

CHAPTER 26: TRAINING DAY OR SCHOOL'S IN SESSION

Rush, burdened by apprehension and excitement, tossed and turned in a fitful attempt at sleep. Six short hours flew by in what seemed minutes to Erik. It seemed like an eternity to Rush. He watched the sun slowly rise from the Eastern horizon just as he was dozing off. Both his and Erik's Pip-Boys began squawking in unison at four forty five, a mere hour after Rush dozed off. He groaned at the horrific din. Erik rolled out of bed and stretched with a great yawn. "Get up Rush! Throw on some clothes and let's go. We got PT." Rush rolled over on his tiny bed and hugged the cinder block wall, wishing for more sleep.

Erik flipped on the overhead light and walked back to shake Rush. "Get up! Let's go, Initiate!" Rush growled in response. "How is he so happy this early," Rush complained to himself. Erik shook him again. Rush remained limp in the bed, hoping that Erik would just leave him be. Erik threatened, "get up or get wet." Rush rolled back over to face Erik who was now holding two glasses of water directly over his head. Rush called his bluff, rolled back toward the wall, and immediately regretted his decision. Erik turned both glasses directly onto his head, filling his ears with water, matting his fur, and soaking his bed.

Rush shot up, and shook his head violently. "'Atta boy. Now. Get dressed, and let's go," Erik said pointedly. "We're gonna be late. I don't *like* being late." Rush roughed up his fur, lazily rolled out of bed, and noisily drug his claws on the scuffed linoleum floor to their closet. Erik strapped on his Pip-Boy after pulling on a well-worn t-shirt and a pair of shorts. Rush was struggling with his belts when a sharp knock came at Erik's door, "y'all still in there? Let's get goin'!" Jenkins yelled through the door.

Erik growled under his breath at his lethargic brother and accosted him with his own Pip-Boy. Erik grabbed his arm, strapped on his portable information processor, then drug him out into the hall. Rush yawned, readjusted his clothing and Pip-Boy. He lazily looked over as Erik frantically locked the door and pulled on his own armor. "We're gonna be late! Damn it, Rush!"

They repeated this same scene, every morning, for a week. However, after the first day, Rush opted to wake up early enough to avoid Erik's impromptu bath. Each morning was a chore, the new schedule was quickly becoming the norm for Rush by the end of the first week. That Sunday, he found himself awake and staring at the ceiling

before Erik or their Pip-Boys. He silently slid out of bed and stretched upward, brushing the ceiling with his palms while he tried to coax his muscles into action.

He padded over to his desk, fished out his Pip-Boy and gasped. They were late! Rush spun around took two long steps to Erik's bed and shook him violently, "brother, we are late! Wake up!" Erik groaned and rolled over just like Rush did every morning. "It's Sunday, Rush. Go away." Rush shook him again, and again he replied groggily, "it's Sunday. We have the day off. I wanna sleep." Rush took a step back and silently obeyed Erik, leaving him to his sleep as he went to the closet to get his leather garments. Just after he got his first belt situated, there was a knock at the door. Rush spied through the peep hole, expecting Jenkins, and replied, "Erik is sleeping. It is Sunday." The mysterious metal-clad person on the other side of the door knocked again, this time with more force.

"Christ," Erik moaned in frustration and yelled, "who is it?" The figure, a man, replied through his helmet, "It's Artie, call off your dog. We gotta chat." Erik rolled out of bed, roughed up his hair, and proceeded to shove Rush out of the way to open the door. He was fully clad in an older set of T-51b Power Armor. The left pauldron, rather than showing the typical white BoS symbol, had a thick red cross overlaying it. Erik stood brazenly in his boxers as the man pushed his way in. Artie took off his intimidating and angry-looking helmet to reveal a sun-beaten man in his late thirties with dark brown, almost black skin and short-cropped, kinky black hair. His bright blue eyes were his most striking feature, otherwise he looked like every other dark-skinned Cajun in their area.

Rush stared at him, unashamedly, he'd never seen a human of that pigmentation before. "Why's you dog eyeballin' me?" Erik shrugged then mentally yelled at Rush for being rude. "What's the problem, Major?" Major Artimus – Artie for short – replied, "that," pointing at Rush, "is the problem." Erik, confused and groggy, looked between Artie's finger and Rush a few times. "What? Why?"

The major continued, "he's been gettin' special treatment, and the younger members above him are afraid for themselves." Erik raised an eyebrow. "First off, sir, his name's Rush. He's not a dog, and he gets treated like every other Initiate. Where's this comin' from?" Artie leaned back to check the hall, walked into the room, closed the door behind himself, and sighed. "Like I said, some of the younger members are complainin' of special treatment. Frankly, they're scared of 'em. They wanted me to come in and give you a talkin' to." Erik narrowed his eyes, "okay? And what do *you* think, sir?" Major Artimus looked up to Rush who had silently sat at his own desk

and was reading though one of his journals. "Seems well enough to me. Had any problems?"

Rush cleared his throat and replied for Erik from his own desk, "no sir." "You gettin' along with your peers, Initiate?" Rush jammed his chewed pencil in his notebook, then walked to stand next to Erik. "They avoid me, sir. Spend my free time with Ida and Willis. Come here after, sleep, train, repeat." Artimus nodded, "that's what I figured." Erik was still suspicious, he'd never seen the Major act like this. "Sir, is there anything else? You've never taken interest in someone like this. Well, not since..." Erik paused as he just figured out what was going on. "You're taking him, aren't you?"

Artemis nodded. "Yeah. New orders." Erik was instantly angry, "who gave them?!" Rush looked down to his brother with interest, he was curious as well. "There're two people in this Brotherhood that order around me around: our Elder and the head scribe. You guess." Erik muscled past the older man and marched down the hall, his bare feet echoing as he approached the elder's room.

Rush stood silently and traded stares with the Major. "You should pack. We've got *special* trainin' for you." "One moment, please, sir" he nodded at Major Artemis, and followed the thick trail of anger and frustration that his brother left lingering in the air. The Major made himself at home, digging through Erik's refrigerator as he waited. Rush quickly found himself staring down the double doors that led to the elder's personal apartment. Inside, he heard Erik yelling something unintelligible and the elder's typical level-headed-and-gentle responses. Rush knocked lightly at the door.

