

CHAPTER 27: CHANGE OF PLANS OR SURPRISE!

Rush found himself temporarily disoriented, expecting to be in his own bed when his Pip-Boy started screaming at six o'clock that morning. He groaned and slapped it off of the end table, sending it clattering across the floor. Elder Redding groaned at the din: he had just drifted off to sleep a mere hour ago.

“Rush, are you awake? Go fetch Major Artemis and Jenkins. Bring them here, please. Rush rubbed the sleep from his eyes and leaped out of the bed to fetch his Pip-Boy. After jamming the device on his forearm, Rush saluted his raccoon-eyed elder and left through the double doors.

It didn't take Rush long to find the Major: he was trying to knock down Jenkins' door. “Axel, get up! We gotta get on the road!” Rush silently approached the older man, tapping him on the shoulder. “Damnit! What? Oh. Hey Hawthorne. What is it?” Rush hiked a thumb toward the hall behind him, “Elder requested you.” Artemis nodded and pounded on the abused door one last time. “Get that damn boy up, would you?” he asked before setting off to the Elder.

Rush studied the door momentarily: the hinges were on the outside. “Strange,” he thought as he knocked on his own door, two down from Jenkins'. No answer. Rush fished his key from around his neck. The stale scent of sweat and sex assaulted him upon entry. He looked around and found that his room cleaner than it had ever been. Someone had made both his and Erik's beds, swept, and took the time to arrange all the tools on Erik's workbench and neatly stacked up the notes and notebook on his own desk.

Rush located a flat-head screwdriver and hammer in record time to free Jenkins' door from its hinges. Following some precision percussive persuasion, the door's hinge pins clattered to the floor. Other occupants on the floor were peeking out from their doors to see who was making such a fuss. Rush waved them off with a smile and handily removed the door.

Rush gently padded into Jenkins' room and was battered with the same scents of sweat and lust that he found in his own room with an extra helping of thick musk. It didn't take him long to find Jenkins in the tiny room. He was pinned between Rush's colossal cohort, Willis, and the wall. Both of them were sleeping soundly. Rush stood up on his tiptoes to reach over Willis, hoping to gently extricate Jenkins. Unfortunately, his shaking and jarring did nothing to wake the young man from his slumber.

Rush walked into the nearby bathroom, filled an empty canteen from the counter with cold water, then returned to pour it over both of his friends. "Time to rise," he said with a cruel smile. Willis groaned and rolled over and off of the small bed, then continued to gently snore. Jenkins shot up, alert and confused. "What's going on?" Rush continued his silent, award-winning smile. "What time is it? Why're you in here? Why'm I all wet, Rush. What's going on?!"

"Elder requests your presence," Rush said, offering him a hand to climb over Willis. He accepted, shedding the stained cotton bedding as he clambered over his green mate. "Thanks...I guess," Jenkins muttered. He stretched, then winced in mild pain. "Oh, ouch." Rush's look of slight panic made him explain, "I'm fine Rush. I'm just going to, uh, walk funny for a while today." Rush threw up an eyebrow in query, but got no further response.

Jenkins half-waddled to his closet, paused to notice that his front door was missing, then turned into his bathroom with a handful of wrinkled clothing. He yelled back through the closed door, "Tell 'im I'm on my way. And put my damn door back up." Rush chuckled as he saw himself out to do as he was asked. It took Rush longer to get the door realigned that it did to take it down. After hanging the door, Rush made his way down the hall and gently knocked on the elder's door. "Enter," the elder said with exasperation. "Jenkins is en route, sir." Artemis and Elder Redding both took notice of the tools he brought with him. "Didn't waste any time did you, son?" Rush shrugged and shifted his weight from foot to foot awkwardly for a few moments. "Thank you for your persistence Mr. Hawthorne, you're dismissed. Go put those away and get some breakfast. We've got new plans. Bring Erik and Initiate Olivia back when you've all eaten." Rush nodded silently left.

Artemis looked across the ancient coffee table to his old friend. "New plans, eh Marshall?" Elder Redding sipped his mug of lukewarm chicory tea and nodded. "Mmmhm. We've got interesting spots to investigate, something that will hopefully help us when the Enclave comes knocking." Major Artemis furrowed his brow, "when'd this happen?" "Last night, after I got back," he replied with a hint of mischievousness. "Couldn't sleep so I stopped in to see the scribes on night duty." "What're you proposin'?"

Redding sipped his tea again, "We're sending out Jenkins along with our two newest recruits." "What about the other scouts," Artemis asked with growing alarm, "didn't they make it back yet?" Elder Redding shook his head solemnly, "no, and I'm worried. We haven't heard back from any of them in a few weeks – that leaves us with just Erik. The other scouts are still a few months from being field ready. Thankfully, we've got the extra hands since all the folks came up from Fruitland so we can start

training up more medics and infantry. Haven't seen much in the newest batch of people for scouts though."

In the middle of his explanation, Jenkins knocked lightly on the door, "sir?" "Come on in, Jenkins." He took three slow steps in then paused again, standing dead still. "Well, come *in*, son." Jenkins took a few more awkward steps in and leaned on the back of the couch Major Artemis was sitting on. "Come, come. Sit. We're setting up your next trip." Jenkins slowly walked around the couch and sat next to Artemis, wincing as he settled in.

"Son," Elder Redding asked, "are you okay? Need a medic check you out? Major Artemis could do it." "No! I, er, no. Sir. I just overdid my workout yesterday. Strained my legs is all. I'll be right as rain this afternoon." Artemis and Elder Redding exchanged knowing glances and let the subject dissolve into silence. Elder Redding unfurled a coiled map on his coffee table. "Here, men, is what we're going to do." "Jenkins, you and Erik will scout these areas," he said, pointing at three separate circles. The first was nearly 150 miles west of their current position. The other two sites were within a 200 mile radius of the first to the northwest and the south-southwest, respectively.

