

CHAPTER 25: NEW COMRADES OR CHECK OUT THE NEW GIRL

Erik laughed aloud as their little chat led them directly to the common building. Olivia and Rush stood quietly by while Erik spoke with one of the guards, instructing him to allow them in and to send notification to the Elder of his need for a meeting. The unknown metal-clad man saluted Erik and swiftly did as he was told. The other swung the door open and gestured for Erik's companions to follow closely and not touch anything.

"Short tour," Rush mumbled as they entered the building they were just in an hour ago. "What's that?" Olivia asked. Rush shook his head, dismissing his complaint. Erik led them to the room they had previously used as a meeting room. "I'll be back in a few, get comfy," Erik said aloud. He quickly followed to Rush mentally, "you tell her anything embarrassing, and I swear I'll kill you. Dead. As in permanently-not-coming-back-dead, Rush." Rush nodded as he took a seat in a chair. Olivia took a seat on the couch's arm, smoothing out what little dress she was wearing.

Rush couldn't stop staring at her. Olivia took it as a compliment. "Erik'll get jealous if he sees you staring at me like that," she said with a sly grin and sultry tone. Rush blushed and immediately averted his gaze to a random corner in the room. She laughed at his awkwardness, "now I *know* you're kin to Erik. You can't handle women, can you?" Rush slowly shook his head, fixing his gaze on the corner of the fireplace mantle.

She sighed slightly before getting up and sitting in the chair next to him. "So, big guy, how're you and Erik kin?" Rush wasn't sure if he should be completely honest with this strange woman or if he should lie through his many, pointy teeth. Rush swallowed and said, "will let Erik explain." She shrugged, "okay, then." Rush looked over and asked, "how did you meet him?" She smiled coyly and replied the same way he had, "I'll let Erik explain."

After that, they sat in awkward silence. Well, it was awkward for Rush, she though it was funny how easily flustered he was. She tentatively reached out to pet him, wondering if he was as much dog as he looked. He watched her strong hand rise from her lap and over to his muzzle. She smelled like mint. He liked that. She gently rested her hand on his muzzle and petted him gently. "Oh, you're a lot softer than you look." Rush blushed, but stayed still, quite happy to be getting some attention. She moved up to his ears and gave them a good scratching, like one would their loyal pet. Rush's pink tongue escaped his mouth as he smiled with simplistic pleasure.

She smiled at him, "aww, you're just a big 'ol puppy dog, huh?" Before he could answer, Erik came back into the room, their Elder in tow. Rush looked up to see the Elder with a wide grin on his face and a grimace on Erik's. He quickly stood up and saluted the Elder and Erik, sucking his tongue back into his maw. Olivia stood idly next to Rush. "At ease, Initiate." Rush slowly lowered his hand and quickly realized that he didn't know what to do with it or the other one attached to him. Olivia patted him on the arm and gently pushed him back into the chair.

"Howdy, sir," she said to the elder, "how are ya?" Elder Redding closed the door behind them and walked over behind the desk before responding. He sat in the comfortable chair and said, "very well, thank you, Olivia." She took the chair next to Rush, Erik stood next the Elder, wanting to separate himself from his loved ones on the other side of the desk. He needed to be professional.

"I have reports from Captain Penn. She feels you are ready to join, and I agree." Olivia's eyes lit up, "that's great news, sir!" He nodded, and continued, "you and your new friend there," he paused to glance at Rush, "will start training full time tomorrow. Olivia, your belongings have been relocated to the barracks, second deck. Rush, we're still sorting out a place for you, you'll be with Erik until we find a suitable location for you." Rush nodded slowly, but questioned, "is something wrong, sir?" The elder slumped a fraction of an inch in his chair, "well, to be honest, son, folks are scared of you."

Rush folded his ears back in shame or embarrassment, he wasn't sure. "Now, son, it'll just take some time. The other Brothers will have to get used to you. You've already got a great reputation ahead of you thanks to Franklin. In fact, I'm sure that you've helped put him well on the way to recovery. He's not been in such an amicable mood for quite some time now." Rush's demeanor lightened up a bit. "Until that time, I feel that it's best you don't suffer through staying in the common barracks on the second deck. I'm working with Ida right now to find you somewhere more like your old home. Make the transition easier."

Rush thanked him but was unhappy with the special treatment and the acknowledgement that everyone was frightened by him. "Well then, Initiate Brown, Initiate Rush, enjoy the rest of your day. You will be expected to report to the mess hall at 0600 for breakfast. Don't miss it. Captain Penn will manage y'all from there." Rush panicked momentarily, "what about brother?! Er,..." The elder replied gently, "Paladin Rade has duties of his own, Initiate. I will see that he gets time to spend with you two, but do not expect much. My newest initiates have the incredibly important task of learning and training as hard as possible. We have little time to get you ready

for the field. And I fear what little time we do have may not be enough." Rush shrunk back into his chair.