"I'll bet that's him now," Rush heard their elder say cheerily. He opened the door and smiled at Rush, "Good morning, Initiate. Ever at your brother's heels, eh?" Rush, unsure of how to answer, bowed into the room and took a seat on a nearby couch facing Erik who was standing further in. Rush was impressed with the grandeur of the room. He guessed that it had been two rooms at one time, but was now a cozy two-room affair with a meeting space, small library, kitchenette, and a queen-sized bed behind what Rush guessed were hospital-style accordion dividers.

The elder smiled at Rush then turned to Erik. "Have you cooled down yet?" Erik sighed and nodded without response. "Good. Now, go have a seat next to your brother, and we'll have a chat. You should know better than to raise Hell like this, this early in the morning, son." Rush likened Erik to a pup that had been scolded: if he

had a tail, Rush figured, it would be low and between his legs. Erik flopped next to Rush and folded his arms in silent protest on the worn cream-colored couch.

The elder sat in a chair across from said couch and sighed gently. "Now, son. Why did you find it necessary to wake me up by yelling at me? It won't be Christmas for months." Erik inhaled sharply and sputtered, "Artie came down sayin' that you're takin' Rush away. I...I'm not gonna let that happen." The elder reached forward to grab his cup of tea and sipped it. "Yes, I'm planning a trip for our Initiates Rush, and Olivia. Did Artimus tell you that?" Erik shifted his glance around, "no." He muttered. "When did you start jumping to conclusions, son? You've always been very level-headed and methodical. Like your old man."

The elder sipped his tea again, then looked over to Rush. "Rush, go pack enough for a week. You, Initiate Olivia, and Jenkins will be joining the Major for some training in the woods. "Just training, sir?" The elder nodded silently. Erik muttered and looked up sheepishly, "I was worried that you were takin' him away for good."

The elder stood up, walked around the coffee table, and patted Erik on the head like a child. "I will do my best to keep you both safe. I gave the elder my word that I would, and you know I hold my word above all else." Erik nodded again, still thoroughly embarrassed, "but, what if something happens and I'm not there?" "Do you not trust your peers? Jenkins, one of our best medics, will oversee their training and his commander, Major Artimus will be there, as well."

Erik nodded again and muttered, "yeah. Of course I do," before falling silent. "You will need to trust his safety to me and your comrades. You will not always be able to keep an eye on our newest Initiates." Erik sighed and nodded: he'd given in. Rush looked up from an ancient book that sat on the coffee table. "Sir, may we go? Must prepare. Want to help Ida and Willis before we go. Nearly done with the brahmin." The elder smiled and patted him on the head this time, "take care, son." Rush nodded and silently extricated himself from the awkward room.

Erik looked up at his father and before he could speak, was interrupted. "I don't want to hear it, son. You can't keep doing this. Every time he's slighted, you run to the rescue. You are hampering his education by coddling him. Aren't you worried about Olivia as well?" Erik was silent, unsure how to answer. "Yeah, but she's had a lot more experience in the real world." The elder narrowed his eyes in a fatherly way, "I'm not sure what's gotten into you since y'all made it back. That, and you

know how I feel about our brothers curating relationships between junior and senior members. It leads to favoritism and *that* leads to people getting hurt."

Erik nodded again. "We don't want another incident like Chase," the elder said gently. Erik sighed deeper this time, "no. How's Frank been doin'?" The elder sipped his cold tea, scowled, then continued. "Better. He's been working here and there and seeing the father a few times a week." "The father? That's unlike him." The elder nodded in agreement, "seems to be helping. It's not my place to condemn him one way or another. I've just been trying to keep him busy and out of the field until he comes back around. You know he hadn't been deployed since last year."

Erik nodded after finally cooling down. He stood up and straightened out his boxers. "Better?" Erik nodded, saluted the elder-father, and walked back to his room. Marshall Redding smiled as he watched his precious son walk down the hall with his head declined in shame. He shook his head and returned to his book.

Erik slowly opened his own door to find Rush packing his duffel bag. "You should, uh," Erik said as he dug around in his desk, "take this with you." He tossed a silver trinket at Rush who caught and inspected it. The shiny trinket was a trio of silver cogs with a tiny winged sword through the center of them, suspended from a beaded stainless steel chain. "It's our symbol, wear it with pride. Remember your brothers in Steel Rush, they will watch out for you." Rush stuck his head through the chain, leaving it to nestle and glint through his chest fur.

"Do you not want it?" Erik shook his head, "no, no. I made two, the elder has one and I kept the other. Didn't have anyone to give it to." "Why not Olivia?" Rush asked, confused. Erik shook his head, "she doesn't wear much jewelry." Rush pet his trinket. "Thank you, brother." "Yeah, no problem. You'll probably be getting your tags tomorrow."

Rush nodded slowly, silently wanting for further explanation, "they're to," Erik paused and gulped, "identify you, in the event of an accident. A, uh, permanent accident." Rush nodded, the chain around his neck suddenly feeling tight. "Right, uh, what time is it?" Rush glanced at his Pip-Boy and muttered, "ten past eight." "Okay, you got everything packed?" Rush nodded. Erik clapped his hands together then proclaimed, "I'll get dressed, then get a bite to eat. Gonna have a busy day."

"Busy now, brother," Rush muttered. Erik ignored him as he threw on his civvies. "Let's go 'round town, see what's happenin'. You need a break from the lab and from training." Rush whined aloud and complained mentally to his brother, "must we? We're

so close to fixing the brahmin." Erik replied from the inside the shirt he was fighting to get on, "yeah. All work and no play, makes you a dull boy." Rush inspected his claws, "not dull at all, brother.

Erik's head and messy brown hair popped through the collared polo shirt, "You gotta get out and meet some more people aside from us." "What about Willis, Ida, and Olivia? The Elder?" "Yeah, but you need some friends of your own, too. Or at the least, help your Brothers in Steel realize that you're not a giant walking monster." Rush was becoming weary of having to go through the trouble of pacifying every new person he met.

"Fine," Rush grumbled, "breakfast sounds good." Erik grabbed his backpack and handed Rush his. They quickly descended the three flights of stairs and nearly ran Jenkins over in the process. He and Willis were on their way to an early breakfast as well. Jenkins had dark circles under his eyes, but seemed quite happy. Erik laughed to himself and asked, "you and Will stay up all night?" Jenkins nodded and yawned, "yeah." Erik declined to ask further questions, he could guess for himself. Willis frequently stayed the weekends at Jenkins' place "to research."