Jenkins balked. "Sir! It'll take us two months or more to cover all that ground! There's not even any towns or anything nearby. What if we need backup? Or supplies?" Elder Redding nodded, "I'm well aware. That's why you'll be taking one of our three Highwaymen." Jenkins was in shock; neither he nor Erik really knew how to drive that well and they'd certainly never been afforded the luxury of having a vehicle for a scouting mission. "Sir, I don't know..." Redding cut him off. "To cover more ground, Initiates Hawthorne and Brown will be covering these three here." Elder Redding pointed out three more circles: two of them were within three day's trip, but the last was considerably farther away. "They'll knock out the first two, report back, restock, then take out the third."

"Have you had a chance to tell Erik this yet," Jenkins questioned his elder. "No, not yet. I planned to wait after breakfast. We all know he can't concentrate on an empty stomach." Jenkins nodded and continued to stare at the map, "so, sir. What's so important about these locations?" Both he and Artemis leaned in before the Elder explained. "I have reason to believe that these locations will be useful against the Enclave. If my sources are correct, they'll have information and hopefully even some tech we can salvage to keep us on the winning side."

Jenkins kept a healthy amount of skepticism handy – it was unlike the Elder to put people into such questionable circumstances. "Sir, with all due respect, do you think this is the best plan? Those two barely have any training – they're not even

fully-fledged members yet – and *we* just got home a scant week ago.” Jenkins paused to scratch his jaw, “who’re you sending with ‘em?”

Elder Redding looked up to Artemis, “you were looking to get out, right?” Artemis reclined into his couch. “Yeah, it’s about time I hit the road again. It’s been a few weeks since I made my rounds.” The elder nodded and stared at the map himself. “Looks like,” he paused, “Major Grey and you will conduct your quarterly rounds up North. Go to Jackson and the rest of your stops along the way. I’ll send Erik with y’all. He can stick around until here,” Redding pointed at a junction in the ancient highways. “See if you can dig up some more intel about those new tribals, or if anyone’s seen the Enclave ‘round.” Jenkins nodded, “what about the greenhorns?” “We’ll speed their training along for a few weeks, then they’ll have a good enough understanding to go scout out the other three sites. They’ll be close to home, should be okay.”

Artemis stretched lazily, “so we got a Highwayman? Good. Didn’t want to have to walk all that way anyway. Who’s gonna be runnin’ things for you here? You’ll be out of your two top medics and Frank’s in no shape to lead if someone comes snoopin’ ‘round.” Elder Redding nodded, finishing the last of his tea, “I thought about that. I’ll just have to shine up my old armor. We’ll just sort him out in the meantime.” One of Franklin’s frightened minions quietly dropped off a tray of steaming eggs and toast for the elder before scampering back to the kitchen without a word.

Jenkins chuckled, remembering Franklin’s earlier attempted murder with the butcher knife. “So, that’s it then, sir? We’re droppin’ Erik off in the middle of swamper country while two of our newest initiates go snoopin’ around the woods with a mentally unstable Paladin?” Elder Redding grabbed a triangle of toast, dipped it in his tea and nodded while he munched on it. “Sounds good to me. What do you think, Artemis?” Major Grey stole the Elder’s other piece of toast and wolfed it down. “How’s ‘bout I do the rounds up north alone. Send Jenkins with Erik. They’ve always made a good pair.” The elder looked to Jenkins who nodded, more relaxed knowing that Erik wouldn’t be off on his own again. “It’s settled then, y’all depart this Wednesday. Spend around six days at each site, find everything you can. Report back via radio once forty-eight hours. I’ll expect y’all back in three weeks or so.” “Sounds like a plan to me, sir.”

Rush was looking around the empty cafeteria for his brother and Olivia when he bumped into Franklin. He stank of whiskey. “Mornin’, ya flea-infested mongrel,” Franklin slurred. Rush furrowed his eyebrows and asked, “are you okay? Too early to be drunk.” Franklin brandished the 9-inch Saturnite chef’s knife he was holding. “Don’chu be tellin’ me when I can and cain’t be drunk, dog. Ain’t you got some balls

to sniff somewhere? Get the fuck out!” Rush stood his ground. “Came for breakfast.” “Ain’t no breakfast today, mutt! I’m shorthanded on staff.” Franklin threw his knife at the swinging metal doors that lead to the kitchen. It glanced off the heavy door with a **clang** and fell to the ground with a clatter.

“Two o’ my minions died yesterday,” Franklin stammered as he tried not to cry, “sent ‘em out to the woods . They didn’t come back in one piece. Yao Guai tore ‘em into pieces. I got ‘em killed, damnit.” Rush was shocked, “Yao Guai?” Franklin turned and walked toward the coffee mess to hide his tears, “I’ve seen teeth marks like those before. It was a ‘Guai. Some of our scouts-in-training found ‘em during their patrol early this mornin’.”

“Anyone tell the Elder,” Rush questioned. “No. I just found out myself. Damnit! The elder. I forgot their breakfast.” Franklin wiped his eyes before fishing out his flask and taking a swig. “Go in the kitchen and send up those trays for Artemis and Axel. Tell the elder what I told you. I...can’t.” Rush nodded and quickly did as he was instructed. Before he left the cafeteria, Rush heard Franklin weeping quietly in the cooler.

Two more flights of stairs and Rush found himself at the Elder’s door again. He nudged the doors open with a free foot and let himself in. The elder looked up from a detailed set of notes to see that he was sullen. “What’s wrong son?” Rush set the food down in front of Jenkins and Major Grey before succinctly explaining what occurred. “Two of the cooking staff died. Franklin is upset and drunk downstairs.” The Jenkins nearly jumped from his seat, “what did he do?!”

