

CHAPTER 23: AN EASY JOG OR GOIN' TO TOWN

Rush found himself surrounded by ghostly figures in Erik's now familiar mind. He reached out to touch them, but they flitted out of his reach, gently laughing each time. He found it quite eerie, but not frightening. The strange creatures were almost comforting. Rush kept inspecting them for some flaw or hidden agenda, but quickly came to the realization that these were the memories of people that had died.

Rush spun around to see one, sharper than the rest, conversing with Erik in typical conversational tones. The silvery apparition was sitting on a matching translucent poster-back chair. It was laughing about something. Erik was smiling as he spoke with the strange being, posed in a similar chair facing it. Rush slowly padded over to them. He recognized the thing that Erik was speaking to, it was Franklin's older brother, Chase.

"Hey, Chase, remember how we always thought I's an orphan?" The ghost nodded affirmatively with a strangely warm smile. "Turns out we were wrong, this' my brother, Rush. Rush? This is, er, was, Franklin's elder brother, Chase." Rush extended a shaky hand to the ghost. The translucent man stood up and took Rush's hand in a firm grip and gave him the best handshake of his life. "I see the family resemblance," ghost Chase said as he stood out of the chair and ruffled both of their heads. "Same damn cowlick, too. You as smooth as Erik with the ladies, Rush?" Translucent Chase laughed quickly, "I'm just teasing, Erik's too good to be a hound. Oh, sorry there, guy. I didn't mean anything bad by that." Rush shook his head, he couldn't be sure why, but he liked the man, or at least the way Erik remembered him.

He and Erik spent the entire night talking to those that had died. After a short time, the deceased from Rush's memories crept through into Erik's sleeping mind and introduced themselves. In the course of their joint dream, Erik met the two previous generations of his clan, as well as their would-have-been peers. After meeting Rush's ex, he was curious how Rush didn't see her persuasion sooner. He met Rush's crush, her brother, two more that were quite pleased to make his acquaintance, their Elder's sister who was still heavily pregnant, and Rush's favorite: Alto. They spoke to him the longest, as Rush missed him the most.

It seemed like they spent years chatting with the distant memories of their loved ones, but it was only a few hours. Erik's trusty Pip-Boy started squaking at 0600 hours. Erik slowly aroused from his sleep to find his shaggy brother curled around

him, protecting him. Erik smiled to himself and gently rubbed Rush's head until he woke up. "Mornin' big guy." Rush answered with a wide yawn that ended in a tiny bark. "Hey, you remember any of that dream?" Rush nodded as he tried to rub the sleep from his eyes. "I like Chase," he mumbled. Erik renewed his smile, "yeah, he was a hell of a guy. How'd you not know your girl was gay?" Rush sat up and ducked under the bars holding Jenkins aloft above as he shrugged in response. "Denial?"

Erik nodded as he sat up and swung his feet onto the cold floor. He stood up half way and paused to turn to Rush. "I don't remember talking to dad," he said curiously. Rush nodded. "We did not. Nor mine." "Well, why not? I'd like to get to talk to 'em once," Rush shrugged, "no one knows if they perished." That sparked a hint of hope in Erik that soon ignited and drove him to get everyone on the road as soon as possible: if his father was alive, he'd damn sure find him eventually.

It only took Erik a few moments to awaken Jenkins and start collecting their inventory. Jenkins slid off of the top bunk and rubbed his face. "What's gotten into him, Rush?" Rush shook his head, "wants to travel again. Feels better." Jenkins sighed happily, "good thing," he mumbled. Rush sniffed the air and looked down at Jenkins. "You should shower, can smell you from last night." Jenkins looked confused for a moment, blushed, and quickly disappeared into the bathroom.

Erik busied himself gathering their goods and directed Rush to get as much data as he thought was necessary from the facility before they left. He said that the more they brought back, the happier the scribes would be. Rush nodded and did as he was asked, sorting through old documentation and holotapes scattered around the facility. Thirty minutes later, Jenkins emerged fresh from the shower. Rush lifted his head from a dusty manual and sniffed the air again. "Can still smell you," he mumbled to Jenkins as he walked through the door into the mainframe room. Jenkins shrugged, "I scrubbed all over." Rush shrugged back and mumbled, "you should get a mate," before returning to his manual.

Jenkins looked at him with an expression that read somewhere between "asshole," and "fuck you," before turning back to the barracks. Rush chuckled to himself, "so sensitive." After that thought, Rush realized he wasn't wearing his new clothes that Jenkins made for him; he must have escaped from them in the night. Rush went back into the barracks to find Jenkins with his belts in hand. Rush held out his right hand to retrieve them, Jenkins kept them just out of reach. Rush growled quietly with a warning that he was not prepared to play games this morning for his new pants.

Jenkins handed over his excuse for pants, but not before stealing a glance at what they would cover. Rush snatched them up and hastily donned his belts and loin cloth. After he clicked the second belt into place, he turned to Jenkins and growled another threat, "enough!" Jenkins ignored his threat and smacked his bushy tail on the way out with an armload of goods. Rush shook his head to himself, "he is very persistent." Rush fluffed out his tail, readjusted his belts and arm wraps, and joined the other two men.

An hour slowly crept by, and the three had finished their final sweep of the facility. By eight o'clock, their stomachs were jointly grumbling for breakfast. Rush whined to himself under his breath, wishing for a bite to eat. Erik had finally decided that it was time to go. He donned his bags and led the way, down the stairs and through the tangled mess of doors and tree roots. The blast of hot, humid air immediately had Rush panting. "Why?" he whined, "is it so hot?" Erik chuckled in tandem with Jenkins. "Rush," Erik explained, "this is *nice* weather. It's less than a hundred so far this summer." It never occurred to Rush that air could be thick: the humidity made him feel like he was breathing liquid water.

"Does it get colder?" he panted in question. Erik paused the group to check his map before he replied: the thick trees and undergrowth were making navigation difficult. "Yeah, but it's not even the middle of summer yet. You think this is bad? Wait 'til August. August is *always* bad." Jenkins chimed in, "that's even if we don't get a hurricane." Rush shook his head sending tiny droplets of sweat flying from his forehead. "What about snow?" Rush queried. "I've seen it a few times in the really bad winters," Jenkins said, "we're a little ways up north at Delta, so yeah. There's a chance." "How'd you know what snow was?" Erik asked.

