

CHAPTER 28: GHOSTS OF THE FALLEN OR I SEE DEAD PEOPLE

Erik found himself standing the middle of a grass field, surrounded by familiar pine trees. It was the dead middle of summer: humid with no wind for relief. After wiping the sweat from his brow, he glanced up to the eastern horizon and saw a green light that reminded him of his Pip-Boy. Erik stared at the growing green stain in the sky and felt an electrifying heat shoot up his spine, igniting his brain with fire.

Rush spied from behind a thick pine tree, watching as Erik clutched his skull and writhed in the grass. Rush could feel him suffering from his position a hundred yards away. It was killing him, but he knew that Erik needed to learn to control this anger, or it would own him.

As Erik wailed and rolled around in the sun-yellowed grass, it slowly curled up and turned black as if it too were on fire. “Who are you?! Where are you?! Get out here and face me like the dog you ARE!” Erik screamed as he rolled around, sending embers aloft. Rush blinked and suddenly saw Erik on his feet and facing a shadow form of himself. “How’d he get up so quickly?” Rush thought to himself.

The blurred and hazy shadow staring down his brother was an inch or so taller than Erik, stockier, and had a bushy tail and ears similar to his own. Erik and his shadow stared at each other momentarily before he took the first swing. A strong left hook surprised the shadow form as it took the full hit to its face. Or would have, if Erik’s hand didn’t soar through it without resistance. He only had a few seconds to be confused before the shadow jumped back to deliver a powerful roundhouse into his gut, sending him flying.

As Erik flew through the air in slow motion, he spun horizontally, blurring the dying grass into the discolored sky. To Rush, it only took a second for him to spiral through the air and bounce off of the ground, out of breath.

Wincing, he tried to inhale and fill his lungs with sweet, sweet air. As he struggled, his shadowy doppelganger slowly stalked toward him. The dying grass crunched under every deliberate step. Erik grasped at his chest, trying to get enough air to steady himself. The shadowy form cackled maniacally at his pathetic display; it kicked him in the face and slowly lowered its clawed foot into his neck.

Rush shook his head, disappointed with Erik’s lack of effort. He watched as Erik gave up without a fight. He quickly found himself awake and in Rush’s bed, coughing and sputtering as if he really did have a foot in his neck. His ruckus woke Rush who yawned lazily. “Brother, that was disappointing.” Erik rubbed his neck and scowled.

REDDRACONI, 2016

“Shut up.” Rush nudged his brother curled up at the foot of his bed. “No. You must fight. You cannot lie down and give up like that.”

Erik scoffed, threw off the sheets, and shuffled to his own bed without a word. He fell back into the same nightmare shortly afterward, and again Rush stood idly by and watched him suffer. After choking himself awake once more, Erik got angry. His anger brought his thoughts back to the mysterious crime scene; it gave him something to focus on – to fight for.

The next time the shadowy figure came at him in his dream, Erik stood up and defended himself. Rush was pleased as Erik dodged a roundhouse and jabbed the shadow in its jaw, sending it reeling. He followed it with a flurry of punches before screaming a war cry. Rush smiled as he could smell the change in Erik; his eyes went from grey to amber, his canines grew long and sharp and his fingers mutated into claws. His mind became clouded and he sunk his new, sharp teeth into the shadow’s neck and clawed at its chest, forcing its blood to run in thick gushes.

Rush grinned, quite pleased at his brother’s new-found effort. He awoke and padded over to his struggling brother’s bed to pull him from the dream. Rush shook his shoulder roughly and as Erik turned over, Rush gasped. He looked just like he did in the dream!

Erik’s canine teeth had grown much sharper and elongated and his calloused fingers mutated and sprouted black claws resembling Rush’s. “Brother,” Rush said with astonishment, “you look like your clan now! How did you change?” Erik shook his head and rubbed his face, scratching it and drawing thin lines of blood.

“Ow, shit! What Rush?” Rush continued to stare at him. “It’s what, midnight!? Go back to bed. We’ve gotta go to work in the morning.” Rush shook his head and turned on the overhead fluorescent light. “Go see, brother!” Erik sighed and drug his feet to the bathroom. He clicked the light on and stared at himself in the mirror. “What the Hell!?” Erik carefully pried apart his lids and inspected his new eyes; he swore his vision was clearer than normal. After staring at his new adornments, he peeked around the door. “What do I do? How do I make this go away? I can’t go around lookin’ like this!”

Rush shrugged. “Did not expect you to change. Interesting.” Erik furrowed his brow, “you knew this could happen?!” Rush looked awkwardly back into the mirror, comparing Erik and himself, before answering. “*Very* slight chance the serum could inflict physical changes; less than a fraction of a hundredth of a percent. Surprised there

were even any psychological effects.” Erik’s vision clouded over instantly like in his dream. Rush smelled his anger boil over instantaneously.

“Brother no. Breathe! You must calm down, control your emotions,” Rush warned with worry. Erik growled like a ravenous wolf, bearing his teeth. “Brother,” Rush said more sternly, “control...” Rush didn’t get to finish, Erik had pounced on him like he did on his shadow in the nightmare, pinning Rush’s arms down with his knees.

Erik swiped at his face. Rush wiggled away from the first swing, but yelped as Erik caught him with his right. “Brother, stop!” Erik struck him twice as he thrashed in attempt to throw him off. “Please stop. Please!?” Erik ignored his pleas. His beating caused so much ruckus that they awoke Franklin in the adjacent room.

He pounded on the wall between them and yelled something unintelligible. Franklin growled to himself and left to pound on their door instead. The commotion had drawn Willis and Franklin out as well. “What’s going on?” Franklin shrugged in response to Jenkins’ groggy question. Willis shoved past them and proceeded to knock down the door, bellowing, “It’s four o’clock in th’ mornin’! Shut your damn faces or I’ll...” He cut his complaints short as he witnessed a hairier-than-normal Erik was busy beating his older brother bloody. Willis dove between them with Franklin hot on his tail. The two separated an incoherent Erik and an unconscious Rush.

Willis hoisted Erik aloft before pinning him against a wall. Jenkins took the break in action to run back for his emergency medkit. Franklin checked on Rush in the meantime. “The hell’s wrong with you!?” Willis yelled. Erik didn’t respond, but snarled bestially and snapped at Willis’ face, sending spittle onto it. Willis noticed in his early morning haze that Erik didn’t look right – elongated canines, mangy, patched fur and bloodshot amber eyes made him look wild. Erik snarled again and clawed at Willis’ arms and chest when Jenkins arrived with his supplies.

Unwilling to put up with his new animalistic behavior, Willis held him by the throat and punched him in the temple until he fell unconscious. After he roughly tossed Erik on his bed, Willis stood over Jenkins next to Franklin. “What’d you do to piss him off like that, Dog?” he wondered aloud to Rush.

Jenkins was gently mopping up the blood and swabbing multiple lacerations across his face and chest with hydrogen peroxide when Rush came to. He immediately whimpered and blocked himself from further abuse. “Hey, hey now,” Jenkins cooed gently, “you’re fine. You’re gonna be okay. We got you.” Rush lowered his hands and glanced away, embarrassed. “Erik’s never acted like that, let alone *looked* like that, Dog.

You experimenting on 'im?" Willis queried. "No," he mumbled in response, "typical behavior for younger members of our clan."

He hissed as Jenkins dabbed more astringent into and around his lacerations. Rush's left eye was already swollen and bruised, forcing it closed. Rush mumbled, "he, ouch, must learn to control it."

Jenkins sighed outwardly; he was worried something weird like this was going to happen ever since their visit to the weather station. "What can we do?" Jenkins asked with exasperation as he offered Rush a hand up. Rush gladly accepted man's assistance. Jenkins made him sit on his bed so he could finish up his medical work. "Not too bad, considering it looks like he was tryin' to crack your skull open, face first" he mumbled as he poked and prodded Rush. "This hurt?"

"Ow, no. Yes? A little" he mumbled, not wanting to complain. "I'd reckon so. Look, why don't you stay with me an' Willis tonight then we can talk to the Elder in the morning." Rush shook his throbbing head, "would rather not. My bed is fine. Do not want to impose on anyone." Franklin shook his head, "there's plenty of room next door." "If he pulls another stunt, he'll have to get through me," Willis grumbled. "I'm not takin' 'no' for an answer," Jenkins threatened. Rush looked from Jenkins to Willis to Franklin before quietly giving in.