As Rush led the crew into the mess hall, he nearly knocked Olivia over with the heavy wooden door from the other side. "Tryin' to get...Oh! Hey Rush, sirs." Rush smiled in reply and quickly made his way through the sparsely populated room as the other four chatted: his mind was on eggs. Eggs and toast and coffee, if he was lucky. Judging from the yelling he heard emanating from behind the swinging doors that lead to the kitchen, luck was not on his side.

"Oh, god damnit, what you mean we're outta grits?!" Rush heard Franklin yell at some poor underling. "Go out, get corn, and grind it down. Now!" A small man, garbed in something resembling a scientist's lab coat with an askew poofy hat scurried from the kitchen with a wooden milk crate full of metal bowls. He looked back at the kitchen in fright, tripped, and sent the bowls skittering across the tiled floor. The loud metal clanging of the bowls made the man wince and whine as Franklin began to storm out of the kitchen, Saturnite butcher knife in hand and an angry scowl across his face. "And don't you come back unless you've got five pounds worth!" He then threw the knife in the poor man's direction, it stuck into the wall near his head with a **twang**.

The handful of remaining people in the mess hall fell silent well before that; each watched in a mixture of bewilderment and fright. Franklin casually strolled out of the kitchen, retrieved his fire-hardened knife and muttered, "damn rookies, in the

bar all night instead of workin'," before returning to the kitchen. After the swinging doors settled to their original state, quiet chatter picked up again as people shrugged off the fresh murder attempt. Erik turned to Jenkins with a calm panic and asked, "is that normal now?" Willis laughed and said, "yes! I like this Franklin. We should kill more of his friends." Jenkins laughed and patted Willis on the arm with a detached smile that said "I wish you wouldn't say things like that."

Rush, distracted by his grumbling stomach, was trying to absorb everything as Erik and Willis got into an argument over his off-color remark. They were nearing blows before Rush covertly dragged Erik away by the nape of his neck. "Breakfast time," he mumbled, retrieving a tray for him. Rush roughly handed it over, and nudged him into the short line to the kitchen. Rush thought to Erik, "he has a strange sense of humor, brother." Erik huffed to himself as he white-knuckled his tray.

Erik barged his way into the kitchen and looked around. "Frank? What've we got to eat?" Franklin came from the cooler and replied, "well, not grits. How 'bout some eggs?" Rush's eyebrows raised with his interest. "Toast?" Franklin nodded as he filled two mugs full of a dark liquid and placed one on each of their trays. "Yeah, we got toast, too. Over easy for Erik. You want scrambled, Rush?" Rush shook his head, "same as Erik, please." Franklin nodded and shooed them from the kitchen, "one of my scared little minions will bring it out," he explained.

They heard Franklin yell at another cook as they exited the second set of swinging doors, "get out of the cooler and get to cookin' damnit!" Erik shook his head as he and Rush sat at their regular table, tucked away in the corner. After a few minutes, Olivia, Jenkins, and Willis joined them, all with white mugs of the same mysterious dark liquid. Rush blew across his and took a sip - it was the bitter chicory tea. He grimaced and continued to drink it, unwilling to agitate Franklin any further. Rush learned the hard way that Franklin didn't appreciate waste: when Rush didn't finish his bread and side of mushy vegetables one night, Franklin volun-told him to hand-scrub every pot, dish, and pan in the kitchen before forcing him to help prep for the next day.

Rush smiled across his mug to Olivia who returned a warm smile of her own. "So, wolfie, you get a visit this morning?" Rush nodded and sipped his awful drink again before replying, "Major Artimus." Olivia nodded, "we've got our first mission, Erik!" she said, teeming with excitement. Erik groaned, "yeah. I know. You two, Jenkins, and Major Artie, in the woods for some sort of training?" Olivia looked disappointed momentarily, "you're not comin'?" Erik shook his head. "Huh, the woods seem like your kinda place, Erik" she muttered over her mug.

Jenkins chimed in, "it's good for each of us to teach you new recruits stuff. Keeps you on your toes." Olivia sighed and asked wistfully, "are we going to get any time together, Erik?" Before he could answer, a frazzled kitchen assistant arrived at their table, juggling plates of eggs and toast. "Over easy?" Erik and Rush both raised their hands, then were served. "Scrambled?" Olivia and Jenkins raised their hands, then got theirs. The last, a whole hard-boiled gecko egg was served to the super mutant. "Ketchup," Willis grunted. The kitchen hand fished a small glass bottle from his apron and handed it over before getting yelled at from the kitchen.

Most of the conversation dissolved as each dove into their breakfast. Willis was busy drawing smiley faces on his giant egg with ketchup prior to each bite. He stopped when Rush asked him, "any progress?" Willis took a large bite of egg, spilling bits from his mouth as he replied, "yes, your hypothesis was correct. We are gathering more samples today. A careless farmhand was increasing their feed with other Brahmin that had passed, to get a 'better flavor.' They were in early stages of infection – symptoms weren't showing." He stopped to wipe his mouth before applying more ketchup and taking another large bite. After swallowing, he nodded his thanks to Rush. "Did a good job, dog. You will save more lives than just our herd."

Rush smiled before taking another sip of tea, pleased that he was able to help. Willis wiped his mouth again and pointed a sausage-like finger at Rush, "you should be proud of this one, Rade. He is much smarter than he looks." Rush smiled his thanks as he shoved the last spoonful of eggs into his maw.

The remainder of their morning was quiet: Jenkins and Willis went back to the lab, Olivia stuck around to help Franklin while Erik and Rush took their packs and went to town. Near lunchtime, Olivia joined Willis and Jenkins in the lab, anxious to help and learn. She knocked on the door to Ida's lab and waited patiently. Moments later, Jenkins squinted through the glass pane and yelled, "it's pretty bloody in here. You sure?" She nodded, quite sure of her strong stomach.

Jenkins opened the door and led her in with a grand gesture using his gloved hand that was coated in gore and dripping blood. He and Willis were in the middle of dissecting a Brahmin that was exhibiting the symptoms Rush uncovered. She got a better view of Jenkins now: he was in a makeshift smock, covered in slimy viscera. Willis was much the same, except for some reason, he chose not to wear gloves. The dark trails of thick blood on his arms sent shivers down her spine. Before Jenkins had the chance to ask why she was so pale, Olivia swallowed her rising bile and walked into the stuffy room. It looked like someone placed a large ordinance explosive into the chest cavity of a Brahmin and let it explode.