Rush shook his head and explained that the scouts-in-training reported their deaths to Franklin, not that he had murdered them in a drunken rage. “Oh, my. That is very unfortunate.” The entire demeanor in the room shifted from nervous excitement to its typical sullen mood. “Rush, Jenkins, go find Erik, fill him in. Artemis, let’s go take care of Franklin and the deceased.”

Artemis wolfed down the fresh toast and chased it with a glass of water. “Aye, sir.” Jenkins looked up from his breakfast, jointly sad about his lost comrades and lost appetite. He sighed, “well, Rush, let’s go find Erik.

They followed their commanding officers down the hall but stopped at Erik and Rush’s room to check and see if they had made it back yet. Rush knocked on his own door and received no response. With a shrug they went down stairs and left the commons building to find their missing compatriots. It didn’t take them too long to find Erik and Olivia: they were jogging northbound on the highway.

"Hoy, Erik, Initiate!" Jenkins yelled. They waved at him and soon met them in the patchy grass field. "What're you doing up so early?" Jenkin shook his head, "replanning our trip. Also, bad news. Two of the kitchen staff were reportedly killed in the woods last night. Your scouts report anything?" Erik shook his head, sending sweat flying. "No, not yet. I'll go find out what's going on." He jogged to the kennel without another word.

Olivia stood awkwardly with the other two men. "Hell of a fine way to say goodbye," she muttered. "Y'all are doin' PT early, huh?" Olivia shrugged at Jenkins' question. "I suppose. I had to get satisfied somehow." Jenkins and Rush both looked taken back. "What now?" Jenkins asked tentatively.

Olivia blushed and covered her mouth, "It's not that Erik couldn't...I mean...he tried. Uh, damnit!" Rush smiled and patted her arm, "he was nervous?" She nodded awkwardly. Jenkins laughed aloud, "what? No way. Erik couldn't...hah!" Olivia blushed deeper and turned away from both of them. She continued to explain, trying to salvage some of Erik's dignity, "it's not that he *couldn't* it's just that he's not *experienced*. He definitely tried his best." Jenkins was dying of laughter. Rush blushed in joint embarrassment for his brother and Olivia.

Erik quickly returned with a pair of scouts that Rush hadn't met previously. "Scouts? I trust you remember Medic..." He paused, "Jenkins, what's so funny?" Jenkins choked down his laughter and lied that Rush told a funny biology joke. Rush grinned awkwardly. Erik failed to believe the lie, considering his girlfriend wouldn't even look at him. "Uh, scouts? These are Initiates Olivia Brown and Rush Hawthorne." The metal-clad soldiers saluted without a word.

"Care to tell us what happened last night?" The scout on the left, a female, spoke muffled through her mask. "Found a pair of the cook-scribes back in the woods to the west, sir. Looks like they were attacked by some sort of large animal or animals." Her cohort chimed in, "possibly Yao Guai, sir. Looks like they were out foraging." "Is that all? What did you recover?" The lady scout produced a satchel containing scraps of food they were foraging for and scraps of clothing. "Not much, sir. They were a bloody mess."

Erik nodded and said, "show us." Both scouts saluted then turned and jogged their way back to the gruesome scene fifty yards into the pine forest that surrounds the Burg. Rush and Jenkins both had a sinking feeling, but were unprepared for the bloody scene. Erik knelt down near one of the two disemboweled bodies and studied it. "Jenkins, come here. What does that look like to you?" he asked, pointing at ragged tears in the man's thighs and ragged torso. "Claws, I'd guess. Why?" "They don't look like any claws marks I've seen before – they're too big and far apart to

be a 'Guai. Don'tcha think?" Jenkins inspected closer, then fell backwards in surprise.

"What's wrong?!" the scouts asked. "Rush, come here," Jenkins whispered. Rush knelt down in a thin trail of blood, "yes?" Jenkins took Rush's hand and inspected it, then moved it near the wounds on the body. "Yeah, that looks about right." Rush quickly pulled his hand back in surprise. "Not one of us!" he exclaimed loudly before sniffing the air violently, trying to pick up a scent. The five humans instinctively huddled near one another on the opposite side of the bodies from Rush.

He continued snuffing the air, anxiously wanting some trace of a scent. The only scents he could smell were the ones of death, bile, blood, and the fear of his comrades. He started to panic. "Brother," he thought to Erik, "it was not one of us! I cannot smell one of our clan here or anything else. I would have known before we entered the woods." Erik lowered his voice and asked Rush, "was...was it you? You've forgotten before. We didn't see you at all last night after you stormed off," he trailed off.

Rush's jaw dropped in shock. Before he could pick it up from the ground, the Elder and Major Grey appeared behind them with another armored scout. "It wasn't Initiate Rush. He was with me last night. You should know better than that, Paladin." The elder and Artemis knelt down where Erik and Jenkins were previously. Redding glanced at Artemis who nodded silently. They'd feared attacks like these were going to happen as soon as they found out about Rush and his clan.

Artemis stood up, brushed the pine needles and dirt from his knees. "Scouts, take our deceased brethren to the chapel. We will bury them alongside their fallen brothers. They have died valiantly in battle against those that wish the Brotherhood harm. Everyone stood silently for a few moments before the armored scouts did as they were told.