"Father told me once. Out hunting, started snowing. Said it never snowed down there." Erik nodded, "I like the snow, but it's cold and can get pretty dangerous. You can get really sick if you don't get out of it and get dry. Or so I've been told. I always seem to be off scouting when it snows back home." Rush's panting slowly evolved into wheezing as they continued their trek Northeastward to their next destination.

Two hours into their four hour walk, Rush slowed down considerably. He halted without warning, dropping his bags and sitting on them, panting heavily. "What's the matter, Rush?" Jenkins asked. He was so thirsty, he couldn't answer verbally. He spoke to Erik instead, "it's so hot. This place is horrible. Why do you want to live up here?!" Erik laughed as he fished out his last flask of water and handed it to Rush. "You get used to it, Rush." Jenkins sighed, "the brain thing again?" Erik

nodded. "He's just dehydrated. He grew up in air conditioning his entire life. He's never experienced real weather before."

Jenkins nodded and joined Rush in a quick quest to quench their thirst. Erik joined in as well. Rush quickly emptied Erik's into his gullet, and still found himself wanting for more. He held the empty flask out to Erik who accepted it and shrugged when Rush gestured for another. "Sorry, we gotta make this last until we get to town." Rush whined loudly and huffed in aggravation. His canine-like pouting made Jenkins feel sorry for him, but knew he had to acclimate to the weather or else he could die.

Rush looked over to Jenkins with soulful puppy eyes and pouted. "Nope, you heard Erik. You've already had your ration. You'll make it to town. We'll restock there." Rush huffed again and fiddled with his belts until Erik and Jenkins were ready to go. Jenkins finished his flask with an extended "aaaah," as he stood up to put his packs back on. Erik did the same and gestured for Rush to do so as well. He took his time out of frustration. Erik slowed their progress down a bit for Rush, making their two hour walk into a three hour one.

After those three hours, they finally came across a dirt road that would join up to the old highway. "Ah! Good, we're almost there." Rush was dragging his clawed feet by this point, he didn't care. It was too damn hot. "C'mon, big guy," Jenkins encouraged, "just a bit more." Rush's pink tongue was lolling from his mouth, his fur was stuck to him in odd, sweaty patches. They continued down the dirt road, emerged onto the remainder of the aged, crumbling highway, and in another twenty minutes of walking North, they arrived.

"Fruitland," Erik sighed with relief. "We made it." The few scattered people on the south side of town paid them little attention. Erik readjusted his bag and led the way into the center of town. They passed a few ramshackle buildings, each peddling their own wares. Some of the waved to him from the porches, other called out to garner his attention. Rush was confused by Erik's rude behavior. "Why are you not responding to them, brother?" Rush thought to Erik. Erik responded mentally, "because I don't wanna buy anything right now. They just wanna trade. Don't make eye contact, just keep walking." Rush did as he was instructed, and stared down at the back of Erik's head the entire way to their unknown destination.

Erik mounted a porch at the far end of the row of ramshackle homes and pulled open a red screen door. A balding man in his mid-thirties called out to Erik from behind the receptionist desk by name. "Well, I'll be damned if it ain't Erik! How ya been,

bud? What's got you down here?" Erik smiled warmly and shook the man's hand as he arrived at the desk. "I'm good Ernie, I'm doin' good. How's Linda and your kid?" The man smiled broadly, "doin' great! Linda'll be happy to see ya." The man looked over Erik to Jenkins, and continued smiling. "Hey there stranger, Ernie's the name. You with Erik?" Jenkins shook the man's hand, "yes sir. Name's Axel Jenkins. We work together. How d'you know Erik?"

Ernie laughed heartily, "Well, son. Me an' Linda met Erik here a few years back. Helped save us from some o' them damn slavers. They rolled into town: said they was gonna wipe us out or sell us. Erik set up with me here in my little hotel and we fended 'em off for two days straight. After we killed their leader, th' cowards up and left. Ain't been back since. Erik blushed at the man's recant of events past. "It wasn't all that, Ernie. I just surprised them from behind when you went and got your stragglers together and blew 'em away."

Ernie came around the counter and locked Erik into a bear hug, "this little guy's too modest, I tell ya. He did our little town right that day." He let Erik go and continued after roughly ruffling Erik's hair, "I told 'em, I says, 'from here on out, you can stay with us as long an' often as you want. We'll keep a permanent room for ya.'" Erik blushed again. "Uh, Ernie. About that room?" Ernie pulled down Erik's special key from the pegboard and handed it to him. "Here ya go! Make sure you stop in and say 'hey' to Linda."

As Ernie was handing the key to Erik, he noticed the large wolf-man behind Jenkins. "Augh! I mean...", Ernie gulped and calmed his excitement. "Uh, sorry. Sir? You uh, travelin' with Erik too?" Rush nodded silently. "Well, alright, if you're with Erik, you're good people." Ernie held out his hand, Rush took it and gave him a hearty shake. "Alrighty boys," Ernie said after retrieving his hand from Rush's vice-like grip, "y'all need anything, jus' let me or Linda know."

Erik smiled and nodded as he thanked Ernie and led their way up the stairs to the left. "Nice man," Rush grumbled. "Yeah, he's good people. I wonder if everyone will be as surprised when they see you?" Jenkins shrugged, "bit rude, don't you think?" Erik and Rush both shook their heads in tandem, "Nobody's ever seen anything like Rush before," Erik explained. At the top of the stairs, Erik took a left and went down to the end of the Eastern hall. He wedged the key into room number 212, twisted the knob, and smiled upon entry. He was glad he helped these good people.

A strong-framed woman, mid-thirties, in a faded yellow dress with a bun of brown hair was freshening up the bed as Erik and the rest of his crew entered. "Oh, Erik!