"Now then," the elder said, glancing down at his Pip-Boy, "it's nearly time for dinner. Initiate Brown, dear, I'll show you to your new quarters. Erik, take care of Rush. Dinner is at eighteen-hundred hours sharp. Franklin's been working hard, don't be late." With that the Elder saluted his subordinates then waited for Olivia to join him before they exited. Erik stood tall and said with the necessary pomp and circumstance, "Initiate Rush! Follow me." Rush nodded silently and did as he was told.

All four of them left the well-appointed room. One of the guards casted a glance to his partner on the other side of the door as Rush passed. Rush thought he heard one mumble something about "dog," but was unsure. Erik and Rush followed their Elder and Initiate Brown up the first flight of stairs, then continued up another to the third deck. Rush absorbed every inch of the hall he could see. It was as clean as one would expect for an ancient building sparsely decorated with an occasional blood stain, broken tile, or missing chunk of drywall.

Rush followed Erik to the northernmost room. He fished a key out from under his shirt and unlocked the door, letting Rush in first. "Home, sweet home, Rush." Rush wasn't impressed. The tiny room was hardly big enough for one grown male, let alone two. Coupled with the fact that Erik had so much stuff, Rush didn't know where he was going to put his stuff, or even sleep. Erik edged in past Rush and entered an even smaller room on the left, "bathroom," he mumbled as he closed the door behind himself.

Rush took the opportunity to explore the fourteen by twenty-two foot room. Rush stared forward and saw the wall to his right was lined with bookshelves. Each was full of books and maps. A dresser stood between those and a refrigerator in the corner. "How'd he get that up here?" Rush thought to himself. In front of each tall, skinny window was a workbench. Both had crates of wires, parts of weapons, tools, and chemicals underneath. The bench on the left had some sort of red tool with a long handle.

Rush took a few steps in to see past the bathroom, then saw the tiny bed Erik slept on. It was neatly made with care. He noticed that, much like himself, Erik seemed to like to keep things orderly. Every tool, part, book, and miscellaneous item was neatly stacked and organized. Rush turned to the bed and noticed shelving overhead. There were three photo frames, one of which was empty. One of the two had a photo of

a much younger Elder Redding with a much darker woman and a small Erik and Jenkins. The other was a signed photo from Olivia; she was in the same hat and dress the he met her in today. Amongst the photos were a few more documents and a blue toy car.

Rush heard the familiar flush of a commode before a faucet. Erik exited, "Had to piss." Rush nodded, continuing to visually inspect everything. Erik asked, "so, what d'you think?" Rush cocked his head in silent query. "'bout my home." Rush shrugged, "the town or here?" Erik shrugged, "both?" Rush pulled out the chair hiding under Erik's desk and sat down. "well protected, orderly, pretty clean." Erik nodded, the elder didn't tolerate people trashing up what they worked so hard to protect.

"Where is everyone?" Rush asked, "must be more people." Erik nodded, leaning on the corner of his bathroom. "Yeah, it's nearing dinner time, so everyone's finishing up their work for the day. Scribes're in those buildings I showed you. They keep a fairly late schedule so we don't all crowd the commons. We'll eat around six, be done by seven, then they'll file in around seven thirty. We get our days started at six, theirs starts at seven. Makes it easier."

Rush nodded again, it seemed very logical to him. "Home is small," Rush mumbled as he looked around again. "Yeah, a bit, especially compared to the place you lived. We don't spend a lot of time in our rooms though, we're always busy training or on missions. Our rooms are mostly for getting a good night's rest, personal time with others, or just a place to store our stuff." Rush nodded, he had grown accustomed to living and working out of his home. He rarely left unless he went to share meals with other members of the clan or had to go work in the hydroponics farm on the fourth deck.

Rush sighed, remembering home made him depressed. Erik pulled him into a halfway hug. "You'll adapt. We're good at that, it seems." Rush nodded thinking to him, "it was what we were made for, brother. That doesn't make it any easier, it seems." Erik nodded and scratched Rush's head the way he liked. He stopped abruptly, remembering he had something special in his refrigerator. "I think you'll like this," he said, fishing a purple-blue glowing bottle from the refrigerator.

Rush looked it with wonder, "it is glowing, brother. Is it safe?" Erik nodded, "should be." "Should be," Rush parroted in question. "It's called a Nuka Cola Quantum. They're really rare. They say they can only be found in the North East." Rush stared at the glass bottle, it gently glowed a violet-blue in his hand, complimented by the cold light of the fluorescent light overhead. "What is it for?"

Erik blinked then chuckled, "drinking, Rush. It's for drinking. Just like any other Nuka." Rush looked at it skeptically.

Erik grabbed a pair of glasses from the top of his refrigerator then popped the cap and split the flat soda in two. "Here," he said, offering Rush a glass. Again, Rush hesitated, but after watching Erik sip on his with no ill effect, he tried his as well. Rush took the smallest sip possible, not wanting to waste such a rare item. Erik was right, he did like it. It was bursting with flavor and he could already feel the tingle of caffeine running from his tongue to toes. He wanted to gulp it down, but restrained himself.

