

CHAPTER 22: LONG ROADS AHEAD OR SOMETHING STUCK IN THE TUBES

Rush tossed and turned his way off of the top bunk and into a pounding headache. His head bounced as he landed on the cold metal floor. He whimpered and whined softly in pain as he rolled over and held his pounding head. Erik, too was awoken by Rush's fall from grace. He was reeling from his sweat-inducing nightmare and instantly angered. "Th' hell?!" he shouted. That, of course, woke up Jenkins who was still a bit tipsy from the night before. "Ugh, what? What! What's goin' on?" They both stared down at Rush from their respective bunks.

Erik sneered, "get up, you fuckin' baby." Rush looked up in genuine pain, then back to his lap, he was fairly sure he fractured his skull. Jenkins rolled out of bed to inspect him, "c'mere. Lemme see." Rush's eyes were squinted shut in pain. "Let. Me. See." Rush slowly opened his eyes and stared at Jenkins above him. "You'll be fine, no concussion today. Just a nasty headache." Rush slowly nodded before picking himself up. Erik stared at his elder brother with contempt for shocking him awake.

Jenkins shook his head and followed Rush into the bathroom. "Hey, how's your head?" Rush turned on the tap and splashed water on his face. "will recover, thank you." Jenkins nodded and milled around awkwardly as he watched Rush bend over again to wash his face more thoroughly. Rush swished his tail back and forth to let him know he knew what Jenkins was doing. Rush stood up and looked back through the mirror at Jenkins, "a picture would last longer." Jenkins blushed fiercely and turned away to shield his embarrassment. "Oh, lockers! You look through these yet?"

Rush nodded, "only four of them," he grumbled. He added, "remember last night?" Jenkins started with the fourth locker from the left to avoid the conversation, "uh. I dunno. Bits." Rush shook his hands free of water before he joined Jenkins in investigating the lockers, "You groped me." Jenkins blushed a second time and choked on his apology, "I'm sorry Rush. It won't...uh, happen again." Rush chuckled and patted him on the shoulder, "you meant no harm."

Rush mumbled, "appreciated the gesture, though." Jenkins thought his head was going to explode "Uh, you're, uh welcome, I guess" Jenkins stuttered. He quickly busied himself by digging through the box of ammo that Rush found the night before. Rush sighed internally, as he'd made things awkward again. "Going to check on Erik," was the last thing Jenkins heard Rush grumble before walking out. Jenkins exhaled and stared through the tiny windows near the top of the wall, "God help me, that dog's gonna be the death o' me."

Rush wandered over to Erik's bunk and stared down at him. He was staring at the metal slats that held Rush's mattress above him. "What," Erik snapped. "Hungry?" Rush asked. Erik replied with silence. Rush bowed out to grab something to eat: he knew Erik was hungry, he could hear his stomach grumbling in sync with his own. After relocating their bags in the main room, Rush produced a handful of dried venison and three flasks of water. He wandered back into the bunks and silently nudged him in the cheek with the delicious, smoked protein.

Erik swatted away Rush's offering and yelled something rude and offensive. Rush ignored him, he stank with a combination of hunger and undirected anger. "Jenkins," Rush called out, "breakfast." Jenkins exited the bathroom moments later holding a handful of cardboard boxes and some rumpled clothing. He looked quite pleased, "Erik, found you some new lock picks an' some ten mil hollow points." Erik answered Jenkins in the same manner he greeted Rush: silence and searing contempt. Jenkins leaned on the door frame to the restroom and looked between Rush and Erik, hoping for some hint of what to do. Rush shrugged and reached out in Jenkins' direction with a piece of meat. Jenkins, his hands full, retrieved the treat from Rush's hand with his teeth.

They continued to stare at Erik until he rolled over to his side and stared at the cinder block wall. Jenkins tossed his loot on the footlocker near Erik's bunk and followed Rush from the barracks into the mainframe room. He busily munched on his meat as he carefully rearranged the bullets he'd found the night prior on the wooden desk. "Moodier than normal," Jenkins observed through a mouthful of meat. Rush nodded as he slowly chewed on his own portion of venison. "Can we do anything?" Jenkins queried. Rush shrugged, "you know him better. You tell me," Rush mumbled. "Yeah, but you're his brother or whatever." Rush swallowed his meal and shook his head. "Knew him four years, missed him for twenty three more." Jenkins raised an eyebrow. "How old *are* you?" "Twenty eight July twenty fourth." Jenkins was surprised, "huh. I thought you were older. Got that wise old man, *all-knowing* sorta feel to you."

Unsure of how to respond, Rush shrugged. They sat in each other's silent company until Erik began yelling. Rush sighed deeply and looked at Jenkins. His look of worry was upsetting to Rush; Jenkins was genuinely afraid of Erik's new behavior. "He's never acted like this, Rush. He's been angry before, but...I don't like this. What'd y'all do to 'im?" Rush shook his head, "bound to happen eventually." Rush stood up, steeled himself, and strode back into the barracks. Jenkins opted to continue listening from the adjoining room, out of Erik's reach.

He was quite glad he did. In the blink of an eye, Rush walked in and Erik began screaming and cursing at him. Sixty seconds after that, they came to blows. "Fuck!" Jenkins leaped from the desk and skidded into the barracks in time to see Erik attempt to cave in Rush's skull with a section of steel pipe that he'd relieved from some poor machine. "STOP IT!" Jenkins bellowed. His demand barely phased Erik, but it was enough to make him hesitate. Rush intercepted Erik's third swing and ripped the weapon from his grip before bear hugging him onto the soft mattress. "Enough, brother. Must control it," Rush said softly. "Control it, brother. Control. Breathe deep."

Erik was panting, struggling, and yelling gibberish at Rush. Rush should have been angry, especially since Erik landed two good blows across his ribs with that pipe, but he couldn't bear to be when Erik was in such distress. Rush could feel it emanating from him, he could taste Erik's fear and confusion in the air. Rush laid on top of Erik until he settled down and ceased struggling. "Feel better, brother?" he whispered as gently as his gravelly voice would allow. Erik panted heavily and nodded slightly. He had quickly broken a sweat struggling against Rush; his hair was matted to his forehead and drips of sweat were running off of his chin. Rush didn't move from his position, he kept a vice-like grip around his brother until he could smell the fear had left, until his blood pressure returned to normal, until Erik was normal again.

Jenkins looked on, unsure of what to think. "Uh, Erik. Hey buddy, you okay?" He failed to answer, but Rush did in his stead, "Yes, better." Rush continued to hold him tight, not to harm him, but to keep himself and Jenkins safe. He thought to Erik, "will keep you as safe as we can brother, but you must learn to control this anger. Use it to strengthen yourself. Do not let it control you. You will become unstable like grandfather if you do." Erik's tiny patch of consciousness cut a path through the red haze that currently surrounded Rush in Erik's mind. It sounded like the voice of the white light he heard previously, "Rush? Rush! I'm scared. I don't know where I am. Where is everyone?" Rush thought back to the gentle voice, "you are with your friends and family. We will go home soon, but you must be strong for us first."

