

CHAPTER 24: A BUSTLING LITTLE COMMUNITY OR MOVIN' ON UP

Whatever Erik was in the middle of doing, surrounded by dogs, was completely derailed by Rush's arrival. He blinked in next to Erik. "Hello, little brother," he said to dream Erik with a drunken slur. Erik smiled, but didn't reply. "Why are there hounds here, brother?" Again, Erik failed to respond. He did, however, part a gap through the dogs and walked in some unknown direction. Rush followed without question, curious to see what this was all about.

Erik walked for some time before he spoke up to Rush. "I want you to see something." Rush nodded and asked, "what of?" "Your new home. I think you'll like it." They walked for some time with the pack of dogs before they spoke again. Rush tried to talk to the dogs in the same way he did with the yao guai, but he got nothing. "Must be because it's Erik's dream," he guessed to himself.

At the end of the worn footpath through their grassy green plain, was a signpost, painted in Erik's hand. One of the wooden arrows, painted "Burg" pointed North, while another, painted "Magnolia," directed them Southwest. A third pointed South, had no name—it had a bold question mark, painted in deep crimson. Erik stared at the signpost for some time, contemplating something. Rush stared at it too, as he threw an arm around Erik's shoulders.

Erik looked up and smiled, then pointed up to "Burg." "We need to go, Rush." Rush longingly looked at the simple sliver of wood that pointed to their childhood home and realized he was already homesick. Erik took a refreshing breath of the clean air, then lead them on their way. Rush and the odd pack of dogs followed at his heels. Rush took better stock of the dogs: they were all mottled, similar in color, size, and markings to what he believed was once a breed of canines called German Shepherds. Every dog had the same silver, rectangular tags that Erik and the other members of the Brotherhood wore.

"Brother," Rush inquired, "why are there dogs?" Erik shrugged without an immediate answer. Did Erik feel they were his flock or was he their Alpha? Rush pondered that question for a few moments, before Erik answered, "I dunno Rush. They remind me of the Brotherhood, I guess: loyal, brave, and most of the time, they don't judge you or each other for their past or decisions." Rush nodded and replied, "makes sense. You miss your blood pack, so you adopted one instead."

Erik stopped, but not due to Rush's comment—he was completely correct. Erik had reached a tree line that he didn't recognize. He frequently had this dream, but had never seen these trees before. He quickly spun on his to face Rush. "What's going on?" Rush shrugged innocently. Soon after Erik queried Rush, they both heard familiar voices emanating from behind the tree line. Erik stood his ground, but Rush was immediately anxious: the voices belonged to their fathers.

Rush hugged the tall pine trees as he slunk into the underbrush to investigate. "They will return," he heard his father say to Erik's. Erik's father nodded and replied, "we must warn the clan." Rush cleared a few more trees to find himself no longer in a pine forest, but in the entrance to the Magnolia base that he had grown up in. Erik was confused as he exited the forest behind Rush: he was expecting more trees, not their old home.

Rush stood between his father and uncle, who ignored him. He then spotted a very young version of himself peering around a corner. He was eavesdropping. "Erik will be safe," Rush's father said, "Rush will care for him, as was intended. We must eliminate the threat of those hostile humans." Erik's father nodded in agreement, then replied, "I'm afraid those that escaped will look for us."

Dream Rush tried to grab his father's shoulders and convince him not to leave: this was the last time he saw his father alive. Rush's father spied his younger self hiding and called him out with a soft growl. "Son, I know you are here, come out from the shadows." Young Rush, tail tucked and ears pinned, came forth as he was told. "You know better than to eavesdrop." Little Rush nodded in shame, then looked up to his father and uncle. "Daddy, are you and Uncle going again?"

Rush's father knelt next to his son, and looked into the amber eyes that matched his own, "yes. We must prevent a threat to the clan. But do not worry, you must focus on taking care of your brother. Uncle and I will return soon." Little Rush nodded looked up to his solemn uncle who cracked a small grin in the same way that Erik frequently did. "Worry not, young Rush. We'll return soon."

Rush's uncle and father patted his head in turn before sending him on his way, back to the leaders-in-charge. Rush watched his past self disappear. Normally when that happened, the memory went too, but this time it stayed. Erik stood opposite of current Rush, his father and uncle to his left and right respectively, and stared intently. It was uncanny how much Erik looked like his father: all four of them shared similar cowlicks, Rush and their fathers shared similar fur colors and markings, but unlike Rush and his father, Erik and his father had stormy, grey eyes.

They both watched as their current elder, twenty-something years younger and three months pregnant, reappeared with young Erik in her arms.

She held his tiny hand as she said, "Donald, you should see your son before you go." Erik's father nodded grimly and hoisted his son, cradling him in his thick, muscular arms. "Oh, my boy," he whispered, "I am terribly sorry." His father nuzzled his cheek, "you must grow to be strong. Help your brother and keep the pack safe. One day, you two will leave home, just like your uncle and I." Tiny Erik knew instinctively that something was wrong. He began to weep profusely.

Erik's father choked up as his eyes misted over. He handed Erik back to their future alpha and smeared the betraying tears from his face. "I love you, son. We all do. Remember us well." He clapped his brother on the shoulder and nodded. Without another word, they set off from the entrance and quickly faded before the past elder and young Erik.

The dream began to fade and smear, as if they were moving through time. Rush realized they were in the server farm near the specimen tubes in sub level five of their old home. Rush and Erik watched a larger version of the Rush they saw earlier sprint by at break-neck speed, calling out for the elder. "Elder! Elder! There is an intruder in the building! A man!" Present Rush gulped as he remembered this day, it was the day that Erik was taken away.

Erik and Rush gasped in unison as a third member joined them: Jenkins. "Uh, where are we?" Rush and Erik exchanged glances, then looked back at Jenkins. Rush replied, "home. Our old home. Sad day. This is the day that Erik was taken from us." Jenkins' dream self nodded slowly, as Rush's dread washed over him.

"Rush! Why must you yell?" the elder replied to young Rush's calls. Young Rush repeated his previous statement and awaited some form of action to be taken: a full-blooded human hadn't been in the facility since before their doctor-grandfather was turned into a robot. The elder snarled to herself, then set off with Rush in tow to find doctor Hawthorne, he would know how to handle this situation. None of them were prepared for a meeting or attack by outside forces. She feared the latter.