Olivia swallowed her bile down a second time as she tied back her hair. Jenkins offered her a pair of nitrile gloves. Willis glanced at them, snorted, then went back to digging through the Brahmin's entrails. Olivia didn't know what he was digging for, but the slick, sloppy sounds he made wasn't helping her constitution. Jenkins donned a fresh glove then reached for his gore-encrusted tray of medical implements to hand Olivia a stained hammer and chisel. "Crack those skulls open for me. We need some tissue samples to verify the encephalitis." Olivia swallowed her rising bile again, took a deep breath, and accepted the tools with trembling hands.

"Give 'em a good knock on the head, right between the eyes. Make a crack big enough you can get the chisel in, then crack your way around. Once you get it good an' loose, you can peel the skull back and off. Good luck, they're pretty thick." Jenkins instructed with a hint of bemusement. Olivia did as she was directed, her bile rising further with each swing.

She quickly decided the skull was made of some impenetrable metal after many futile hammer blows. Olivia, growing frustrated, reared back, and swung one last time a grunt. Some of the Brahmin's grey, swollen brain ejected a trail of blood and pus across her gloved hand followed by an eyeball. Jenkins paused cutting muscular tissues and tendons to investigate the strange gagging noises Olivia was making. Jenkins saw her pale skin and quickly realized more mess was about en route; he threw her a bucket partially filled with organs and half-yelled "don't miss!" before her violent heaving turned into retching.

Olivia wiped her mouth and stared at the bucket's contents, then to the damaged skull and the eyeball staring back up at her from the floor, blaming it for making her sick and embarrassed. She growled, and smashed the top of the skull loose, exposing the slimy and sickly brain. The putrid scent accompanying the brain immediately alerted Willis. Without effort or warning, he flung the laboratory door open and bodily heaved Olivia and Jenkins out after one another before slamming the shut and locked behind them. "What the hell, man!" "Contamination must be contained. I can resist it, you two flesh bags will probably explode or something." Jenkins lacked a response to Willis' typical haphazard way of showing he cared.

Rather than argue through the laboratory door, Jenkins collected himself from the scuffed tile floor, dusted himself off, and offered a hand to the very confused and gore-splattered Olivia. "That's...that's normal?" she squeaked in question, accepting Jenkins' assistance. "Yeah, he sighed. He's surprisingly protective." Olivia nodded uneasily as she rubbed her freshly bruised butt. "Let's use the lab next door to get sterilized."

Erik was struggling to keep pace with Rush as they trekked through the makeshift bazaar in town. "What's your hurry?!" Rush replied mentally, "anxious, excited." Erik adjusted his flailing pack, "about what? That stupid cow?" Rush yelled back aloud, "not stupid! Very important, brother!" Erik grumbled to himself, "I know, I know. I just think you spend too much time with those scribes, Rush. You should be training as a paladin, not some pencil pushing paper monkey." Erik continued to jog in silence behind him for a short while before Rush finally replied. "Needs of the many outweigh needs of the few, Brother. My skills are better suited as a scribe."

"Bullshit!" Erik yelled aloud, catching mildly alarmed looks from scattered townspeople and vendors. "I've seen you fight," Erik continued mentally, "you can hold your own. Hell, you ate some guy's throat out. Remember that? Scribes don't do that!" Rush paused at the crumbling intersection that led North to their barracks; he still didn't remember. He squinted to the Northeast in the direction of Tom's garage, he tried to remember what Tom said about the streets. Erik walked around Rush and stared in the same direction. "What're we lookin' at?" "Garage," Rush mumbled aloud. Erik nodded slowly, "yeah. I gathered that much. You wanna go see what Tom's up to?"

Rush shrugged and muttered "sure." Erik led the way across the intersection and up the side street that ran parallel to the old highway. A quarter mile of walking, and they'd arrived to find Tom's legs poking out from under the rust-trimmed red highwayman that brought Ernie and his family to their home. "Hoy, Tom," Erik called out. Tom lurched up and smashed his head on the undercarriage, cursing his unexpected visitor. He crawled from under the car and rubbed the fresh red mark on his forehead. "Hey boys. What y'all up to this fine Sunday?" Erik shrugged, "on our way back from the bazaar. Wanted to stop in an' say 'hey' before we leave again tomorrow." Tom rubbed his greasy hands on his jumpsuit, "well, y'all come on in for a spell."

They followed the muscular man into the office and threw their respective bags on the couch, following Tom further into the back of the tiny three room building. He produced a couple of beers, handing them one each. Tom popped his own and sipped it, "so, how's it goin' out in the real world?" Erik cheered Tom's beer. "Since we brought those folks up from Fruitland, the Burg seems a lot busier. More traders and stuff." Tom nodded and asked Rush, "what you think, son?" Rush imitated Erik's shrug, "do not know. Been in the lab."

"Well ain't you two just makin' everything 'round here better?" Rush blushed slightly and hid by drinking more of his beer. Erik came to his rescue, "what's wrong with that car?" "What, th' Corvega? Fuel cell's goin' out. I'm surprised y'all made it up here before it died." Rush's curiosity piqued, "voltage sensor?" Tom shook his head, "nah, I think it's the DC to DC converter. Chewin' through fuel cells pretty quick." "Where is it?" Rush asked. Tom held his beer and pointed to the mess of wires and chips on his workbench, "have at it, son." Rush nodded and took his beer with him to the bench.

Tom and Erik chatted about the new folks in town as Rush got to work. He dawned Tom's goggles and got busy with the nearby pliers and smoking soldering iron under the florescent light. "I'll be damned if he don't look right at home in them goggles. You good with tools, son?" Rush nodded slightly, "yes, sir. Repair things for people," he mumbled. Erik smiled to himself, proud of his big brother. "Hey Tom, you see Axel lately?" Tom shook his head and replied with a slight melancholy, "nah, he's been too busy with that big, green sombitch and ghoulie to come an' see his ol' man lately."

Erik milled around the office for a bit before approaching more serious subjects, "so, uh. You heard yet? 'bout th' tribals?" Tom nodded as he flipped through some work requisitions on a clipboard. "Yeah, sounds like they're movin' 'round again." Erik nodded, "yeah. We think they're the same ones that burned down y'all's old town." Tom dropped the clipboard from his view. "No one said nothin' 'bout that. You sure son?" Erik sighed and nodded, "yeah, Mr. Tom, we're pretty sure."