The tiny voice quivered as it replied, "I'll...I'll try big brother. I'll try to be strong." Rush renewed his attempts to calm Erik, "breath," he mumbled aloud, "you are safe." Erik was finally coming around from his spell. His breathing slowly returned to normal, the irrational fear he felt was slowly ebbing away. It took a few minutes, but Erik was back to his old self for now. He quickly complained at Rush's being on top of him. "Off," he grumbled with agitation.

Rush lazily rolled off of Erik and the bunk with ease and smiled with relief. "How do you feel," Rush grumbled. Erik slowly sat up, swinging his legs off of the bed and avoiding the metal support with his head. He shuddered and hugged himself. "I. I'm, uh. Not sure, exactly. Better, I think. What's happening?" Rush patted Erik on the head, "struggle." "I was so angry all of th' sudden." Rush ruffled his hair and replied mentally, "you were frightened. You did what frightened animals do, you fought. It's natural to want to fight to survive. That is what you are doing." Rush repeated an abbreviated version aloud for Jenkins' sake, "fighting to survive."

Jenkins meekly took a seat on the mattress on the opposite site of Erik. Jenkins wasn't sure what to do, but the silence made him feel awkward. "Hey, Erik?" Erik turned to his left to acknowledge him, "hmm?" "Remember how bad off I was after the whole bath house incident?" Erik nodded slowly, "yeah, you were a wreck, why?" "Well, think you're goin' through something like that?" Erik furrowed his eyebrows, "how d'you figure?" "I think it's like a defining point, you know? Somethin' to make or break you." Erik continued to stare blankly at Jenkins, hoping he would soon make some sense.

"You jus' gotta suffer through it and make it out on the other side okay. Like you, an' Chase, an' Franklin were there for me, me and Rush're here for you." Erik nodded, grateful to his understanding companions. Jenkins added with a wide smile, "'cause I'm about done puttin' up with your lazy-ass bullshit. We got work to do, an' I can't have you tryin' to kill folks just 'cause they looked at you funny or offered you breakfast or something." Rush smirked at Jenkins' attempt at humor and decided to prod Erik off of the bed and into some breakfast. "Must eat, brother. Traveling soon."

Erik took a deep breath and shivered again. "Does it happen to you Rush? Do you ever forget and hurt people?" Rush replied without hesitation, "not for over a decade. Until that man ambushed you; don't remember anything until waking up in the Brotherhood's care. Had the taste of blood in my mouth. It was not mine." Erik's eyes widened a bit, "Rush. You ripped that man's throat out without a second thought. I think you even ate bit of 'em. That was scary as hell," he said, trailing off. Rush looked down with mixed feelings, "Lost control when you were in danger. Instinctual."

Erik smiled to ease Rush's spirits before he took a deep breath and stood up, strangely refreshed from their pep talk that was riddled with death and trauma. "Okay, uh, ya'll find out anything? Do we have enough food and water for three or four days? What do we have for protection? How's our ammo stock?" Rush and Jenkins

took turns answering, "yes," "yes," "your ten mil, two plasma rifle, two bowie knives, and these," Rush said, imitating spirit fingers to show off his sharp claws. "We got a fair stockpile of ECPs an' I found a bunch of ten mil for you. Hollow points, too," Jenkins added. "Where's your trusty crowbar?" Erik shook his head, "left it with dad an' Henrietta."

"Huh, was afraid you'd lost it. Damn thing's got us outta penty o' jams," Jenkins said. Erik smiled a little bit wider and nodded before changing the conversation. "You know? I kinda like it here. It's nice, in a run-down shit-hole kinda way" Erik mumbled as he looked around. Rush nodded in agreement, "sturdy, remote, has power, water, communications." Erik looked surprised, "what, now? Communications?" Rush nodded, "terminal shows we have network access to Magnolia. Satellites, too, maybe." Erik was nearly giddy. "Satellites?! Where? Show me!" he said with child-like enthusiasm before leaving the two men alone in the room, kicking up dust in his wake.

Jenkins sighed internally with relief. "Well, at lest he can still do happy, too." Rush clapped Jenkins on the shoulder before he strode out after Erik. Jenkins thought to himself, "crazy kid's got a grown-ass dog followin' him like a lost puppy. The hell's that make me?" He shook his head before running his fingers through his short-cropped hair and following them into the main operations room.

Rush and Erik were already crowded around the terminal when Jenkins joined them. Erik seemed overly excited about the discovery. Rush seemed quite happy himself. His claws were clacking rapidly on the keyboard as he and Erik chattered on about technical details that Jenkins didn't understand. "No way! We've actually got a live uplink to the sat? What happens when I do this?" Erik questioned Rush excitedly. Rush got up from his kneeling position and found the other terminal in the room. The terminal hummed loudly before the screen slowly glowed into focus after Rush switched it on. "On," he said behind himself to Erik, "found diagnostics. Communications." Erik nodded before replying, "see if you can get a better lock. I'm gonna go siftin' though these mainframes."

Jenkins scoffed. "Anything *I* can do?" Erik shrugged and waved him off. Rush was more helpful, "can you operate a radio?" Jenkins wandered over and nodded, "yeah. We all switch off doin' radio duty." Jenkins paused and glanced at Erik, "well. Almost all of us." Rush nodded and went back to typing before responding. "Done." No sooner had he mumbled that, a rack of ancient radio equipment and another terminal came to life. Jenkins involuntarily gasped. "These guys work quick," he thought to himself.

"You think we should go ahead and give Delta our position, Erik?" Erik nodded to the terminal in front of his face. "Yeah. Sounds good. Jus' make sure you keep it short, we don't know if anyone's listenin' in." "Uh, yeah," Jenkins said mostly to himself before sitting between Rush and the glowing rack of communications equipment. He twiddled various knobs and dials for twenty minutes to get a good signal on their radio band; he assumed it was due to the tall pine trees in his way. Jenkins looked around for the call-sign for the station; he found it after knocking over a stack of books and clipboards. "SM02, huh?" He donned the ancient headset and spoke deliberately, "Bravo Oscar Sierra Delta, this is Sierra Mike Zero Two, do you copy?"

Erik and Rush had halted their efforts at their terminals to turn and watch Jenkins with anticipation. He called again, "Delta, this is Sierra Mike Zero Two, Sierra Papa Jenkins. Do you copy?" For a few tantalizing moments, Jenkins thought he got a heavily distorted response. He tried the same line a third time. He got a response, but not one he was expecting: the radio remained silent, but the terminal near Rush beeped. It had received a new message.

It was more than a message, it was a command. After beeping twice more, the terminal ordered the facility fully into life. The other long-dead control stations faded to existence, their dials and diodes sweeping back-and-forth as they warmed up their tubes and circuitry. All three of them looked around, very excited and very nervous. This clearly proved Rush's theory: someone knew they were there. After the terminal quieted down, Rush turned back to see the previous weather information was replaced with a new message.