They soon found the robotic man, pouring over an equation he had composed on one of the wheeled chalkboards. "Ah, yes. Elena, what is it?" She replied quickly, "man inside. Intruder." The robot nodded mechanically, "I am aware. I have been following his progress through our facility. He is very bright and appears to have some

training. The intruder has been able to detect and decoy all of our traps. He is intriguing. I'd like to meet with him."

Elder Elena didn't seem pleased with that plan, and said told him so. "I don't think so, if you die, we'll have no medical care or scientist capable of creating more of us." The robot shrugged nonchalantly—if that was possible. "Elena, you worry. I have been watching him. He is not prepared for a war to break out, he is simply armed and I have blocked radio communications: he does not have backup. I believe he is on a scouting mission." She shook her furred head in disbelief.

"What if he kills you? What then?" The doctor failed to reply immediately. "I will meet him on the fourth sub floor and distract him from the populace here. Instruct them to hide, but prepare to defend themselves if necessary." He paused for a moment then asked, "where is Donald's son?" Little Rush went wide-eyed when the doctor asked that. "Little brother Erik," small Rush asked. "He's at home with Auntie Alexis." "Fetch him," the doctor said, "I believe it is time."

Elena visibly paled under her grey-tinged fur and questioned with fervor, "do you intend to give him Erik!? He may not look like us, but he is no failure ..." "If the man is of good heart, I will send Erik home with him. Erik will not develop properly without human interaction." That statement angered the elder, "*human* interaction! How is that any better than his own damn family?! How are we any less than human?! Since the last attack, I think we've had enough human interaction!"

Again, the doctor repeated his demand: "get Erik." She sighed deeply as she was sure that he was being sent to his death. "Very well, doctor," she muttered bitterly. The scene faded and moved the slumbering trio to a new location: the familiar entrance to their facility. They saw the doctor and Marshal Redding holding a civilized conversation about the necessity of adopting Erik. Redding was led to believe that, miraculously, the babe had been born down there as a product of lost raiders and the robot's experiments. The doctor persuaded him that Erik must be raised outside of the facility: he would perish down here.

After much discussion and chatting, Rush saw his tiny brother being carried away by a strange human. Jenkins squinted, "is that the elder?!" Present-day Erik and Rush nodded in unison. "Yeah," Erik replied. "I guess this is the day I left home." Erik blinked blankly at the scene, astonished that his grandfather would so willingly trust a strange human with his grandson.

The scene faded out and back to a place familiar to Jenkins and Erik, Rush had never seen it before. They were standing in front an ancient brick building. It was the old commons hall in the Burg. It must have been shortly after the Brotherhood liberated it from the area's raiders, as there were still obvious signs of recent warring: shells, bullet casings, and bloodstains. Elder Redding was carrying the small Erik in his arms as he arrived to the building opposite the one they were standing in.

In the doorway into the second building, he met with a female ghoul in a blood- and smoke-stained lab coat. Erik smiled, that was the old ghoul professor that lived with them at the Burg. She helped train their medics and lead the experiments with Willis. Ida, to Erik, was like Alto was to Rush. A mentor and role model that helped shape them into useful young men. To Erik and Jenkins, she looked nearly identical to how she did when they left home just a few weeks ago: thin framed with small patches of lose or missing flesh, scraggly blonde hair, bound into a ponytail. She happily took young Erik from the elder, then led them both into the brick building. "That's the labs," Erik muttered to Rush, "Ida and Willis work there with the scribes at home." Rush nodded as they followed Ida down the linoleum-lined hallway. The halls were smoke damaged and lined with refuse from the previous raider inhabitants. A few moments and a case of stairs later, she entered a code on a metal panel to grant them access into her home for the past one hundred and fifty years.

Ida, a professor of botany and biochemistry at the University, set up shop when the war broke out. She often helped the locals with their farming needs, or the government when they came calling for assistance or, at least she did before the bombs fell. She was anxious to examine this child, it was the first she had seen in quite some time. Ida led them through a hall, down another flight of stairs and into the basement of the building. They finally came to an examination room she set up for the express purpose of detailing the mutating wildlife she encountered on her frequent trips to the surface which lead to her own mutation.

"Here we go," she said gently as she placed Erik on the barber's chair. Elder Redding then patted him awake. "Wake up, Erik I want you to meet a friend of mine." Little Erik pried his heavy eyelids open, then screamed when he saw Ida. She was taken aback for a second before remembering how she looked. Little Erik leaped from the chair to hide behind Redding. He chuckled, "it's okay. She is a friend. Her name is Miss Ida. Can you say "hi" to her for me?" Little Erik refused as he dug his face into the strong legs in front of him. Ida smiled at Redding as she knelt down to meet the child.

"Hello young man, I'm Ida. I work with mister Redding. What is your name?" Little Erik was silent before peeking out from behind the safety of his adoptive father's legs, "Erik," he squeaked. Ida extended a gloved hand, "nice to meet you Erik. I just want to take a look at you, make sure you're well. After I'm done," she paused to glance up and wink at Redding, "I'm sure mister Redding will take you around the lab here and let you see all of my cool experiments. How does that sound?" Redding turned and picked Erik up to place him back on the char. "That sounds like a great idea, Miss Ida."

Dream Erik blushed with embarrassment at his younger self. They watched as Ida took a blood sample, much to Erik's behest, followed by a general checkup, then a small toy car to compensate him for his time and good behavior. Ida beckoned Redding to her messy desk, jotted something down in a file, then handed it to him with a genuine smile. "Very healthy," was all they heard her say.

The laboratory swirled away before the three men, and sent them back outside to the entrance of the commons building. It was much cleaner now: the debris had been cleaned up, and the blood stains had long been faded by the sun. Ida led Erik from the Scribe building about eight o'clock in the morning when something in the distance caught her attention. Whatever it was, it was off in the distance, kicking up dust down the highway. She hoisted up Erik and ran inside, just as their sirens went off. She ran through the commons into the operations room with the child and announced breathless, "something's coming north up the highway!" Redding and a few other well-equipped men exited past her. Redding paused to glance back at now five-year-old Erik who smiled and waved at his father.