Tom sighed and rubbed his sore head as the color slowly drained from his face. "God. Damnit!" He threw the clipboard across the office. Rush yelped as he burned himself with the iron as Tom's clipboard bounced off of the wall and grazed his furred head. Rush sucked on his burnt thumb as he fetched the clipboard. Tom huffed to himself momentarily. "You'd better be damn sure, son. I got a serious beef to settle wit' those bastards if that's true." Erik nodded calmly, but steeled himself to argue with the man.

Tom's face paled in anger, "I'll be damned before I let any more of 'em get away after what they did! They got a lifetime of pain to pay for and I intend to charge 'em. I swear to God I'll kill every one of 'em by hand." "I know, but you gotta let us deal with it. We need you here, takin' care of us. Can't do that if you're dead, right?" "Who the Hell d'you think..." Marie walked in with a small box interrupting his rant. "Sweetheart! What's wrong?"

Tom grabbed her box, threw it on the bench and hugged her tightly before whispering in to her ear, "they're back." Marie's cheery face turned ashy and sullen. The years of laugh lines on her face made her look two decades older than she was. "Oh, Honey, no. That can't be right." Tom nodded to no one as he gently petted her thick, neat braids. "'Fraid so." "Does our baby know?" "I'll bet so, right Erik?" Tom strained. "Ah, yes sir. He was with us when we spotted 'em." Marie's deep brown eyes misted over, "not again. I won't have it, Tom. They ain't gonna do this to us again. They can't take my family." Tom nodded again and pulled her closer. "Over my dead body, babe."

Rush didn't want to interrupt the moment, but was curious why Erik didn't console them. Rush cleared his throat, "module is repaired, Mr. Tom." Marie peeked around him and wiped her eyes, "oh, dear. I'm sorry boys. You shouldn't have to see us like this." She wiggled out from Tom's strong grasp and hugged Erik and walked over to pat Rush in turn. She cleared her throat and retrieved her box before offering it to Tom. "You got a package, dear, from Marshall."

Tom took a steeling breath and accepted the box. "Don't hear from him much any more. Wonder what it is?" He opened the flaps on the stained cardboard box and smiled. Inside was a weathered 10mm pistol with two full boxes of hollow point ammo. A note accompanied it:

Tom, Marie

I expect that by now, one of our sons will have told you the news. We are working on a plan to prevent the past atrocities that brought you here. Take this, may it keep you safe.

This is by no means an invitation to go hunting alone, only a gift to my old friends.

— Marshall.

Tom took the pistol out and inspected it. The matte black pistol was heavily scuffed and worn with time, but had been lovingly repaired. He chuckled gently, "that ol' man of yours, Erik. Hell of a man." He replaced the pistol in the box and placed it on his desk and leaned on the wall. "Well, shit," Tom sighed before looking over to Rush who silently holding the mess of wires, chips, and boards that comprised the

brains of the Corvega. "Son, you can set that down. I ain't workin' on that damn car any more today."

Rush still held it as he sidled next to Erik, "we can finish it," he grumbled. Tom shook his head and waved them off. "Don't make it worse than it already is." Rush nodded as he and Erik exited the office to leave he and Marie alone.

While Rush and Erik smashed their knuckles and cursed from under the rusty car, Jenkins and Olivia were making their way toward the shop themselves. "I don't think I've ever been here. No reason to, really," Olivia said offhand. Jenkins shrugged, "well if you don't have anything that needs fixin', I don't see why you would." She shrugged in response. "So, the mechanic's your dad, then?" Jenkins continued to lead their trip from her right-hand side. She glanced over, "what's wrong?" Jenkins shrugged, "dunno. Just a bad feeling's all."

"What are those? Are we're relying on feelings now? When do I get training on that? Is there a requisition form for feelings? Is that like a new 10mm?" Olivia chided. Jenkins shrugged off her sarcasm and continued as they passed the small white chapel. Its white walls and few remaining stained glass windows starkly contrasted the ancient brick that made up the remaining collegiate buildings. He squinted and spied two sets of legs protruding from under a red car on the other side of the highway. One of those people wasn't wearing boots.

"Rush!" he yelled to no effect. "That's weird. Dad doesn't let anyone else work on the cars," he mumbled half to himself as he picked up the pace. They both jogged across a patchy grass field, across the crumbling highway, and through the faded parking lot that surrounded the shop. "Rush!" Jenkins yelled again, surprising him into bashing his head on the undercarriage. He growled to himself in pain. Erik winced sympathetically.

"What?!" Rush barked back with frustration. "Where's dad, er, Tom?" Rush pulled himself out from under the car and coaxed the loose gravel from his coat. "Inside with your mother." "Why're *you* under the car?" "Repairing the fuel cell, why are *you* bloodstained?" Rush asked them. "Cowsplosion," she muttered. Rush winced in disgust.

Rush smiled to himself and looked back to the car that appeared to be cursing loudly. Rush nudged Erik's exposed leg, "Your mate is here." Erik smashed the socket wrench into his knuckles again, drawing more blood and expletives. "Damnit!"

Olivia faced her male comrades and held up a finger up to her lips before crunching through gravel to Erik's legs. She gently brushed up and down the inside of his calf

with a gore-stained foot. "Fuck off Jenkins! I'm fixin' Ernie's car. Ow! Shit!" She carried on, moving up to his thigh. Erik kicked at the foot that wouldn't quit. "Dude! Seriously!" He threw the socket wrench out from the other side of the car and roughly drug himself out. "That's not fuckin'..." His face quickly changed from pissed to fully blushed, "oh. Uh, hey."

He glanced at Rush and Jenkins who both grinning from ear to ear. "You both're bastards." Rush shrugged, "told you your mate was here." "I thought you were bein' a dick." Rush squinted in confusion, "why lie?" Erik sighed wearily. Rush was smart, but sometimes he was unbelievably naïve. "Never mind, Rush. Let's just go get cleaned up," he muttered while retrieving his socket wrench. "But I wanted to stop and introduce dad to Olivia," Jenkins said. Erik quickly glanced at the garage, "ah, maybe later Jenkins. Tom said something 'bout havin' a headache. That's why he let us fix the car. Right Rush?"

Before Rush could corroborate the story, Marie exited the building with slightly puffy eyes. "Mamma? What's wrong?" Marie blinked in surprise, "nothing's the matter dear. I'm just havin' allergies again's all." She crunched across the short expanse of gravel, kissed him on the forehead, and quickly left toward their small home on the north side of town.