Message 12: R[]5]-[

To: 0x552552480a

From: <UNAVAILABLE>@<UNAVAILABLE>

Rush, Erik,

Smart boys. You and your friend have much work to do.

Call your crew. They will be excited to see their new post.

I willingly gift it to them. In exchange, I ask that you two find me.

I cannot care for my children locked up here. I have much work to do, many questions to answer, and information to give to you two.

I want to go home. Please help me get home.

--Dr. Hawthorne

Rush was so shocked by the message he just read, he jumped up, sending his chair spinning behind him. He stared, ghastly pale, at the terminal. He was frightened. "Rush, what's the matter?!" Jenkins exclaimed. Erik left his chair just as dramatically to read the phosphorus lettering on the CRT. His reaction was nearly identical to Rush's. Again, Jenkins was left out in the dark. "Guys, seriously," Jenkins said with an undertone of worry and fright in his voice, "th' hell's goin' on?"

As he asked his question, the terminal shut itself off and the facility slowly faded back into the half-powered, dim, wreck it had been for the past day and a half. Rush took a deep breath and reactivated the terminal. It beeped as the screen flashed and read:

ROBCO INDUSTRIES UNIFIED OPERATING SYSTEM

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- WXOBS Terminal 3 -

ERROR 0xFFFFF710

"Processor

Corru;xsfkleg,,g364[735}3__."

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Jenkins shuddered at the unannounced change of scenery. Rush stared at the terminal with irritation. Erik opted to shriek and strike it in a burst of anger. "COME BACK!" Rush restrained Erik as he feverishly swung at the glass screen repeatedly, following it down from the console to the ground, drawing blood from his battered knuckles. Erik complained loudly and struggled before giving up. He stared at the terminal, pleading with it, "why would you take that away from us? Why?" Rush guided Erik into his nearby chair, told him to take a breath, and returned to the terminal prop it back up on the console and wipe Erik's blood from the screen.

Jenkins slowly turned his back to Rush to look at Erik. He seemed to be in a daze or shock. Jenkins, having no other ideas, turned back to the radio stack. Thankfully, it seemed to have survived the unexpected power fluctuations. He tried hailing again, "Delta, this is Sierra Mike Zero Two, Sierra Papa Jenkins hailing. Do you copy?" A fuzzy, distorted voice came through, "Sierra Mike Oh Two, this is Delta, we read you Jenkins. Heavy interference, please switch to emergency band one seven. Repeat: emergency one seven. Will wait your copy."

Jenkins sighed with relief, he recognized the woman's voice coming through the tinny speakers clamped to his head: it was their head scientist, Ida. "We're in good hands, boys," Jenkins said over his shoulder. He tweaked a few knobs and was rewarded with a much clearer signal. "Sierra Delta, this is Sierra Mike Zero Two, Sierra Mike Zero Two. Do you copy?" A woman's voice came through, as clear as a crystal bell. "Zero Two, Delta here. Roger Zero Two, we hear you. How're our boys?" Jenkins smiled to himself as he replied, "Zero Two doing well, Delta. Doing well. How's the farm, over?" He patiently waited for her encoded response. "Zero Two. Zero Two? Brahmin are out to pasture, grass is green. Found some deathclaws, but they laid eggs. Mother goose and her golden eggs are home, no feathers ruffled. Mother goose said that there's a new waddler in the flock?" Jenkins replied, "Copy that, Delta. Got a new waddler. Mother's golden egg's gettin' scrambled, expected to recover."

"Copy that Zero Two. Keep the flock safe. Anything else?" the woman asked. "Roger Delta, got another message. Found a new nest, will report upon return. Recommend taking it to vacation. Tell mother that we got flyers." The woman on the other end of the line suddenly had a hint of excitement in her response. "Roger, Zero Two. Flyers confirmed! We await your return. Copy?" "Copy Delta, summer break ends in four. Over and out, Delta." "Roger Zero Two. Stay safe, boys. Delta over and out." After her last statement, the line faded back to a gentle hiss.

Jenkins smiled as he took the headset off and smoothed his hair down. "Good news. Ida picked up." A calmer Erik looked up with a hint of a smile. "How's she?" "She said that Elder, Franklin, and Henrietta made it home safely. The folks back home had some trouble with radriers, but they ran 'em off. Apparently Elder told 'em that we got a new recruit." Erik nodded and asked, "anything else?" Jenkins shook his head, "nope." Erik slumped and turned to face the terminal he was sitting near. "No," he mumbled before absentmindedly poking at the keyboard in front of him. Jenkins looked to Rush who shrugged. "Who is Ida," he asked.

"She's the head o' the scientists back home," Jenkins replied. "Smart lady. She's been the head scientist for as long as I can remember." Erik nodded to the screen in agreement with Jenkins, "she an' Willis are nearly inseparable. If I didn't know what I do 'bout Willis, I'd bet they'd get married." Rush thought that was an odd statement, but found himself distracted by Erik's rhythmic tapping on the keyboard.

"Brother what is wrong?" Rush inquired. Erik stared at the green phosphorous screen and shrugged in response. Rush shook his head, and spun Erik around in his swivel chair. "Enough. Let us go for a walk." Erik stood up and agreed to do as he was

asked. "Fresh air would be good." Jenkins cleared his throat and said, "I'll hold down the fort. Y'all don't be gone for too long." Rush nodded and grumbled, "thirty minutes. We will return." Jenkins waved them off as he walked back into the mainframe room on his way to the barracks.

Rush placed a hand on Erik's shoulder and guided him down the stairs into the large mechanical room. Erik allowed himself to be steered, he was on auto pilot. Rush sensed his absentmindedness and took advantage of it. He silently guided Erik through the two room, through the root-entangled doors, and into the tree-filtered sunlight. Rush took a deep breath of the humid air: it was sweet with the smells of pine trees and moist foliage. "Breathe brother, it smells nice." Erik made no effort to breathe harder than necessary.

Rush took another deep breath and held it as long as he could, savoring the new scents. Erik stared blankly at the pine forest in front of them. "Are there fruit trees here?" Erik shrugged. "I wonder what fruit tastes like," Rush thought aloud. He wanted to get Erik's mind off of whatever was bothering him. "Do you have fruit up here?" Erik nodded slowly before replying, "uh, yeah. Apples, pears, mutfruit, an' the like. Tomatoes too." Rush took a few steps away from toward the small creek than dribbled by. Rush stared at the slow-flowing water before thinking of another topic to get Erik distracted. "Brother?" he asked. "Hm? What, Rush?" "Who did we sneak away from at the lake?"

Erik shrugged in response. "Dunno, didn't like the looks of 'em though. Could be a new gang of bandits or raiders or something worse. Didn't wanna find out, bein' so far away from home." Rush nodded as he kept his gaze locked on the creek. "Think they were the same ones that Jenkins mentioned?" Erik shrugged again shifting his gaze from the trees to the creek. He took a deep breath, paused, and screamed as he punched an innocent pine tree. He repeated this action a handful of times before Rush moved to restrain him. He stopped just as Rush got within an arm's length.