"Have fun daddy!" he yelled with a smile. Redding matched it and followed his team outside to assess the situation. An hour later, and to everyone's relief, it was not an assault on their base, but a group of refugees. Erik and Ida watched from a second story window as Redding met with the largest man of the group. He was driving a beat up blue four-door Corvega. It was filled to the brim with people and supplies. Two more were parked behind it, each just as full as the first. They couldn't make out what the men were talking about, but from Redding's body language, he seemed quite pleased, despite the obviously harrowing circumstances the people were under. Fifteen in total emerged from the cars and milled about on the road between the commons hall and the main road.

Erik excitedly pointed through the window to the last car, "look Miss Ida! Look! They've got a friend for me!" Ida squinted at the last car then nodded, "yup. Looks like they've got a kid." Little Erik was beyond ecstatic. He began to run around in

circles chanting, "new friend, new friend, new friend for meeeee." Ida thought this behavior was both precious and irritating, but she couldn't blame him. The only people that had time for him were herself and Redding. "Yes, Erik, now. Let's settle down and see what happens." A few more laps around with chanting was all he needed to return to concentration.

The pair, along with the dream trio, watched as Redding inducted the survivors into their town. The large man that spoke with Redding was visibly relieved. He slumped from his perfect militaristic posture with a grateful sigh and shook Redding's hand vigorously, ending it in a hug. His small crew of survivors cheered in an exhausted sort of way. The strong man turned to get back into his car when Redding placed a hand on his shoulder and said something they couldn't hear from their vantage point. The large man exited his car and made his way to the last one, beckoning a frazzled black woman and child from the front.

Dream Jenkins, who was peering through an adjacent window, nearly fell out of it. That was his mom! "Momma?" he muttered aloud. She held the small child and looked skeptically at Redding. He extended a hand to shake, but she wasn't having it. She was still distrustful of people in general. Redding nodded knowingly, then turned to point out the young man he knew was peering through the window. Little Erik bolted down the stairs, skidded through the double doors, then slid to his father's side, ready to be a member of the welcoming party. Dream Erik grinned, "Jenkins, remember this?" Jenkins shook his head negatively.

"This is the first time we met," Erik explained. No sooner after he explained, did the scene dissolve from their view, leaving the three men in the joint dream suspended in grey darkness. Not long after, a final scene opened up in front of them. Older versions of Erik and Jenkins, both about eight, were in a makeshift classroom, presided over by Ida. "Now boys, did you do your homework?" Jenkins nodded as he lifted the lid on his desk to fetch his assignment. Erik folded his arms and shook his head defiantly. Ida shook her head, "well, I'll have to inform your father then, Erik." He silently called her bluff, they both knew that he didn't need to do the homework, science and math came easy to him.

Just as she called him to the front for a good spanking, familiar sirens went off across the Brotherhood campus. She grabbed the boys and they dashed to the safe confines of her basement facility. They waited for what seemed like hours before they heard the "all clear" signal. Ida emerged first from the safety of the basement as Redding came to the entrance with a broad smile, "more refugees." Ida's eyes lit up, any children? He nodded, "two young men, quite a bit older than our own." She

smiled and patted Redding on the shoulder. Dream Jenkins remembered, "this is when Chase and John came," and told his surrounding dream comrades.

Erik nodded, "We didn't meet them until later though, right?" Jenkins nodded, "they showed up during dinner." As they spoke, the dream melted away, leaving them in the familiar darkness. Jenkins opened his mouth to say something, but was distracted by Erik's real-world Pip-Boy. It was 0600 in the real world.

Jenkins, asleep on the cot in the hotel room, rolled off in attempts to locate and silence Erik's Pip-Boy. Rush found it first: it was still attached to the still slumbering Erik. "Oh, God. Please. Make it stop," Jenkins muttered through his hangover. Rush removed the device from Erik's arm, disarmed the alarm, then placed the device on his own left arm for safe keeping. Jenkins sighed, cradled his head momentarily, then made his way to the bathroom.

Rush investigated Erik's Pip-Boy when he heard Jenkins turn on the tub's taps splash in. Rush quickly became bored and resorted to roughing up his little brother's hair. "Wake, brother." Erik groaned and turned over to his back and squinted at Rush through the early morning light that filtered through the boarded window. "What Rush? It's so early." Rush smiled and licked his forehead, "we must go home today." Erik sighed when he heard that, "home," he echoed. "You're calling it home now?" Rush shrugged after sitting up, "you showed me last night." Erik shook his head and requested clarification, "what, now?" "To help prepare me for arrival." "Oh, yeah, sure," Erik mumbled. He didn't remember.

Thirty minutes later, Jenkins emerged from the bathroom in nothing but a towel. "Much better," he declared. "'Bout damn time, I gotta piss like a racin' race horse," Erik complained as he escaped the confines of the comforter, made his way to the bathroom, and locked the door behind him. "Good morning," Rush said to Jenkins, who nodded in response. Jenkins sat in the desk chair and dug through his duffel bag for some clean garments. Rush immediately began interrogating him. "Jenkins, why is your mother a different color than you?"

Jenkins turned his back to pull on some fresh boxers as he replied, "dunno Rush. Never asked really." Rush squinted in mild disbelief, but then remembered Erik's warning that Jenkins didn't know he was adopted. "May have skipped your generation," Rush said. Jenkins stood up from the chair and threw his towel over his shoulder before pulling on his pants. Rush watched. "Not wearing your armor?"

Jenkins answered to his bag, "Nah. Too hot and there's not much reason to here anyway." Rush shrugged as he looked around for his arm wraps. How did he keep managing to disrobe in his sleep? He checked under the covers to realize that his leather kilt was missing as well. "Jenkins," he asked, "pants?" Jenkins was fighting a shirt and poked his part of his head through an arm hole to reply, "Yes, I'm wearing pants." Rush shook his head then extracted himself from the covers. "No, mine," he replied. "Seen them?"

Rush watched as Jenkins blushed through the arm hole then turned his back to Rush as he completed donning his shirt. Jenkins shrugged to the door, rather than reply to a Rush with no clothing. "Nope, haven't seen them. I'm, uh, gonna go see if I can scrounge up some breakfast while you look," he said with an awkward strain. He reached out for the door, fought the urge to turn and steal a glance. He fumbled with the door and nearly sprinted out of the room, fiercely blushing. Rush shook his head and started investigating their bags for his clothing.