Without hesitation, Jenkins left the group to find his father and investigate. He stormed through the faded blue door and found his father leaning on the same desk where Erik had left him, holding the 10mm pistol and staring blankly at the dent in the wall his clipboard made. "Dad? What's going on? Why's mamma cryin' and whose gun is that? Are you okay? You're not gonna shoot someone are you?" Tom blinked out of his gaze and scratched his right temple with the muzzle of the gun. "Hey son. Your mamma's upset over them damn tribals. Th' gun's ours. Elder gave it to us. Sit down. We need to talk."

Jenkins gulped, those words have never preceded good news. "Uh, dad, how 'bout a beer? An' I'll hold on to that." Tom nodded. Jenkins took the gun and fetched two beers from his father's refrigerator. "What's goin' on?" Tom took a long drink of his sweating beer and paused, there were shadows moving near the window to his office. He glared in their direction and recognized Erik's outline.

"Rade! Get your scrawny ass in here. The rest o' y'all can go on somewhere else." Three sets of feet shuffled around on the pavement and loose gravel. Erik sheepishly came in and stood awkwardly next to Jenkins. "Axel, I got something me and your mamma never wanted to talk to you about." Jenkins gulped again, "like...what? Are you

leaving? Are you sick? It is cancer? Are you...disowning me?" Tom choked on his gulp of beer.

"Why th' Hell'd we disown you? We love you more than anything, son. You may not be givin' us grandkids, but we've accepted that. Well," he paused and inhaled sharply, "not really." Jenkins was visibly confused. "Dad. What d'you mean?" "Those tribals y'all found? They're the ones that razed Red Creek, where we used to live." Jenkins shrugged, "I don't remember anything before moving here." Tom nodded, "you's just a baby at the time. Th' bastards came an' burned down the town, killed and raped the women, murdered the children and ol' folks. Most o' the townsfolk didn't make it out." Tom paused to drink his feelings back then continued, "I remember her like it was yesterday. Your real daddy was a sickly man; died a few weeks before the tribals came. Your birth mamma died protectin' you an' your sisters. You's the only one that made it. An' only 'cause Marie found ya."

He paused again to finish off his beer. "Marie fought off one o' them tribals that tried to rape 'er. She shot 'is dick off, then his head and saved another girl and another woman from the same. She was runnin' from house to house tryin' to find survivors. That's when she heard you cryin'. Said you was the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen in this godforsaken world." Tom shuddered, "I was just gettin' back to town from a tradin' trip from the Crescent when I smelled the smoke an' saw her running for the shop, covered in blood and soot, cradlin' you."

"We laid you down, safe in my car, and spent the rest of what little daylight we had roundin' up who an' what we could from the town. Marie lost her 'ol man an' two kids. I lost my brother Bill an' his kids. Never found his wife. I didn't have a wife or family of my own. Hell, we lost most of the town. We decided from that day on, you'd be ours."

"So," Jenkins choked, "you're not..." Tom got up and mussed Jenkins' hair, "nope, but we did the best we could. Shit son, if not for you and your mamma, I'd still be livin' alone and workin' on cars, drunk as a skunk all damn day." Tom paused and chuckled sadly after shaking his empty beer bottle, "well at least I ain't alone no more."

Jenkins fell back on the couch in silence. Pretty much everything he took for granted was some form of lie at this point, but he wasn't angry. He thought for a few long minutes that he should be, but couldn't figure out why he wasn't. "Did you tell mamma that you're gonna tell me? That why she was cryin'?" Tom nodded, "yeah."

Tribals didn't help." "Tell 'er you couldn't." Jenkins found himself enveloped in the larger man's caring embrace.

Erik was happy for them but felt pretty awkward at the same time; he hated seeing grown men get tearey-eyed like this. Tom released his son from a bear hug and roughed up his hair again. "We're proud of you Axel, don't you ever forget, son." After clearing his throat, Tom looked down to Erik, "an' you know your daddy feels the same way 'bout you, don't you, boy?" Erik nodded, glancing down to the floor. "Aye, sir." "Good. Now, you two get the Hell outta my shop, I got a fuel cell to replace."

Erik shook his head, "Actually, Rush and I got it installed. Should be good to go." "Oh," Tom exclaimed. "Well good! Thanks. Get out." Erik grinned and hooked an arm around Jenkins' neck as they exited. They found Olivia and Rush sitting in the freshly repaired car listening to one of the three broadcasting radio stations. Rush exited the passenger door to the tune of "Crazy" by some lady who's name Erik couldn't remember; Rush was visibly tense.

"Everything's fine," Jenkins said, "they're just worried about those tribals we found." Erik nodded with a smile to placate Olivia while he gave Rush a quick mental summary of what actually happened. Olivia reached in and switched off the car's worn ignition. "So what now?" she queried. Erik glanced down at his Pip-Boy, it was nearing four o'clock. "Ah, well. You two gotta finish getting ready for your trip." Erik paused and scratched his chin, "Jenkins, can Rush crash at your place tonight?" "Uh," Jenkins stalled, "tonight's not good. Willis likes to visit before I leave on trips." Rush squinted, "would like to sleep in my own bed." The look that Erik shot Jenkins screamed "you're not the only one with plans to get laid tonight!"

Rush quickly realized the problem. "Perhaps the dogs in the kennel will let me stay with them," he muttered bitterly. "Must be a nice problem to have," he continued sourly. "Hey now, look," Erik started, "don't be like that. It's just for tonight. We don't have anywhere else to..do stuff." Rush harrumphed and left by himself toward the kennel. Jenkins laughed at Erik, "what are you, ten?" "We don't have anywhere else to do stuff," he mocked in his awful sing-song voice.

He was on his own again, his own brother kicked him out of his home. He knew Erik meant the best and only wanted some alone time with Olivia, he certainly couldn't blame him. Rush wouldn't mind some alone time with her either, she was the only person aside from Jenkins, Erik, and the Elder that treated him like a real person, not some overgrown animal. Rush couldn't act on those impulses, though. He didn't

want to damage the relationship his brother and Olivia were fostering. Rush sighed as he remembered the girls at the bath house didn't want anything to do with him either.

His pouting directed him up the highway to the crops that bordered the kennels. He looked at the sad building: it had been a house at one time, now extended in both directions by rough wooden fences. The dogs smelled Rush coming and began barking at him. "Hey! Two-legs," they called out and mocked, "why're you sad? Lost your human?" Rush growled at them half-heartedly. "Even the mutts mock me," Rush thought, "at least they..." He would have continued that thought if he didn't smash into Willis like a brick wall.

