jenkins queried, "sorry for what?" Rush shrugged, "seems hard. Living up here." Jenkins sipped the bottle again, "it's not easy, that's for damn sure. 'Specially for folks like us."

Rush drained his water skin then asked, "Us who?" Jenkins took another long swig before replying, trying to prevent himself from doing something stupid, "y'know. Us. The folks that're different. You're you, all big and buff and fuzzy, with a tail, and I'm...well. I'm just *different*." Rush tweaked an eyebrow in his direction, "you mean you like males different, or eat people different?" Jenkins chuckled. "I

wouldn't eat people, Rush. That's cannibalism an' cannibalism's wrong." Jenkins thought for a second, "would it count as cannibalism if *you* eat a person?"

Rush shrugged in response, "only half?" Jenkins laughed as he took another swig from the dirty glass bottle before offering it back to Rush. Rush took it, but only to keep Jenkins from inhaling any more of the bottle; he'd already imbibed a quarter or more by himself. "Are you well, Jenkins?". Jenkins chewed loudly on some of the venison he'd previously offered to Rush, "yeah. Sure. I'm fine. Only drove my best friend mad 'cause I can't behave." "Cannot behave," Rush asked, trying to lead him on to spilling the real reason he was drinking heavily. "Yeah, y'know. When you want somethin' you can't have. But you keep wantin' it anyway. It's bad for ya. Makes you do crazy things." Rush nodded and had another quick nip of the whiskey.

Jenkins continued on his rant, spelling out in the vaguest way possible how he felt about the entire recent situation. "Anyway, big guy. I can't have what I want 'cause it'll hurt other folks. Can't do that. Gotta care for 'em, so I'ma suffer for 'em instead. Y'know?" Rush nodded. The more Jenkins talked, the more unstable his position became on the desk. This particular bottle of whiskey seemed to be having quite an effect on him. Rush re-corked the bottle and placed it gently in the bag. "Come, let us sleep. We will talk more in the morning." Jenkins, who was still ranting drunkenly about the sacrifices one makes for their loved ones, decided that now was the best time to make a drunken pass at the large man helping him to bed.

"So, mister fuzzy guy. What's a place like this doing in a guy like you?" Rush shook his head as he helped Jenkins off of the desk and toward the barracks. "What? Thought you decided to suffer." Rush chuckled. Jenkins tried again, "does your face hurt?" Rush shook his head again as he placed a hand in Jenkins' lower back to stabilize him. "No, why?" "'cause when you fell from heaven, you messed up your face." Rush laughed harder than the first time, "my face is disfigured?" Jenkins stopped dead in his tracks, halfway between the desk and the door, and began profusely apologizing.

"No! No. Nonono. You're a cute dog. Man. Beast. Thing. Er, I like your face." Rush chuckled awkwardly as he tried to speed their walk to the bunks. "Th...thank you," Rush stammered. "You must be ready for bed," he mumbled. Jenkins agreed, but had a different idea of what bed entailed. As Rush was shoving him through the doorway, Jenkins tripped on his own drunken feet and sent the two of them flying to the cold metal floor. They landed with a dull thud and both grunted, Jenkins more so than Rush who landed on the smaller man.

Jenkins giggled, "movin' quick there big guy." Rush started to ask when he meant, but instead yelped loudly as Jenkins roughly grabbed a handful of his crotch. Rush scrambled to get out of arm's length of the drunken and handsy man. Rush growled in aggravation. Jenkins though it was hilarious. He sat and giggled at his own mischievousness. He opened his mouth to say something even cleverer, but quickly forgot what it was. Rush shook his head and offered a hand to help him into a bunk so he could sleep off the alcohol. Jenkins accepted but not without trying to put Rush's hand in his mouth first.