Rush wasn't frightened by his brother per se, but by his unpredictable behavior. Rush felt guilty, he didn't know how to help Erik. His growing pains appeared to be quite different than what Erik was experiencing. After some quick deliberation, Rush decided giving his brother some space would be best. "Okay," he grumbled, "we should go before he wakes." Jenkins set off to rummage around on behalf of Rush and produced a quick overnight bag complete with extra medicine and clean clothes. Willis took the bag from Jenkins and tossed it at Franklin, "he's goin' with you."

Franklin caught the bag, shrugged, and turned to leave. "Thank you," Rush mumbled as he tagged along with Franklin. Jenkins sat on Rush's bed across the room from Erik's and sighed as he slumped on Willis, "what the hell are we supposed to do with him?" The super mutant shrugged, "never had one of beat another for no reason." Willis chuckled oddly, "never had one turn into something new, either." They decided to take shifts monitoring him throughout the night.

Rush wasn't sure what to expect in Franklin's room, probably a homage to alcoholism. He was pleasantly surprised after Franklin fished a key from his pocket and unlocked the solid wooden door: his quarters were well kept and organized, decorated with a few articles of dirty clothing and empty beer bottles. "Nice quarters," Rush mumbled. "Eh, they're okay. Gotta keep things clean; ladies don't like a pig sty."

Rush unconsciously raised an eyebrow in question and winced, regretting his curiosity. Franklin cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, “so, you can crash on th’ couch ‘til we get Erik sorted.”

“Thank you, Franklin,” Rush said sincerely. Franklin shrugged, “you know my first name, don’tcha? It’s John. You don’t have to be formal here.” Rush nodded his thanks a second time, “thanks John.” “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just get some sleep you’ve still got a job to do, crazy brother or not.” Franklin retrieved a pair of dirty pants and socks from his soiled white couch before tossing a pillow on it and pointed Rush at it. “Night, Rush.” “Goodnight John. Thank you again.” “Shut up. Stop thanking me.”

An hour later, Willis sat on Rush’s small bed as Jenkins laid in his lap, sound asleep, trying to fight off sleep when Erik came around. He blinked slowly and looked around, sniffed the air, then sat up. He sniffed the air again, trying to place the new scent. “Don’t get off that damn bed,” Willis warned sternly. “Why’re you in my room?” Willis continued to pet Jenkins’ hair as he responded, “you and that mutt were fighting. You beat the shit outta him.”

Erik sniffed around again and looked down at his mutated hands, covered in Rush’s lose fur and blood. He sniffed them and grimaced. “I don’t remember. What happened to me? What’s that smell?” Willis shrugged without answer. “You said we fought? Where’s Rush? I want to see him.” Will shook his square green head, “I don’t think so. That blood on you’s his. You were tryin’ to kill ‘em.” Erik tentatively licked a sticky finger and confirmed what Willis said. He could taste remnants of Rush’s fear and adrenaline mixed with his own. Erik wondered to himself how he knew what adrenaline and fear tasted like, let alone whose it was.

“All I remember is the nightmare I keep having. I was fighting something that looked like I do now.” As Erik recalled the nightmare, he slowly changed further into the shadowed form. He held his head, “it wanted to kill me. I think. Rush was there, I could smell him. Why didn’t he help?” Erik paused and shuddered as the fur filled in between the rough patches that already covered his body. “Why wouldn’t he help me? Willis?” The super mutant switched from petting Jenkins to shaking him. “Get up, something weird’s going on. You need to see this.”

Jenkins screwed up his face before smiling up to his giant green man. “What? Is it my turn?” Willis shoved him upright, “the boy’s changing. Make him stop.” Jenkins rubbed his eyes then looked across the small room at Erik. He was muttering something about how he was abandoned. “Erik, buddy? You okay? You and Rush were fightin’. Anything you wanna chat about?” Erik lowered his hands from his face, his

eyes were dark orange now, almost red; they glowed faintly in the dim room. He bared his teeth and growled. "Oh...that's new," Jenkins mumbled as he stood up and grabbed his nearby medkit from the workbench. "Willis, keep an eye, I'm gonna ready some tranqs." Willis nodded and stood slowly, moving between Erik and Jenkins.

"Breath, little man. Calm down. Ain't nobody got time for this," he warned. Erik scratched his scalp violently, sending his short brown hair down in showers. Willis nudged Jenkins with the back of his bare foot, "hurry up," he muttered, "I don't like this." A bloody and nearly-bald Erik growled again, drooling and foaming at the mouth. Jenkins was juggling multiple syringes of ketamine, hoping he would only need one. "I'm ready, watch my back," he said as he readied the medicine. "Okay, Erik? Hey buddy, It's Jenkins. Can you understand me?"

Erik growled again and snapped in his direction, but didn't move from the bed. Jenkins spoke as calmly as he could, "okay buddy, I'm gonna give you some medicine, okay? It'll make you feel better." Erik growled and scratched at his face and gnawed on his own arm. He yipped in pain and yelped at himself. In a short moment of lucidity, he blinked and saw Jenkins through his grey eyes. In that short moment he whispered, "hurry Jenkins, now!" Jenkins failed to hesitate as he leaped forward and jabbed Erik in the arm with a pair of syringes and depressed them deep into his muscles.

Erik blinked again and screwed up his face, red-orange eyes emerging again. He howled in pain and swiped at Jenkins before leaping from his bed onto a nearby workbench. He bared his teeth again. Thankfully, the double dose worked its magic in short order. Erik's eyelids grew heavy and his breathing slowed as he growled lightly and passed out on the wooden table. Jenkins retrieved his syringes and gestured for Willis to help move Erik to his bed. "How long will he be knocked out?" Jenkins shrugged, "I don't know. I've never dosed anything like that before. It was enough to knock out a Brahmin for half a day.

Willis nodded slowly after moving Erik back to his bed. They both resumed their previous positions: on Rush's bed and Jenkins in Willis' lap. Jenkins sighed and gently stroked the thick thigh he rested on, "whatever he's facing, I don't think we can help much from out here." Willis nodded and stroked Jenkins' hair to calm them both.

Through the early morning hours, while Franklin, Rush, and the rest of the Brotherhood slept, Jenkins and Willis maintained their vigil. By nine o'clock, Rush came knocking with breakfast for everyone. Willis shook Jenkins awake and pointed at the door. He shuffled over, rubbing his eyes of sleep, "hello?" Rush smiled back;

his face was visibly battered and bruised, but his spirit was as strong as ever. "Breakfast," he grumbled as he let himself in.

Rush nodded at Willis and placed three trays of food on his desk. "How is he?" Jenkins yawned before replying, "not much change. He's furrrier now." "How're you, dog?" Willis asked. Rush shrugged in response, "sore. Well enough." Rush handed them each a plate of food and a fork before sitting next to slumbering Erik. Rush smiled to himself and pet Erik's new, spiky hair. "Get well, brother," he mumbled aloud before looking across the room. "Thank you for watching him."

Willis nodded as he shoved a forkful of dry scrambled eggs into his mouth. "No problem. You see Olivia yet?" Rush nodded, "she intercepted me on the way to breakfast. She asked what happened to my face." "What'd you say?" "Fell down the stairs." "Really," Jenkins chuckled, "did she believe you?" Rush shook his head and stood up. "Of course not. She is very clever." "You know," Jenkins said as he gnawed on a corner of toast, "maybe you should tell her. You think she could do something?" Rush shrugged, "perhaps." Without another word, he turned and left to find her.

Rush trekked back down to the first deck and rounded the corner into the mess hall. There he found Olivia eating her breakfast at their normal table, all alone. She smiled and waved at Rush, bidding him to come sit with her. "Wolfy, those stairs did a number on you, want me to kick their square asses?" He chuckled and grinned before his bruises started hurting, "no, but thank you." He sat in his regular chair and cleared his throat, "you know stairs did not do this." She sipped her hot tea and nodded, "yeah, I just didn't want to think that someone could beat up a sweetheart like you. Who was it?"

Rush glanced away suspiciously before responding, "Erik." The shock on her face was nearly palpable. "He did what," she yelled before slamming her fork down, garnering the attention of the surrounding Brothers of Steel. Their curious gaze forced her to contain herself, "where is he," she growled through clenched teeth. "Willis and Jenkins are monitoring him now; they sedated him."