"Came to visit your mother, dog?" Willis asked to the crumpled Rush on the ground. He got up and dusted himself off. "...no. She's dead. Just walking." "Not well, maybe you should try walking on all fours? Maybe you would fall less." Willis joked. Rush growled angrily in response. "Hey! No need to get angry, dog, just a joke," Willis said as he roughly scratched Rush's scalp. He calmed instantly, "good boy, you like that" Willis chided. Rush broke away and rearranged his head fur, gently growling again. "Why are you so angry today, dog? You're normally well behaved." "My name is 'Rush,' not 'dog'," he responded. Willis shrugged, "I like 'dog' better, Ida says you *are* half canine." "Half human too," Rush reminded him. Willis shrugged again. "I was once too."

He roughed up Rush's fur again and said, "I call you dog because I like you. Dog. Can't say that for many 'round here." "You. What?" Willis grinned, patted Rush roughly a third time, then left abruptly. Rush smoothed down his fur again and watched Willis lumber off toward the barracks with something in hand. Rush caught the smell shortly afterward. Wild flowers! How did he miss that, he thought to himself.

Rush soon found himself gravitating toward the laboratory. After a short walk, the rust-flecked stainless steel doors leading to the labs were blocking his way. Ida had posted a hand-scrawled note with duct tape that stated the laboratory had to be sterilized due to an unexpected outbreak of a particularly suborn strain of bovine encephalitis and would be closed for the next week or so for a deep cleaning. Rush sighed, he couldn't even go to his second home. He slammed his fist on the door then turned back to the barracks. Maybe the elder would make the other men let him stay in the bunks with the general population. Failing that, he had enough caps to stay the night in Ernie's motel.

Rush sighed to himself as he got comfortable under the ancient oak shadowing the laboratory building. The warm afternoon sun make it easy for him to nap without a care. He dozed off to a dreamless slumber for some time before being violently awoken by a gnat that buzzed its way up his moist nose. Rush hacked and coughed as the tiny insect bounced around his sinus cavity. It continued to do so until he sneezed, sending rocketing at over 100 miles-per-hour. Rush wiped his nose on his forearm and snuffed his sinuses back into shape.

After the excitement, he glanced at his blue Pip-Boy and saw that it was now past five o'clock; the elder would be out of his meetings and it was an hour before dinner. He decided to set off to find him for permission to dorm in the commons. After crossing the street, a quick salute granted him access into the commons, two flights of stairs got him even closer to the elder, only the hallway remained. He was quickly distracted; the hall was flooded with pheromones. "They wasted no time," Rush thought sourly as he walked to the opposite end of the hall.

After lightly knocking on the oak doors, a tired voice came from inside, "Enter." Rush opened the door to find the elder in a disheveled state. He fell asleep on his couch while writing some maps or diagrams. Elder Redding looked up through dark circles under his eyes as he sat up and bade that Rush enter. "C'mon in, Initiate, Close the door behind you." "How can I," he was interrupted by a yawn, "help you?" Rush sat in a chair across from him, suddenly more worried about his elder's health than where he was going to sleep for the night. "Sir, are you well?"

The elder drug his fingers through his short-cropped silver hair. "Well, Mr. Hawthorne, I'm shorthanded at the moment and need to finish up my plans for the next few months of detail." Rush looked up from the worn maps and sprawling notes on his coffee table and saw the elder pat the worn seat cushion next to him. "Give me a hand, Rush." Rush got out of the chair and joined his elder on the couch. "What is wrong, sir?" "Well, you, Initiate Olivia, Jenkins, and Major Artemis are starting a training trip tomorrow. Remember?" Rush nodded. "Right, well that takes all but one of my viable medics into the field." "Two, I need to send Erik on a scouting mission for a few weeks, we're running low on parts for repairs, and to top it off, we have a fifteen percent increase in population from the folks that came North from Fruitland, all of which are now one hundred percent worried about whatever the Enclave's got up its sleeve. Never mind the fact that we're now running short on housing."

"How many scouts do you have, sir?" The elder grabbed a clipboard, "six, not including Erik. One's a non-starter and the rest put together don't equal another

two." "Medics?" "Three in town right now, you two Initiates in training, and a handful more scattered around the next a hundred miles of here." "Paladins?" "We got plenty of cannon fodder, son, but no one to lead them into battle. Since we lost Chase, their morale's been low. Franklin's not been much help in that department."

Rush sighed, "Sir, should you be telling me this?" The elder rubbed his tired eyes, "no, not really. It's none of your business. You should focus on becoming the best medic you can, not managerial issues." Rush nodded and grabbed a nearby clipboard anyway. After running the numbers, Rush decided that the increase in foot traffic to and from the Burg would allow them access to better trade routes, and Ernie could rent them all rooms. The unfortunate fact was that Elder Redding's Brotherhood detachment had grown soft focusing on altruism and not preparing for the inevitable war.

"Increased trader traffic will help get parts and better weapons. Use small strike groups and guerilla tactics with the paladins," Rush concluded. The elder nodded, "could work. I was planning to double up on cross training the medics with some of the paladins. We'll have fighting surgeons, if necessary." Rush smiled proudly but it quickly faded with worry, "sir, are we preparing for war?" The elder sighed again, "we don't know what to expect, really. The Enclave's been out of our area for so long, we only had to deal with the occasional group of bandits and raiders. Now that we have formidable foes, I'm afraid we're going to be out gunned when the time comes."

Rush swallowed hard, "sir, do you have new intel?" Elder Redding shook his head, "no. That's why I'm worried. We haven't received field reports for nearly two weeks from the scouts or any of our medics. I've got to sort out what's going on." Rush reclined into the couch, thinking. "Erik can take me or Jenkins to scout." "No. You hardly have the experience that Jenkins has." "Then let me go with Franklin. Split up scouting. Do it twice as fast." The elder shook his head again. "Absolutely not. John isn't ready for the field yet." "Then Olivia." Elder Redding laughed aloud, "what? Send two Initiates in the field with nearly no training at all?"

Rush sat up straight to defend himself, "Olivia is very skilled with firearms. We can trap for food. Erik and Jenkins taught us survival and basic medicine." The elder slumped his shoulders. We'll have to see. It may not be such a crazy idea. You two have been the best we've had in some time." Rush raised an eyebrow in query. "No, I'm not exaggerating. In your first week here, you two have solved the Brahmin problem, increased our population here in town, brought more foot traffic, and increased my own family. The only way it could be better is if you two could fix

Franklin, increase our crops yields, figure out what those tribals are up to, and figure out how to get rid of the Enclave once and for all."