Erik looked at his bloodied knuckles with bits of bark embedded therein, and the tree he'd put a dent in. He surprised himself. Was he getting stronger? Maybe this is all part of growing up as one of *them*, he thought to himself. Rush took Erik's bloodied hands and silently began to pick out bits of fragmented wood. "Feel better?" he asked. Erik nodded silently. Rush nodded back with a small smile, "As long as you only strike trees." That made Erik chuckle and feel guilty simultaneously. He quickly pulled his hands back and licked a bloodied knuckle.

That caught Rush's attention. He queried, "why did you do that? That is unsanitary." Erik licked another one before responding, "I thought dogs had the cleanest mouths?" Rush squinted in confusion and replied, "you are not a dog." Erik shrugged, "half one, right?" Rush shrugged again, "No more or less than me." Erik winced as he licked a third, raw, knuckle. "Sorry, just got angry. No particular reason, just on edge. I didn't like seeing those people. They brought back some bad memories. I don't think they're mine though."

Rush nodded knowingly, it was sometimes hard to differentiate memories given and your own at times. Rush thought to Erik, "do you remember seeing them before we saw them at the lake?" Erik shook his head and replied aloud, "I don't think so, doesn't feel like me seein' 'em, anyway. They're crystal clear in my head, like I'm lookin' through binoculars." He paused to look up at Rush, "I think it's something dad wanted me to remember." Rush immediately looked up from the gently flowing water with surprise. "Elder, or your father?" "Dad, dad," Erik mumbled. "That is very good," Rush said as he smiled widely. "Remembering means you healing."

Erik shrugged, "still angry." Rush nodded, "will fade. Tell me what you remember." Erik heaved a sigh and began to explain. "I think...they're spun off from the Enclave or some old tribe. Or maybe they're some tribe hired by the Enclave? I dunno. I know they're more ruthless than the normal trash we deal with. I think our dads found when they were out hunting. Watched them slaughter a town full of folks from the wood line. Looked familiar, like the old town where Jenkins grew up. Killed most of everyone. I remember hearing the screams of women and wailing children. There were men enjoying the pain they were causing. I can smell the tearing and burning of flesh, Rush. I keep hearing the screams, I can smell the fire. I don't like it. I want it out."

Rush involuntarily shivered at Erik's story coupled with the drop in atmospheric pressure. "Did your dad ever tell you anything 'bout 'em?" Erik inquired. Rush shook his head, "no." As they chatted, dark grey clouds that matched Erik's mood rolled in overhead. Erik looked up through the trees to where the sun was and mumbled, "that's rain." Rush inhaled deeply, "smelled it coming." Erik gasped to himself, "it was." He said in shock. "It was Rush, it was. They're the one's that razed Red Creek." Rush started to ask how he knew, but quickly shut his maw as Erik's eyes went wide and his pupils shrank. Erik lunged at Rush, knocking him down onto the muddy bank of the nearby creek.

"What, brother?" Rush cried as Erik roughly grabbed his ears. Rush whined and whimpered as he was forcibly drug into Erik's waking nightmare. They were both

dropped into what looked like a battle zone ravaged by napalm. Thick, black smoke rolled upward from the skeletons of buildings. Bodies were strewn about the village. Men speaking a strange language were cackling with delight as a woman screamed. Rush's senses were assaulted. The scent of burning flesh and fear made his eyes water and stomach turn. He blinked away stray tears as he tried to focus: why did Erik drag him here and how could he help him get over it?

Rush looked at his surroundings: he was near a clearing, surrounded by pine trees, underbrush, and two fully grown furred men. They were indeed his father and uncle. They watched in the same horror that Rush felt from Erik. Rush looked back to the town, as a fresh wail and gunshots caught his attention. They were about thirty yards from a house that was smoldering. A woman wept silently to herself as she carried a bloodied, dead child in one arm and a double-barrel shotgun in the other.

She laid the child down on the porch next to two others and a grown man, as if it were gently napping before loading her shotgun and hunting down the poor excuse for a humans that razed her town. She was in her early to mid-twenties. Her wavy black hair was previously tied into a bun, but was now falling out and obscuring parts of her face. She screamed a war cry as she sprinted after a tribal, painted green and white, her tattered pink dress fluttered behind her. He just began an attempt to have his way with another female. The woman ended his efforts with a well-aimed blast to the back of his skull. Bits of his skull and brain matter were turned into a fine red mist. The prone woman cried feverishly and wept as the older, brave woman helped her up and wiped some of the gore from her face.

"Get outta town! Grab anyone you can, and go!" she yelled. The young woman, sobbing fiercely, fought to get her pants back on, nodded and ran off to find other survivors. The older woman had the look of a grizzled, battle-hardened veteran on a mission. She cocked her gun, ejected the spent cartridges, and reloaded. She spun around to leave the hovel, but was halted at the cry of a child. It was wailing from the back room of the home she just saved the girl from. She readied her gun and slowly walked in to investigate. Rush couldn't see what happened, but she reappeared momentarily with a baby in arm. It was barely three weeks old, by his estimation.

The woman's entire demeanor changed. She managed to save two lives from the disaster thus far. She walked slowly, cooing the child, trying to console it. The babe was wailing loudly, obviously frightened by the chaos of fires, gunshots, and screaming. The woman took a wide, sweeping look around. None of the homes were viable, even her own had burned and was now exposing its burnt bones to the sky. On the far side of town, she caught a glimpse of hope: a car. Rush watched as the woman grew smaller in

his gaze as she sprinted toward the car on the far side of town. He thought the car looked awfully familiar.

Their current scene faded away and was replaced with a blur of pine trees. Their fathers were in pursuit of the remnants of the tribal clan that had decimated the innocent town. Rush drug a limp Erik with him as he chased their progenitors through thick underbrush and slashing brambles. They were close, Rush could taste the sweat and narcotics of the tribesmen on the air. Rush licked his chops. He heard his father's unique howl, it was joined with one a perfect fourth below it: his uncle's. They broke through into a clearing, sending the tribesmen scuttling in fear. An unlucky few were quickly ended by their fathers' claws and teeth: retaliation for their unprovoked attack on the townspeople.

Unfortunately, they were unable to get them all. They dispatched a handful in a few quick moments, but were unable to track down the others. The tribesmen's green body paint had contained the narcotic that Rush smelled. It was affecting their senses: making them ill, weak, and imbalanced. They collapsed near one another, panting as the adrenaline slowly ebbed from their systems. Rush heard his father think to his uncle, "why would they do that to the town?" Erik's father, Aaron, shook his head in response, "don't know. We've kept an eye on that town for months, they've never shown aggression toward others." Rush's father nodded in agreement as he struggled to sit up against the strong currents rushing around in his head, ruining his equilibrium.