She growled to herself and stormed off, leaving her breakfast behind. Rush quickly followed after her up the familiar, well-worn stairs, and into the first room on the left. Rush scrambled to open the door for them. She glanced at Willis and Jenkins sorting through Rush's desk out of boredom. "Oh! Hey y'all," Jenkins said awkwardly as he filed one of Rush's worn notebooks back into the drawer he'd fished it from. It took her a few moments to focus on the furry, disheveled disaster in Erik's bed.

"What the hell did you do to him," she hissed at Jenkins. "Ask his brother," he shrugged and chuckled, "we asked *him* the same. Your 'Wolfie' says it's normal." She

spun around and stared up at Rush, “that true?” “Yes. It is a possibility. Everyone in our clan has a different experience during this time. Mine was very depressing, nearly killed myself. He appears to be very angry, unable to control his violent mood swings.” She continued staring at Rush. She held the gaze for so long that he got uncomfortable and had to look away.

“So, you had to knock him out, huh?” Olivia queried venomously as she waltzed to and stood over Erik. She kicked his small bed repeatedly in frustration, grumbling and fussing over his new form. After venting more frustration on the furniture, she asked Rush “will he go back to normal? Can he hear us?” He shrugged, “there may be one way we can speak with him,” Rush mumbled and glanced at Jenkins momentarily, “but you may not like it. We have the ability to share our thoughts. We may be able to offer assistance.”

Olivia scoffed, “don't say crazy shit like that, Wolfie. No wonder people are scared of you.” Rush lowered his ears and his tail drooped a bit at her harsh comment. “Jenkins!” He looked up, surprised as his underling yelled at him, “Let's try that again, Initiate.” “Mr. Jenkins, Sir! Can't you do anything else for him?” Jenkins shrugged, “that's better. And no. This is the second or third time we've had to do this. We hoped last time would be the last time.” Willis sighed at Rush, “just do whatever you must and shut her up.” Olivia cut a sharp glance at the super mutant; it was ineffective.

She shifted her stare back to Jenkins, silently demanding an explanation. “He's not kidding. We've done it before. It's actually pretty awesome, spelunking around someone else's head – in a weird sort of way.” Willis scrunched his bald eyebrows at Jenkins. Rush gestured for her to sit next on Erik on his bed. He sat next to her and placed a hand on Erik's head and the other on her face before drawing her close. “Control you breathing. Close your eyes and concentrate on me.” She nodded and did as she was told. He gently bumped her forehead with his own.

Within mere moments, Jenkins and Willis were bored again. Willis gently bumped his head against Jenkins' repeatedly and asked sarcastically, “is it working?” Jenkins smiled and pushed him away before falling back into his lap. “No, I don't think we can do it without Rush or Erik.” He paused as a wry smile crossed his lips, “well, I know *one thing* we can do without them. They'll probably be like this for at least an hour...” Willis instantly stood up, throwing Jenkins from his lap mid-sentence before bodily picking him up from the floor and carrying him back to his room, their faces flush with excitement.

While the lovers were having their fun, Rush and Olivia found themselves in a fire ravished field. Rush looked around at their bleak surroundings; even the evergreen pine trees were burnt to a crisp. The remainder of trees looked like blackened skeletons towering around them, filling the air with a stagnant and dusty grit from their smoldering bodies. "What...where are we Wolfie?" Rush choked on the dusty air, "inside his mind," he coughed. Olivia sneezed and shook her head. "What happened?" Rush shrugged. "Don't know. We should look for Erik. He may be hurt."

Olivia scrunched her face in confusion, "how can he be hurt in his own head," she thought to herself. Rush answered aloud, "he has been fighting himself. He must learn to accept that he is an abomination like me. He has skills and instincts that he does not understand yet." Olivia stopped and stared at Rush, "how'd you hear what I was thinking?" Rush scratched his head, "we are sharing our minds with one another and Erik. We must go."

Rush stopped to sniff the air, searching for his brother's familiar scent. Olivia shielded her eyes from the harsh sun, attempting to help. She looked all around: everything looked identically dead to her. She couldn't discern anything from their bleak surroundings. Rush huffed some more and quit soon after with a scowl. "Cannot smell him. Cannot feel him. Can you?" Olivia stopped scanning the horizon and shrugged, "No, Wolfy. I don't see him." Rush shook his head, "no, try to feel for him. You know him more intimately than anyone. Reach out with your mind and feel for him."

Olivia screwed up her face again and grimaced, "what? How the hell am I supposed to do that?!" Rush grinned, "it will come naturally. Let him know we are here to help. Hopefully he will come out." Rush started huffing the air again, hoping to catch a hint of Erik's whereabouts. Olivia sat in the crunchy grass and rubbed her temples in counter-clockwise frustration. She thought as hard as she could for what seemed like forever, with no result. Rush reached out to Olivia from the northern tree line, he located a trail of destruction that didn't match the rest. Olivia huffed and scrambled to his side, some two hundred meters away.

The sun was beating high above them, making Olivia sweat as they slowly trekked through the rough-hewn path through the dead woods. There was no canopy foliage to keep them safe from the familiar star. They walked a few miles into the unchanging woods. Rush stopped in the middle of the trail and wagged his tail in excitement. "He is near," he said before bounding off. "Oh, good," Olivia panted. This heat was killing her, "why's it not bothering him," she wondered to herself.

"It is," Rush yelled back as he ran. Olivia cursed herself for forgetting their mental configuration. "This. Is weird!," Olivia yelled in her head. Rush chuckled as he led them further into the heart of the forest. The longer they ran into the dead forest, the hotter their environment grew. Another mile in, and they slowed to a walk. Olivia was coated in sweat and Rush's tongue was lolling as he tried to expel the excess heat. "You sure he's this way?" Rush nodded slowly before licking his chops to reply. "Yes, he must be the source of the heat. He's why everything here is dead."

"What's that mean," Olivia asked. Rush shrugged, "you tell me. We have only been together a few weeks since we were young. You have known him for years." Olivia stopped and bent over, hands on her knees, trying to force hot, stagnant air into her burning lungs. "He's not normally one to get angry. I've only seen him really, legitimately angry a few times. He always got really pale and quiet." Rush stood by her side and panted. "Quiet anger? Like a smoldering fire?"

She nodded in response, wiping the sweat from her brow, leading their charge. "If it gets much hotter Rush, we're gonna melt. He's gotta be close." Rush nodded in agreement, "hope so." The last half mile led them to a depression in the ground, like a sunbaked lake. They clambered down the steep slopes of the dark lake and found Erik in the center. He was not himself. Rush furrowed his brow and Olivia gasped.

"Oh, honey. What did you do to yourself," Olivia wondered aloud with great concern. Rush wondered the same. Erik had, in his anger, fully transformed into a true Hawthorne: fur, ears, and tail. His wicked black claws were dark and sticky with his own blood. He'd tried to rip the fur from his chest and arms. His face was swollen and lacerated; claw marks extended from his eyes down to his clavicles. Not content with that, he had apparently focused on his gut, trying to eviscerate remove the creature spawning inside.

Olivia collapsed at his side. Unsure what to do, she petted his head gently. "Why'd you do this, you idiot," she asked an unconscious Erik aloud, choking up slightly. Rush sat on the opposite side of Erik, across from Olivia, and sighed. "Olivia," he grumbled, "we are of the same clan. Do you believe that now?" She looked down at her mutilated man, then up to Rush; they were nearly identical, "yeah." "My clan members were designed in pairs to help support one-another. We were a pair, separated at a young age. He must suffer like we all have before him. My time was similar to this...tried to kill myself multiple times."

Rush swallowed the lump growing in his throat as he gently pet the blood-slicked fur on his little brother's chest, "You must support him. You, me, Jenkins, Franklin, his father, everyone. If we do not, he will not survive this transition." A single, large tear escaped Olivia's hazel eyes, undermining her steel exterior. "Will he change? Is he gonna look like you forever?" Rush shrugged, "do not know. He has an improved version of my genome. If he learns to control his anger, he may learn to control his physical form as well. May be hope for me, too. Grandfather never expected us to be able to shift. Well, not that he wrote in his research."