Erik exited the bathroom just as Jenkins slammed the door behind himself. "Where'd everyone go?" Erik queried to what he thought was an empty room. "Wanted breakfast for us," Rush yelled from under the bed. Erik bent down to see Rush under the opposite side of the bed, "what're you doin'?" Rush looked around then withdrew, "can't find my clothing." Erik shrugged, "they're in the bathroom. You don't remember?" Rush stood up and shook his head. Erik hiked a thumb over his shoulder, "you were complaining last night about being dirty, so you took a bath and I guess just left them in there."

Rush shrugged, he didn't remember that at all, but it sounded like what he would do. He went to the small room and retrieved his clothing. He clicked his belt buckle in place around his waist, then inspected himself in the mirror: teeth, eyes, and ears, all looked good. Rush looked at the strips of grey cloth that he used to wrap up his arms and decided that just the weird dress thing would have to be good enough. He took the strips, neatly folded them up and shoved them into one of his belt pouches. He brushed down the more haphazard patches of fur and washed his face.

Jenkins arrived moments prior with a large tray of breakfast, courtesy of Ernie and Linda. Three large plates with scrambled eggs, blood sausage, and toast greeted Rush's nose. He sniffed the air excitedly, "new things to try," he thought to himself as he quickly exited the bathroom. Erik sat at the desk and handed Rush his plate. Jenkins stood in the corner near Rush's polearm and dug in. Rush took his plate, sat on the bed, then began investigating the strange food. He pierced a large piece of egg with a claw, then sniffed and placed it on his tongue. He rolled it

around, chewed on it, then decided it would be sufficient. Erik tossed a fork to him, "rather than use your hands," he explained. Rush nodded then used the fork as a makeshift shovel, piling the scrambled yellow fluff into his mouth.

He quickly wolfed down the eggs before getting to the sausage. He'd never seen anything like it. It was gently crescent shaped, plump, and full of...stuff. He tore it open with a claw and began poking at its contents. Jenkins looked up from his nearly empty plate and watched as Rush investigated his food. "It's boudin. Blood sausage." Rush blinked, unsure if he heard correctly. "Blood?" Rush asked, causing small flecks of egg to fall from his maw. Jenkins nodded, "made from meat, liver, heart, blood, rice, and wrapped in a casing. It's pretty good and full of protein."

Rush nodded as he investigated his meat further. The meat and organ tissue didn't bother him, nor did the little white things that looked like worms, it was the coagulated blood. He carefully ate a small piece and found that the sausage was tasty, just as Jenkins has promised. Rush gobbled down the remainder of his meat, licked his plate clean, then smacked his lips, wishing for something to drink. Erik met his needs, offering a steaming, stained white coffee mug from a second tray nearby.

Rush took it with both hands, sniffing its contents. He grimaced. Erik laughed, "you'll get used to it eventually. It's good for you too." Rush blew across the surface of his chicory tea and sipped on it. This one was better than the first that his new elder gave him. It was much sweeter. The Erik and Jenkins finished their breakfasts in silence. Erik collected their soiled dishes, loaded up the trays, then brought them downstairs after hiding some caps in one of the mugs.

He always felt guilty for how well Ernie and Linda treated him, and made an effort to hide caps in his room during his stays as a way to say "thank you." He trotted down the hall, down the stairs, and into the kitchen behind the reception desk. "Mornin' Ms. Linda," he said happily. She took the dishtowel from her shoulder, patted her sweat beaded forehead and smiled in return. "Mornin' sweetie. Y'all enjoy breakfast?" Erik nodded, "yes ma'am. Thanks." She took the trays and dishes from Erik and placed them in nearby sink. "Ernie's out back." She said, waving him off as she began to wash the dishes.

Erik took no time to stride past her, through the kitchen, through the back door and out to the porch. As the screen door battered closed on the weathered wooden frame, he heard her say, "oh, bless your heart, Erik," as his handful of caps spilled out from the mug and clattered in the stainless steel sink. Ernie was sitting in a

rocking chair, watching the sun rise and sipping on a mug of steaming tea in his boxers. "Howdy, son. Sleep well?" Erik scratched his head and chuckled, "yeah. Sorry 'bout comin' in so late like that." Ernie smiled and took another sip of his tea, "nothing to apologize for, son. Can't work all the time. You gotta take a break now and again."

Linda came out with a pair of mugs and offered one to Erik. He gratefully accepted as she took up residence in the rocker next to Ernie. They slowly rocked to-and-fro as the sun lazily started to ascend, illuminating the gloomy, overcast sky with hints of brilliant orange. Ernie took another sip of his tea then asked, "so, that big friend of yours, Rush?" Erik nodded as he stared to the East. "Yeah?" "He seems like a pretty stand-up guy. Where'd you find 'em? I never seen anything like 'em." Erik continued staring at the trees in the distance, "Ah, well," he stammered, "I was down South, doin' some scoutin'. Found an abandoned facility, and went in to check it out." Ernie nodded silently, "an' what, he was just livin' in there? All by himself." "Yeah," Erik lied, "in that big place all by himself. There was a few robots there too, all friendly." Ernie shuddered, "hate them damn things." "Yeah. So I get down there, trigger a silent alarm, and the bots come runnin' for me."

Erik was making things up now, but he knew it'd be believable. "So, I'm dealin' with the robots, they knocked me out, took my guns, and threw me in a cell. Then this guy come out. At first I thought I was dinner. He stared at me through the bars for an hour or two, just studyin' me. Eventually he starts talkin' to me and not long after, he lets me out, so long as I don't make trouble." Ernie looked genuinely surprised as he sipped his tea again. "Big guy said you saved him. How'd you manage that from a cage?" Erik took a quick swig of the warm tea to make some time. "Ah, yeah, so after he let me out, we talked some more. Worked out that he's not a man killer or anything. We were chattin' when the Enclave hit."

Ernie jumped out of his char. "Shit! What're they doin' back down here?!" Erik shrugged, "dunno." Ernie realized he spilled his drink on himself as he tried to take a sip out of the empty mug. "Damnit," he muttered. "You think it's got anythin' to do with those folks th' traders're talkin' 'bout?" Erik shrugged again, "Hope not. Enclave's never been good news." Ernie agreed.