Rush quickly tired of this behavior and threatened Jenkins, "enough! Remove your mouth from my fingers or I will hurt you." Jenkins sheepishly did as he was told, and drug himself up with the aid of a nearby footlocker. Rush flung the saliva from his fingers angrily then demanded that Jenkins immediately go to sleep. Rush already had a brother with a mental schism, he didn't need a lustful human to deal with as well. Jenkins threw himself on to the bunk opposite of Erik without another word. Rush leaned over to pat him on the head and wished him goodnight. "Thank you for your help, Jenkins. Your...persistence is appreciated, but your feelings will not be reciprocated." Drunk Jenkins missed most of what Rush said, but caught the gist. "Okay, okay," he mumbled half to himself and half to the concrete wall he was facing, "I'll jus' have t'get ya drunker later."

With that astounding proclamation, Jenkins passed out on the bare mattress. Rush stood on the cold metal floor between his brother and drunken comrade. He wanted sorely to sleep, but instead looked at his disturbed little brother then to his sorely desperate friend and heaved a deep sigh. Rush absentmindedly scratched his jaw and exited to the mainframe room. "Something to distract me should be good right now," was his thought as he sat in the leather swivel chair facing the terminal. It was much more comfortable than he remembered. Rush's mind was strangely at ease, despite his current circumstances.

It was probably the rhythmic pulsing of the mainframes, Rush thought to himself. He tapped on the terminal's spring-loaded keys and was pleased to see that the previous user had left the terminal unlocked. He was displeased, however to see the last user that was supposedly active.

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- WXOBS Terminal 3 -

```
Hello Dr. Hawthorne. You last used this terminal: today.  
You have mail available.
```

```
> Inbox (13)  
> Current Forecasts  
> Current Observations  
> Historical Observations  
> Disestablish Network Connectivity  
>_
```

Rush blinked in disbelief. He apprehensively selected "Inbox (13)" and struck the return key. He waited while the terminal slowly loaded up the good doctor's inbox.

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- WXOBS Terminal 3 -
- Inbox: 13 Unread Messages -

```
1 ! Jun 19 root (993 b) Remote connection notification  
2 ! Jun 19 root (993 b) Remote connection notification  
3 ! Jun 19 root (993 b) Remote connection notification  
4 ! Jun 19 root (993 b) Remote connection notification  
5 ! Jun 19 root (154 b) Reactivation of weather observation services  
6 ! Jun 19 root (0x0 b) R145[()][234[5p][;']-[  
7 ! <UNAVAILABLE>  
8 ! <UNAVAILABLE>  
9 ! <UNAVAILABLE>  
10 ! <UNAVAILABLE>  
<< Next 10 messages... >>  
>_
```

He glowered at the subjects. He sincerely hoped that they'd all be unavailable and thus a waste of time so he could just go to bed. His curiosity got the better of him, though. He selected the top message and drummed his fingers on the desk as one of the tape-to-tape units spun up before writing the message out for him.

Message 1: Unauthorized Remote Connection Failure Notification

To: root(john.hawthorne@

From: <AUTOMATED NOTIFICATION SYSTEM>

A connection attempt was made from: <UNAVAILABLE>@<UNAVAILABLE>.

> This is an automated message from Weather Station Magnolia.

> A remote access attempt was received from this network. This incident will be reported. (This is a relay notification from Weather Station Magnolia Remote Sensing Station Gamma. Message follows:

A remote access event was logged by Station Magnolia ZAX by an unregistered user: <UNAVAILABLE>.)

Rush was confused by the message: was the attempt from here or from his home *to* here? "Ancient equipment acting up," Rush muttered as he moved on to the next message. It was exactly same as the first, as were the next two. Something, Rush gathered, was trying to make an attempt to get into their network from home. He took pause before reading the next message. "Does someone know we are here? Who there would be trying to contact them if they did?"

Rush selected message 5. It didn't have any useful information other than the serial number of the satellite uplink: 00-005525-53480a-00. Again, Rush stared at the string of characters. He knew it was a pattern, but he wasn't sure what it was supposed to be. He stood up to fetch a notebook from his duffel bag. As he returned with his small, worn, leather-bound notebook and chewed pencil, the terminal beeped at him.