The elder fell back into the couch and sighed, "poor kid. He used to be a hell of a captain, you know. He and his brother ran their own squads and nearly whipped this place into shape by themselves. Erik learned most of his field skills from them. Elder Redding wiped his dry eyes again, "if I hadn't gotten soft, we'd still have Chase." The elder looked over to Rush who shrugged in response. "John was courtin' a young lady in his brother's squad. I decided it would be okay to let both squads go out to do some routine patrols in the woods. Well, instead of minding their posts, John and his lady friend thought it would be better to go off into the thickets by themselves for some 'personal time.'"

"It's not all John's and the girl's fault, of course, we should have been better prepared. Anyway, the Enclave unleashed a cargo box the size of your apartment, full of angry, mind-controlled Deathclaws on my men. John supposedly finished up and got his pants on in time to watch his own brother get disemboweled as he fought to keep the remainder of their squadrons alive. By the end of it, John and the woman were the only ones left. He reportedly ripped the claws from a dead deathclaw and used them to eviscerate the remaining four with his bare hands."

Rush was agape. "The young woman returned to us long enough to send help for John. We haven't seen back since. I took Jenkins and one of the reserve squads to find him. He was nearly as bad off as his brother: a deathclaw caught him across the face, flaying his flesh to ribbons. Another had punctured him in the gut. Add that to a number of broken bones, and he had nearly bled out by the time we found him. Jenkins and I spent hours putting him back together while the squadron fanned out to find any remaining threats. Half of the folks with us had to transfuse blood. The poor kid died three times in those woods that day. Once when his brother did and twice more when he gave up and flat lined on us."

"Long story short, I'm not going to let that to happen to my son. I can't stand to lose him, and I'm sure if we did, you would be just like John. I'm not going to have that either. You both are too important to me and to the Brotherhood." "That is why you keep separating us," Rush concluded. The elder nodded, "it's the best way to keep you two alive, Rush." He sighed and rubbed his temples. "I'm sorry, son. I was so busy worrying and complaining that I forgot you needed something. How can I help you?"

Rush suddenly felt very foolish. "Would like to help, sir. And a place to rest tonight." The elder lazily tossed his clipboard on the coffee table and said, "I don't need to guess why you can't sleep in your own barracks tonight." Rush blushed under his fur, "I was a young man once myself too, you know. This couch is all yours, kiddo. Blanket and pillows in the wardrobe." "Th...thank you, sir." The elder smiled and roughed up his head fur, "you know, you and Erik aren't really that different. I'm glad for that. Goodnight, son."

Rush retrieved a pillow and was well on his way to unconsciousness soon after he curled up on the elder's couch around nine o'clock. The elder laid on his bed and stared at the flaking paint and sighed. "What the Hell am I going to do with those two?" He quietly rolled out of bed and exited his own suite to walk down the hall barefoot in his red scribe robes. He paused by Jenkins' door and heard muffled grunts and a bed that loudly protested to someone's vigorous thrusts. He sighed, shook his head, and walked two doors up to his son's door. He almost brought himself to knock and interrupt whatever was going on, but decided against it, instead he knocked on Artemis' door across the hall.

Moments later the slightly pudgy black man answered the door in nothing but his underwear. "Evenin' Elder. C'mon in." The elder walked in and sat on the bed. "What's up Marshall?" Artemis questioned as he put on a pair of sweat pants out of respect. They had been best of friends for decades now, and he could always tell when Elder Redding was troubled. "Artemis," he started, "do you think..." Artemis interrupted him by pouring two fingers of clear liquid into a coffee mug. "I think this'll help." Redding grinned, "couldn't hurt, old friend." "Now, what do I think? About what?" A loud moan from across the hallway answered Artemis' question. "Ah," he chuckled, "nah, they're just kids. You remember those days, don't ya? It's only been 'bout a hundred years." He nodded and sipped his clear drink with a grin.

"Yeah," Redding replied, "you talk to your sister any since she moved up North to Jackson?" Artemis shook his head, "nah, not since Chase," he lamented. The elder sipped his moonshine again. "I don't want another incident like that happening. Especially not to Erik. Or Rush. Or Jenkins. Or any of them, Artie." The elder lowered his voice to a whisper, "I don't think I can handle losing any more of them." His best friend nodded, then clinked his glass against Redding's mug. "Better teach 'em well then, brother. Can't stop 'em from livin' without killin' 'em one way or another."

"But you already knew that, Marshall. Why'd you come over, to drink all my whiskey?" The elder smiled warmly, "'cause you've got the best whiskey and best advice to go

with it, Artie." The hulking man smiled and sat next to his old friend on the quilted bedspread. In a few short hours, they were slightly inebriated and reminiscing about old loves of their own. After four more fingers of moonshine, the elder called it a night, thanked Artemis for his time, whiskey, and company, before retreated through the hallways back to his own room.

There was a gentle snoring coming from inside, which alarmed the drunken elder until he remembered that he gave Rush the couch for the night. Redding slowly opened the door and found his adopted wolf-man shivering on the wooden floor between the couch and coffee table, deep asleep. "Get up, son. What are you doing on the floor?" He nudged Rush with a foot to persuade him. Rush woke up confused. "Why're you on the floor, Rush?" He sat up and shrugged, "do not know." He wrinkled his nose at the elder's acrid breath, "whiskey?"

Redding chuckled, "you caught me. I couldn't sleep so I had a nightcap with Artemis. Rush continued to stare up at him from the floor. "Why don't you go sleep in my bed tonight," he said with a loving smile, "I don't think I'll be sleepin' tonight." Rush quickly disappeared behind the semi-translucent dividers without a question or compliant. Redding followed him and tucked him in, petting his head like he did Erik when he was young. "You know, Rush. I can't keep you or your brother from yourselves. You're both bright and headstrong. That's a dangerous combination." Elder Redding paused, "I know I'm not your dad, but I love you an' your brother anyway, just like you two were my own. I want you to remember that, no matter what Rush. Will you do that?"

Rush, suddenly worried, sat up in the comfy bed, "sir, are you dying?" The elder chuckled awkwardly, "well, we all are, I suppose. But no, I just wanted to remind you. I just don't get time to tell y'all that as much as I should." He tucked Rush back in and petted his head again. "Goodnight, son." "Goodnight, elder," Rush replied before rolling over and hugging the pillow with a faint smile.