"Here, hon," Linda said, exchanging his empty mug for hers, "an' dry off, dear." He blushed, kissed his wife thanks, and did as she instructed. She offered to take Erik's mug, but he declined as he wanted to finish its contents. Ernie eased out of the rocking chair and walked to the edge of his porch while he wiped himself down. "Damnit, son. Anyone else know 'bout the Enclave comin' back? They ain't been down

here for a while now, right?" Erik swallowed hard and replied quietly, "no. Not since we lost some folks to 'em a while back. Them and their damn deathclaws." Ernie stared at the young man and immediately felt bad about bringing breaching a sore subject, but it was necessary.

"You say somethin' 'bout the Enclave sweetheart?" Linda asked as she returned from the kitchen with a fresh mug and another towel. Erik nodded slowly and said, "I think they're on the move again. Plannin' somethin'. Maybe somethin' to do with those tribals we heard about from the traders." Linda exchanged a nervous glance with Ernie. They all stood silently on the porch, sipping their respective drinks, slowly filling with worry.

Erik cleared his throat, "well, I gotta get back home and see what they wanna do. Maybe we got reports from other places 'bout these folks." Ernie and Linda nodded, unsure that they wanted to see their link to the Brotherhood go. "How do we, uh, get a hold of ya if we need anything?" Ernie asked. Erik thought for a moment. "You still got that radio I left here a while back?" Linda nodded, "yeah, Ernie sleeps with it on the nightstand." Ernie scoffed. "Use that to call us. You see or hear anything suspicious, call and let us know."

They both nodded as Erik smiled again and thanked them for their hospitality before walking back through Linda's pristine pre-war kitchen and into the foyer. Rush and Jenkins were awaiting him there. "We're gonna have to cut this trip short. We need to get home," Erik muttered to Jenkins with a hint of dread in his voice. Rush didn't like that at all. "What is wrong, brother?" Erik shook his head, "we'll chat on the road." Ernie and Linda came in through the kitchen and bade them farewell and swift travels, promising to keep his room available for the next time he was down in their neck of the woods.

The men shook hands, Linda gave out hugs, and watched as the three men traveled northward on foot. They made slow progress, as they each had a full pack, weapons, and various bags to lug around. "Damn," Jenkins muttered three hours into their walk, "wish we had a car handy." Not two minutes after that one zoomed by on the dilapidated highway they were walking on. The driver pulled the emergency brake, then swung back by them. All three watched this mad man in awe and fear. Erik dropped his bags and had his 10mm at the ready before the car finally finished fishtailing around. To their surprise, Ernie appeared from the driver's door with a pack on his shoulder. "Y'all need a ride?"

Jenkins was agape, maybe he was hallucinating. It was beginning to heat up. Erik looked up, highly suspicious, "yeah, but where's Linda and Mary?" They both emerged from the back seat of the Corvega. Linda smiled, "we decided to make a trip up to the Burg and thought y'all could use a ride." Ernie popped the trunk and offered the space for them to throw in their packs and bags.

Erik beckoned Ernie into the median, pulling him away from earshot. "What's going on, Ernie? Why're you leavin' Fruitland?" Ernie looked around and replied, "well, we got to thinkin' about what you said. The Enclave comin' and we figured it'd be better for us to go up North an' help y'all rather than stay in that podunk town and wait for death by laser rifle. Been through that before. Ain't doin' it again." Erik sighed and nodded, "I understand, but what about the rest of the town?" Ernie shrugged, "some boarded up and hit the road East, some are headin' up this way, some are stayin', said they'd be damned if they're gonna give up their land."

Erik turned and scratched his head, "so, you told them and now Fruitland's just a ghost town now?" Ernie nodded sadly, "more or less. Gave the hotel to the traders, told 'em to take care of it, use it as a pit stop, keep movin' north. Talked most of 'em into extending their trade up to the Burg." Erik sighed aloud. "Okay, okay. Let's go then, we've got a good three or four hours of drivin' before we get there, then I gotta talk to the Elder an' let him know this is goin' on, then get y'all settled."

Ernie nodded, thankful. "This gonna be a problem?" Erik scratched his jaw, "no, I don't think so. Just a surprise is all. Besides, there's an abandoned hotel in town that need a proprietor." Ernie smiled, "good." "Yeah," Erik said, "there should be plenty of shops and old homes and stuff that the townsfolk can shore up and stay in. I'm a bit worried 'bout resources though."

Ernie clapped him on the shoulder, then pulled him in for a tight bear hug. "Don' worry, son. You did us right before, now it's our turn to do the same." Erik nodded uneasily and led them back to the car. He tried to sit in the back bench seat, but was quickly foisted into the front at Linda's protest. She, her daughter Mary in her lap, Rush, and Jenkins took the wide back seat.

All six of them chatted about various things amongst themselves, mostly about the mysterious man named Rush. The long, three-hour ride culminated shortly after noon. Ernie's disheveled red Corvega rolled into the southernmost part of town. Brotherhood sentinels were already descending upon it when Erik and Jenkins exited. A quick chat with the captain on duty granted them quick access into their makeshift

base. Erik walked around to the driver side door and instructed Ernie to follow the captain's every word and to drive slowly. He'd go get the elder, explain the situation, and sort everything out.

Ernie nodded, worried at all the multiple men in metal suits that surrounded his car. Rush wanted sorely to leave with Erik and Jenkins, but was told to stay in the car. The captain mounted his motorcycle and ordered that the civilians in the red car follow him from checkpoint Bravo up to the garage. Ernie followed their every instruction. Five slow minutes later, they saw Jeknin's father, Tom, appear from the garage, covered in grease and grime and a giant smile. "Howdy folks! Don't worry 'bout the big tin cans. They're here to protect us all," he explained as he opened the driver side doors, letting Ernie, Linda, and Mary out. "Just got word from Erik 'bout y'all arrivin'. Y'all got one more?" Ernie nodded and pointed to Rush, who was hunkered down in his seat.

"Well, come on out, guy. Ain't nobody gonna hurt you here," Tom exclaimed with genuine intensity. Rush fumbled with the locking mechanism on the door, then slowly exited the car. It was a good thing that the men in suits were under helmets, or Rush would have been even more scared than they were: he was in genuine shock. Erik already warned Tom, so he didn't miss a beat. He walked from the front of the car over to Rush, did his best to wipe the grease from his left hand, then offered it to Rush. "Howdy, son. Heard good things 'bout you. You been takin' care o' my son an' Erik, I hear." Rush nodded and accepted the man's handshake. "Now, then. Let's get y'all settled in, and I'll take care o' your beauty here."