Elder Redding waited for the three scouts to leave before explaining. "We were worried about this, Rush. We didn't think you, Erik, and your three remaining clansmen could be the last of your kind. Too much time and sacrifice went into your design just to let it go to waste." Erik and Rush found themselves excited and full of dread simultaneously. "Sir," Rush asked, "what do you mean?" "Artemis, Ida, some of the scribes, and I have been pouring through the documents and data we recovered from Station Magnolia. Combining that with reports from our few remaining scouts and partners across the southeastern commonwealth, we have reason to believe that the Enclave have continued experimentation not only on the local fauna to create abominations like the Deathclaws, but also on people they deem unfit to populate their ideal America." Artemis chimed in with a gross simplification, "we were afraid

that they were makin' more o' y'all and were gonna put you up to killin' folks. This is the first attack we've had *here*."

Rush stood in shock and refused to respond to Erik's mental badgering. He was excited at the prospect of his species surviving, but also sickened at the idea that someone could use them as tools of war, even if that's what they were originally designed for. He didn't realize for some time that he was being guided back through the woods by his younger brother. Jenkins clapped him on the shoulder, "hey, big guy, look. Maybe we're wrong. Maybe it *was* a deathclaw or they got between a mamma Yao Guai an' her cubs or somethin'?"

Rush didn't speak another word the rest of the day. He went to the impromptu funeral in Erik's hand-me-down dress uniform. He would have said it was beautiful if he could focus. He couldn't get the thought of one of his own doing something this vile. He joined his regular crew at their standard table for dinner, but wasn't hungry. Even when Franklin broke down at their table and silently wept, Rush didn't feel anything. He was so lost and confused, he didn't know what to do.

The elder, however, did. He called another meeting after dinner and declared that, even though an unfortunate loss had occurred, their missions could not be further delayed, lest more of the same occur to their innocent brethren. Erik and Jenkins solemnly agreed. Franklin had grown as silent as Rush. The elder laid out their plans: Olivia and Rush would continue training at an accelerated speed for the next two weeks. In the meantime, Jenkins, Major Grey, and Erik would head up north to begin their half of the mission. Franklin would join Olivia and Rush after their two weeks to scout out two of the three identified areas. Once they finished that, Erik and Jenkins should be back. Rush, Olivia, and Franklin would continue on to the last area then return.

They would all compile their new intelligence, make recommendations, and proceed from there.

With their plans solidified, the Elder stood up and hugged each one of his members. Jenkins, Erik, Franklin, Olivia, and finally Rush. He wished them good luck, saluted them, and shooed them into the commons. After the heavy oak doors closed behind them, he collapsed onto the couch with a deep sigh. Artemis looked across the familiar coffee table at his best friend. "Well, I guess it's begun again." The elder nodded, "We've known the Enclave was cooking something up. I'd just hoped it wouldn't be this soon." Artemis nodded silently in agreement before seeing himself out. "Night Marshall. You know where you can find me."

"G'night Artemis. Thanks old friend."

The crew of five milled around for a few moments, gathering themselves. “Ah, Rush, why don’t we turn in early?” Erik asked, gently patting him on the shoulder. Rush looked down to Erik, then over to Franklin who was still silent and sullen-eyed. “No,” Rush muttered bitterly, “want to revisit the scene.” Erik sighed and nodded, “I figured as much. You’re not going by yourself. I’ll come with you.” Jenkins took Franklin upstairs and Olivia waved goodbye as she walked up the stairs to her shared dormitory.

Rush and Erik took their time walking across the base to the woods. “So, Rush, are you gonna be okay? I don’t think I’ve seen you this shaken up since the Enclave hit your home.” Rush nodded slowly, “senseless violence. They’ve struck my home twice, now.” Erik nodded again. They crunched through the loose gravel scattered across the parking lot of the laboratory. “So, you couldn’t tell if it was someone you knew?” Rush shook his head again, “no. Something was missing. Everything has a scent. Only scents were blood and fear.” Erik shrugged, “maybe it’s some kind of new animal the Enclave’s working on? One that can mask its scent?”

Rush shuddered at the thought; it would be the one thing he couldn’t predict and prepare against. As they reached the sniper tower, Erik paused to look back at the long shadow it cast across the base. He looked up and saw a tiny glint of binoculars from the room. “Let’s stop in before we go rooting around in the woods. Maybe they saw something from up here.” Rush followed his brother into the ancient brick building. Its interior reminded him of the laboratory: wooden doors with brass number plaques, soiled linoleum floors, and peeling cream-colored paint accented by mysterious stains.

The entrance led directly to a small room housing pair a of elevators that bookended a spray painted Brotherhood Of Steel logo. One of the elevators had an askew “out of order” sign taped to it. There were only four rooms leading from this one and a set of stairs to their left. Rush grunted, “elevator or stairs?” Erik poked the “up” button and listened patiently as the elevator descended from the twentieth floor above. “No fucking way I’m walking up twenty flights of stairs, Rush” Erik muttered. Rush mussed his hair and leaned heavily on him, exhausted mentally and emotionally.

Erik grunted but didn’t complain any further. He reached up and scratched Rush behind his ears to kill the time. Erik sighed and rolled his eyes five minutes later. “This thing must run on molasses.” “What’s that?” Rush questioned. “Ah, you had some a few days ago with breakfast. Remember the pancakes Franklin made?” Rush licked his chops, he thoroughly enjoyed them. “That was the sticky brown stuff on top. It’s made from trees.” Their conversation kept them from noticing that the

elevator finally arrived. The elevator's bell rang twice in warning that it was going to close up and make them wait longer.

Erik shoved his arm between the closing doors and the elevator buzzed in warning. He yelled in return, "hang on a damn second!" The doors slid open and they both boarded. Rush though the crate they were in was horribly boring and had a terrible stench. Erik punched the faded "20" button and watched as the doors closed them in. They both stood and stared at the bronzed doors locking them in before Rush spoke up again. "Molasses is made of trees?" Erik nodded, "yeah, I think so." "What kind of tree?" Erik shrugged. "A molasses tree? I dunno Rush. No wait, it's from sugar cane." Rush shrugged, "what do we get from trees?"