He looked at it with suspicion, "why are you making noise," he thought to himself. Rush stuck the pencil in his mouth and absentmindedly gnawed on it as he stroked the keyboard again to select the next message. Message six was a strange one. The subject appeared to be a string of corrupted text. The body of the message wasn't much better. "There it is again," Rush thought as he poked at the screen with the moist eraser, leaving a tiny smudge of saliva on the screen. "What does that mean?" He wrote it down in his trusty notebook for later.

Message 6: R145[[]() [234[5p][;']- [

To: 0x552552480a

From: <UNAVAILABLE>@<UNAVAILABLE>

Rus#,
1 hope y0u receive thi\$ |ne\$\$age. 1 @m w@t(#1|\g 0\er v/0u. |)o |\0t fe@r, 1
(v)1ll fol|0w v/0u and {rik. 1 w1ll |<ee|o you \$@f{. I w1ll kee|o t#ese {v1|
|n{n from att@(|<1ng yo_) agai|. I wi|| sa\|e yo_). I (v)1ll \$a\|e v/o_). I
w1ll \$a\|e v/o_). I wi|l \$ave you. I wi|| sa\/{ y0u. I wi|l sa\/{ y0u. 1
(v)i|l save yo_). I wil| \$@v{ v/0u. 1 will \$ave you. I (v)il| sa\|e y0u. I
(v)1ll \$av{ you. 1 wi|| sav{ yo_). I wil| \$ave v/ou. 1 (v)1l| \$a\|e y0u. 1
save you. 1 w1l| s@v\|e yo_). 1 (v)1|| \$@v{ v/ou. 1 wil| sa\|e v/0_). I wi||
sav{ you. I (v)1ll sa\|e v/o_). I wi|| save you. I w1|| \$ave v/0u. 1 wi|l
s@v{ you. I wil| s@v\|e yo_). 1 wi|l s@ve y0_). I (v)1ll s@v{ y0u.....
A// of you...

Rush stared at the corrupted mess until his eyes went cross and a headache slowly built behind his eyes. He pressed the palms of his hands into his orbitals to ease the pounding, "imagining things," he mumbled. He sat like that for a few minutes, hoping it would subside. When it didn't, Rush eased up from the chair, grabbed Erik's Pip-Boy, strapped it on, and used its light to navigate him to the bathroom in the back. He eased the door open and looked around for a sink. He found them hiding behind a small dividing wall to his right. "Fancy," he thought aloud. Rush eased over and turned the taps with a hint of apprehension. The first did nothing but squeak, so he moved on to the next one. It made a horrible rattling noise and sounded like the faucet was a dying man, gasping for air. For good measure, he tried the third and was granted a thin, burbling stream of clay-colored water. It smelled like sulfur. Rush wrinkled his nose at the stench.

Rather than stare at the pitiful dribble from the faucet, he decided to take a look around. Rush spied some lockers coming in, and felt that it was a good time to investigate. It didn't take long before Rush found something of use; the fourth locker held a red jumpsuit like Erik's and a pair of cardboard boxes. He pried one open to find a mixed container of ammo. The other, much smaller than the first. It had faded floral decorations on the side and fancy filigree on the top. He gave it shake to find that it was full of tiny metal lock picks like Erik used. "A whole box," Rush though excitedly to himself, "that'll make Erik happy."

An angry, coughing sputter turned Rush's attention from the locker to the sink. He bent his arm around to direct the light from the Pip-Boy into the basin of the sink and was pleasantly surprised to see clear water rushing into the basin of murk. Rush was instantly excited. He turned on all the water taps in the bathroom: the three

showers and the other two sinks. He sincerely hoped they would all function. Erik was soon leaning on the door jamb and glaring at him with a tired aggravation caused by Rush's excitement.

"What. Are. You doing, you dumb dog?" Rush spun around with his trademark toothy smile. "We have water, brother." "We...what?" "Water, looks clean." Erik rubbed his naked forearm and looked to his Pip-Boy that Rush had borrowed. "That's good, but how're we getting clean water way out here? I don't remember any purifiers or anything." Rush took pause, then remembered the large, unknown machinery on the first floor. "Downstairs? Past the generator?"