"You mind?" Tom asked as he closed the doors and jumped into the driver's seat. Ernie shook his head and watched as Tom parked his red four-door Corvega between a pair of blue ones that had also seen better days. The captain walked up, popped off his helmet and officially introduced herself. Rush was captured by her brutish beauty immediately. She shoved her helmet under her left arm and offered a gloved hand to Ernie, Linda and Mary in turn. "I'm Capitan Penn. Brotherhood of Steel. Head of every miscellaneous thing that keep this place runnin'. Y'all just met Tom. He's one of our civilians. Runs the garage. Keep our stuff in workin' order." She nodded to Rush and said, "*you*, don't move." He squinted in confusion, but did as he was told.

Capitan Penn gave some instructions to her surrounding subordinates who ushered the three newcomers into town, towing their belongings for them. The Captain saluted Rush who stared back, unsure of protocol. "Nice to meet you, Initiate Hawthorne. I gotta get you debriefed, into housing, then training in that order. Can you handle

that?" Rush nodded silently. "You talk, boy?" He cleared his throat and replied, "yes." "That's yes ma'am, Initiate." Rush nodded again, and replied, "yes ma'am." "You can listen. That's good, now let's go. I'll have my boys drop your stuff off at Rade's place." Rush furrowed his eyebrows in question. "Who, ma'am." "Erik, son. Erik Rade." Rush nodded, he forgot that was Erik's full name.

A short jaunt across the secured highway, a median, and field of crops, Capitan Penn dropped Rush off at the entrance to the barracks. A pair of Brothers in Steel guarded the door in full power armor and automatic weapons. They saluted as she approached, she matched their gesture. "Got the new Initiate here, show 'em 'round." The guard on the left saluted again, opened the door for Rush, and ushered him in. The Captain turned and said, "we'll see you, Initiate. Go get settled in." Rush a bit uncomfortable, hiked his thumbs in his belt and followed the armored man in to the commons hall that Erik showed him in his dream.

The great hall lead off into various rooms and offices. Each end of the building had stairs twenty feet wide leading up to the second deck. Rush took in everything he could: every smell, every sight, every strange social custom. He followed the slow man from the entrance, through two sets of double doors and into a wood paneled room with a couch, numerous chairs, a cold fireplace, and grand wooden desk. Behind the desk was a chair turned away from the entrance, hiding its occupant. The metal-clad solider next to Rush announced, "Initiate Hawthorne sir." A familiar voice came from behind the chair, "that'll be all, solider. Thank you. Close the door on your way out."

The man saluted and did as he was instructed. Moments later, the chair swiveled around and looking back at Rush was his own little brother, Erik. Rush was ecstatic. "Brother!" he said excitedly under his breath. Erik stood up from the leather chair and walked around the desk to give his big brother a hug. "Hey big guy. Welcome home. Initiate." Rush smiled, initially, but it faded into confusion. "My name is Rush. Why does everyone call me initiate?" Erik shrugged as he sat on the front of the desk. "We go by titles, then last names. First names are only for intimate settings with friends and family. In public and around other soldiers, we stick to title and last names," Erik paused. "For instance, if you see me across the way, you shouldn't just yell out 'Erik!' stick with 'Paladin Rade, sir.' Just like I'll be calling you 'Initiate' or 'Initiate Hawthorne,' unless we're at home or something."

Rush nodded, it was a similar setup to what they did back home, just words instead of body language, scents, and pheromones. "Sir," Rush asked, "is this your room?" Erik chuckled, "no, I'm just borrowing it. All of us paladins share it. Don't call

me sir when it's just us." Rush slumped a bit with relief. "Brother, are you not a scout?" Erik nodded affirmatively. "Yeah, but my rank is Paladin. I'm one of the youngest the Brotherhood's ever had." Rush stared at his brother in awe, proud of his accomplishment, even though it didn't mean anything to him yet.

"Ranks start at Initiate. That's you. Then Knights, Paladins, Knight Captains, then the Elder. That's the military side. The civilians're Scribes, High Scribes, and then the Head Scribe." Rush nodded, attempting to memorize this new information. "Don't worry," Erik assured him, "it's all covered in your training. Which, by the way, starts tomorrow." Rush was surprised, "but, there is no home for me to sleep in." Erik nodded, "yeah, we're working on that. You're staying with me until we get you something set up." Rush nodded slowly, glad he had some sort of comfort to hold on to in this whirlwind of change.

As they chatted, a knock came at the door. A muffled voice came from the other side of the double wooden doors. "You decent, Pallie?" the voice asked as the doors flew open. Rush spun around and stared at the men striding into the room. It was Franklin, followed closely behind by Jenkins. "Grab the door, trash can." The same man of steel quietly groaned as he closed the door behind them. Franklin prided himself in thinking of derogatory terms for those lower than him. "Howdy boys," Franklin said as he collapsed on the white couch. "Home early?" Erik and Rush nodded in tandem. Jenkins took a seat next to Franklin. "Sober?" Erik asked Franklin. He scoffed lightly then replied, "yeah, for now. Workin' in the kitchen again 'til the elder says I'm good for field duty." He stood up, realizing Rush was in the room, and offered a hand to shake. "Good to see you again, Initiate. Welcome home." Rush completed the shake with a grateful nod.

Another knock came at the door, this time with an announcement, "Elder Redding, incoming!" There was a short pause, enough time for Franklin and Jenkins to stand up, then the door swung open to allow the Elder in. He wasn't in his armor, like Rush expected, but scarlet red robes. "That will be all, thank you Gene," he said to the man who closed the door behind him. Three of the four men saluted his entrance, Rush did so after realizing that was the proper thing to do. "At ease, men. Have a seat, and let's be frank." "Done," Franklin said sarcastically. The crisp tension in the air dropped immediately as Erik offered the chair behind the desk to his father. He and Jenkins took the two freestanding chairs while Franklin and Rush took residence on the couch.