"Well, let's see, we get mutfruit, apples, persimmons, pecans, walnuts, and shade, I guess. When we're out survivin' we can use pine bark and the needles for tea. Makes a pretty good astringent too. We get Chicory from trees too – your *favorite* tea." Rush stuck his tongue out in disgust. "You'll get used to it. It took me years." Finally, their elevator arrived at the top floor. The brass doors slowly slid open to dump them on the roof. Rush glanced around; there wasn't much to speak of, just some chairs and scattered crates and ammo boxes on the roof.

"Hail, Paladin Erik," one of the snipers greeted them. The other glanced behind himself to see them, then went back to his binoculars. "Hail, brothers. Y'all hear or see any commotion last night in the west tree line? The sniper that first greeted them shook his head. "No sir, I wasn't on duty last night. You see anything Duke?" The man with the binoculars set them on the brick railing and walked over to them. "Not much sir, just a pair of the scribes that works in the kitchen go in over that way. Didn't see 'em leave before my shift was over. Somethin' happen, sir?"

Erik nodded, "yeah, they were both killed last night." Both men looked shocked. "Some sorta animal get 'em," the first man asked anxiously. Erik nodded. "Yeah, looks like we've got some sort of large creature huntin' 'round here. Y'all keep an eye out for anything suspicious. Alert one of the senior Paladins if you see or kill anything out of the norm." Both men saluted and quickly went back to their duty, scanning the tree line for any danger.

Erik summoned the elevator. It slid its wide doors open and he and Rush stepped back inside. "Well that didn't help." Their descent was quiet, aside from Erik humming fragments of a song to himself. Rush was lost in thought again. The elevator's buzzer caught his attention as they arrived at the first floor. "Let's get out into the woods. Maybe the killer left something behind?" Rush perked up at that thought, "we did not search," he mumbled. "Yeah, we should've. Sorry for accusing you earlier

too, Rush, I know you couldn't do something like that to one of your own," Erik mumbled as they exited the building through the double doors.

By the time they got to the scene of the murder, dusk had fallen and was making their job considerably harder. They switched on their Pip-Boy's lights and began searching for anything that would shed some light on the murderer. Twenty minutes in, they had turned up nothing of significance. They traced and re-traced the scuffles and drag marks in the ground and the blood splatter across the trees. Erik leaned on a particularly thick pine and sighed before glancing around for Rush. "You find anything yet?" "No," Rush grumbled with mild aggravation. "No fur or claws or anything?" "No," he grumbled again.

Then Erik had a brilliant idea. "Can you talk to plants like you do other animals?" Rush dropped the sticks he was investigating to scratch his chin. "Don't know. Never thought to try. Can you?" Erik shook his head, "I actually was just tryin'. I don't think I'm getting anything." Rush walked over to Erik and rubbed his head on the tree, trying to figure out if he could talk to it. After some short moments, Rush thought he made a connection.

"Hello? Can you hear me? My name is Rush. Would you mind talking with me?" A tiny mind squeaked back. "A big wolf you are!" "Yes, thank you, you are a large...tree." The tiny mind squeaked in laughter, "I'm not tree, silly mutt. Look up!" A red squirrel was chattering at him. "Apologies. Thought you were the tree." "Trees don't talk, silly dog. What do you want?" "We want to know what happened to the two humans last night. Do you know?"

The mutant grey squirrel excitedly ran up and down the tree chattering all along the way. "Yes! Yes! We all saw it. Another human came and turned into something like you! He was big, mean, and the color of rotting trees. He eat those other two humans and left. Why would he do that?" Rush quickly relayed what the squirrel told him to Erik, who paled in surprise and disbelief. "No way we've got werewolves. That's just insane. Tell the stupid squirrel it's insane!" Rush shook his head and carried on with his questioning.

"Are you sure it was one man and not two?" The squirrel threw a pecan at Erik and chittered. "No. Tell that human with you that I don't like how he said whatever he said." Rush chuckled at the strange little mammal and thanked it for its time. The squirrel pitched another pecan at Erik before scampering off. "Anything useful?" Rush shrugged, "strange mammal. Do they taste good?" Erik nodded, "yeah, but did it tell you anything?" "May have seen one or two men. One was like me, it said. Or just one and it turned into something like me, it wasn't sure. It was black, or so it said."

Erik ran his fingers through his hair and stared up at the tall pines surrounding them that were quickly being swallowed by darkness. "Well, I guess that half-way confirms our suspicions. It wasn't any of our clan, none of them have black fur, right? I don't think we planned on them being able to change back-and-forth though. That's gonna make it tough to find them. You think that's possible?" Rush shook his head, "Would cause too much strain on the body. It would rip itself apart before than shifting forms completely." Erik shuddered at the thought, "I guess I can't do it then, either?"

Rush grinned and roughed up Erik's hair, "you will never look as handsome as me, brother. Sorry." Erik swatted away his hand playfully before turning to lead them from the forest. "That's a damn shame. I always wanted to be tall." Rush chuckled, "how do you function without a tail?" Erik paused at the edge of the woods to signal the snipers. He didn't feel like getting shot before going on a trip. After a few moments, one signaled him back with a lighter. "Two means go, we're clear," Erik mumbled. "I dunno Rush, how do you function *with* a tail? It looks like it would be in the way all the time. I mean, how do you plan to wear pants?" "Just like at the funeral, tuck it in." "Sounds uncomfortable." "It was," Rush admitted, "and hot" "May we cut a hole for it?" "Not in my dress pants you're not!"