Erik shrugged, "maybe. You check the radiation?" Rush failed to reply, and dunked the Pip-Boy in the sink full of water and stared at it. Erik's level of aggravation rose as a vein in his forehead slowly began to throb. "That's...not how you do it. Didn't anyone teach you anything underground?" Erik asked sharply. Rush didn't appreciate Erik's snippy tone, but after earlier, he let it go.

Rush pulled his soaked forearm and Erik's attached Pip-Boy from the basin and gave it a good shake, sending droplet of water across the walls, mirrors, ceiling, himself, and Erik. Rush began to apologize, but the overflowing sinks interrupted him. He quickly spun the taps on all three sinks in succession, spun the knobs in the shower stalls, then turned back to Erik. "Apologies, brother," Rush grumbled. "Got excited."

Erik sighed as he trotted through the spreading puddle of cool water on the tile floor. "Here," Erik said, pointing at the dial of the left side of his Pip-Boy, "is th' radiation level. Lower is better. You start feelin' rad poisonin' 'round a hundred or two rads. Five hundred, you start hemorrhaging. Most folks suffer severe diarrhea, and vomiting, then die closer t' a thousand. Or turn into ghouls—but that's pretty rare, you'd need a warhead-sized dose for that. Then you'd need to survive it." Erik paused and swallowed to parch his scratchy throat, "most wasteland docs can take care of poisonin' below four or five hundred; great ones can save you from seven or eight. After that, you're screwed."

The thought of massive hemorrhaging made Rush shiver. "How irradiated is it up here?" Rush whispered in awe. Erik swallowed again before replying, "depends. Most places are fine, radioactive dumps are bad. Occasionally you'll cross a Glowin' One or a swamp that's ate up with it. They're the worst though." Erik grabbed Rush's forearm, inspected his Pip-Boy, then took a long drink of the water from the

overfull sink to parch his thirst. "Water's good. Need to fill up in the mornin' before we go."

Rush nodded and asked, "are you well, brother?" Erik cupped some water in his hands and splashed his hot face. He replied to Rush's reflection in the mirror and shook his head, "dunno. Think I'm comin' down with somethin'. Feel worse. Got a fever that's makin' me angry all the time. Don't like it." Rush was pretty concerned with the reflection of his brother that replying to him. "Brother?" he questioned hesitantly, "You have more than a fever."

"Oh, that's...new," Erik mumbled as he squinted then pried on his eyelids to inspect their captives. Aside from the shift in color from grey to muddy brown-yellow resembling Rush's amber, and being very dry and bloodshot, he didn't see any reason for alarm. He blinked repeatedly, wondering if the fever was making him hallucinate. Erik stared at himself for another minute longer before deciding that this was a fever-induced dream. He waved to Rush and mumbled, "'night," before splashing through the water, stumbling back into his bunk, and passing out into a feverish dream.

Rush watched him leave then inspected himself in the same dirty and cracked mirror that Erik had a moment ago. He blinked, yawned, inspected his numerous sharp white teeth before washing his face. Rush smiled sadly to himself; if his past was any indication, Erik would be in for quite a bumpy ride. "He'll pull through," Rush thought aloud. He'd be there for him. Rush splashed his face one more time before deciding to turn in for the night; he'd finish investigating everything tomorrow.

Rush glanced back at himself momentarily before exiting the bathroom, proud of the wild fur on the top of his head. He splashed through the wet floor and into the bunks where each of his brothers in Steel were occupying their own bottom bunks. Jenkins seemed to be quite content in his dream, but Erik seemed to be struggling. Rush watched him grunt and scrunch his face in anger or struggle. He sat by Erik and stroked his head until he calmed down. He wasn't kidding though, he was running a tremendous fever. Sweat was already beading up on his forehead. Not wanting to make him suffer more, Rush opted to take residence on bunk above Erik.

He stared at the cobwebs in the corners and the dingy ceiling for quite some time before finally drifting off to a fitful sleep of his own.