"Speak to him, Olivia. Help him calm down and come back. You will be more effective than having me alone." She nodded and did as Rush instructed. She ignored the mess of ripped fur and blood on his chest as she laid her head on him. "Erik, you need to come on back now. Me an' Rush are worried. Jenkins and Willis an' Franklin too." She paused as she listened to his faint heart beat grow stronger through his broad, muscular chest. It was slowly gaining speed. "Erik, come on, we need you to come back. *I* need to you to come back." Rush smiled and rubbed Erik between his tattered, pointy wolven ears. "Wake up brother."

Olivia shot back with elation as Erik quietly moaned in pain under his breath. He mumbled something that Olivia didn't understand. She looked to Rush to translate. "He is very sore, and would like to know why." Olivia smiled and gently cupped his cheek, "you did it to yourself, you idiot. But that's okay, we're here now." Erik furrowed his brow as he opened his heavy eyelids. His bright amber eyes shone out as if they were one hundred watt bulbs. He took a deep breath and cried out in pain.

"What's wrong?!" Olivia yelled back at him. "Ah, ah! My insides are on fire! Everything burns!" Erik pushed on his eyes with his palms, trying to block out the pain as his body slowly changed back to the form they were all accustomed to. His bushy tail fell off and withered into dust. His face creaked and cracked as the bones were rearranging to reabsorb his muzzle. He coughed up phlegm, blood, and teeth, as his organs rearranged themselves. Various lacerations and wounds sewed themselves up as if dozens of magic elves were all performing major surgery simultaneously.

It felt like an eternity to him, but he was back to normal in under a few minutes. Rush's scientific mind was distracting him from his brother's pain, fascinated instead by the physical transformation. "You should be dead," he mumbled, "from trauma like that." Erik sat up, now naked without his layer of fur. He panted and winced in pain as the final changes occurred: his fingers returned to their normal size as his wicked black claws dove back into his fingers. The last things to change

were his eyes: they slowly faded from amber to cold grey, just like they were yesterday and every day for the past twenty-five years.

Olivia hugged him as tightly as she could, forcing him to wince and moan in more pain. Rush licked his cheek and petted his hair; which had returned to its cowlick and wild demeanor. Olivia choked on her emotions as she spoke, trying to remain stoic, "are you gonna be okay? Don't you ever do that to me...to us again!" Erik leaned into her shoulder and nodded, "I'll try," he mumbled. "I'll do my best."

The three sat in the dry lake for some time, letting Erik rest before Rush pulled them all back to the physical world. Erik had reverted to his normal form in real life as well. Unfortunately, things didn't dissolve here like they did in his dream: scraps of fur and fatty flesh surrounded him. He slowly sat up and pulled a piece of sticky, blood-matted fur from his arm, revealing fresh gently-tanned skin underneath.

"Oh, good God, what happened to your face?!" Erik yelled in raspy surprise. "You," Rush grumbled without hesitation or venom. Erik looked down at his hands, covered in dried blood with a broken knuckle on each hand. Erik looked in surprise to Olivia, fearing that he'd done something similar to her. "Did I..." "No, not to me, just your big brother here," Olivia said gently. "Now apologize to him before I break more of your fingers." He covered his face in shame, "I'm sorry Rush! Why do I keep doing horrible things to you," he choked. Rush continued to pet his hair and said softly, "we are stronger together, brother. Even now. You will learn in time."

Rush licked and nuzzled his cheek before licking Olivia's and seeing himself to the bathroom, mumbling about needing to clean up. Olivia smiled, still visibly shaken. "Do you remember anything?" Erik shook his head, "not really. I just remember having a weird recurring nightmare: Rush was trying to kill me. Then you and Rush were there in that weird place and now we're home." Rush yelled from the bathroom over the sound of washing his hands, "was not me trying to harm you. It was you." He shook the water from his hands as he came back to stand over them. "The other 'me' was your clan form. He wanted to surface. He must have been scared when he got out for the first time and attacked me in fear. Jenkins and Willis were kind enough to knock you out."

Rush gently poked him in his bruised left bicep, garnering a hiss from his brother. "How much," Erik asked. Rush shrugged, "two syringes full of ketamine." Erik's eyes widened in surprise. "That's enough to kill a person." Rush smiled and roughly patted his little brother's head, "you are not normal." He smiled again to Olivia as he turned to leave said, "please help him clean up. Need to find our medical staff."

"He's giving the orders now," Olivia wondered aloud. Erik shrugged and smiled, "I think he's right, though. I could use a bath, don't you think?" She matched his smile and helped him from the gore-splattered bed into the bathroom.

Rush didn't have far to go to find his slipshod medical crew, Jenkins and Willis were fast asleep in Jenkins' too-small bed. Rush wondered why he failed to lock the door as he waltzed in and cleared his throat with authority. Willis snored in response, but Jenkins peeked over Willis. "Oh, shit. Oh! Shit! Willis," he shook his mate, "we overslept! Get up!" Willis groaned and smiled at his puny human. It was only after he saw Rush, standing impatiently in Jenkins' small room, that he realized what was happening, "dog, it's rude to come into people's private rooms without permission. Rush growled ferociously, baring his teeth. "Erik was left in your care. Why did you abandon him? You overdosed him with ketamine, then left to go mate. Explain yourselves. Now!"

"That's the gist of it, dog. He was safe without us or with us there, bored to death," Willis explained, "so we decided to kill some time while we waited for him come 'round." "On top of that," Jenkins chimed in, "he has a very high tolerance for medication, especially tranquilizers. It's always taken at least two or three times what's typically necessary to be effective on him. It's not like this is the first time I've had to doctor him up, you know." Rush growled again, unsatisfied with their responses. "Down, dog!" Willis yelled as he threw off the sheets and angrily launched himself out of bed. "Who do you think you are, acting toward your superiors like this?!" Jenkins winced involuntarily; he hated to see Willis get angry, and it was too late for him to stop him now. "Insubordinate mutt," Willis spat venomously, "we care for that human in there more than you could understand. He may be your blood, but he is *our* brother."

Willis towered over Rush. "If you think we would carelessly endanger him, you," he paused to violently shove Rush down and stand directly over him, "have lost your bone-coveting mind." Willis placed a large foot on the side of Rush's head and held him firmly in place. "How dare you question your superiors!?" Rush strained and struggled under the mutant's weight for a few moments before going limp, giving in to the domination. Jenkins got up and tugged on one of Willis' arms, "That's enough, Will," Jenkins whispered sadly, "I think he gets it."

"I think you'd better go, Rush," Jenkins said flatly, tugging on Willis' foot and inserting himself between the naked super mutant and the wolf-man. "Willis doesn't appreciate the lower ranks acting out," Jenkins explained as he helped Rush up, "and I agree. He's harsh," he whispered, but that's how Willis shows he cares. Give him some time to cool down and do better to remember your place in the Brotherhood,

Initiate.” He patted Rush on the shoulder with a tiny caring smile while gently nudging him out of the room.

Rush swallowed his anger and fear as well as he could, nodded, said through gritted teeth in the empty hall, “apologies, sirs. Will do better in the future.” then left with his tail between his legs. Willis yelled after him, “stay the FUCK out, dog! Don't let me see your mutt face again! I WILL EAT YOUR DELICIOUS DOG HEART!” Rush marveled sadly how his brain was nearly another random stain in that bedroom; he heard Willis continue to yell obscenities after Jenkins closed the door behind him, trying to calm him down.

Rush trekked slowly back and knocked gently on his door. Olivia answered, she smelled fresh and clean, he noted. “Hey, big guy,” she frowned, “what's wrong?” Rush shook his sore and pounding head, “nothing,” he mumbled. “How are you, brother?” Rush asked as he nudged past his fellow Initiate with a sad smirk.

Erik, fresh from his shower and clad in nothing but a towel, smiled up at his elder brother. “Sore, but feeling much better, thanks. Something wrong, Rush?” Rush shook his head a second time. Erik scowled, “I can't lie, but you get to? How's that work?” Rush, thoroughly embarrassed, admitted that he had been insubordinate and gotten a well-deserved verbal and physical berating. Erik nodded. “You got off easy, he chuckled hollowly,” you've gotta remember your place, Rush. You're expected to be respectful to your superiors; folks don't take that sort of behavior lightly, Brotherhood or otherwise in the Wastes.” Olivia patted Rush on the shoulder, “I get that talk at least twice a week. Captain Rose doesn't appreciate my outbursts, either,” she chuckled, “I don't know how many miles I've run 'round those stupid crops now 'cause of my mouth.”