He offered Erik's dad a hand up. They sat side-by-side, silently thinking of what to do next. Rush's father wasn't paying attention, but Erik's was. He looked up at the human spying on them through the trees. He slowly tapped his brother on his shoulder and gestured toward the human. They both stared at the human, who, in turn, stared back at them. It slowly stepped out into the clearing. Its pink dress was tattered and smoke-stained. The child in her arms slept soundly. She looked up at the pair of furred men. She smiled and said, "I knew you two were good. Thank you." They glanced at one another before looking back to her for explanation. She smiled as she rocked the child in her arms. "You know, I've seen you two in the woods. At night. Watching us." She stopped to gently pat the child's head. "Protecting us."

Again, the brothers exchanged glances, unsure of what to do. They'd been discovered, and apparently weren't that good at hiding in the first place. They continued their silent stare at the brave woman from their seated position in the grass. She laughed at herself, "We're taking refuge North, if you decide to go looking for us. A town called 'the Burg.'" She stopped and shook her head, "look at you two. You probably

don't understand a word I said..." She carefully reached around behind her back and produced a handful of dried meat from her pack. She tossed it in front of them before turning her back and leaving with gentle, "thank you."

Erik's father waited for the woman to retreat before investigating the dried meat she'd left behind for them. He picked it up and gave it a good sniff. A tentative lick told him exactly what he'd hoped for: the meat was perfectly safe. He gobbled up his piece and offered the other to his brother. Rush's father gladly accepted, but continued to stare in the direction the woman came from. "Do you think we should worry about her," he questioned Erik's father. He shook his head in response, "No one would believe her anyway. Grown wolf men? They'd blame it on shock or something."

The memory that Rush and Erik shared faded away just as their fathers were helping one another up. Erik and Rush were soon doing the same. Erik was woozy from the strain of the sudden charge of emotions. He felt outside of his own body. He felt like he was watching himself help Rush to his feet. They were both covered in mud. Erik felt terrible, his head was pounding again. Rush smiled and chuckled as he gave Erik a huge bear hug. "You are improving, brother," he thought to him happily.

Erik stood motionless as he watched Rush happily embrace him. Erik wasn't paying attention until he found himself soaking wet in the creek. Rush splashed in behind him, anxious to get the mud out of his coat. Erik sat in the refreshing and slightly radioactive water, motionless. Rush was busy scrubbing himself when he noticed Erik's lack of movement. "Brother?" Erik failed to answer. Rush stood up from the ankle-deep creek and roughly picked Erik up by the shoulders. "Brother!" Again, Erik failed to respond.

Rush sighed and shook his head, "must be shock," he thought to himself. As he guided Erik out of the creek and back toward the observation facility, the clouds that were concentrating overhead had begun to overflow, sending a pelting rain down on top of them. Rush sped up their return through the dense forest. They arrived to the first set of doors in time to beat the worst of the rain. No sooner had they crossed the yellow and black caution paint on the floor near the mangled doors did the rain begin to hail down in sheets.

Rush took stock of his younger brother with a hint of worry and guided him through both machinery rooms and up the stairs. Upon their arrival to the main operations floor, Rush was surprised to see that Jenkins wasn't there. He placed a hand on Erik's shoulder and continued to guide him, this time through the mainframe room,

through the barracks, and into the grand bathroom. There, they found Jenkins. He was loudly singing to himself in one of the three military-style shower stalls. "I go walkin', after midnight..." Rush cleared his throat in the middle of Jenkins' chorus of *Walkin' After Midnight*. He spun around, embarrassed, and made his best attempt to make himself decent. "Rush! Uh, hey? Why're y'all all muddy?" Rush shrugged, "fell in the creek." Jenkins nodded embarrassedly; he had nowhere to hide his wet and naked frame other than the tile wall of the open shower stall.

Jenkins glanced at Erik, who was clearly somewhere else in his mind, "what's wrong with him?" Rush shook his head and mumbled, "growing pains." Jenkins slowly nodded and stared at Rush who stared back at him. "So, uh. I'll just finish up here an' get out of your way." Rush nodded his thanks, guided Erik back into the barracks, and sat him down into the wooden chair near the small desk. "Brother, you must come back," Rush pleaded. Erik stared at nothing in particular; he was too busy sorting out the details in his mind. Why did that lady and baby look so familiar?

Erik sat silent for the ten minutes it took Jenkins to finish his shower. After turning off the water and emerging in a towel, Erik's attention snapped back. The baby had to be Jenkins, so the lady must've been Marie? He looked at Jenkins with a furrowed brow. "What?" he asked defensively. Erik couldn't answer—he didn't have the heart. Erik suddenly realized that Jenkins didn't know he was adopted. He paused in thought, "does dad know," Erik questioned himself.

Before he could ask again, Erik started laughing. "Nothing, Jenkins," he chuckled with an odd, screwed up smile. "Uh, nothing, really. Rush and I were busy rough housing and fell in the creek. You know how muddy the banks get this time of year. Especially since it's rainin' again." Jenkins nodded slowly, "yeah... Anyway, I found some soap in one of th' lockers. Y'all can use it."

Jenkins walked past Erik and into the mainframe room, clothes in hand. Rush looked up from behind the terminal on the desk. "Better?" he asked. Jenkins nodded before he turned to dawn his fairly clean clothing. "Shower's always th' ticket." Rush nodded in agreement as he stared at and fingered the worn brown keys on the keyboard in thought. Jenkins threw his towel across one of the mainframes to dry and reengaged Rush. "So, were y'all really roughhousing," he whispered, "or did he have another fit?" Rush shook his head in response, sending bits of dirt and mud falling to the ground. "He remembered those people we saw days ago. Not good."

Jenkins was preparing another question when Erik walked in. He clapped Jenkins on the shoulder as he glared at Rush as covertly as possible. Jenkins stood in the warm

room, between his two muddy comrades and shook his head. "You two need a damn bath. Go get cleaned up, then we can work on what's what for tomorrow. We still gotta get t' town. Maybe we can get some damn sleep." Erik reapplied his shoulder clasp then turned and left back to the bunks as silently as he'd arrived. Rush got up with a shrug to follow his brother.

Rush padded behind Erik into the barracks and stared at him, silently demanding an explanation. Erik thought to him flatly, "don't bother Jenkins with what we learned today. I think...he's adopted. He don't know it." Rush shrugged as he dug through the footlocker near at foot of his bunk bed. "So what? Needs to know what those people are capable of." Erik had walked into the bathroom and was retrieving the soap Jenkins told them about as he responded angrily, "it's not my place nor yours. Don't tell 'em a damn thing." Rush walked into the bathroom as Erik was disrobing and stowing his muddy gear into a locker in preparation for a well-deserved shower. He veered left into a shower stall and spun the handles to call forth the water. Rush stood under the lukewarm without responding to Erik.

"Irresponsible, brother," he muttered to himself through the water cascading over his muzzle. Rush decided to work on his betrayal later and focus on enjoying the shower. Erik stood in front of the locker, boots and shirt in hand, motionless and deep in thought. Rush was growling some tune to himself as he worked the mud out of his tangled fur. Rush turned the taps off and shook himself from ears to tail fifteen minutes later.