How you been sweetheart?" She smiled just as broadly as her husband before walking over to give him a hearty hug. "I'm good Ms. Linda, you an' Ernie look like you're doin' well for yourselves." "Yeah, we've gotten some more traders comin' through pretty regular, got some new shops openin' up. Wouldn't've happened without your help, dear." Erik blushed again, "that's not true, Ms. Linda. I was just in the right place at the right time, that's all." Erik introduced her to his companions, "Ms. Linda, this's Axel Jenkins, and this, is Rush. He just started with us a few days ago." Linda smiled, "It's very nice to meet y'all. Now, get comfortable, and I'll have someone bring up a bite for y'all to eat. You look starved to death."

She didn't so much as flinch when Rush extended a fabric-wrapped hand to shake hers. "Well, ain't you just the gentleman? C'mere honey, we hug 'round these parts." She grabbed Rush around his midsection and gave him a warm, inviting hug, ignoring his copious amounts of sweaty, sticky fur. "Welcome to Frutlan' dear." With that, she left. "Is she good people too?" Rush asked. Erik and Jenkins nodded. "Yup," Erik said, "when you help people out, it always works out in the end." Rush nodded, "she was not scared." Erik chuckled, "Rush, these folks have seen the worst that people have to offer. As quiet and polite as you are, it's a welcome change." Jenkins nodded as he wedged between them to throw his gear on the freshly made queen-sized bed.

"So what's our plan, Erik?" Jenkins asked. Erik picked his bags up from the floor and tossed them next to Jenkins'. "Well, we need to get a bite, get stocked up on travel goods, and then I wanna go 'round and see if anyone knows anything 'bout those folks we spotted out there." Jenkins nodded in agreement, but asked as he hiked a thumb at Rush, "what 'bout him?" Erik shrugged and looked up to Rush, "how do you feel about asking a bunch of strangers questions they probably don't have answers to?" Rush shook his head, "would rather not." Erik nodded, "Yeah, me either. Do this then, while Jenkins and I are out gathering information, why don't you go chat with Ernie and see if he's got any odd jobs you can do? You're gonna need caps t' survive."

Rush nodded, remembering their conversation about trading caps for goods. He found the idea of trading slivers of pre-war metal for other things a foreign idea. After he agreed to do some jobs around town, a teenage boy knocked on the ajar door with a tray full of food. "Hey, Mr. Erik? Got some grub, if y'all're hungry." Erik eagerly took the tray and gave the young man ten caps. "Here ya go, thanks!" The boy nodded and left as quickly as he'd arrived. There were five plates with food and three ice cold Nuka Colas on the tray. "Alright!" Erik exclaimed, "we got squirrel on-a-stick, this," he poked a slab of some strange meat, "looks like iguana, that's probably

mirelurk cakes, uh what's this?" Jenkins took a bite of some strange casserole and shrugged: it was very sweet. "Dessert?" The last plate was a mixed assortment of fruits from the area: apples, pears, and mutfruit.

"Okay boys, dig in." Jenkins didn't need to be told twice. He and Erik quickly tried bits of everything while Rush poked it all very skeptically with a fork. "Hey, you gotta eat," Erik said through a mouthful of iguana. Rush nodded as he gently picked up a small portion of the casserole and nibbled on it. He was quickly licking his fingers for remnants of the sugary sauce that soaked the breading. He took a small bite of the shish kababed squirrel, then decided to devour it. He would have eaten the stick too, if Erik hadn't caught it before he gobbled it down. Now that his hunger had beat his skepticism, Rush slowed down a bit, then dug into the iguana. It was deliciously moist white meat, almost better than any mole rat Rush ever had.

Rush picked up one of the small corn cakes with his clawed digits and visually inspected it before he chomped it down. It was a little sweet and quite fishy. He didn't care for it, but he knew better than to complain. That left the Nuka Cola and the fruit. Rush recognized the apples and pears from books he'd read, but the third thing was new. He pointed to it and asked, "what is that?" "Erik picked it up and ripped a piece of the purple-blue flesh free and chewed on it. He mumbled, "mutfruit," through another mouthful. Rush looked to Jenkins for explanation.

"It's a fruit with little crunchy purple and blue knobs. Eat the knobs, they're good." Rush did as he was told and found them to contain an interesting flavor that he had never encountered before. He quietly ate one nodule at a time, trying to describe the flavor to himself. Ten minutes was all they needed to clear the plates. Erik topped off his voracious hunger with the ice cold Nuka Cola. It was so cold, there was actually frost on the cap when he popped it off and stuffed it into a pocket.

Jenkins took a sip of his soda and said, "you've never told me 'bout this place, Erik." Erik shrugged, "do you go around flauntin' your accomplishments?" Jenkins nodded, "yeah. Like when I patched up the huntin' dogs after they pissed off that Yao Guai that time. Seven of 'em, Erik. Seven. I basically reassembled seven of those damn dogs and nary a one has a limp or anything." Erik shook his head and smiled, "yeah, well. I don't like to go 'round gloatin'."

Rush appreciated Erik's modesty, and was equally impressed with Jenkins' medical prowess. "Seven?" he asked as he nibbled another nodule from the strange fruit. "Yup, lost one though. Poor thing got cut across the neck, bled out before I could

do anything about it. Still though, that's a damn good day's work for us medics." The young man that brought them their food reappeared at their door with a letter. It was addressed to Erik. The young man took the tray after handing off the letter and disappeared again. "Who's sendin' letters?" Erik mumbled aloud as he carefully opened the sealed letter.

The letter was written in a feminine, loopy script, complete with hearts over the i's and smelled lightly of mint.

Erik,

I spoke with the Elder when they got back. He wouldn't tell me where you were or why you haven't made it home yet. He said you'd probably get this letter if I sent it to the inn at Fruitland. It went with one of the traders, I don't remember which. Probably Crazy Dave. He's always out that way.

It's been pretty quiet here at home, just the regular traders running their routes, stopping in for their regular "services." It's all boring again, but I guess another day alive is better than one dead.

Franklin stopped in last night for his regular visit, Candy ended up going home with him again. (I don't know what she sees in him!) I chatted them up on the way out. He said that you and Jenkins are bringing someone new back? That's great! I'm anxious to meet the newest member of the Brotherhood.

There've been rumors going around from the traders that there's a group of bandits or tribals or something going around down there, harassing people. Have you seen them yet? Be safe out there...