He and Erik took turns sipping small amounts of soda. Rush soon found himself at the bottom of the glass and wanting more. For a split second, he thought of stealing Erik's and drinking it too. Erik finished the last dregs of his own drink and collected Rush's glass. "I'll wash these up, then we'll head out to dinner." Rush nodded and thanked him mentally for the drink.

"No problem, Rush," Erik half yelled from the bathroom. "Where a good spot to sleep?" Rush asked. Erik rinsed and shook the glasses off and returned them to their place atop the refrigerator. "Uh, well," he muttered while looking around, "I dunno. I can clean off the benched and set you up there, or on the floor, or we can split my bed." Rush looked at each as Erik mentioned them. "What about a blanket?" Erik laughed, "yeah, Rush. We're gonna take care of you. Don't worry."

Rush tried to believe him, but was still worrisome. "C'mon, let's go get a bite. I'll have someone run some extra bedding up." Rush nodded and followed his younger brother through the door and down two flights of stairs. Erik flagged down another anonymous Brother in a metal suit, "Hey. That you in there, Robbins?" The figure saluted and acknowledged him through the suit's headset. "Aye, sir." "Good. Do me a favor and run an extra set of bedding and pillow up to 307, please." The man in the suit saluted again, turned in the direction he was coming from, then disappeared around a corner and out of sight.

Rush asked mentally, "does everyone do what you say?" Erik shook his head, "nah. I'm middle class 'round here. There're still folks I answer to, but they're not many these days." Rush nodded, "me too?" Erik nodded again. "Yup." Rush thought that was strange, seeing as he was the elder, but didn't argue. Erik clearly knew the upper world, its inhabitants, and dangers better, but Rush knew his internal world better than anyone.

Rush followed Erik silently as they walked past the small office they used earlier to the southern corner of the building. Rush's eyebrows popped up in surprise: there had to be at least fifty members in this small room, each in mostly shiny metal armor. Some men, some women, some he wasn't sure either way. Then he saw Franklin enter the dining area from what he assumed was the kitchen and had to keep himself from laughing aloud: Franklin wasn't wearing his armor from before, but a suit and an apron.

"Huh," Erik noted, "looks like he's back as chef. That's good." He saw them as he hustled back to the kitchen, "go grab a seat, I'll be there in a bit." Erik looked around and saw Jenkins off by himself in the corner at their regular table. For some reason, as Erik and Rush entered the room, everyone's conversation quietened down. Everyone was staring them down. Staring Rush down. Suddenly, the six-and-a-half foot were-man felt about four inches tall. He tucked his tail and followed Erik to their table. "They're just curious," Erik thought to his brother, "nothing to worry about."

Rush was terrified. He was getting claustrophobic with all the people staring at him. He thought he could feel their gaze piercing his skin. Erik got up and cleared his throat. "Brothers in Steel, this is one of our two newest initiates, Initiate Hawthorne." Erik paused and glanced back, "stand up," he said. Rush did so with great trembling trepidation. Erik continued, "it's been my pleasure to work with him for the past week or so, and I think all of you will soon feel the same." Rush was blushing under his fur. "Now, let's all give him, and," he paused to wave to his favorite female that he just spotted among a group of scribes, "Initiate Brown, a warm Southern welcome into the Brotherhood."

Franklin stepped out to catch the end of Erik's introduction and after he finished said loudly, "Hail Steel!" The same was repeated by every member with enthusiasm, followed by clapping. Rush looked around at the strange people and noticed that nearly every one of them was smiling at him and Erik's girlfriend. They seemed genuinely happy that they were there. Franklin yelled aloud after a few moments of fanfare, "that's enough! Enough! Eat your damn food."

Jenkins smiled and patted Rush on the shoulder, "welcome home, Initiate. We're happy to have you, Rush." Rush nodded and continued his silence until Franklin reappeared at their table. His apron was gone, but he had two trays full of food. "Here," he said as he handed everyone a plate of steaming food and a cold glass of orange-brown liquid. Erik was pleased, "looks good Frank. Thanks." Franklin nodded as he sat down with his own tray. Rush looked at the strange food, then at the empty chair next to

him. "Who sits here?" he asked Erik. Erik's eyebrows knitted before he replied mentally, "that's where Chase used to sit. No one's filled his place." "Why not Olivia?"

"I don't know Rush," he replied mentally as he took a bite of Franklin's famous red beans and rice. "You'd have to ask Franklin." So, he did. "Uh, sir?" All three men looked at him. "Uh, Paladin? Franklin?" He nodded, "what's up furball?" "Can Initiate Brown join us?" He looked to Rush, then to the empty seat at the end of the table, then back to Rush. "I uh, yeah. I guess so." He slowly withdrew from the table to fetch their second initiate, unconsciously pushing his brother's loss a bit further from his mind. Rush looked over to Erik who was stuffing another spoonful into his face, "was that bad?" he asked mentally. Erik gently shook his head.