He shook off a second time before walking up behind Erik and grabbing his shoulders to shake him. "Brother!" he growled in his left ear. Erik jumped and smacked Rush in the maw with his boots as he spun to face him. "Huh? What!?" Rush rubbed his sore jaw and grumbled, "you must shower." Erik shrugged. "Been standing there for fifteen minutes." Erik scoffed and threw his boots over his shoulder and into the locker with a loud, metallic clang. His shirt took the same trajectory, but failed to stick in the locker and slid out onto the stained tile floor. He kicked at it before looking up at Rush. "Out." Rush rubbed his jaw again, and turned to leave without argument—he was tired of getting bruises without cause.

Rush returned through the barracks to the mainframe room to find Jenkins in his chair behind the desk. He nodded to him, and was greeted with a nod of his own. Rush read the green text over Jenkins' shoulder. He was currently trying to decipher a METAR report from the station. Jenkins repeated shifted his gaze between the terminal and a large red binder that read "North American METAR Standard." Rush leaned on the back of Jenkins' chair as he pointed out the various bits of

information, "S M zero two is this station. Ninteen fifteen Z is the time. One fifteen here. Plus T S V C: severe thunderstorms in vicinity." Jenkins verified each fragment in the large binder. Rush continued to translate: "Ah, temperature here. Eighty two degrees, winds at one hundred thirty degrees: ten knots. Gusts at twelve. How fast is a knot?"

Jenkins gave up, slammed the binder closed, and threw it on the top of the desk, sending a plume of dust in his wake. "Okay, how'd you know all that?" Rush shrugged, "grew up in what was once a weather station." Jenkins nodded and shrugged. "Had a lot of time to read." "Ah, well. How does that help us?" Rush shrugged, "current weather, not forecast." Jenkins squinted at the letters again, "yeah, but, I can jus' look outside an' see what the weather's doin'." Rush nodded in agreement before grumbling, "would help with planning?" Jenkins shut the terminal off. "Dunno, maybe."

Rush scratched his head and walked around to sit on the desk next to the terminal. He swished his tail back and forth as he scratched his sore jaw again. "What is our plan, Jenkins?" Rush asked. Jenkins looked up and scratched his head. "Well, Rush. We need to get to town, first off. I wanna find something out 'bout those folks back at the cabin. We need to get back to Delta so you can get your trainin' started, an' me an' Erik's gotta get debriefed so we can get our next mission. But before that, I wanna get Erik checked out. He's been worryin' me. He's not actin' right. You know?" Rush shook his head and replied with a hint of melancholy, "no."

"Ah, sorry, big guy," Jenkins consoled. "He's normally pretty cheery, happy to help folks, deadly serious when necessary. I don't think I've ever seen him half as pissed since we left y'all's place." Rush nodded, "will get better. Must learn to manage it." They both fell silent as Erik appeared in the doorway, his hair sopping wet. "What's goin' on guys?" Jenkins shrugged and replied, "sortin' out plans for the rest of our time away from home." Rush nodded in agreement, "planning." "Well, good. What d'you wanna do? Go up to town?" Jenkins nodded, "yeah. Hit up Fruitland and see if anyone there knows anything 'bout those folks."

Erik nodded slowly, "okay. Sounds good. We got enough stuff for the trip?" "Yeah, got enough for dinner tonight an' breakfast. We'll barter around for the rest in town, then head up back home." "Fine, fine. Sounds solid to me." "Well, okay then," Rush grumbled in time with his stomach. "Dinner?" Erik smiled for the first time in the past two days and nodded. "Yeah, let's get a bite, I wanna turn in early tonight." Jenkins took that as a cue to fetch them all something to eat.

Moments later, he returned with three portions of dried meat, three flasks of water and bad news. "This is the last of the venison, y'all. We'll have to skip breakfast." Erik accepted his portion of venison and anxiously ripped a piece off. "We'll be fine," he continued through a mouthful, "we're not but four or five hour's walk from here." He stopped chewing and slowly looked at Rush who was still perched on the desk, quietly chewing on his own meat. "You're gonna be a problem." Rush cocked an eyebrow in question. "Uh, well. I don't think people are gonna like seein' a big wolf guy runnin' around." Jenkins shrugged, "think we could pass him off as an overgrown dog?"

Rush stopped chewing and looked at the two scheming men. "Unacceptable," he grumbled. They ignored his protest, "I dunno. I can talk to 'em up here, so he can just fake barkin' or somethin'" Erik said to Jenkins as he pointed at his own skull. Rush didn't like where this was going. Erik smiled at Rush, "sorry buddy. You're gonna have to play man's best friend until we can get out of town." "No," Rush argued sternly, "it is demeaning." They both looked to Rush, then back to one another with a shrug. "Well, what do you wanna do, Rush?" Erik asked.

Rush shrugged, "would rather walk like a normal man, thank you." "Yeah, but you don't even wear clothes, Rush. That's not gonna fly. How 'bout if we rig up somethin' that won't bug you too much." "Like?" Erik shrugged again, "oh, I know! You complain 'bout bein' itchy, right?" Rush nodded. "Well, we found some old clothes before, I guess we can go native-style on you." Before Rush could ask, Jenkins explained, "the natives 'round our parts're descendants of the old Indians that lived here before the war. They wear loin cloths and the like. Some wear vests of bone. Some bind their forearms and hands for fightin'." Rush thought about it and agreed rather halfheartedly; it was a better solution than him acting like a mongrel.

"Will try it." Jenkins nodded as he rose from his chair to begin the necessary preparations. He located their bags and produced three sets of jumpsuits: two grey and one red. Erik yelled through the doorway, "should be some extra belts in mine, an' some leather in Rush's from that deer." Jenkins yelled, "copy," before retrieving the items that Erik mentioned. Jenkins dug through his bag again and located a sewing kit and some hearty thread.

He came back to the server room and bade that Rush stand tall: he needed to take measurements. Rush obeyed without question. "You still have your notebook handy?" Jenkins asked. Rush nodded and pointed to it on the opposite side of the desk. Jenkins grabbed the well-used leather-bound book and appreciated it momentarily

before searching for a spot to scribble in. As he was flipping through the pages, he stopped as a folded paper fell out.

He bent down to open the paper and found a child's drawing: it had two small, lopsided stick figures with tails, one blue and one pink. A larger brown stick figure with a tail was accompanied by a similar grey one. Underneath were the creatures' names, crudely drawn in the same blue crayon as the first stick figure. "Ian, Harmony (with a backwards 'y'), Rush, and MOM. A pencil stick figure was hastily added to the larger two with the name "Arik" above the head. The text "To Rush" was scrawled with the same blue wax in the top corner with another set of scribbles."

The scribbles were more than that: they were a well-wishing from Harmony and a quick note from their elder, wishing him and Erik their best. Jenkins smiled to himself before apologizing and stuffing it back in the notebook. Rush quickly requested it: he'd missed it earlier when he was jotting down notes from the terminal. He held the picture in his hands and stared at it intently. "Those beautiful children," he thought to himself, "had to leave me with more to remember them by." He handed the drawing to Erik who investigated it nearly in the same manner as Rush had. He smiled broadly. "I don't know 'em and I miss 'em like Hell, Rush." Rush nodded in silent agreement.