I'll be waiting for you to get back, so be sure to stop in and say 'Hi.' No payment necessary :)

- ♥ Olivia

P.S.

I've got a surprise for you when you get back. I think you'll like it. ♥X♥0♥

Erik finished reading it, then lazily handed the tri-folded letter to Jenkins. He mumbled aloud to himself as he read it, then smiled broadly. "When're you gonna man up and make that girl yours?" Erik sighed and shrugged, "I dunno Jenkins. I wanna, but I don't wanna settle down yet. Got too much to do without having to drag her along an' worry all the time. Besides, I can't even afford to support the both of us." Erik slumped his shoulders, but Jenkins reminded him, "she can handle herself. Remember last fall when she beat that guy's ass bloody for gettin' handsy at work?"

Erik chuckled, "yeah. Guess I forgot about that. She sure handed his ass back to him in pieces, didn't she? D'you know where she was before she moved to 'th Burg?" Rush grasped for the paper to investigate for himself. Jenkins shrugged in response to the question, "dunno, but I know the elder tried recruitin' her. That was before y'all met, though. I think that damn woman's been head-over-heels for you..."

"What is the surprise?" Rush asked. Erik looked over from Jenkins and shrugged. "Dunno, Rush. Wouldn't be surprise if I knew, now would it?." Erik paused and asked with a hint of irritation, "why're you still here? Go see if Ernie can give you somethin' to do. We'll catch up later." Rush scowled slightly as he handed back the letter to pursue his new orders. Erik accepted the letter then glanced toward the ajar door. Rush nodded sheepishly as he crossed the room and closed the door as he exited.

Rush silently tread past a raucous party in room 203, descended the stairs, and soon found himself at an empty reception desk. He looked around warily, but found no one. He leaned over the desk to investigate further. He was nearly laying on the desk when a strong hand clapped his shoulder. Rush flailed momentarily, making it appear that he was trying to swim on the desk. The sturdy, balding man behind him chuckled loudly, "hey again big guy. Sorry 'bout that, had to piss like a racin' racehorse. Can I help ya with somethin'?" Rush nodded with a sigh of relief as he withdrew from the desk, "Yes. Erik said you may have odd jobs?" Ernie stared past Rush as he stroked his stubbly chin. "Lookin' to earn a few caps, huh? I dunno, son. What're you good at?" Rush shrugged, "can repair nearly anything:" he explained as he counted off on his digits, "radios, terminals,...." Ernie stroked his chin again in thought, then slapped his thigh in excitement. "Sure as hellfire, I got somethin' for ya! See if you can take a look at my ol' jukebox. Can't have a half-ass bar without a workin' one."

Rush nodded and followed the heavyset man into an adjoining room. An ancient, oaken, bar stood behind numerous stools of varying condition and heights. The small pub also held a handful of square tables with three times as many mismatched wooden chairs. In the corner, next to a dusty Nuka-Cola machine, was the malfunctioning jukebox. Rush knew what the problem was immediately, his sensitive ears could detect a power issue: it had a ground leak, causing it to hum around 60 hertz. Rush weaved between the numerous tables, located opened the front latch and stuck his entire head into the thing's guts.

In ten minutes flat, he'd discovered the main driver board had a short, rerouted power to bypass the faulty coupling, and re-latched the front of the wooden cabinet with a sense of pride. He confidently pushed the large blue, pulsating button on the front, and assaulted the pub with some sort of violin and yodeling din. Ernie was quite pleased and clapped Rush on the shoulder again. "Damn, son. That's quick work you done there. Tell you what, I'll pour you one o' my famous beers and we'll see if I can find you more stuff to fix. You keep this up, an' either I'll be flat broke or you'll be sloshed in no time!"

Rush panicked a bit, unsure of the euphemism. "Do not want to break you, sir." Ernie laughed heartily, "don' worry 'bout it son, let's go get you that beer you earned." Rush struggled to get the dust and grease from his padded palms, but happily followed the man to the bar. As Ernie rounded the corner to start a fresh pour, Rush took a seat on the most level stool. He fidgeted with his leather kilt-like garments before getting comfortable. Rush unconsciously signaled his generally pleased mood by nosily swishing his tail to-and-fro under the leather gear.

"Here ya go, son," Ernie said as he poured a bit of the foam from the top of the beer. "Thank you," Rush said as he accepted the golden beverage, his tail speeding in tempo. Ernie leaned on the bar as he poured himself a brew to match Rush's. "So," Ernie asked, "how d'you know Erik an' his friend?" Rush took a sip of the refreshing beverage and replied, "helped me, like you. Was under attack. Saved me." Rush took another sip. Ernie nodded deeply before gulping down a large portion of his lager, "good man, that Erik. You know, you two look kinda th' same. How's that for a coincidence?" Rush smiled, and continued his beer. "Now, who'd be attackin' such a civil guy like you?" Ernie paused and grinned slyly, "it's 'cause your a lady-killer, huh?"

Rush's eyes went wide as he panicked due to a misunderstanding of colloquialisms, "no! Never harm a female." Ernie shook his head and took another long draw of his beer. He finished by smacking his lips before explaining. "You must'a grown up in

one o' them valuts," Ernie mumbled to himself. "Naw, son. You look like you'd be breaking all kinds o' ladies' hearts round here. Charmer, a lady's man." Rush calmed and sighed inwardly before silently sipping his beer in silence.

Moments of silent beer drinking passed before Ernie asked, "not much for conversation are ya, son?" Rush shook his head negatively. "That's alright. Makes it more important when you got somethin' to say. Tell ya what, son, you finish that beer, and I'll go find some more stuff for you to fix." Rush nodded and thanked him as he left to retrieve more malfunctioning devices. Just as Rush got to the suds in the bottom of his glass, Ernie returned with an armload of miscellaneous objects: lamps, an old radio, a camera, and a hotplate. His wife quickly followed with a RobCo terminal in her arms. Rush thanked them both with a nod, then set to work. Linda and Ernie both watched with wonder from behind the bar as Rush deftly disassembled each item with the sparse tools available, diagnose, and repair each item; each quicker than the last.