Rush dug in the nearby closet for his backpack and gathered assorted notepads, books, and pencils from his desk, roughly stuffing them in. “Going to the laboratory,” he said grimly and left swiftly before Erik could stop him. “He's gonna be okay, right?” Olivia wondered aloud after she heard him pad down the stairs. Erik nodded in response, “yeah, he's just gotta learn that being my big brother doesn't give him the right to boss his superiors around.”

Rush saw himself out of the commons and into the mid-morning sunshine. A peculiar squirrel-shaped cumulonimbus cloud caught his attention, leading him into a listless daydream. Rush stared out from the middle of the sidewalk until a harried scribe mowed him down, pulling him out of his daydream and spilling his bag's contents across the ground. They were in a hurry to get the southern part of town. Rush shrugged to himself, gathered his things, and walked to the laboratory across the

street. Rush smiled when he saw that Ida's hand-scrawled warning of contamination had been removed.

Rush attempted to gain access through the stainless-steel doors; he ran into them nose first, not expecting the laboratory to be locked on a Monday morning. "Scheiße," Rush cursed under his breath and rubbed his sore and now bleeding nose. The same scribe that ran him down ran by again and skidded to a halt next to him, panting. "Sorry 'bout that," he panted breathlessly as he handed Rush one of his worn black notebooks from the ground, "you lookin' for Ida?" Rush nodded silently, trying to stymie a trickle of blood from his nose. "She's out doin' some field research. Said she'd be back next week." Rush scowled and asked, "where?" The scribe shrugged in response, "sorry, dunno." He ran off just as quickly as he appeared, toward a large building on the southern side of the base. "Is that one Erik said was the Scribe's workplace?" he wondered aloud.

Following the excitement of being accosted and the disappointment that the lab was closed, Rush found himself wandering around town aimlessly. He walked southbound after the scribe and stopped at the crossroads that lead from the automotive garage toward the bar. "Maybe Jenkins' father will need assistance with some work," Rush thought to himself. A short jaunt down the broken and rough road led him to the familiar faded and rusty Red Rocket gas station and garage.

Rush didn't care that he had responsibilities or that they were due for more training this week, he needed something to fix to clear his mind. After knocking on the faded door, Tom answered it in short order. "Tom's. You break it, we fix," he stopped midway through his spiel when he saw a battered Rush. "Damn son, you look rough. The hell happened to you?" Tom opened his door to allow Rush in. Rush shook his head and muttered, "stairs are tricky." Tom scowled and asked, "y'all not got stairs where you're from?"

Rush sighed inwardly, "not many," he lied. The older man removed his welding goggles to throw them on top of his refrigerator while grabbing a beer. "What time is it?" Rush asked, realizing he left his Pip-Boy behind. Tom shrugged, "beer-thirty as far as I care. You look like you could use one." "No, thank you, sir," Rush mumbled. "You need somethin' fixed?" Rush shook his head, "enjoyed working on your vehicle. Wanted to offer more assistance." Tom stroked scratched his left sideburn before sipping his beer.

"Well, I ain't got much right now, truth be told. Th' ol' Corvega was my last thing on my list 'til somebody else comes in. I already tuned up the first two as good as they're gonna get." Rush grunted and slouched, disappointed, "no side projects?" Tom

scratched his sideburn again, "well, I dunno." Tom walked over to his desk and flipped through some papers. "Did get some requests a while back: a motorbike an' a couple o' pickups. Got most o' th' parts for th' bike an' most o' two trucks." Rush was already interested when Tom said "motorbike."

"What is a motorbike?" Tom sipped his beer and smirked, "where'd you grow up, boy? In one 'o them vaults?" Rush nodded, "more or less." Tom nodded, "motorbike's like that Corvega you worked on, 'cept it's only got two wheels an' no roll cage. Damn fast and doubly dangerous." Rush imagined the wind whipping through his fur as he drove down an imaginary pristine highway. "Th' trucks," Tom continued in his thick redneck accent, "'re for th' caravans. They're all chippin' in to get 'em. Guess they wanna move goods quicker than what Brahmin can. Should help us get some new stuff through here."

Rush nodded, "so, no available work?" Tom shook his head, "naw son, sorry. Tell you what though, you keep an eye out for parts an' I'll pay ya for 'em. Sound good?" Rush nodded and thanked him, sending his nose dripping blood again. "Scheiße," Rush cursed, "here." Tom tossed him a well-used grease rag to catch the blood. "You keep it, and tell that son 'o mine to stop by some day." Tom saw Rush out kindly and as quickly as he came.

After emerging back into the bright sunlight, he was surprised by the same scribe a third time. "Initiate Hawthorne! There you are. You're late. I thought you were behind me?" Rush squinted at the young man in confusion. "Late for what?" The scribe shrugged, "your training with us started at 0900 this morning! Initiate Olivia is already there. C'mon! Let's go!" Rush did as he was told, "what is your name?" he grumbled. "Matthias, Initiate. Do you know what we do?" Rush shook his head as he walked behind and to the left of the young man with shiny blonde hair.

The scribe stopped and asked again, "do you know what scribes do, Initiate?" Rush shook his head again in response. "If a superior asks you a question, you should respond, Initiate." "Yes, sir." The man continued to the scribe's workshop. "We're doctors, engineers, scientists, and technicians. We keep everything repaired, perform research, data recovery, and support for our Brothers in the field. We also run shifts on the communications and radio towers with the other Brothers."

"Sir," Rush asked, "what about Ida, Jenkins, and Willis? Are they scribes?" The scribe scratched his head, "well, Ms. Ida and Mr. Willis are technically scribes, but Mr. Jenkins is the second-in-command of the medic battalion. So no, he's a Paladin. Anyway, we're here. The scribe in charge of y'all's training this week can answer more of your questions." He was correct, they'd just arrived at a large,

three-story brick building. Rush spied multiple men and women in long red trench coats scurrying about, making and fixing things for the Brotherhood. The scribe saluted the pair of armored guards near the stainless-steel double doors that appeared to be attached to every building on this campus.

They saluted back and motioned the pair in. Rush followed closely as they walked through halls that were reminiscent of the laboratory that Ida worked from and lived in. "We do something different on every floor, Initiate," the scribe said as they passed the first set of office doors. "First floor, or deck, is for research and historical archival. Books, holotapes, maps, the works. Second deck our scientists work on problems like the Brahman issue you helped solve. The top deck is armor and weapons research and maintenance. We keep the Brotherhood's equipment in tip-top shape up there. Mainframe's in the basement with the historical archive. Nice and cool down there."

Rush nodded silently, absorbing the information for later use. As they turned a corner into another hall of offices, he saw Olivia. She looked incredibly bored. He smiled and waved to her, she did the same in return. "I see you know each other. Good. We've got a project for you two to complete this week," he said as he led them both into a sparsely decorated room. It had been a classroom or office at one time, but was now home to some broken terminals, scattered cables and miscellaneous parts. The scribe clasped them each on a shoulder and said, "you're going to learn to repair terminals and Pip-Boys this week. How to hack them and how to clean them. Enjoy!"

Olivia couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or actually wanted them to have fun fixing ancient crap. She looked to the cheery scribe, then to Rush who seemed equally as cheery, although his nose was bleeding. "Wolfy, er, Initiate Hawthorne, your nose is bleedin'," she stated with concern. "You got excited by all that tech, didn't you" she joked. Rush sighed and requested for the scribe to direct him to the restroom to mop up the blood. After sending Rush on his way, the scribe returned to their cozy workshop, humming with testing equipment, and found a Bristol driver to hand to Olivia. "Here, Initiate. This' a Bristol driver. Just about everything RobCo makes is held together with these. Holotapes, Pip-Boys, and terminals all use 'em."

Olivia looked at the slender screw driver with an air of boredom; its shape reminded her of a vault door. "Too bad they couldn't save *all* those people," she muttered sourly. "Sorry, what," the scribe asked. "Nothing, sir," she paused, "what's your name, sir?" "Scribe Matthias, Initiate. Second in command 'round here." She nodded and asked, "so, we're gonna fix stuff all week. What's first?"