While they were busy appreciating the children's hard work, Jenkins was busy doing hard work himself. He'd earned a surprised yelp from Rush when he roughly grabbed his tail for a measurement. "Oh! Sorry, Rush!" Rush shook his head, "was unprepared." He was from then on: he stood in a perfect 'T' pose until Jenkins completed nearly all of his measurements. He'd saved the most awkward for last. "Rush," Jenkins said as he handed him the end of a string, "I need you to hold this under your, uh, balls." Rush did as he asked, but kept moving his hand up and down, trying to find the perfect placement. This quickly flustered Jenkins who was on his knees in front of Rush and made Erik laugh aloud.

Erik shook his head, "just put it below everything by about thumb's width. That'll be good." Rush nodded again, did as he was told, and silently waited in position. Jenkins quickly got Rush's inseam measurement, wrote it down, collected his bits of string, then set off to work. "You're good," he told Rush so he would lower his arms. "Gonna borrow your knife though," he mumbled. Rush nodded and watched as Jenkins began to measure and slice up the first grey jumpsuit on the wood-topped desk.

Rush and Erik watched Jenkins work for nearly thirty minutes before something recognizable started to form. At the end of an hour, he'd rigged up something he was confident that Rush would be proud of, or at least wouldn't chafe and make him itch. "Arms out," Jenkins commanded. Rush obliged. Jenkins took each of Rush's forearms and began by wrapping with two-inch wide grey bands from the jumpsuit. He went from Rush's thumb, around his wrists multiple times, around his thumb again, between his fingers, and finished each hand with extra wraps on the knuckles and wrists before going up his forearm, nearly to the elbow. Rush repeatedly flexed his fingers and was quite pleased by the time Jenkins finished.

"Half way done, bud," Jenkins said as he handed a complicated-looking mess of belts and leather to Rush. He studied it and quickly found a quick release buckle. He fumbled with it momentarily before undoing it. "'round the waist, buckle in the front." Rush nodded and donned it using Jenkins' instructions. In seconds, Rush had a modern-looking leather loin cloth complete with tactical belts for mounting a gun holster, or anything else. Rush shook himself to settle it into place as Jenkins made a few final adjustments. "There you go! Not too shabby, an' you should keep cool to boot." Rush nodded as he smoothed out his forearm wraps and swished his tail to and fro.

Erik clapped Rush on the shoulder and nodded, "that'll do. You're funny lookin' but I don't think anyone'll be stupid enough to mess with you. Help keep Jenkins in line too," Erik said with a chuckle. Jenkins had a wry smile to accompany answer to Erik's prod, "lets me use my imagination." Rush secretly blushed under his fur in embarrassment. Erik gave him a gentle nudge in the ribs to let him know it was a joke.

Rush decided to go take his new clothing for a walk in the afternoon sun. Jenkins joined him in his jaunt outside. Erik, however, opted to stay indoors and sift through Rush's things, starting with the leather notebook he'd left on the desk. Erik opened it to the first page, it read, "Eigenschaft von Rush." Strangely, Erik had no trouble reading it. Page one was nearly completely covered in black ink and graphite from pencil. Erik had no idea what he was looking at, but he did slowly realize a pattern. The tiny, perfect, square text was a code of some sort, all comprised of the numbers zero through nine and a, b, c, d, e, and f. "That looks like code I've seen on computers," Erik thought aloud.

The precise scrawl surrounded some symbols in the middle of the page. One of them looked suspiciously like the logo that he'd seen on the Enclave box they found back home. Erik caught himself off guard again, "since when is that place *home*," he

muttered to himself. He kept perusing the journal. The majority of its contents were foreign, but again, like any good scout, he noticed a pattern. For each of the photograph-like sketches he found in Rush's journal, he found an accompanying dream or quote or something alluding back to Erik. It seemed that Rush never got over having his brother taken away from him.

There was one sketch in particular that Erik liked. It was Rush's approximation of Erik's would look like at the ages of ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty five, and thirty. He was astonishingly close, except that he'd never had long floppy hair: he tried to keep it fairly trim and short, but was failing lately. Rush even managed to guess that his nose was ever-so-slightly crooked to the left.

Erik didn't get to see much more. As soon as he heard Rush and Jenkins re-enter the entrance down stairs, he quickly shut the book and put it back precisely where it was previously. He hastily sat in front of the terminal just before Jenkins strode in. "Muggy outside since the rain let up." Rush came in behind Jenkins, fidgeting with his new protective gear. The belts in particular were giving him some trouble as he kept getting his fur caught in the buckles. He rubbed his belly as he glanced over to Erik. He noticed that Erik was trying very hard to avoid his gaze. "What is wrong, brother?" Rush asked as he readjusted his belts.

Erik's shifty glance told Rush everything he needed to know. "Snooping," he deduced. Erik looked shocked and began to protest. Jenkins nodded in agreement with Rush's assessment before he had the chance. "Yup, he's always up to no good with that look." Rather than make a fuss, he nodded. "Yeah. I was readin' your book there," he admitted as he slid it across the desk toward him. Rush shrugged, "nothing secret. Cannot keep secrets from you, brother." Rush scratched his head, then his thigh, then his jaw. "You read German?" Erik shrugged.

Rush picked up his book, flipped to a random page and began reciting something he'd written in German. "Die Versuche sind nicht gut. Ich muss Alto konsultieren. Die Kreuzungen sind schneller sterben als ich erwartet hatte. Vielleicht wird er mich noch einen Versuch zu machen." He looked over the top of his paper and mentally requested that Erik translate. He did so without a second thought: "Experiments aren't going well. Gotta talk to Alto. Cross breeds are dyin' quicker than you wanted, hopefully he'll let you try again.

A visibly surprised Rush shrugged in response, "close enough. Konnen Sie sprechen?" Erik opened his mouth to reply, but only English came out. "Yeah. No. Wait, what? I can hear it in my head." He quickly became frustrated. Rush roughed up his slightly

damp hair to calm him, "very good, brother." During this exchange, Jenkins stood calmly by Rush and just accepted that strange things were going to happen from here on. He lazily looked up to Rush and asked, "so, what's next on the surprise list? Is he gonna grow fur too?" Rush shrugged and genuinely replied, "do not know. Would be interesting."

Ever the scientist, Rush retrieved his pencil from the desk, flipped to a lightly used page, and began to chew on the eraser end in thought. As he laid each perfectly formed letter into the book, he thought to Erik. "You, brother, are growing quicker than expected. Grandfather estimated that you wouldn't start showing these kinds of signs until months after the serum. He underestimated how bright you are." Erik shook his head and replied aloud to let Jenkins in. "Dunno Rush, I guess I'm just picking stuff up quicker now?" Rush nodded in agreement. Jenkins shrugged nonchalantly. "So long as you keep your mood swings in check," Jenkins muttered under his breath.