The last item to repair was the terminal. After unscrewing the screws with a butter knife, he squinted at its dust-coated innards. Ernie took one of the freshly repaired lamp and used it to illuminate Rush's work. He looked up to Linda and grumbled, "what was it doing?" She took a cursory glance inside and shrugged, "won't save anything. I think it said something about some storage device, dear." Rush nodded and reached into to investigate. He poked, prodded, and wiggled various cables and components to find that one bundle of wires was burned clean through.

"Not good," he mumbled to himself. Rush extracted himself from the terminal and looked up to the two humans watching him. "Do you have wire?" Ernie thought for a moment then got half a sentence out to Linda who immediately set off like she could read his mind. She quickly returned with a bundle of miscellaneous wires and chips neatly arranged in a circuit-board green wreath. "Can you use these, honey?" Rush nodded and accepted the rats nest of cabling. He pulled some free and rewired the storage device, re-affixed the terminal's case, then powered it on.

The terminal hummed as the CRT warmed up. Within moments, it booted up as if it was brand new. Linda was visibly ecstatic, "oh, bless your heart! Now I don't have to keep inventory on paper anymore!" Her pleasure was infectious. Ernie grew a smile that matched his wife's. Rush soon found himself smiling back at them. He looked around and asked, "more?"

Ernie and Linda exchanged silent glances, then shrugged to one another. "Dear, I'm afraid you've gone and fixed all our stuff," Linda said cheerfully as she patted him

on his large forearm before offering him a fresh beer. "That one's on the house too," she said sweetly to Rush before turning to her husband. "Now, dear," she said in a slightly less-than-pleased tone, "have you paid the young man for his efforts?" Ernie quickly downed the last of his own brew before responding, "I ain't jus' yet, hon." She gave him a stern look and said, "bless your heart Ernie. You take it easy and I'll settle the bill."

Rush could sense that Ernie was about out of more caps that he'd planned. Linda patted her husband on the cheek as she swung around the bar. As she cleared the first set of tables, she beckoned Ernie to bring her freshly repaired terminal to the reception desk. Rush watched and waited silently while the married couple were having a fierce argument through glances and eyebrow twitches. He followed them into the main entryway, sipping his beer along the way. Linda rolled up her chair, powered her terminal on, and began processing her first digital bill of sale in nearly a year.

"Sweetheart," she called out to Rush, "what all did you fix?" Ernie chimed in for him, "two lamps, the hotplate from 102, your mamma's old camera, the busted radio from the kitchen, and that RobCo contraption." Rush cleared his throat and reminded him about the jukebox as well. Ernie blushed with embarrassment, "I'll be damned, if you didn't son. I love that damn thing. Th' bar's better off when its workin'." They fell silent again as Linda started to tally up Rush's total.

"Ernie, dear," she cooed sweetly, "go fetch two hundred caps, please." Ernie scowled but did as he was instructed. While he stepped out, Rush asked, "is that a lot?" Linda looked at him in surprise, then replied, "well, bless your heart. Don't you know? You been livin' underground, honey?" Rush nodded sheepishly in response. Ms. Linda didn't skip a beat, "oh, dear. Well, let's see. You fixed in an hour what it would take my butterfingered husband a year, so no. That's not going to be enough. I'll make it three hundred." She smiled up to Rush who continued his look of unsteadiness. "Oh, dear, what's wrong?"

Rush replied coyly, "never used caps." If Linda wasn't such a southern belle, she probably would have laughed squarely in his face. "Well, bless your heart, dear," she explained without the slightest hint of condescension, "when you want something, say t'get somethin' fixed, you trade caps for that person's time and supplies. Same if you want somethin' they've got, you give 'em caps, dear." Rush nodded and stood in an awkward silence, sipping his remaining beer until Ernie arrived with his payment.

Ernie produced a leather pouch of caps and poured them on the counter for Rush to behold. Unsure of what to do, he busied himself counting them. Rush had gotten up to fifty three when Erik came down the stairs. "Hey, Ernie, Ms. Linda! Is he doin' y'all alright?" Ernie laughed heartily and replied, "yeah, he an' Linda are in cahoots to help me outta all my caps!" Linda smiled sweetly at Erik and nodded, "he did a fine job, dear. He's a wonderful little repairman. Rush blushed fiercely at the compliment.

Erik paused and watched Rush continue to count his caps, making neat stacks of five. "Hey, Jenkins and I are gonna go stock up for the rest of our trip. You wanna come?" Rush shrugged again before returning to his stacks. Erik sighed internally at Rush's social awkwardness, slumping his shoulders before he looked over to Ernie, "Hey, Ernie? Ya'll hear anything about raiders, or tribals, or anything like that down this way lately?"

Ernie exchanged glances with his wife before responding. "Aw, well you know how them traders are, yappin' on all th' time. Truth be told, we heard not too long ago that there's a crew makin' rounds down by ol' Red Creek, maybe a bit further south. Even as far south as th' port, some say. O'course, you know how trustworthy their stories are, they're like my granddaddy an' his fishin' stories. Everyone knows the damn fish'll be the death of ya, but I'll be damned if he didn't catch one *this* big." Erik smiled politely and nodded, "did you get a description, by chance?" Ernie shook his head, "naw, son. Jus' that they were built like brick shit houses." Erik nodded again and looked over to see that Rush had completed his inventory of caps and was now trying to figure out where to store them.

"Uh, Ernie?" Erik asked, "any traders got leather goods?" Ernie stroked his chin while Linda answered, "yes, dear. Go find ol' Mae. She slaughtered one o' her Bramhin a few weeks ago. She's been hockin' leather all month." Erik nodded in mild excitement. "Can you hold on to these 'til we get back then?" he asked. Linda smiled, "sure dear, that's no problem. They'll be safe here behind the counter."

Erik issued his thanks before yelling for Jenkins to join them so they could investigate the wares for sale. He descended the stairs moments later to toss the key to Erik who handed to Linda with a appreciative smile. "Thanks, y'all." She smiled warmly while accepting the key.