Rush returned shortly after Scribe Matthias and Olivia began deconstructing a RobCo terminal. Rush stood patiently behind them as the scribe explained the various pieces, parts, and functions. "This, here, is the network interface. Comes in a few flavors: ThinNet, ThickNet, and wireless radio. This one's set up for ThinNet runs at a blazing 10 megabits. Most are Pip-Boy ready too, so you can just jack into them. This," he pointed to a green board covered in nearly-identical black chips, all hand-soldered, "is the RAM board. This one's got 32 K. That's enough to store 5 books!" He continued on for another ten minutes while Olivia's eyes glazed over. "This is one of the most important parts. Even if the whole thing's busted, try to pull this out," Scribe Matthias said as he reached for the terminal's internal holographic storage drive. "Not all have one, some relied strictly on holotapes or big mainframes. Those are called 'dumb terminals.'"

Olivia yawned, "why do we need 'em?" The scribe disconnected the one in front of them and handed it to her. "That, Initiate, could hold all the secrets to saving our race or a home-made recipe for a bomb, or just someone's diary. We gather every scrap of data to better understand those that came before us and to make our lives better." Olivia carefully handled the square metal box, studied it, and handed it to Rush who did the same. "Someone told me once that these things could get sick."

The scribe nodded and said, "yes, some nefarious people create what are called viruses. They run code on terminals and mainframes to corrupt or steal data. Some groups from before the great war were supposedly very adept at launching attacks against the United States. If you find viruses, they're useful too. We can reverse engineer them for use against the Enclave and their ilk."

The rest of their morning continued like that: explanation after dreadful, boring explanation. Olivia thought she would literally die of boredom before lunchtime. Scribe Matthias took a shining to Rush who had nothing but stars in his eyes since they cracked the old terminal open. They broke for an hour's lunch. Afterward, they found themselves in the same brick building. The two initiates followed the Scribe back to their little lab. The constant buzzing of the overhead fluorescent lights, blinking mainframe lights, clicking of tape reels, phosphorous oscilloscope waveforms, and static-y radios were giving Olivia a blinding migraine. She rubbed her temples in frustration, "sir," she asked, "weapons and development are on the third deck, right?" "Yes, Initiate, they are." "Could I go up there? I think I'm dying down here." The scribe chuckled to himself and replied, "no problem. Go on up, tell them Scribe Matthias said you're clear to enter and start learning how plasma and laser weaponry function."

Olivia nodded happily and escaped as quickly and politely as she could. Rush sat on a stool, and poked at the internals of the terminal. “Anything else interesting about these?” The scribe nodded and handed Rush a copy of “*A Programmer’s Handbook for the RobCo RT-V300, RobCo Termlink, and RobCo Unified OS v.85*” “Lots, Initiate. Try to get this one working,” he paused to hook up the holographic drive from another terminal, “and recover as much data from here as you can. That will be your exam for the end of the day. Have it for me on a holotape before dinner.”

Rush watched momentarily as the man left him alone with the thick, comb-bound tome and various tools and equipment. He plugged in the terminal and pushed the square orange power button to little effect. It booted, beeped, then reported the following message:

```
ROBCO INDUSTRIES UNIFIED OPERATING SYSTEM
  COPYRIGHT 2075-2077 ROBCO INDUSTRIES
    - Server 2 -
```

```
ERROR 0x07F6BAAC
Bad Data. Cannot Read.
```

Rush scratched his chin, turned it off and took the case off. He fiddled around with various components and found some loose RAM chips. After re-soldering them, he booted the terminal and got a new message:

```
ERROR 0xF141A013
No Data Storage Detected.
Check Tape Drive Connection.
```

Rush sighed and repeated the same steps as before. After two hours of the same actions – tweaking, rebooting, and tweaking some more – he finally got the terminal into a semi-working state. Just one more error message separated him from the goods on the drive:

```
ROBCO INDUSTRIES UNIFIED OPERATING SYSTEM
  COPYRIGHT 2075-2077 ROBCO INDUSTRIES
    - Server 2 -
```

```
ERROR 0x357C5001
Bad Sectors Found In Boot Block.
Terminal Error.
```

Rush squinted at the message, he'd never heard of a boot block or sectors or how they could be bad, so he relocated himself from the uncomfortable wooden stool into a plush, pink, padded chair tucked away into a corner with his large, dusty tome under arm. After fishing around his bag for a leather-bound notebook and a gnawed pencil, he was ready to study.

Olivia, like Rush, was now having the time of her life. She was studying with a scribe that led the Brotherhood in weapon preservation, research, and advancement. He was currently disassembling a laser rifle and explaining the various bits and pieces that made it powerful and deadly. "The crystal stack," he noted, "if not properly maintained, will cause the unit to overheat and fail or will cause reduced output. Not very useful for keeping you alive in the wastes." She nodded dutifully and scribbled some notes down in a book resembling Rush's personal notebooks. "Sir, could you modify the optics here," she pointed at the mess of wires and crystal lenses, "to increase damage output?"

The scribe smiled at her, quite proud with his new charge. "Indeed, Initiate, you can. What other modifications do you think we could make to make these weapons more effective?" She flipped through her notes, picked up the dissected model and answered carefully. "Increase power input?" The scribe nodded again, "that's true. Good job. Now, let's go investigate the plasma rifle." Olivia was nearly giddy as they tore apart various weapons and discussed the best way to fill their enemies full of hot lead, plasma, and lasers.

Olivia and the scribe happily exchanged details until a knock came at the door. "Sir," a armored Brotherhood member called out through their muffled mask, "Paladin Rade for you." The scribe nodded and walked into the hall to chat with Erik. "How're things going for the first day of training?" "Promising," he said assuredly, "she's a natural with firearms. Terminals, not so much." Erik nodded, "you got her Pip-Boy ready?" The scribe held up a finger and left to retrieve it.

He came back moments later. "RobCo Pip-Boy model 3000A. Just like the ones we have. Fresh install with updated maps. Got most of the blood stains out of it." Erik nodded, "good. If you think she's ready, let her have it this afternoon. If not, then just make sure she gets it before they leave in three weeks." The scribe nodded, saluted, and returned to his lab where Olivia was pouring over the rifle. Erik smiled to himself, readjusted the large Brotherhood helmet under his arm, and clanked back down to the first deck to check on Rush's progression.

Rush heard him coming long before he arrived. Erik knocked on the door and let himself in. "Initiate." "Paladin, why are you here, sir" Rush asked. Erik closed the

door behind himself and smiled with a hint of sadness. "Wanted to see you guys before we left on our mission. Gonna be gone two weeks or so. I'm hopein' we'll be back before y'all leave on yours." Rush nodded appreciatively and stood up from his chair, stuffing the pencil behind an ear. "Thank you, sir," Rush grumbled, "it is kind of you to visit. Wanted to see you before you go." He paused awkwardly, "was worried," he half-whispered. Erik patted Rush on the shoulder firmly, "don't worry, Initiate. I'm not a Paladin just because the Elder's my dad. I had to work hard to earn that title. I've been on much longer and more dangerous missions alone before. This one should be a cake walk."

Rush smiled sadly, "love you, brother, please be safe," he said mentally. Erik responded likewise verbally and gave Rush a tight hug before leaving. "Take care of your fellow Brothers, Rush. Help Paladin Jenkins and Willis and Ida and especially Olivia. This is all new for her too." Rush nodded with a knot in his throat as he watched his brother walk down the hall and disappear around the corner.

After retrieving his dusty tome and notebook, Rush again collapsed into the chair and sighed. He stared at the time-stained pages of the book, wanting to force the words into his head, but he couldn't focus. He re-read the same paragraphs three times, they contained the background information and necessary steps to call up the debugger and examine the RAM's contents. Slamming the book closed with his pencil as a book mark, Rush made his way through the hall and back to the bathroom, maybe washing his face would pull him back into focus.

It didn't.

He walked back to the small workshop. It seemed much smaller and impersonal than before; like it was trying to squeeze the life out of him with information and electronics. Sighing, Rush took a seat on the stool and went back to work, trying to retrieve something useful from the terminal. Dinner time finally rolled around, four long hours later, and he had nothing new to show for it. Scribe Matthias retrieved Olivia and they both barged in on Rush's futile attempts. The scribe was happy to see that he had the terminal functioning, but was unhappy when Rush delivered the news of failed attempts.