Franklin returned with her and her tray, placing them both at the end of the table. "Howdy, boys," she said with a warm smile. "Mind if this fine-ass lady joins you?" Erik smiled and chuckled around his spoon. "So," she asked while swirling around her red beans and rice with a square of cornbread, "any idea what we're in for tomorrow?" Franklin nodded as he sipped his glass of iced tea. "Yeah, weapons trainin' with Captain Penn after breakfast. Then, field medicine with me 'til lunch. Grab a bite, then you two'll be with Erik after that." Erik was quickly trying to swallow the large bite of cornbread before responding.

After choking it down with a gulp of tea he said, "Right. We're doing survival and evasion training for the rest of the week. Just us three and the woods. We're gonna learn how to live off the land." "Sounds like fun," Olivia said. Rush disagreed. He picked up the yellow block of bread and sniffed it. "Better eat up, boy," Franklin said. "We only got fifteen minutes left, then y'all gotta be outta here."

Rush shoved the entire serving of cornbread in his maw and did his best to swallow and choke it down. The remainder of their dinner was light chatter about what everyone had done since they last saw one another. Rush was silent for the rest of the meal; he was preoccupied with the nagging feeling that he would be competing with this woman for Erik's attention. "Hey, big guy," she asked with concern, "you feelin' well? Ain't touched your dinner." Rush shook his head, downed his glass of tea, and mumbled, "thinking." She nodded and went back to her own dinner.

Minutes later, an alarm went off. Every chair lazily slid out from under the table with its occupant and they exited in a well-oiled and orderly fashion. Franklin slumped in his chair, "round two, coming up," he mumbled under his breath. Erik and Jenkins lead their initiates out of the mess hall, out of the commons building, and

into the night air. "Should we help?" Rush asked. Erik shook his head, "nah. Franklin's got a crew to help him clean and serve everyone." Rush nodded, but still felt guilty.

Erik stretched and turned his back to Olivia and Rush, mumbling quietly with Jenkins. While he was being rude, Rush saw a ghoulish exit the laboratory building. He panicked, "brother!" Erik spun around in worry, "It's Paladin, Initiate, and what?" Rush pointed wide-eyed at the female ghoulish in the lab coat. "What about 'er? That's Ida. She's awesome, and don't point. It's rude." Rush felt ashamed and thought, "is this how everyone feels when they see me?"

Rush's outburst caught her attention. "Paladins! Who've you got there?" she asked as she walked toward them. She was in pretty good shape for being a few centuries old: some decaying skin, most of her nose was missing, and she even had enough hair to make a passable, blonde-silver pony tail. "Hey Ida, how's it goin'?" Erik asked. She smiled and hugged him. "Very well, Paladin Erik," she replied before kissing him on the cheek, "you gonna introduce me?" "Uh, yeah, sorry." "Head Scribe Ida, this is Initiate Olivia Brown, and this is Initiate Rush Hawthorne." She shook their hands in turn.

"You're a lovely youngin', darlin'," she said to Olivia. "Strong hands too. If you're lucky, you'll look half as good as I do at two hundred." Olivia smiled sweetly, "I hope so, ma'am." Ida turned to Rush and said, "Hawthorne, eh?" He nodded. "Figured as much. You look like his handy work. Did some early work with those brothers. They still 'round?" Rush shook his head negatively. "Huh, damn shame," she lamented lightly, "they were pretty damn good gene splicers. Looks like ol' Doc Hawthorne did a number with you." Rush felt like he was under a microscope on display.

Ida laughed and said, "I'm not gonna dissect you. I'll leave that for the medics here," before clapping Jenkins on his shoulder plate with another toothy grin. Or, it would have been toothy if she hadn't lost most of them over the course of time. "I don't suppose you learned anything from him, eh? Maybe some skills in those meaty claws of yours?" She thought for a moment, "Erik, have they been through medical yet?" "No ma'am. Why?" She smiled, "I'll take care of it. Jenkins, go get your paperwork. You two come with me. We're gonna get your first medical visit out of the way. I hope you like gloves and lube." She laughed loudly as they all watched Jenkins scurry off as he was told.

Rush definitely didn't like the sound of that. "Wh...what?" She laughed again and ignored his question. Jenkins soon reappeared with a clipboard and the same medical bag that he'd brought to Rush's home. "I'll have 'em back to you in about an hour, Rade." He nodded and watched them disappear into the brick building in front of him. "Well, shit," he muttered to the night, "guess I'll go help Frank."

Rush followed between Olivia and Franklin as they made their way through the decrepit building. The further in they went, the stronger the smell got. Rush recognized it as a mixture of blood, strong astringents, sweat, and decay. It made him very nervous and burned his sensitive nose. They finally arrived at a moderately sized laboratory, complete with slate table tops under a cacophony of glassware, hot plates, clipboards, and various chemicals. Rush suddenly felt very much at home. "Okay, kiddos. Here's how it's gonna go. Piss test, blood tests, then a quick physical and you can go back to whatever it was you were doing."