The elder cleared his throat, then leaned on the desk with his elbows, folding his arms into a nonchalant pose. "First thing's first. Welcome to the Brotherhood,

Initiate Rush Hawthorne. Rush saluted again, earning him a genuine smirk from the elder, "At ease, son." Rush slowly lowered his hand back to his lap. "Second," he turned to Erik, "I hear you brought some new folks here." Erik nodded affirmatively. "Care to tell me about them?" Erik nodded again and gave him a brief explanation of Ernie and his family, where they came from, and why they were leaving. The elder leaned back in his chair in thought, "so, are they back for sure?" Erik shrugged as he mirrored his father. "Dunno, sir. Saw what we thought were tribals back in Red Creek, got confirmation of reports from traders in Fruitland. I wouldn't be surprised if the Enclave's behind it. Usin' 'em to scout around maybe? Would draw less attention."

The elder rubbed the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "Well, we knew it was going to happen eventually. Enclave's been quiet for too long. What else does using the tribals gain them?" Rush spoke up, "have seen them before, sir." Elder Redding looked up to his newest member and bade him to explain, "what do you mean, son?" Rush did his best to mirror Erik's brief style. With a great deal of effort, he explained that their clan had seen the same, or similar, tribals wipe out Red Creek a few decades ago. "Father reported it," he finished with an air of confidence. The elder massaged his nose again in silence. They all sat in silence before the elder spoke up again, "Jenkins, go get your mother and Tom. I need to speak with them. You have permission to take the remainder of the day for yourself."

Jenkins looked around momentarily in suspicion before standing up, saluting him, and left to do as instructed. The elder waited for him to leave before speaking again. "Boys, I have some news that I'm sure you already know." Erik looked back to Franklin, then to Rush. "Sir?" "To the point, Jenkins is adopted, his parents died in the attack on Red Creek." Franklin was slightly surprised, but the other two simply nodded. "I figured as much. He doesn't know, and Tom and Marie want it to stay that way. All of this business with these tribals may drag up old memories." All three nodded.

"Following that, we need to get more intel about these new tribals, figure out if we need to do anything about them. If worst comes to worst, we'll have to deal with the Enclave again. I don't like how they showed up and attacked your home, Rush, and I don't like how they knew I was coming." He produced a creased letter from his pocket and tossed it across the desk to Erik. "That's from y'all's grandfather. Franklin looked shocked before he remembered that Erik was adopted and born by werewolves. Or something like that. "Was it that they were raised by wolves?" he thought to himself.

Erik opened the letter. It was fairly new, to his surprise.

June 20, 2280

Marshall Redding of the Brotherhood of Steel,

It has been quite a time since we last spoke, Mr. Redding. I apologize, but I seem to have forgotten your rank. I'm sure you understand, at my age, you tend to forget such trivial things. Regardless, I wanted to thank you for the good news--I am happy to see that you have now adopted Rush into your little brigade.

I write to inform you that my grandchildren and their friend have stumbled upon one of a number of remote sensing stations. These were originally part of my research station, but have now lapsed into disrepair. Included with this letter are their locations: five in total. You and your company are welcome to use them, provided you care for them.

I believe they will be instrumental in the upcoming months.

Allow me to explain why: the men that attacked my home are on the move. They appear to have recruited a score of people and appear to be preparing for an attack. I do not know whom they plan to attack, but I can assure you they are preparing to wage war like no one has seen since the Great War that ravaged our planet long ago.

I know this because I am their silent captive. They have not yet detected my presence in their ZAX mainframe and I have maintained limited access to their networks and data stores in the local area. While, I cannot promise that I will remain undiscovered, I will continue to send you updates and help as I can.

Give Rush and Erik my best.

—Doctor John Hawthorne"

Erik read the dot-matrix printed letter multiple times, just to make sure he wasn't having a stroke. Their grandfather was indeed alive and now has infiltrated the Enclave's network. Great! Erik handed the letter to Rush before collapsing back into his chair and rubbing his forehead with confusion and frustration, mimicking his

adoptive father. Rush had much the same reaction that Erik. "There's a chance," he thought, "we can save him."

Rush carefully folded the letter and stuffed it back into its envelope. He stared at it momentarily before sliding it across the desk to his new elder. Redding stuffed back into a back pocket, then sighed. "So, there's that. That's good news, right?" Rush nodded slowly, but Erik and Jenkins shook their head. Franklin was too busy with his previous thoughts of Erik being raised in the pine forests by wolves to pay attention and missed the question. "Was it bears and not wolves?"

Erik replied, "sir, if he can get to us from their mainframe, what's to stop the Enclave from doing it too?" The elder shrugged, "the scribes say we're safe for now. Something about bouncing satellites or some other nonsense. I never know half of what they're saying." Rush that broke their short silence. "Sir, what about the new people?" The elder smiled in response, "they're being taken care of, it's almost like it was twenty years ago. Much more pleasant this time though. The Jones' will be taking over the old Magnolia Hotel on the East side of the highway. Some of their neighbors from Fruitland have decided to stay in the Burg and help build it up. I believe that most of their traders have sent letters far and wide to reroute them up here."

Erik sighed with relief, "that's good. You think we'll be able to keep everyone fed and taken care of?" Elder Redding nodded slightly, "we'll find a way. We always do. We may even get a few recruits out of it, eventually." With that morsel of good news, he stood up from behind the desk and saluted his subordinates. "Hail steel, brothers." They stood up, saluted him back, then watched as he left into the hall.

The guards left the door open, signaling that their meeting was over. Everyone followed Erik into the main hall and milled around. "Gotta go get dinner started," Franklin mumbled. Jenkins waved as Franklin turned to walk toward another set of large wooden doors down the hall. He turned to face Erik and ask, "what now?" Erik shrugged, "you've got the day off, I've gotta drag this guy around and give 'em a tour." Rush brought his gaze down from the grand staircase he was inspecting with a mixture of apprehension and excitement.

"Okay then, be sure to introduce him to your lady, Erik," Jenkins said in a sing-song and irritating sort of way. Erik grumbled in his direction as Jenkins left through the main entrance and walked southbound. "Probably going to the bar," Erik thought to himself. Erik looked up to Rush and smiled, "well, let's get to it."

Erik started by leading Rush down the steps of the commons building. He pointed East, "that's the lab, further past that's the sniper tower. Used to be another science building, I think." He turned to the North and pointed Northwest, "there's where we do our morning training and weapons trainin'. Brahmin pens next to that." He looked around, and walked south. "The little building here's the chapel." Rush tilted his head in his dog-like manner, "chapel?" "Yeah, it's for religious folks. They go there once or twice a week and pray or whatever it is they do." Erik's explanation of the building answered Rush's next question of Erik's religious beliefs. Apparently they were far and few between.