"Well, Initiate, I was hoping you'd make more progress today, but that's okay. Do you know what you did wrong?" Rush nodded, "yes, sir. Paladin Rade left on his mission; got distracted by my emotions." The scribe scratched his head, he wasn't prepared for such a response. "Ah, well, that's why you have to work even harder. Our work supports our Brothers in the field, Paladin Rade included. Pack up, and

we'll head off to dinner, Initiate.” “Aye, sir,” Rush said despondently as he carefully packed the ancient book and his notes of the day into his leather pack.

Olivia smiled at Rush, trying to cheer him up. “At least Erik stopped by to see you,” she thought, “he didn't even say goodbye to me.” Rush heard her mental complaints and thought back, “surely he did. Why wouldn't he?” Olivia shook her head and violently dug a finger in an ear, trying to get Rush's voice out of her head. She coughed and glared back at Rush. He replied mentally again, “apologies. This is new to you. It is a skill that we are born with. We can share it with those close to us. It seems to fade with time for your kind though, Jenkins could do it for some time afterward.”

Olivia dug in her other ear, then growled under her breath, “get out of my head, Wolfy.” The scribe stopped as he exited the building, “everything okay, Initiate?” Olivia faked an impressive smile and said, “no problems, sir. I think all those lasers today made my ears itchy.” He chuckled, “it happens to the best of us,” as he lead them east on the avenue intersecting the main drag.

Scribe Matthias made small talk with them as they casually strolled northward, trying to make them feel more at home as the the late afternoon sun drifted toward the horizon. He filled them in on more on the daily expectations of Scribes and their individual expectations. “Grab books, research, and whatever the other Scribes need while you work on your individual tasks.”

He saluted the men guarding the door to the commons. They silently saluted back and opened the doors, allowing them all inside. “Surely you two know where the cafeteria is by now.” They both nodded in response, “yes, sir,” the said in tandem. “Very good,” he paused to glance at his Pip-Boy, “it's 1830, so you're off the clock. We'll expect you both at the Scribe workshop at 0830. Don't be late like you were today.” “Aye, sir,” they responded again, as they were taught, and watched him wander down the hall to the meeting room.

Rush's stomach took this time to remind him that it was empty. The loud roaring from Rush's midsection triggered Olivia's stomach as well. They stared at each other momentarily before Rush followed Olivia into the cafeteria. He sighed upon entry, the mediocre and strange smells coming from the back meant that Franklin was still relieved of kitchen duty. “Franklin has not returned,” he mumbled to Olivia as they grabbed trays and got in line behind the other scribes.

The sea of men and women in red clothing was quite a change from the silver and leather Olivia was used to. Rush noticed that it smelled quite different; the scents of heavy musk and sweat were replaced with old paper and an odd metallic smell. They

REDDRACONI, 2016

sounded different too, he noticed. The chatter was much less gruff, but still punctuated by laughter and insults, just of a different variety. After Rush and Olivia received their plates of sad mashed potatoes, burnt toast, and white mugs of dark tea, they realized their regular table was occupied by a group of older scribes.

Olivia glanced up to Rush and shrugged, “guess we'll have to mingle.” It didn't take them long to find a pair of unoccupied seats among a table of younger people like themselves. “You must be the...new folks,” the young blonde woman stuttered when Rush sat down. “Yeah, we just joined up a few weeks ago, right Rush?” Rush nodded as he sipped his mug of watery tea. “Yes. We did.” A copper-headed man with short-cropped hair spoke up, “I seen you at the ol' bath house! You used t' work there, eh?” Olivia nodded confidently, “yeah, name's Olivia. I gave that up to fight the good fight.” “Betcha give a helluva blow job, eh?” he cackled lightly. Rush glowered and growled at the man menacingly. The man, easily a few years young than himself, stopped laughing instantly and went a few shades pale with fear. “That. Is rude,” Rush threatened through clenched teeth. Olivia laughed awkwardly and scratched him between the ears, thinking as hard as she could, “he was just joking you idiot. Trying to break the ice. Calm down or people will think you're weird or insane or something.”

“Silly, Wolfie,” she continued aloud, “always lookin' out for me. Don't worry, he's got all of his shots and he doesn't bite. *Hard.*” Rush quit growling but gave the man a look that said, “I'll rip your heart out and eat it in front of you as you slowly die.” The man cleared his throat, apologized under his breath, then asked another question. “So, where're you from originally? I was born in Jackson and got recruited a few years back.”

“Well, Wolfie here was born in a Vault, right?” He nodded, agreeing to the lie. “On the southern coast, was a Naval facility long before the war.” “How about you, uh,” Olivia paused to look at the blonde woman, Iris,” she answered. “How about you Iris?” “My parents were in the Brotherhood, I was born into it here.” They fell quiet as jointly decided their awful dinner wasn't going to get any better. Rush started the trend by attempting to scoop some of his soupy mashed potatoes on to the charcoal-flavored bread.

He grimaced and crunched every bite down, wondering if death by hunger was a suitable alternative to the awful meal. “So,” the blonde woman said between bites of hard bread, “you never said where you were from Olivia.” She swallowed her soggy bite and said, “yeah. I know. It's not a pleasant story.” Rush frowned slightly and asked mentally, “is that true?” Olivia dug at the buzzing voice in her ear and said,

“yeah, so. Long story short; my mom died when I was born, my sister and I was sold into slavery to pay for our dad's jet habit. I grew up servicing slavers and eventually earned my freedom. One of the ring leaders took a liking to me and I killed him in his sleep. Started a riot, got my sister killed, then moved to The Burg, worked in the bathhouse, met my sweetheart, then joined up to help out. That's about it, really.”

Rush was wide-eyed with surprise, he had no idea that she had such an abused past. He reached out again to console her mentally, but met a block on the way. She cut her glance at him and grabbed his thigh, squeezing hard. “Don't,” was all she had to say for Rush to halt in his tracks. He faked a cough and nodded simultaneously to persuade her to release the death grip on his major muscle groups.

Dinner was silent after that. Rush and Olivia scarfed down the remainder of their meals and left the cafeteria. Rush followed her outside into the warm summer air. “Apologies,” he grumbled, “had no idea.” Olivia straightened her ponytail before answering, “there's a good reason for that, Rush. I don't want people taking pity on me for my past, just my present so I can build a better future. Got it?” Rush nodded obediently. “Good,” Olivia exclaimed before reaching up to scratch his head.

Rush didn't complain, he appreciated the attention. After a few moments he grumbled, “where are you sleeping?” “In the commons, why?” Rush shrugged, “never slept well alone and Erik's bed will be empty.” “Can we do that?” Rush shrugged again and pulled his key off of his dog tags. “It is my room, too.” Olivia smiled widely, “well, only if you're sure you want me to. It's not that bad in the commons.” Rush nodded gratefully, “please?” “Yeah, sure. Let me pack some stuff and I'll meet you up there, okay?”

Rush watched as she turned to go into the common building. He paused and smelled the sweet air. “At least it smells nice up here,” he thought to himself, “better than the recycled air back home.” He drew a long breath and held it in, savoring it. He did it again and paused, he thought he could smell Erik on the wind. “He better come back in one piece,” Rush thought aloud. “Who?”

Rush was pulled out of his moment by Willis; he involuntarily cringed at the sight of the green giant. “Nothing to worry about,” Jenkins said as he emerged from behind him, “unless you didn't learn your lesson.” “Learn your lesson, Initiate,” Willis asked. Rush nodded violently. “Yes, sirs,” he exclaimed and saluted. Jenkins chuckled and saluted back. Willis roughed up his head fur with a tiny smirk. “Good dog.” “Erik left today,” Rush mumbled sadly.

Jenkins scrunched his face in mild confusion, “no. He's still 'round here somewhere. We're not leaving until 0530 tomorrow morning. You check with the Elder? They typically do a last minute check of mission parameters the night before. Have done for years.” Willis smiled down at Jenkins, “we are wasting time.” “That's true. We've gotta go, Rush,” Jenkins agreed they continued walking northbound toward the small ranch homes there.

Rush watched them until he saw Tom come out and hug his son, then the super mutant, before inviting them in. Rush smiled to himself, glad to be surrounded with such accepting and understanding people. Olivia, at this moment, was not one of those people. She yelled at him from a window near the third-story staircase. “Wolfy! You don't keep a lady waiting!” One of the two nearby guards chuckled as he opened the door and said with a thumbs up, “good luck, buddy.”