Rush was getting nervous again, he glanced with worry to Jenkins who smiled warmly like he always did. "Don't worry," he added, "it won't be too bad. Rush groaned internally. Olivia, however, was unphased. "Okay, fine. Gimme a cup." Ida nodded and handed her a beaker, pointing her to a small unisex bathroom that branched from the lab. "Jenkins, Ida said, "get the wolf's while I make sure she's not cheating." Jenkins nodded as she walked off. Jenkins nonchalantly handed Rush a large beaker and said, "fill 'er up." Rush accepted the beaker and grimaced. "Why?" "It's just part of your regular exam. Make sure you're healthy." Rush handed the beaker back, "I'm healthy." Jenkins handed the beaker back a bit more forcefully than he meant to. "Piss in it. Now, Initiate." Rush folded his ears back and began to growl before he remembered his place. Defiantly, Rush took the beaker, turned his back to Jenkins. He fought with the buckle holding up his leather leggings, dropped them completely, then proceeded to do as he was told.

Jenkins waited patiently for Rush to finish. He hurriedly sat the beaker down, fought his pants, then handed the beaker of warm, glowing liquid back to Jenkins who lazily raised an eyebrow. "Where'd you get a Quantum?" Rush didn't really want to have a conversation about his miscellaneous fluids. "Erik," he mumbled. Jenkins swirled the beaker of dark liquid and said, "you should drink more water." Rush nodded, wishing Jenkins would put the beaker down or pour it out.

Ida and Olivia exited the small bathroom. Neither one seemed to be suffering from embarrassment like Rush was. "Got you a Quantum, eh wolfie?" He nodded slightly. Ida took both beakers for testing. "Get me seven vials each of red Jenkins." "Yes ma'am," he said as he turned to find a set of needles and vials. Olivia stood next

to Rush, wanting to get warm in the cold room. "You like that, name? Wolfie?" Rush shrugged, "my name is Rush." Olivia nodded and followed, "yeah, but surely it's better than any number of things like 'mutt,' or 'half-breed,' or whatever, right?" Rush nodded. She patted his shoulder and said, "I think wolfie's a cute nickname."

He was beginning to warm up to her. She leaned into his arm and said, "I don't like needles, wolfie." Rush looked down at her and found himself unsure what to do. "But they are necessary," he explained. She knew that, but still had a phobia. It probably had something to do with the psycho she was forced to take before by an unforgiving wasteland pimp long ago. She sighed and shivered. Jenkins returned, gloved up. "Who's first?"

Rush stuck out his left forearm without hesitation. Jenkins directed him to sit on the table and he'd get started. "So, Rush, are you getting settled in well?" He was trying to distract Rush while finding a vein to puncture with the sterilized equipment. "Guess so," Rush mumbled, "everything is happening quickly." Olivia nodded in agreement. "Where are you stayin'?" Olivia asked. "With Erik." She scowled slightly, "must be nice. I gotta sleep with about twenty or more other women." Rush winced as Jenkins expertly punctured the vein and was drew the first vial.

"Have you been to Erik's home before?" She shook her head, sending wisps of hair flying. "We didn't get that far," she lamented. "He'd come into where I used to work plenty of times, but never let me, uh," she paused, not wanting to embarrass him in front of his brother and best friend. Jenkins laughed, "it's fine. We know how he is." "Four down," Jenkins mumbled as he began on the fifth. "Movin' quick here, bud."

Rush wasn't sure if that was a compliment or something was wrong. Rather than worry about it, he asked another question to pass the time, "want children with him?" Olivia was shocked at Rush's boldness, Jenkins shared that sentiment. "Uh, that's none of your business." Rush disagreed, "my family, my business. May look like me. Erik is the exception in our clan." Olivia's eyes were having trouble finding their way back into her skull. Jenkins cleared his throat to break the awkward silence.

"Uh, we're done, Rush. Hold your arm up and hold this on it," Jenkins instructed as he handed Rush a piece of gauze. "Hop down, and you up, ma'am." They both did as they were instructed. Olivia was visibly shaking. "You okay?" Jenkins asked. She nodded warily. Rush instinctively grabbed her hand with his right and held it tight. He nodded silently, trying to console her. Olivia gulped and smiled her thanks back to him as Jenkins swiftly punctured the scarred vein in her arm. Olivia winced and

whined, betraying her hardened exterior. She turned her head away from the needle, trying her best not to pass out as the color flushed from her face.

"Just keep breathing, we'll be done before you know it," Jenkins reassured her. Rush increased his grip slightly. "Olivia," Rush queried, "what did you do before?" She answered to the set of glassware that was cooking chemicals to her right. "I worked in a bath house." Rush stared at her blankly, "okay?" "We helped people on long trips get clean, and if they paid enough caps, to, uh, relax." Jenkins silently thanked Rush for distracting her, it was a pain in the ass when his patients passed out.