Erik got up and stretched. He thanked Jenkins for his hard work on Rush's new set of clothes, and Rush for putting up with his absurd behavior and both of them for supporting him. They nodded in turn and watched as Erik walked back into the barracks and collapsed onto a bottom bunk with a ***thud***.

Jenkins looked back up to Rush and asked, "well, what now, big guy?" Rush fidgeted with his belts again before replying, "a drink?" Jenkins nodded happily and retrieved the small remainder of their alcohol. They drank and chatted about various things until the sun went down and they were sitting in the warm glow of the mainframes, nearly out of alcohol. They'd jointly polished off nearly two bottles of vodka. Jenkins stumbled through the barracks and into the bathroom to relieve himself before returning to bludgeon Rush with a barrage of questions he'd just formulated.

"So, fuzzy, you learn anything good today?" Rush took a quick swig of vodka and replied, "yes. You can stitch things that are not skin." Jenkins laughed and nodded, "yeah, had to practice somehow. The livin' don't like gettin' poked with needles jus' for practice." Rush nodded and asked Jenkins the same, "you?" Jenkins copied Rush's swig and said, "well, my best friend's probably going insane. Hopefully it's temporary. Then there's you, I like you all the more time I spend with ya." Rush blushed under his fur as he took a quick drink. Jenkins backpedaled a bit, "not, like, like. But you know, you're a good guy. I'm glad you're one of us. I don't think I'd like to be at the business end of your fangs an' claws." Rush nodded his thanks.

"You too," Rush mumbled. "You think it could happen?" Jenkins asked. Rush shrugged, "could what happen?" Jenkins took a long swig of his alcohol. "Us?" Rush immediately shook his head, "no." Jenkins sighed and smiled, "just wanted to be sure. I won't be bringin' it up any more. Promise." Rush replied, "it is a compliment, but no. I cannot mate with you." Jenkins' alcohol was making him slightly agitated in more ways than one, "well, why not, goddamnit? Not good enough for you?" Rush was taken aback by Jenkins' outburst, "no," he replied, "I want my first to be a female."

Jenkins was halted in his tracks. "Your first? First what? I thought you said you'd got laid before?" Rush shook his head sheepishly, "not exactly. Fooled around with my mate before she left me. Never," he paused to take a steeling gulp of the scant remainder of vodka at hand, "mated." Jenkins laughed aloud, much to Rush's embarrassment. Jenkins laughed as he tried to get the image of such a studly guy with massive blue balls like that out of his head. "Sorry, big guy. Even I've had my way with a few chicks."

Rush looked into the clear, square bottle in his left hand as he swirled its contents around. "What is it like?" Jenkins coughed and sputtered the vodka he was trying to drink. "Oh no, I'm not doin' that. If you're lucky, one of th' chicks at the bath house'll do the dirty for ya. You may have trouble though," Jenkins thought aloud, "they don't like non-humans too much."

Rush scowled, "what do you mean? We are half human." Jenkins nodded before taking the last sip available in his bottle, "yeah. But you don't look too much like it." Rush's pointed ears collapsed to his skull as he began to sulk. Jenkins awed, "hey now, don't be like that. There's plenty of adventurous folk' round. Just gotta find someone that's not adverse to fuckin' dogs," Jenkins laughed. Rush growled a warning halfheartedly. Jenkins clapped him on the shoulder and massaged it, "I'm jus' kiddin' buddy. I'll introduce you to Willis, I'm sure he knows someone adventurous enough."

"Willis?" Rush asked. Jenkins sighed, "he's a lot of things, Rush. He's, one, a super mutant. Two, the smartest damn guy I know. Three, a hell of a scientist, an' four, my favorite fuck buddy." "Super mutant?" Rush asked. Jenkins nodded again, "yeah. They were people once, got sucked into some sort of government experiments. They used, ah, what was it called?" "FEV?" Rush suggested. "Yeah! How'd you know?" Rush shook his head, he knew very well what Jenkins was talking about now. "They do not have secondary sexual characteristics," Rush mumbled. Jenkins shrugged, "he said somethin' 'bout bein' a first generation, whatever that means."

Rush shrugged, but was quickly sorting through the knowledge of past experiments in his head. "Where did he come from?" "Somewhere out West, I think. Doesn't like to talk about it." "He is a scientist?" Jenkins nodded, "yeah, works with Ida. They both do stuff to make plants more tolerant of the radiation, water purification, better farmin' techniques: normal science-y stuff." Rush remembered Elder Redding mentioning something about a super mutant that was in the Brotherhood.

"How'd you know if they had whatever second sex characters or whatever?" Jenkins asked, freshly intrigued. Rush cleared his throat; it was starting to get sore from all of the talking. "Humans changed by the FEV at Mariposa were first generation. More human than others. Different from the East Coast. East Coast experiments introduced FEV differently than West Coast. West Coast was external, dipped. East coast was injected or inhaled." Jenkins nodded intently, "how'd you know that, though?" Rush shrugged, "grandfather was a scientist during that time. Working on joint project—us— when FEV was made to make better soldiers for war."

"So, you, an' Erik, an' everybody down there was made for war?" Rush shrugged, "at first. Yes. Generations ago. Original tests were unsuccessful. Unable to properly splice genes. FEV samples brought in to modify experiments. Grandfather and his brother created first generation using their own bodies. Two more by hand, then by first generations mating. Another set by hand after. That was us." "You and Erik?" Jenkins asked. Rush nodded; the more he spoke about the experiments that became his family, the more sad he became. The mixture of alcohol and latent feelings of sadness and inadequacy were welling up, making his eyes misty. He didn't care that Jenkins saw him cry. It felt good to do it.

He wept to himself for a few moments before Jenkins realized what was happening. "Hey, now. Quit that, you'll make me cry too." Rush sniffed and laughed a bit, "apologies." Jenkins threw an arm around him to comfort him, "it's okay, big guy. He'd never show it, but Erik's just as soft hearted as you. We've had many a night up drinkin' with Franklin, reminiscing about us growin' up. We talk a lot 'bout the folks we've lost over th' years, tryin' to survive out here." Jenkins sighed. "It's not easy, Rush. You'll run into folk's that've lost everything and every time you find it makes two kinds of people: ones that are bitter and hate everything and everyone and the ones that vow to do their best to make things better for those of us that're left."

"Which one'll you be, Rush?" He smeared the trails of salty tears from his face and smiled. "Will improve things." Jenkins got up from the desk and roughed up Rush's head fur, "good man. Now, let's get some shut eye. We got a bit of a walk in the

mornin'." Rush nodded, smoothed his cowlick down as much as possible, and followed Jenkins into the barracks. As Jenkins was disrobing, he looked coyly over at Rush before quickly making his way to the top of Erik's bunk. He was hoping that Rush wouldn't see the frustration-induced erection he was sporting. Rush didn't need to see it, he could smell it. Rush shook his head at Jenkins and chose to share the small mattress with Erik, he wanted to comfort him and himself.

The repetitive, rhythmic sounds of the rain above served to help lull Rush to sleep; he didn't remember dreaming himself that night, but shared Erik's instead.