"The big building past that is the other scribe's building. They stick to it and the lab." Rush nodded, he squinted and pointed past the scribe's workshop, "what is past there?" Erik kept walking. "A couple of abandoned buildings here, a few crop fields, a brahmin pen, dog kennel, the bar, and the bath house." Rush nodded again, "is that where we are going?" Erik nodded, "yeah. Want you to meet Liv." Rush blinked, "Liver?" "No, Liv. Short for Olivia."

Rush asked, "was she the one in your dream?" "What, the one you spied into?" Rush nodded silently. "Ah, yeah. She's the one." Rush nodded again, "good. You should mate her." Erik coughed as he choked on a bit of saliva and surprise at Rush's comment. Rush chuckled as he patted Erik on the back. "Apologies." Erik sputtered before yelling at Rush, "you can't go 'round sayin' stuff like that!" Rush shrugged, ignoring his embarrassment. "Why ignore the truth?"

They walked past a few abandoned buildings and a careworn motel before arriving at their destination. Erik paused outside the door, checked his pockets, took a deep breath, then opened the white paneled door. "Howdy, stranger!" some lady cried from behind the desk near the entrance. Erik nodded at the woman and asked, "Liv in?" The lady began to answer, but paused when Rush walked in behind him. Her eyes grew wide with fear, but stayed dead silent. Erik noticed this and immediately turned to pat his elder brother like a dog. "Oh, no! He's fine. He doesn't bite or anything. He's with me."

Rush played the part, smiling and panting like a good dog, while mentally berating his brother. Erik took every mental slap in stride and agreed that he deserved it. Erik explained that he and Rush would wait outside for Liv while the nice lady fetched her before exiting the whitewashed wooden building. Rush sat on the railing while Erik stood nearby, waiting anxiously for his favorite female. Rush groaned loudly, "Not a dog." Erik shook his head, "I know Rush, I panicked. I don't think it's a good idea for me to be tellin' everyone exactly who and what you are. We need

to find a better way to introduce you." Erik began a mock conversation, "Oh, hi! This is my werewolf, Rush. Or how about, I'm a werewolf and so is he! Except he's hairier." Erik sighed, "I dunno. You sure you don't wanna get on all fours and act like a dog? I'd be so much easier."

Rush halfheartedly growled and mumbled, "do you like urine in your boots?" Erik laughed and roughed up his hair affectionately. Olivia exited the bath house, in a blue dress that was low cut and had a short hem, leaving little to the imagination. To Rush's surprise, Erik's dream was fairly true to life. He watched her full and shapely hips move as she shifted her weight from one leg to another, inspecting Rush just as he was inspecting her. He investigated every bit from her heels, up her long legs, great birthing hips, to her respectable bosom, up to her emerald green eyes surrounded by flowing shoulder-length hair. It was brown this time, not blonde like in Erik's daydream. Those eyes held no hate, no contempt, nor fear. She put her hands on her hips and squinted at Rush through her long eyelashes and smiled.

"Why do you look like a big, fuzzy version of my Erik. Who are you?" Erik took the item he was fiddling with from his pocket and readied it and mumbled, "he's my...my, uh. My brother, Olivia." She stared into Erik's cold, grey eyes, then up to Rush, who was wearing a goofy grin. "Yeah, I could believe that," she said, "anyone with that cowlick and stupid grin *has* to be kin to you somehow." Rush immediately dissolved his grin and instead chewed on his lower lip in mild embarrassment. Erik gently took her left hand from her hip and placed the item in it. "I, uh, thought you'd like it." She opened her hand and immediately threw herself into a tight hug around Erik. "It's beautiful!"

Erik nodded as he returned the hug and started to explain his feelings for her, but quickly became embarrassed and trailed off into a mumble. Rush cleared his throat and spoke for him with a mischievous grin, "he likes you. Wants to mate with you." Erik's eyes went wide with shock as he stuttered over her shoulder, "I. No! I mean, yeah, but. No. Er, not if you don't want. Uh," he paused to glare momentarily at Rush who continued to be pleased with the chaos he just created. "I uh, want you to come with me. Be a member, come with me and we'll do good...stuff. You know, like we do. In the Brotherhood."

Olivia broke her hug, and looked at the goofy werewolf as she palmed her silver necklace. "Is he serious?" she asked Rush. He nodded without hesitation. She looked at blushing Erik and said, "I'll let the Madame know I'm leaving. She's been expecting this for a while now anyway, she and your father had a chat. I'll let him know my final decision". Erik gulped. She leaned in and kissed his forehead before

calmly walking back into the bath house. Unphased by the news that Erik had a werewolf for a brother, or that he wanted her to come with him.

The instant the door closed behind her, Erik was on Rush like white on rice. "The hell did I say, Rush? What did I say?!" Erik yelled at his older brother mentally. Rush smiled and roughed up his hair, "needed help." Erik groaned and said, "I'll remember that the next time I'm near a cliff." Rush bent down and licked his brother's forehead, "you are welcome." Olivia exited the building again, this time carrying a small duffel bag and wearing a large brimmed hat. "Well, Erik. Let's go. I've got some training to do, I believe." Erik nodded in a trance: her silky smooth brown hair was hidden neatly under her hat, making herself seem smaller than normal.

"You get that letter I sent?" she asked as they began walking back toward the common building. "Yeah, what's your surprise?" She paused dramatically and said, "I'm pregnant." She waited for the color to drain from Erik's face before continuing. "You...what? Who?!" She laughed, "nah, I'm just kidding. I'm no whore." Erik was both relieved and quite angry. She threw an arm around his shoulders, mussed his hair, and said, "the surprise is that I'm joining up with the Brotherhood. I already spoke to the Elder, he's more than happy with my progress."

Erik turned and asked ",progress?" She nodded and continued her slow pace, "yeah, been training on the side with one of the Captains there. Captain Penn?" Erik nodded again, "yeah, she's tough alright." "She thinks I'm ready for field duty already, she's really pleased with my weapons handling." Erik and Rush's eyebrows jumped at the same time, "weapons?" Rush inquired. "That's right, big guy, little lady here's got quite an eye for plasma rifles." Erik was positive that he just fell in love 100 per-cent more with this hardened wasteland woman. "Interesting note about Cap. She's butch, you should let Frank know," she said nonchalantly.