Rush asked, "relax? How?" She sighed, "well, it depended on how much they're willing to pay, wolfie. Could be just talkin' to 'em or giving 'em a massage. Some girls went even further and fucked 'em. I didn't." Rush nodded, "how much does that cost?" She was constantly amazed at how blunt he was—she appreciated it, but occasionally felt like she was holding a conversation with a five-year-old. "Well, it depends. Handies and bjs are a lot cheaper than full service. You'd be surprised how many people come in off the road, especially traders, and just want to get cleaned up and have a nice chat. Everyone's not out to stick their dick in something."

Rush nodded. Jenkins nodded as well, he'd spent his fair share of caps there, never to his disappointment. "They do a good, uh, job there," he said. "Just two more vials, Initiate." Rush patted her hand absentmindedly. His attention shifted as he heard heavy footsteps in the hall. He dropped her hand and instinctively put himself between his comrades and the door. "It's just Willis, Rush," Jenkins mumbled, "calm down."

The heavy, uneven footsteps boomed closer and closer until a shadowy figure appeared in the frosted glass. The door handle slowly turned and the door opened to reveal a behemoth of what was once a man, long ago. The first-generation super mutant was decked in similar clothing to Ida, except about three times larger. "Jenkins," he bellowed. "Hey Wil. Jus' collectin' some blood samples, here. You do any good?" Willis stared at Rush before slowly responding, "no. Could not save them. Lost two more today." Jenkins sighed, "that's not good." Willis asked, "whose dog?"

Jenkins swiftly removed the needle from Olivia and gave her the same items and instructions as Rush. She sat silently on the counter, watching Jenkins and the huge super mutant hold a normal conversation. "Ah, Willis? The pretty lady on my table is one of our two newest initiates: Olivia Brown. The other is Rush Hawthorne." Willis entered the room further and offered a ham-sized hand to Olivia to shake. She

accepted his hand, each finger nearly the size of her wrist. "Pleased to meet you," Willis said. He turned back to Rush, "Do you speak?" Rush nodded and said, "yes." "Good boy," the super mutant said, pleased with himself.

Rush scowled, he hated being called a lowly dog. Olivia noticed this and said, "I think he looks more like a wolf, don't you?" Willis shrugged and patted Rush roughly on the head, further antagonizing him. "Does he bite?" Rush thought, "yes, and enjoy the taste of blood," to himself, but instead of biting Willis, bit his tongue and swallowed the growl that was working its way up. Willis turned his back to all of them then asked Jenkins, "where is Ida? I have new samples to test." "In the back lab, I think." Willis left without another word.

"That guy," Jenkins mumbled to himself, "strange sense of humor." He arranged his freshly labeled samples, smiled up to Olivia, then to Rush. "You'll get used to him. He's really a nice guy." Olivia patted Rush on the shoulder, leaned down whispered in his ear, "thank you wolfie," before scratching his head. They maintained their positions until Ida and Jenkins came back with the lab results a long five minutes later.

"Initiate Olivia," Ida said, "you're good. Go home. You, however," she looked to Rush, "we need to chat." Rush looked worriedly as Olivia left him alone in the cold room. Rush followed Ida and Jenkins into the small back office, made to seem even smaller by the massive amounts laboratory equipment stuffed into it. He stood awkwardly near the entrance as his new physicians chatted over a folder overflowing with papers. "You, wolf, should drink more water," Ida said flatly. Rush looked around, "is that all?" "I have some questions about your development. "I've only seen blood samples like these once before, would you like to guess who they belong to?" Rush knew the answer, but shrugged to keep up appearances.

"Don't play stupid, dog. You and Erik share at least half of your genome, don't you? I already spoke with the elder." Rush glanced to Jenkins who gave him no hints how to answer. "Yes," he admitted. "Were created within a few years of each other." The ghoul nodded and scribbled some notes into her file. "Very well," she said, "I shouldn't expect to see you in here often for being sick then, should I?" Rush shook his head. "Had influenza once," he mumbled, "ate a sick molerat." She laughed, "so you're not superhuman?" He shrugged without answer.

Jenkins closed his folder with a soft slap and handed it to Ida, "looks fine to me. Levels look good." She nodded and looked up to Rush, "sorry guy, but you get one more test and you're not going to like it." Rush gulped, lowered his ears, and

tucked his tail. "I'll wait out here," she said, leaving them in the privacy of the small office. A few silent minutes passed by, punctured by the sound of gloves snapping on, a chair scraping the ground, and someone growling, yelping, then growling louder. "I'm sorry!" she heard Jenkins apologize sincerely, "I know it's cold." Another yelp, followed by a whimper and she knew she'd have the results shortly.