Rush tagged along behind Erik and Jenkins as they exited the hotel and turned southward to brave the small, rickety wooden stands full of miscellaneous goods, guarded by traders and their armored, gun-stroking mercenaries. The slightly dusty

trade area smelled strongly of sweat, beer, and unwashed Brahmin. Two long hours there, and Rush learned all there was to know about trading caps for goods, how to tell if someone was conning you out of your money, and that some people have the unique ability to smell worse than a brahmin that has been rolling around in shit for a solid week.

Their short adventure netted Rush a pair of leather belt pouches and a military-style backpack, filled with goods for the trip. Erik carefully watched over him as he bartered and took no quarter from the fierce scrupulous traders. Erik and Jenkins did pretty well at the bazaar as well; between the two of them, they got about a dozen stimpacks, some miscellaneous parts and medical paraphernalia, some gun parts, loads of ammo, and a small silver locket that Erik planned to give Olivia when they got home.

As the trio neared the last vendor, Erik paused to stare at his wares on the table. He picked up and inspected a strange weapon that he'd never seen before: it was a wooden pole with a machete-like curved blade affixed to one end. The entire weapon was easily nine feet long from butt to tip. "Ah, fine choice, young man. Finest blade you'll find in these parts. Take off a guai's head in one good swing." Erik nodded silently with skepticism before handing it to Rush who held it awkwardly, unsure of what exactly to do with it. Erik shook his head and set it back against the stall in its original location.

The grizzled trader squinted at the mysterious creature named Rush, then asked "where'd you get that, young man? Don't you know them dogs need collars?" Erik put down whatever useless trinket he was inspecting, "get what? Collars?" The vendor looked up to Rush, then back to Erik. "I didn't *get* him anywhere. He ain't a pet," Erik replied sternly. "Ah, didn't mean no harm, just never seen one before. Was thinkin' it was a new mutie." Erik placed both hands on the rough-hewn wood and leaned toward the older man. "He's not an 'it', not a mutant, and not a pet. Got it?" Erik asked threateningly. The man slowly shrunk back and nodded silently. His nearby mercenary was getting an inflamed trigger finger, as he kept rubbing the hilt of his sawed-off shotgun.

Erik snorted in aggravation, and led himself and his comrades back toward the hotel. The old vendor yelled out to Erik shortly after he turned in a huff. Erik ignored him, but Rush felt compelled to see why he was yelling. Rush adjusted his backpack and looked over his shoulder to see the man advancing toward them with the sickle. "Brother!" Rush hissed in alarm. Erik spun on his heel, 10mm cocked, and aimed it between the man's eyes. "Don't move, old man. The hell's wrong with you? You think

it's a good idea to run at people with a weapon?!" Erik yelled. The man skidded to a halt on the dusty gravel road, sending small rocks flying with the toes of his worn leather boots.

The man stood completely still. His mercenary drew his weapon and cocked it, as did many of the surrounding vendor's protection. They all aimed at Erik, who kept his bead on the old man. "No son, sorry. I just thought *he* might like it. Didn't see 'im with no gun or knife or nothin'. Gotta have some sort of protection, right son? Erik nodded slowly, his aim unwavering. Rush stepped out from behind Erik, took a quick look at the unassuming man clad in shoddy merchant garb, and outstretched his long arm in his direction.

The man slowly advanced, grabbed the machete-stick near its head, and tilted the staff toward Rush. Under the aim of various merchants' mercenaries, he took a few, calculated steps and accepted the weapon. The older man sighed relief and said, "jus' take it son. Can't sell th' damn thing, had it for six months now. Didn't mean no harm earlier. Honest. Jus' take it." Rush nodded a silent thanks to the man who quickly returned to his booth without another word about the matter.

Erik enabled the safety on his 10mm and holstered it. One by one, the surrounding mercenaries did the same with their various shotguns and rifles. Under sixty seconds, everyone resumed their previous matters. A small group of nearby vendors were arguing over some inconsequential trinkets, mercenaries were sharing smokes; normal activities for those who live day-to-day.

Erik watched Rush inspect his new weapon and decided that he looked particularly frightening with it. "C'mon Rush, let's get back. We gotta fill you in on the rest of our trip." Rush tore his attention from the oaken handle, unable to decide if it was naturally red, or if that was the color of the previous owner's enemies before grunting his acknowledgment.

The three men walked back toward the town proper, their boots and Rush's padded feet crunching the gravel underfoot. "Well," Jenkins noted aloud, "that was nice of that guy. Bit weird though." Erik nodded, silently wondering what exactly the man's motivation was. Rush didn't care, according to the rules he learned that day, he made the best deal of all: he got a freebie.

Rush continued to inspect his new weapon. He eyed it closely as he kept Erik and Jenkins in his peripheral. The polearm was about nine feet long, its stock comprised of dark, nearly-black oak, and topped with a machete-like blade that thinned out

into a hook at the end. The blade of the weapon glinted in the afternoon sunlight with Rush's every step.

The three arrived back at the hotel some short time later, to find Ernie dozing at the desk. "Hoy, Ernie. We're back!" Erik exclaimed, alarming the overweight man, nearly sending him out of his chair. "Oh, hey boys! Have a good..." Ernie paused as he saw the intimidating weapon Rush had at hand. "Shit son, that's a hell of a blade ya got there," he whispered loudly. Rush smiled proudly and nodded. "Ah, well, it suits ya," Ernie chuckled as he fished Erik's key out of the desk, "y'all head on up. I think Linda's workin' on dinner. I'll have the hop send y'all up a bite." He paused and tapped on the nearby terminal's keys. "How long you stayin' this time Erik?" Erik adjusted his pack as he answered, "actually, we were lookin' at leavin' in the mornin', Ernie. Goin' out tonight, though."

Ernie smiled as he handed Erik his room key. "Sounds like a good plan son." He looked up to Rush, "you're gonna wanna leave that in the room son. I don't think the bar'll be happy with you draggin' that 'round." Rush nodded silently before following the other two men up the stairs, down the dark hallway, and back to their room. Erik fought momentarily with the lock, then swung open the door to see that some kind soul sent up a cot and full set of bedding. "Bet that was Linda," Erik muttered. "She's the best."