They argued all the way back to the commons. "They are your old pair." "Yeah, but they're still mine! I don't want a giant hole for my ass to poke through. It won't be very formal that way, now will it?" Rush shrugged, "would be much cooler. They were itchy and hot." Erik paused at the stairs, "let's go see if anyone's in the cafeteria covering Franklin. I could use a bite." "Do murder scenes make you hungry," Rush asked.

"What? No! I just haven't eaten since...breakfast? I don't even remember." Rush shrugged and followed Erik into the cafeteria. There were two scribes in their red robes with white chef's hats bustling around. "Awfully busy for," Erik paused to check his Pip-Boy, "eight thirty." Rush nodded and walked toward their regular table. He looked at the familiar faces around, they all looked at him then quickly glanced away. "Not this again," he mumbled. "You say something," Erik asked.

Rush shrugged, "everyone is staring again." Erik scratched his chin as he flagged down a scribe. "They probably just think you killed them." Rush sneered at Erik's distasteful joke. "I'm just kidding Rush, settle down. They're just scared. Do you blame them?" "No," he grumbled in response. A scribe came to their table, "how can I help you sir? Initiate?" "Franklin in?" The scribe shook her head, making her golden neck-length hair bob around. "No, he's off of the roster for a few weeks. Nobody really told us why. Did he have something to do with the...other scribes?"

Erik shook his head, "nah. He'd never do that to one of our own. Anyway, what do you have tonight?" She adjusted her robes awkwardly, "well, sir, we really weren't prepared, so we made mashed potatoes." Erik squinted at her, "just mashed potatoes?" "And butter," she squeaked. Erik sighed, "we'll each have one please." As she left, he sarcastically mumbled to Rush, "they better get their shit together in the morning, or they'll be like the two we found in the woods." Rush nodded in agreement. Breakfast was his favorite meal of the day.

She quickly returned with two large helpings of thin, lumpy potatoes with a side of tea and cold butter. "Uh, thanks, what's your name?" "Naomi, sir." "Thanks Naomi." "I would recommend y'all get ready for the morning. We like a big breakfast after PT." She nodded shyly and quickly left to go see her other patrons.

Rush couldn't decide if the bowl was full of soup or paste. After a few attempts with the fork, he gave up and just drank the potatoes. Erik mirrored him, frustrated at the lack of spoons. After their sorry excuse for a dinner, they wandered up the two flights of stairs. Rush paused at their door and asked, "have you checked on your father? He is not taking care of himself." Erik pulled his key from the lock and shook his head, "no. Let's go."

They walked past Jenkins' room, Franklins' room, Chase's old room, the storage closet, the head scribe's room, then finally arrived at the Elders'. Erik knocked gently, not wanting to wake him up if he went to bed early. "Hail. Who's there," Elder Redding asked through the double doors. "Erik and Initiate Rush, sir. Request permission to enter."

"Granted, c'mon in boys." Rush opened the door for Erik then followed to his rear-left, just as he was taught. After closing the door, Rush joined Erik on the well-worn couch facing the Elder. "Evenin' dad." The elder smiled warmly, though the dark circles under his eyes and pale skin made him look deathly ill. "You boys want some tea?" "Sure, I'll get 'em," Erik said. The elder smiled again at Rush, "are you feeling better, son?" Rush nodded. "Good, good. I'm glad." "Are you well, sir?" "You don't have to call me 'sir' here, Rush. You can call me whatever you want." Rush nodded and asked again, "are you well, elder?"

"I will be, yes. It's just been a bit more tolling than I expected. We rarely lose anyone this close to home. It's quite upsetting, really." Elder Redding sighed lightly and changed the conversation, "you know Rush, you remind me more and more of Erik every time I see you." Rush nodded, unsure how to respond. "Thank you, sir?" The elder smiled wearily, "I just think it's interesting that you are both very similar, despite growing up separately. Almost like twins." Rush nodded again. "What did I say about calling me 'sir' here?" Rush apologized, "sorry, sir. Er, elder."

Erik came over in time to hand his father and Rush a mug of warm tea. "There, that's better," he mumbled as he lazily sank into the couch next to Rush. "You know Rush, you can just call him dad like I do." Rush sipped his tea and faked enjoying it. "Would be awkward," he muttered half to Erik and half to his mug of tea. The elder sipped his own and said, "I understand completely. You barely know me! I'm still surprised you came back with us when I think about it. How did you know you could trust us, son?"

Rush balanced the warm mug on his knee, "Erik. He was healthy and well mannered. After meeting you, it was obvious why." The elder smiled and sipped his tea, "well I did what I could. He's still very bull-headed, despite my attempts to curb that behavior." Rush smiled, and sipped his tea. Erik was tired of hearing about himself, "Enough about me, tell him how you got into the Brotherhood, dad."

"Ah, well let's see, it's been about thirty five years or so now. Around 2245, I guess. The Brotherhood was getting pretty big at the time. President Richardson, the Elder of America and then the Enclave, was murdered by some tribal a few years before that. The Enclave had taken to banding into smaller squadrons and were busy eradicating everyone they deemed unfit for their perfect America."

"I was living in Chicago at the time. I'd been lucky enough to escape a slaver camp with two of my friends. We wandered the streets for a few weeks, doing odd jobs here and there, scraping by to survive. A few months later, we had earned enough to rent a shoddy hotel room and lived off that for a while. I guess it was around December when the Brotherhood came 'round – it was snowing out. They were looking for young men and women to join against the likes of the slavers and some folks called the Enclave."

"They offered shelter, food, and the kind of stability we couldn't afford, so we joined without hesitation. It wasn't too bad except for the Inquisitors. They were brutal."

Someone knocked at the door, interrupting his story. "Hail. Who's there?" "Grey." "C'mon in Artemis." Major Grey let himself in and was mildly surprised to see the elder playing host in his condition. "Have a seat Artemis, I was just telling Erik and Rush here about how we joined the Brotherhood." Artemis groaned, "haven't you told Erik that story enough times over the years?"