Jenkins never failed to disappoint, Ida thought as she waited for them to exit. Jenkins came first, inside-out, soiled gloves in one hand, clipboard in the other. Rush, however, was busy readjusting his belts and feeling one-thousand per-cent more humiliated than he previously knew was possible. Jenkins nodded that the results were good and handed her the clipboard before tossing his gloves in a hazard bin. He looked back past the threshold of the door into the office at Rush who growled a fierce warning. "I'm sorry, Rush, but it's necessary."

Jenkins quickly set off to find Willis, anxious to see both him and his test results. Rush was alone with Ida in the cold lab. They stared at each other for a few moments before she said, "what do you want?" Rush shrugged, "you remind me of an old friend." That simple sentence sent she and Rush into a deep conversation about science and genetics. Nearly an hour passed before Willis and Jenkins reappeared in the lab. "Rush, why're you still here? You should go get ready for tomorrow," Jenkins warned. Ida waved him off, "shoo. We're chattin'. This kid's got some interesting ideas about the work we do here." Jenkins raised an eyebrow, looked up at Willis who shrugged in response. Willis tossed a stack of clipboards on the nearby table and mumbled something about, "poor results," before leaving with a tree trunk-sized arm around Jenkins.

Ida got up from her chair and investigated the clipboards. "Oh, dear. He's right, these are quite poor results," she said under her breath. Rush padded to and loomed over the small woman, investigating the results for himself. "They are ill? Bacterial infection?" Rush asked, pointing at the scrawls on the page. She nodded in response, "yeah. Our brahmin have been coming down with something for the past few months. It started with one here or there, but it's steadily been getting worse. If it keeps going like this, we're gonna starve." Rush didn't like idea of missing a single meal, let alone missing all of them.

As Ida explained details of the ill Brahmin, she turned a hot plate on to warm up a dark liquid. As it started to simmer, Rush thought he recognized it as the chicory tea that everyone seemed to be so fond of. He grimaced. She filled up two mugs, dumped some crystalline powder into them, and handed him one, sipping on her own.

Rush begrudgingly took it out of politeness. Rush sipped the hot liquid and was taken aback. There was something different about this one, it was both bitter and sweet, and one-hundred percent better tasting. He sipped it again and smacked his lips with pleasure.

Ida smiled, "this's a real scientist's drink, wolf. Coffee." He smiled and took another drink, quite pleased with the bitter, black drink. "Where did you get it?" "Grew it in the hot houses here," she replied, gesturing to the grounds behind and above her. "Grandfather always lamented not having any. Can see why," Rush noted, taking another sip. Ida nodded, savoring the cup, "So, you said 'bacterial.' How'd you figure that?" Rush took the clipboard and read it again, to reassure himself. "Infection pattern. Localized clusters. How do they get food and water?" Ida shrugged, "the farmhands take care of that. They get the left over crops and whatnot."

Rush nodded, "anyone sick?" Ida thumbed through some papers on her desk then shrugged again, "Not that I know of. You'd have to ask Jenkins or his C.O., Major Artie, to be sure." Pondering, Rush scratched his chin fur that resembled Erik's short, shaggy beard. "All of their water is from the same place?" Ida nodded again, "we've got samples from just about everything, son. That's the first step." Rush sipped his coffee and continued to think about the strange bacterial infections, or would have, if Erik hadn't come storming down the hall.

Rush knew he was coming the moment Erik opened the exterior door to the building. He was soon standing in the doorway to the ancient classroom. "Initiate Rush!" Rush responded by sipping his steaming coffee and lazily moving a clipboard of figures down from his view. If he was wearing glasses, he probably would have lowered them condescendingly. "Yes?" "What are you doing," Erik asked with fervor, "we're supposed to be getting you ready to train you as a knight, not a scribe! Let's go!" Ida instantly grew irritated with Erik's tone, "look here, boy, you better watch your mouth. This kid's helpin' us with the Brahmin issue. You come in here yellin' like that again, and I'll bust your ass myself."

Erik wanted sorely to lash back, but knew better. Just like his adoptive father, Elder Redding, Ida never gave idle threats. He collected himself before replying. "Sorry ma'am, you're right. Please have him back before twenty-three hundred hours. He's got a lot of training ahead of him starting tomorrow." Ida replied with her gapped-tooth smile, "now, that's better. C'mere and gimme a hug, I haven't seen you in at least six weeks." Erik paused then looked to Rush who had resumed studying the clipboard full of data.

Again, Erik did as he was told. Ida hugged him tightly, he was the closest she still had to a son. In fact, she pretty much adopted Erik soon after he was brought home by the Elder. She ensured he had a good education and was fairly well mannered. Most of the time. Their moment over, Rush cleared his throat and announced, "it's their food. Something in the food." Ida took another of Willis' clipboards and was soon in agreement. "Autopsies?" Rush queried. Ida shook her head, "haven't had time yet."