Jenkins nodded as he unloaded his pack on the left-hand side of the bed. Erik did the same on the right. Rush propped his polearm in the corner, then proceeded to wrestle his backpack. He nearly tripped over the desk chair before Erik came to his rescue. "Thank you," he muttered with embarrassment. Erik sat his pack in the chair and patted him on the back. "Ya did good today, Rush. I think you earned a drink." Rush liked that idea. Jenkins nodded as he stuffed a handful of caps into a pocket.

"I've got the first round," Jenkins said. Erik looked to Rush and suddenly recalled that he didn't have pockets. "Rush, let's go downstairs, get your pay, then we'll go." Rush nodded and led the trio back from whence they came. "Well, damn. That was quick," Ernie noted aloud. "You find Linda's handiwork?" Erik nodded and handed him back the key. "Yeah. We appreciate it. I think that bed's a bit small for three. You mind if we pick up Rush's pay? He can't buy us drinks if he's broke," Erik chuckled. "Yeah, one sec," Ernie said as he disappeared behind his solid wood desk. A hand fished up from the floor holding a leather pouch.

Rush took it, and turned the container out onto the counter. Ernie watched as he did so, then asked with a hint of irritation, "don't think I'd steal from ya, do you

son?" Rush paused mid-count then realized he was being rude. "No, sir. Apologies," he mumbled as she scooped them up and stuffed them into a belt pouch. Ernie cleared his throat, "where y'all drinkin' tonight, boys? My bar's back open, thanks to the big guy here!" Erik shrugged, "is the Shipwreck still serving shitty drinks?"

Ernie's gaze shifted up nervously to meet Erik's gaze. "Ah, you think it'd be a good idea to bring *him* in there, son? They don't take kindly to, ah, well you know," he faded off sheepishly. "Nah, we'll be fine," Erik said confidently. "Besides, we need more info on that new crew down in Ol' Red Creek." Ernie nodded. "Alright, son. We'll see you 'round. If you get in late, you know where your key is."

Erik nodded and shook the man's hand, then led his crew out into the quickly setting afternoon sun. Rush was surprised to see that it set so early. He guessed it was about 6 o'clock or so. The trio crunched back down the gravel road, past a few closed storefronts and scattered town homes before they came to the corner of the street. Sitting in front of them, was a wood-and-brick building with a weather-beaten shark's head sticking out of the top. It had a rough wooden sign with the hand-painted letters "SHIPWRECKED" jutting from between its triangular white teeth.

Erik stopped fifteen feet in front of the door, then thought back to Rush, "behave and don't talk much. Don't tell them your in the Brotherhood. Just drink with us and enjoy the night. If things get dicey, get out of there and go back to the hotel." He then repeated these directions to Jenkins, who nodded skeptically. "Why the warning?" "You never know who's around. Just be smart. We wanna get some more info about those people we saw back at the camp." Jenkins and Rush nodded jointly, then followed Erik through the crustacean-and-cast-net-decorated door into the smoky bar.

The bar was fairly empty: a larger man sat at one end of the bar, chatting with one on either side him; one skinny, the other balding. The bartender was near them, leaned in, and listening intently. There was a couple playing pool, and a younger man who looked out of place. He was in a fairly well-kept suit, smoking a cigar, and sipping what Erik guessed was a few fingers of whiskey. No one paid them immediate attention, much to Rush's relief.

Erik slowly approached the bar, taking a seat near the middle on the longest side, bidding his two friends to join him at either side. The burly bartender with a short-cropped haircut that seamlessly became a beard noticed their arrival. "What can I get you...." He paused when he looked at Rush, who looked back without provocation. "We don't allow pets in here, he's gonna have to go." Rush fiddled with his pouch and supplied five caps to the man. "One beer, please."

The grown man nearly fell over himself in surprise. "I'll be damned if you ain't well trained!" Rush nodded, unsure if that was a compliment or not. "Is five not enough?" The man was fighting an internal battle of "what the fuck is happening" and "oh! money," while Rush provided ten more caps and arranged them in three neat stacks of five. The bartender blinked in disbelief, then decided it was rude to not take customer's money.

He scooped up the caps, pulled three empty pint glasses from under the bar, and proceeded to fill them up with golden bubbly liquid. "Uh, sorry, chief. Never seen anyone like you before." The man poured a fourth and placed it by Rush. "S'on me." Rush nodded his thanks and grabbed his first pint and began drinking. He, Erik, and Jenkins chatted amongst themselves in hushed whispers, discussing their upcoming plans for the week when the bartender reappeared.

"Sorry to bother ya again chief, but we gotta know," the bartender explained, "where'd you come from?" Rush looked to Erik who sipped his beer and replied mentally, "just make something up. You grew up in the woods, raised by wolves. That should be believable." Rush choked on his own beer: that explanation was absurd. He cleared his throat and finished the remainder of his beer then replied exactly as Erik had instructed.

The bartender nodded, as if that explanation made perfect sense. "Makes sense you'd look like one seein' as how they'd raised ya." The three men at the end of the bar were nodding at one-another completely taken by the shoddy excuse. The bartender cleared Rush's empty glass, then moved to their right where the couple playing pool were coming up to the bar. The woman, a slightly chubby brunette of mixed descent, cooed when she saw Rush. "Aww, he's like a big teddy bear, ain't he, Jimmy?" Her boyfriend, or husband didn't seem to share the same excitement about a man-size furry wolf thing that undoubtedly had sharp teeth to match.

The woman sloppily slapped five caps on the bar and demanded another beer before she turned her attention back to Rush. He realized now that she was heavily inebriated. Unabashed, she reached up and roughly petted Rush's head. This made him feel incredibly awkward. The baby talk that leaked out in slurring dribbles, didn't help matters. Rush cleared his throat then took a sip of his beer before speaking to the woman. "Do you need help, ma'am?" "Oh, look Jimmy, he can talk? Isn't that sweet? Who knew they made talking teddies?" She failed to stop petting him. Rush sighed internally and looked to her male friend and hoped he would intervene.