Elder Redding smiled and sipped his tea, "but a good story is worth retelling, don't you think?" Artemis sighed, "you got some tea?" Erik jumped up and began brewing a fresh kettle. "Right then, were was I?" "Snowing," Rush said with excitement. "Ah, right. So we joined their ranks as Initiates during that bitter cold winter."

Artemis snickered, "it snowed a good two feet that winter." The elder nodded, "so we trained and trained and trained for a few years, earning our ranks. We saw less and less of each other during that time. I was training to be a Paladin, Artemis here was quickly jumping up the ranks as a wonderful Medic, and his sister a scout much like yourself, Erik."

"Artie, when was it we went on our first real mission?" He stretched in his chair, "ah, I reckon somewhere 'round 2250?" "Oh," he chuckled, "yeah. It was spring by the time we got back. We had been lucky enough to be chosen with six others to go do a recon mission at some long-abandoned research facility about 300 miles away." Artie chuckled, "took us damn near two months to get over there, gear and all. Didn't have cars."

"We decided to take Lincoln Highway over there, instead of 20. We had reports from caravans that raiders were pretty thick up that way." "Probably would have been quicker in the long run," Artemis interjected as he accepted Erik's offering of tea. "That's true, considering the terrain," the elder paused and sipped his tea. "So, we're just a few hours out of Illinois and we get to a hole-in-the-wall town called 'Gary' right on the lake. We were there long enough to learn that the 'mayor' of the place, also named Gary, was crooked and enslaving folks. Traded them for money to one of the slaver gangs." Artemis interrupted again, "the whore house was nice though." The elder laughed aloud.

"So, we spent the week clearing out the place and dethroning Gary of 'Gary.'" "What happened to Gary," Rush asked. "Well, Gary wasn't pleased that we were wrecking his income and put up a decent fight. We ended up killing him, unfortunately. Regardless, the traders took over the town, fought off the slavers, and kept it going, free from Gary's tyranny. We continued on our way and did pretty well until we got about half way there. We were running low on supplies and a terrible snow storm had us bunkered down in some bombed out town. It was completely abandoned, aside from some delicious rad roaches, so we scavenged for what we could find until the storm broke. That took another week. By that point, half of our members were getting sick due to the weather, so we slowed down some more. By the time we got to Fremont, we lost two due to pneumonia. One was our captain."

"It was a pretty harsh first assignment," Artemis noted. The elder nodded. Artemis picked up the story for him, "so, we get to Fremont, bury our dead and scavenge around some more. No one had expected the weather to be that bad. Our supplies were naught. We even tore apart our radios for the batteries to start fires. And to top it off, we had no Captain. So, Mr. Marshall Redding here naturally assumed the duty. Under his leadership, we were able to piece together a pair of working Highwaymen in

exchange for the extra suits of power armor we had. Of course, we didn't bother telling them they couldn't use it without training," he laughed. "We drove those things to the outskirts of the town and left them behind a derelict hospital. Threw some debris on top and left. That was the most interesting part."

The elder sighed, "We scouted all the way to the research facility. It had been a pretty important bunker, we supposed, considering it was surrounded by lumbering rusty structures and turrets." "Turrets?" Rush asked. "They're computer-controlled automatic guns," Erik explained. "Oh, sounds dangerous," Rush concluded. "Indeed, they are son. We saw them and decided there had to be a better way in. We sent Artemis' sister and another member to go scout around and find us a way in."

"They spent the entire day looking and only found a drainage pipe leading to the lake. It was either the lake or the turrets that would kill us, so we opted for the cold lake." Artemis sighed, "yeah, we lost the other scout that night. They were off takin' a piss 'round the lake and got ambushed by a lakelurk. It was the first time any of us had ever seen one. Big human-shaped crab bastards." Elder Redding nodded and said, "well, at least they taste good."

"Yup, we learned that too that night. We had to eat, after all. Our detachment had shrunk to six – that's pretty small for a detachment. Let's see it was me, Marshall, my sister Cynthia, two more Paladins, and the other medic. We ended up wading into the freezing lake and clambered up through the sewage pipe. Thankfully, the place had been abandoned for years. We popped out in what looked like a hanger. In six short hours, we found the operating center, shut the defenses down, and cleaned the place out."

Elder Redding sighed, "there wasn't anything useful at the facility. In its early years, it was all space research. Going to the moon and back, building a base up there. That sort of thing. Artemis and I went back to get the cars, drove them in, filled them up with whatever wasn't nailed down, and set off back home. We'd lost half of our team and nearly nothing to show for it." "That's not the good part, though," Artemis reminded him, "that was when we got back."

"The elder in Chicago was so proud of us that we were promoted to full members and even made second Medic. Cynthia was promoted too. Marshall made it out the best though, our elder took him under his wing and trained him personally." Elder Redding finished his tea and sat the mug on the table with a clatter. "I was lucky. He saw a talent in me that I didn't even know I had."

"We spent the following few years building up the Brotherhood, recruiting others as we had been. It was pretty run-of-the-mill by then; patrols, excavations, research."

Rinse and repeat. It wasn't until 2254 when Lyons' squad was sent off to DC from California to find our missing detachment. Turns out our chapter of the Brotherhood was supposed to go to D.C. before our ship crashed and we civilized Chicago."

"Traders that eventually came from the D.C. area claimed there were giant green horrors eating people. We dismissed them, of course," Artemis snickered, "but we were wrong to so do. Regardless, after Paladin Lyons' crew got shipped out, and discovered all the tech there, our elders decided that we should go check out the Gulf Commonweatlh. About half of the Delta bunker – our bunker – was sent southward." Artemis stretched and yawned. "So, we spend the next five months getting everybody and all of our crap down here."