Rush nodded, "can we?" Ida smiled, "I like your work ethic, son. Go get Willis and we'll get to makin' hamburger." Rush stood up in excitement before realizing he had no idea where Willis was, "where...?" Ida stopped him short, "he's probably at Jenkins'. On second thought, we'll let those boys have some time together. We'll sort this out a bit later, okay?" Slightly disparaged, Rush nodded slowly. "Go up to Erik's, get washed up, and get ready for your big day tomorrow," she demanded, gently patting Rush on the back.

Again, Rush found himself being dictated by a human, and again he obeyed with little to no question. Ida walked them both out of the laboratory complex, and pointed them across the street. "Off you go, wolf. Erik." she said, patting them both on the back. "Those two're something else," she mumbled to herself before being swallowed up by the dark laboratory.

Rush silently nodded as the dual door guards saluted them. "Evenin' gents," said Erik as the guards opened the doors. They made their way through the deserted building to the third deck rather quickly, much to Rush's dismay—he would rather be burning the midnight oil in the lab with Ida. "Welcome home, big brother," Erik said with a tired smile. Rush followed Erik into his tiny apartment and realized that it was markedly different from the first time he saw it. Erik's room had completely changed: there were two small beds, one of the workbenches was nowhere to be found, and Rush's bags were cleaned out and now on display on a second desk with a terminal.

Rush looked around with excitement, "this was for me?" Erik nodded, "yeah, Jenkins an' Willis gave me a hand. Didn't take too long." Rush sat down at his desk and gently touched everything: his leather notebook and chewed pencil, the terminal's squeaky-clean keys, the photograph of their grandfather and first clan, their clan mother's urn. "Look in the drawers there," Erik said. Rush did as he was told. He was quickly greeted with his books, notes, and holotapes in perfect alignment, alphabetically arranged. The second drawer had more notes, but on top of them was Rush's Pip-Boy.

He pulled it out and inspected it: it had been lovingly restored. The original metal brace and sleeve was replaced with a hand-stitched, thick leather band. He tentatively pushed the red power button, preparing for the worst, yet hoping for the best. Rush smiled widely when the screen flickered to life and the Vaultec Vault Boy waved back through the tiny screen. "See if it fits okay." Rush strapped it to his left forearm and wiggled it around, adjusted the strap and repeated these motions until he was quite happy with the fit.

"Thank you, brother!" Rush said with quiet astonishment. "Grandfather's. Never had parts to repair it." Erik nodded, "thank Tom the next time you see 'em. He was more than happy to help. Synced it up to our mainframes, so you should have all the same maps and radio frequencies that I have." Rush nodded, engrossed in the blue phosphorus screen. Erik let him be for a few moments before ordering him to bed. Rush made a few more hurried stabs to power down the equipment before placing it back in the drawer.

"Grab a shower, then let's hit the sack. We gotta be up a 0500 for PT. Breakfast at 0600. Captain Penn won't be pleased if you're late and it'll be my fault. I hate gettin' yelled at by her. She's manlier than some men 'round here." Rush nodded and noted with a small grin, "she and my mate would have gotten along well." Erik knew that look, Rush's eyes glazed over as he wandered off into his own imagination.

Erik shook Rush from his sexy daydream and ordered him again to go get cleaned up and ready for his day tomorrow. Rush, grateful for the first time that he now pants, did as he was told again. Erik opted to recline on his bed as he waited to wish his older brother "good night." After fifteen minutes, he was tired of waiting. Erik swung his feet from the bed and walked over to the bathroom door and rapped his knuckles on the door. "Drop your cock and grab your socks, boy. Get out!" Erik yelled at the door. A surprised Rush dropped the bottle he was reading and, in his attempt to catch the bottle, he juggled it, then spiked it into the tub.

"Rush?" Erik asked, "Rush?! Hey! You okay in there?" No response came through the hollow-core door for a moment, before Rush replied sheepishly over the running water, "fine, dropped the soap." Erik sighed and returned back to his bed with a sore hand and a small serving of embarrassment. Another ten minutes later, and Rush exited the restroom with nothing but wet fur and his leather leggings in hand. "Apologies," he said to Erik, dripping water on the floor. "Huh? Oh, yeah. It's fine," Erik yawned. "Throw them in the closet." Rush stood in the middle of the room, trying to figure out where to put his clothing. Erik lazily waved a hand toward the built-in closet. Rush dripped a trail of water as he walked to the closet

and slid a door open, revealing a dark storage area divided 60 / 40. Erik had piled most of his personal belongings into the larger portion, slicing some room out for Rush.

Rush neatly hung his leather kilt-pants, making a mental note to either come up with a better name for them or give up and get real pants, slid the door shut and turned off the overhead lights before feeling his way to Erik's bed. "You're bed's over there, Rush," Erik mumbled as he turned over to his left side. Rush ruffled Erik's hair and climbed into his new bed. It was small, forcing Rush to hang his feet off the edge. "Thank you, brother. Good night." "Night," Erik mumbled. With that, he was quickly off to sleep with a gentle snore.