Rush quickly made his way into the common building and up the two sets of stairs to allow Olivia in. “Apologies,” he grumbled as he fished out his key and unlocked the door, “ran into Jenkins and Willis.” She sighed upon entry, “can't you two keep this place clean?” Rush shrugged, for having contained a changing werewolf-man and his own scattered research, he thought it was in great condition. Erik even did something about his bed that had previously been covered in blood and fatty tissue; unless someone had Rush's acute sense of smell, no one would have known any different.

“Cleaner than normal,” he grumbled. “There's clothes all over the place, dirty dishes, and I have never seen so many chewed up pencils in my life! I cleaned up before I left...” Rush folded his ears as he picked up the dishes scattered around their room, followed by some of Erik's freshly-shredded clothing. “He must learn how claws work,” Rush thought aloud. “About that, Rush,” Olivia said as she closed the blinds on their massive windows, “is that gonna be a normal thing?” He shrugged in response. “No clue. Gives me hope, though.”

After removing her shirt, she turned to face Rush in a black bra. “Hope, huh?” Rush was too distracted by her C cups to respond. “Up here, Rush. Stop staring. Most folks have to pay for that.” Rush blinked and blushed, heavily embarrassed. He spun around and mumbled, “apologies!” She chuckled and hugged him from behind. “How's that give you hope?” “If he can change to look like me, the opposite may be true.” “And what, lose your fluffy tail and pointy ears and beautiful teeth,” Olivia admonished him. He blushed deeper and nodded.

“I was skeptical when we first met, but you're nothing if not a giant fuzzy gentleman. And warm.” Rush froze on the spot, unsure of how to react. Then, he heard her sniffing into his back. Rush softened his stature and thought back to her,

"what is the matter?" She replied to his thick, soft fur, "I'm just worried. This is really hard, you know? Starting over. I'm...scared and now Erik's gone." Rush nodded knowingly, "try living underground, learn there is a whole world above, *then* have your whole family murdered in front of you, while you are helpless to aid them." She sobbed quietly at his statement.

"That really happened, Rush?" He nodded as he stared at the wall near his terminal. "Yes. Our clan was much larger when we were children. Had about thirty before the Enclave. Lots of genetic diversity to expand. Now, Erik, along with me, our niece, nephew and Elder, are the last remnants of our clan. The Enclave found us somehow, deemed us unfit to live. Tried to remedy that." Rush's anger and sadness grew together, making him shake and tear up at the same time. "It was my job to protect them. Failed miserably."

Olivia tightened her hug from behind, silently crying. "Apologies," he grumbled, "it is wrong labor you with my problems." She sniffled and replied, "they're our problems now, big guy. As long as I'm with Erik, it looks like I'm stuck with you too," she half-chuckled. Rush smiled and looked up to the pot-marked ceiling. "Would you like to see a photograph?" Olivia let him go and quickly wiped her eyes, not wanting to be seen as weak. "Yeah, sure."

Rush did his best to ignore her captive, perky breasts as he turned to fetch the framed photo from Erik's workbench. He turned it around and removed the aging photo from its frame. "This," he pointed at the tall man in the back, "is our grandfather. This is our grandmother, great uncle, and great aunt. They were conscripted by the old government to build weapons out of humans. While other military bases were focusing on making humans stronger through the FEV alone, grandfather and his family decided that splicing DNA would be more effective."

Rush paused to rub his forearm. "They both were correct. The two here are our fathers, mine on the left and Erik's on the right. They were second-generation. More animal than man, but still very human. They used to scout for us, gather supplies when we were children. My design was one of the first of the third generation. Erik was the last; an anomaly. Our niece and nephew are fourth-generation. The last, unfortunately."

Olivia took the photo and stared at it. Their resemblance to their fathers was uncanny; they both had the same eyes and hairstyles, and in Rush's case, cheekbones. "I'll bet they were great men, Rush. They look strong and caring at the same time." Rush nodded and put the photo back in its frame.

"Tell me about your family," Rush said, sitting down at his terminal, trying to stay distracted. Olivia realized she was causing him to be awkward. "Wolfy, it's okay, you can look if you want. I just expect you to not stare at them when we're talking." Rush hazarded a glance over his shoulder, "should not. Would be wrong. You are Erik's mate." Olivia shrugged, "so what? They're mine, not his. He doesn't own them." Rush was waging an internal war between his the brain above his shoulders and the one below his navel.

"No, thank you," he said staring fiercely at the green phosphorous screen, "please put them away. Would be wrong of me." Olivia shrugged and threw a t-shirt on. "There, all better?" He looked over his shoulder again then swiveled around in his chair. "Yes, thank you." Olivia smiled and mussed his head fur, "I've never had anyone ask me to put 'em away before. You sure you're not gay?" Rush shook his head, "no. Prefer females. Just cannot prefer you." She shrugged and grabbed Erik's stool from underneath his bench. "Well, you asked about my family, didn't you?"

Rush nodded. "Yes, you said some disturbing things at dinner, wanted to know if it was true." Olivia narrowed her eyes slightly, "I don't lie about much," she said. "So, like I said at dinner, my mom died when I was born. I guess it was a complication of childbirth. We lived in a town called 'Peachtree.' I dunno why it was called that, we certainly didn't have any peaches. Anyway, dad always blamed me for mom's death. He developed a nasty Jet habit when I was still young and got into debt to a local gang. They came by one day, shot him up, and took me and my sister and sold us to one of the slavers to recoup some of their lost money."

She paused to reflect before continuing, "sorry. Ah, well we were forced into prostitution after we were sold again. We ended up in 'The Crescent.' After a few years – I was about twelve at the time – I worked my magic on the pimp there, made myself his 'number one.' Fortunately, he liked to sample his wares. One night, he was flying high on Jet and after we'd finished up, I slit his throat, stole his gun, and led a full-on riot. Me and the other slaves and prostitutes – about forty total – rebelled against our captors. Out of the forty, about half of us made it out. I got my elder sister killed that day." Olivia sniffled at the remembrance, but continued anyway, "she took a bullet for me." Rush wanted to cry for her, "how could humans treat each other like that?" Olivia shrugged, "sex, drugs, and booze sell best in the wastes, Wolfy. Not many people are out to help each other."

"So, I've got a dead sister and eighteen ex-slaves and no idea of what to do. We raid the place we were at, gear up, and take to the wastes after burning it down to the ground. We wandered for a few years, stopping in at towns here and there, helping out where we could and killing every slaver on sight. By the time I was

seventeen, I was ready to quit wandering and settle down. We were at some tiny settlement, cleaning out the last dregs of a slavery ring when some Brotherhood folks rolled through. They were impressed with us and offered to recruit all of. I'd heard about 'em and decided to try it out. It had to be better than trekking through the wastes without a purpose."

Rush furrowed his brow, "so you were in the Brotherhood before?" Olivia nodded, "yeah, but not for long. I decided that basic training was miserable and I'd rather work in the bath house in town. So, I quit, talked to the owner, and worked there for a few years. Everything was easy until I met Erik: he was one of the only boys that didn't want to play rough or try to get handsy with the help. He just wanted some attention from a nice-looking girl." She sighed again, but with warmth rather than sadness, "so, a few years of him comin' in after every trip and I got attached. We'd talk about things and I'd do my best to make sure he was relaxed and clean. I even offered him *extra services* a few times for free, but he always passed."

"After being turned down a few times, I started to get a little depressed. That'd *never* happened before. The last time he went away for a few weeks, I decided as a surprise, I'd join up. I decided that after all I'd been through, if he could make me feel that way, I shouldn't let him go. I went to Elder Redding, explained how I felt, and he gladly accepted me back into the Brotherhood." Rush nodded, "you are a very strong female. Will be a good mother someday." Olivia blushed heavily, "well thanks, Rush. I think."

"Does everyone have such a traumatic past," Rush asked aloud. "I wouldn't think so, no. Look at Jenkins. Erik told me he grew up here, happy, with friends and a loving family," Olivia answered. Rush sighed, "miss my family." "Yeah. Me too, Rush, me too."

They chatted for hours more about their pasts, their day's training, and what they thought the future would hold. Both agreed that the coming days would be difficult, but with each others help, they could make it through. When 2330 rolled around, Rush yawned and got up from his desk to shut off the overhead light. "Goodnight, Olivia," he yawned again. She replied the same and made herself comfortable in Erik's bed, savoring his scent from his pillow. The Initiates quickly fell into a peaceful sleep, assisted by a random summer thunderstorm.