He did not. Rush thought to Erik, "please, make this woman quit. I don't know her. Why is she touching me? Why is she speaking strangely? Is she okay?" Erik choked on the last dregs of his beer before aiding Rush. "Ah, ma'am? Would you mind giving my friend here a break? He's not a dog, but he does like to bite, you know, if you're into that sort of thing." She quickly withdrew her hand, wiping it on her blue jeans. She muttered something under her breath to her male friend along the lines of "that sounds good right about now." The man quickly tossed a large handful of caps at the bartender and the two exited into the night.

Rush was provided another drink, "that's from her man. Was thanks for gettin' 'im laid, I think." Rush nodded awkwardly as he tried to put his head fur back into its normally-messy position. As he accepted and sipped his second beer, Jenkins furnished a handful of caps and beckoned the bartender, "three fat mans, please, sir." In a moment's notice, the bartender produce three mason jars and proceeded to fill them half way with Nuka-Cola. He then wrangled three shot glasses and filled each with a perfect amount of three unknown liquors.

Jenkins counted out his caps, then arranged the glasses in front of himself, Erik, and Rush, then provided a simple set of instructions: drop, chug, enjoy. After a count of three, they did. Rush thought the drink was horrible, but Jenkins and Erik seemed to be enjoying theirs immensely. Rush licked his now-numb lips and went back to sipping his beer. Erik ordered them a second round of Fat Boys. Rush grimaced, but repeated Jenkins' instructions, and did his best not to vomit.

After placing their glasses back on the bar with a clang, they then both looked to Rush hoping for a third, he shook his head and sipped his beer, offered ten more caps, then pointed at his beer, then his two comrades. After the bartender served their round of beer, the three men on the far end of the bar were getting rambunctious. Their conversation had grown from an angry whisper to all-out yelling. "I tell ya, Bobby, I seen 'em. Clear as day, God damnit!" "My hairy ass, Dale. They ain't been anywhere near here for twenty years." The third man wiped the foam from his patchy mustache and chimed in, "Jimmy's right, Dale, ain't nobody seen 'em since they cleared out Red Creek."

That immediately got Rush's attention, as Jenkins and Erik were arguing about something that was undoubtedly unimportant. The bartender perked up as well at the mention of Red Creek. "What'd you say, Dale? See what?" Rush leaned on the bar to see the man as he spoke. "Those damn tribals what burned down my ol' home, that's who. Bastards burned up everything. Even my still!" He paused momentarily, then cheered the air, remembering his whiskey still.

"I thought they all got killed," the bartender asked. The man named Dale shrugged, "I dunno. Same lookin' folks, built like brick shit houses, carryin' those damn flags or whatever they are." Rush piped up, "was it white and black?" The drunk man nodded roughly in reply, "yeah. Had some sort a snake or something, how'd you know" Rush nodded solemnly and thought to himself for a moment before he ordered the three men at the end of the bar a round, then another for his own companions.

They stayed and drank until midnight, when the bartender declared that he had a woman upstairs to tend to, and they needed to leave. All six drunken men complied with minimal complaints. Rush was doing his best to stumble through the loose gravel toward the hotel while supporting a very sloshed brother and Jenkins. He walked slowly behind the three men they'd met in the bar; trying to overhear their conversation.

The loudest of their group, the potbellied and balding man named Dale, picked up his story from earlier. "So, like I's sayin', there's them tribals or something that comes to town — my town — and starts killin' folks and burnin' the place down! Good folks, I tell ya. Lost damn near everyone. I made it out with my old lady an' our dog Ratslayer. I heard later the mechanic and some lady saved a kid or something and went up North. Maybe it was a dog? I don' remember." His friends were cajoling him, generating frustration. "I tell ya, godamnit, I was there. I tell you I was!"

That's all Rush got to hear, as they had arrived at their final destination. He gingerly guided them up the steps and to the reception desk. He smiled broadly when he saw that Ernie had fallen asleep at the desk, waiting for them. Rush whispered as gently as his alcohol-soaked brain would allow, which wasn't very gentle at all. "Mr. Ernie! We are back!" Ernie toppled over backwards with his chair in surprise.

"Ah!" he yelled, slowly peering over the top of the desk. "Oh, damn it," he muttered, rubbing his eyes. "Looks like y'all had a Hell of a time. Headin' up?" Rush nodded roughly. A wobbly Jenkins nodded about five seconds after Rush had stopped. Ernie chuckled to himself then decided it would be best to help. Ernie took Jenkins from Rush, then led them up the stairs to the second floor, down the hall, and to their room.

Ernie sat Jenkins on the bed, then ushered in Rush and Erik. He patted Rush on the arm, thanking him for taking care of Erik, then left them to their eventual suffering. Rush took stock of their situation: Erik was so drunk, he forgot how to speak verbally and drunkenly assaulting Rush's brain. Jenkins had the same idea as Erik: be loud and irritating.

Every few seconds, Erik would relay something to Rush that he thought was life-or-death information for Jenkins. Rush would then relay the message to Jenkins who made him repeat it multiple times until he fully understood the statement. Jenkins then proceeded to yell his responses back at Rush, as if Erik had gone deaf. This went on for ten minutes before Jenkins realized he needed to urinate, but had forgotten how.

Rush watched Jenkins rise from the desk chair and graze the wall on his way to their tiny restroom. He ran a hand along the wall to stay sturdy. He was soon baffled by the door knob on the wooden door leading into the bathroom. He held onto it, then unconsciously rocked back and forth with his alcohol-drenched equilibrium before remembering that it needed to be twisted, not pulled.

Rush chuckled to himself when Jenkins was still fighting the door moments later. He helped by wandering over and opening the door for him, silently praying that he didn't fall and smash his drunken skull on anything, as Rush wasn't going to go in and help. All was quiet until Jenkins got his zipper working.

The longer Jenkins took, the quieter Erik's mental drunken ramblings became as he slowly drifted to sleep on the queen-sized bed. Rush's eyelids were getting heavy as well; he abandoned his post near the door and wobbled back to Erik, who was just drifting off to sleep, still fully garbed in his civilian attire. Rush tugged off Erik's leather boots and threw them haphazardly on the floor. Rush then stopped caring all together and utilized gravity to pull the bed closer to him, leaving him in drunken pile next to his little brother.

Rush quickly drifted off to sleep. However, the concoction of alcohols left his mind restless, leaving his addled mind to wander into Erik's dream.