Elder Redding stood up, stretched, and collected everyone's mugs. As he busied himself cleaning them and pouring two fingers whiskey into them, Artemis continued. "So, we eventually get to Jackson. The place is a hell hole. Half of it had been hit by nukes and was irradiated. The other half of the metro area and suburbs was in a civil war between the slavers and the fiends. We gave them a wide berth and made it down here to the Burg. You see, this place used to be a University town. Well, it was an overgrown shit hole when we got here, too" he paused to take a swig of the drink the elder offered. "Ahh. Like I said, shit hole. Overgrown with murderous plants, giant hungry man-eating animals, swampers, and bugs the size of my head. On a *good* day."

The elder sipped his whiskey and continued as Artemis dug into his. "We originally started with a crew of sixty out of the Delta bunker. After a month-long skirmish with the raiders that had this place, we were down to forty. We wiped out the raiders and began cleaning the place up. By Christmas, we had a nice little home." He chuckled into his mug as he drank some more whiskey, "that's around the time we met Dr. Ida Simmons. She'd been bunkered in the basement of the research lab for years. She spent most of her time avoiding the people living above her, waging their personal wars."

"Needless to say, we were all very surprised to meet her. It was rocky for a few months, she avoided us like the plague, and we were afraid we'd catch whatever plague she clearly had. We eventually warmed up to one another. Summer of that year, she joined us as an honorary member of the Brotherhood. Not too long after that, Willis found us." Artemis laughed aloud at the reminder. "Frankly, he scared the shit out of us. He managed to sneak into our sniper tower and was living out of it undetected. We started working on it the end of that first summer, floor by floor. We kept finding discarded food cans and magazines, but never any solid proof that someone lived there. He'd been moving up floor by floor ahead of us! He kept it up

until we got to the roof – twenty floors in all. He didn't have anywhere else to go. He was sitting in a chair near the wall, watching the sun set. Me and Marshal were working that day. The first words he said to us were, "it is beautiful here, I'm staying." We were speechless. We'd never personally met a super mutant before, let alone anyone so well mannered."

"He became the second non-human in our branch. We've actually been excommunicated for it," the elder noted. Erik raised an eyebrow, "we what?" The elder nodded, "yeah, didn't you ever wonder why we don't get resources shipped in or anything?" Erik shook his head, it had never crossed his mind. "We took a shining to the folks around here and, instead of shipping our tech and intel back to the headquarters in California, we kept it and used it to make our new home better." Erik drank all of his whiskey at once. "So you mean we're not *really* the Brotherhood?" The elder shook his head, "we are, we're just a splinter cell and I'm still the elder. It's all very official," he chuckled. "The higher ups in California decided that if I want to take care of the people rather than do my job, I can do it without their help. They still write occasionally."

Artemis nodded and clinked his glass against the elder's empty mug. "Here, here." "So," Redding continued, "things were fairly quiet for some time. We got better settled in here, and started to mount expeditions of our own, helping out little towns here and there to survive. People slowly trickled in and through The Burg. After some time, the tribals and raiders and other riffraff started causing issues with our friendly little towns. We put them down time after time, but they kept coming."

"Erik, you're still 25, right?" He nodded in response, "for a few more weeks, yet." "So, it would be about twenty years ago today, fifteen after we arrived, that I brought you home. Jenkins and the rest of the Red Creek survivors came a year or so afterward, and then the Franklins after that." "Then me," Rush mumbled. "Yup, the newest addition to my wonderful family. You made it even bigger when you brought most of Fruitland back with you," the elder praised him with a wide smile.

Rush had one last itching question, "Major, sir. What happened to your sister?" "Well, Mr. Hawthorne, her kid was the one that got tied up with John Franklin. They're the reason we're shorthanded as of late," Artemis answered with a hint of disgust. She and my niece moved up to Jackson to run a medical facility. We make trips up there every so often to make sure they're still fighting the good fight."

Everyone fell silent for some time before Artemis excused himself to his own bed. Erik stood up, collected the remaining mugs, and hugged his father. "Thanks dad. I'm off to bed." "G'night son, sleep well." Erik left Rush alone with the elder. "Well,

here we are again, Mr. Hawthorne.” Rush swirled the remainder of his whiskey in the white porcelain mug and said, “you don’t get to call me mister if you can’t be called sir,” he smirked, “father.” The elder smiled wider than before, “very well Rush. Thank you.” Rush nodded, gulped down his whiskey before prying himself out of the couch to go wash his mug.

The elder stood up and stretched with a great yawn. Rush turned to face his new elder and smiled. “Thank you again, for taking me in. It is very important to me to live with my only brother.” The elder nodded and said, “it’s no problem Rush, I’m lucky to have y’all.” Rush blushed and the elder hugged him before sending him off to his own bed. “I’ll can’t replace your father, but I will love you both the same anyway. Now get out, I’ve got to get some sleep.” “Stay well, elder.”

Rush grinned and saw himself out of the elder’s quarters and quickly into his own. He found Erik sitting on his bed, inspecting the photograph and urn he brought from Station Magnolia. A second glance informed him that Erik was getting weepy. “Brother, what is the matter?” Erik shook his head and stared the framed photo. “Dunno, just got sad looking at it.” Rush sat next to him and took the photo. “That,” he pointed at the furred man in the front-left, “is the man you share half of your genome with. He loved you very much, but he is not your real father. Redding is.” Erik nodded and petted Rush’s head. “Enough,” he said as he retrieved his photo and ashes from Erik. “We must be well rested to be useful, brother.”

Rush got up, turned off the overhead light, and realized Erik was still in his bed. He didn’t complain, but instead curled around his brother and quickly fell into a fitful sleep.

