

CHAPTER 29 : SUMMER RAINS OR A TUMULTUOUS TWO WEEKS

The late night thunderstorms were a welcome phenomenon for the area, signaling the beginning of rain-punctuated, stagnant summer days. When Rush, Olivia, and the rest of the battle-ready Brotherhood members arose around 0530, it was still storming. Rush woke Olivia and notified her of their current inclement weather. “Uh, what? Rush, what's wrong?” “It is thunder storming!” “Okay, great. Why'd you wake me up?” Rush was at a loss for an excuse. “Thunder storms!” Olivia sighed and crawled out of Erik's comfortable bed to stare up at Rush.

“Surely you've seen rain before?” “Once, yes. We were inebriated and frightened. Well, maybe that was just me,” Rush mumbled to himself. “We, who” she asked with a short yawn. “Me, Jenkins, and Erik. We found an abandoned building near Jenkins' old village, stayed during the storm. Found alcohol. Made the storm much less frightening.” The sky lit ominously after a violent clash of thunder, making Rush jump and shiver. Olivia awed involuntarily at his reaction, “oh, bless your heart!” Rush shivered again as thunder rolled through their skies repeatedly.

Olivia cast off the sheets, swung out of the bed and stretched, single-handedly distracting Rush from the percussive light show outside. He quickly caught himself staring at her perky again and spun away. “Just like your brother,” she muttered to herself. “I'm gonna get a quick shower. You want to go down for an early breakfast?” Rush nodded to the cinder block wall, “yes, please.” She shook her head, grabbed some clean clothes from her duffle bag, and set off to address her hygiene. Rush, to further distract himself, decided that nothing could kill a case of morning wood quicker than the dense, endless paragraphs and diagrams in his *“Programmer's Handbook.”* He was correct.

By the time Olivia finished her shower and emerged drying her hair, Rush was pouring over one of the many schematics in his book. Olivia thought he was looking at a copy of the “Cat's Paw,” given the ferocity of his gaze and the odd way he was holding it midair, letting a large tri-fold unfurl from the spine of the book. “Rush,” she chided with a chuckle, “if you need some private time, I can make myself scarce.” Rush carefully glanced over his shoulder to avoid further embarrassment and said, “it is not pornography. Circuitry schematics.” Olivia shrugged, “could've fooled me. Hurry up and get ready, I'm starving.”

After carefully folding the schematics into his book, Rush acquiesced her request. In the middle of his quick shower, Olivia took the opportunity to peek in at the wet werewolf. She even playfully whistled a cat call when he noticed her and panicked, falling in the tub and smashing his tail and lower back. She awed then chuckled to herself as she ducked out of the small bathroom, “clumsy just like Erik, too.”

Rush finished washing the suds from his fur and exited the bathroom, blushing fiercely and clad in a slightly-too-small towel. “Sorry, Rush. I didn't mean to scare you,” she apologized. He rubbed his sore back and shook his head coyly in response. “I just wanted a better look at the man under the cute fluffy fur.” For an instant, Rush saw his own particular brand of scientific curiosity in the woman staring at him. “You are researching.” She mimicked his patented eyebrow twitch, “What? No, just curious. That's all.”

Rush nodded and asked shyly, “please look away. Must dry.” Olivia obliged him his privacy by turning her back, instead moving to rearrange the items on Erik's workbench. When Rush finished toweling off and had his Pip-Boy and leather kilt on and properly adjusted, he spoke up again. “Ready for breakfast?” Olivia paused before responding, she was staring at the two wolf-men in the Hawthorne family photo that Rush showed her yesterday. “Uh, yeah. Let's go see what the scribes're burning for breakfast.”

After locking his door and bounding down two flights of stairs, Rush was pleased to discover that the scents emanating from the kitchen didn't resemble charcoal. “Franklin has returned,” he said happily to Olivia. She had to jump down two stairs at a time to keep up with Rush's pace. “Good. I'm tired of burnt *everything*,” she said with a smirk. Rush held the door open for her and followed her into the cafeteria, bustling with happy, metal-clad warriors. Franklin's return to the kitchen was a visible boost to the base's morale.

They grabbed their trays and filed in line, quickly making their way to the kitchen. “Good morning,” Rush said with a toothy smile to Franklin, smacking Olivia's legs with his happy tail. The battered man smirked back and replied in kind. “Mornin' Initiates. What'll you have?” “Scrambled eggs, toast, and tea, please,” Rush requested politely. “I'll have the same, sir,” Olivia chimed in, “glad to see you're back.” Franklin nodded again as he filled their plates. He was even in such a good mood that he squirted smiley faces on their eggs with ketchup. “You are happy, given recent circumstances,” Rush said bluntly across

his tray of breakfast. Olivia furrowed her eyebrows at him, silently accosting him for being so rude.

Franklin took the comment in stride, knowing that Rush meant well. “Decided I'd be more use 'round here fueling folks 'stead of drinkin' myself into oblivion. Father Murphy helped me through it an' I'm feelin' better, thanks. You'd like 'em.” Rush nodded and smiled again as he happily hoisted his breakfast and led Olivia to their regular table hidden in the corner.

“You're an idiot, you know that Wolfy?” Rush looked mildly shocked at her rude comment as he nibbled on his perfect triangle of toast. He hadn't heard that since he left home – his elder always had a way with words. They sat and enjoyed a quiet breakfast. After some time, Willis joined them. He looked quite disgruntled. “Good morning, Willis,” Rush said after chasing the remainder of his toast down with a swig of hot tea.

Willis replied with an undertone of venom, “is there something good about it, dog?” Rush glanced at Olivia for some help, she shrugged. “You are alive? That is good.” Willis angrily dug into his eggs, “easy for you, dog. You have that *girl* to keep you company.” Rush glanced over to Olivia at the head of the table. She shrugged again. “We could spend time together,” Rush said sympathetically, “are you lonely?” The super mutant sneered and slammed down his fork, “you think I'm some kinda backwoods dog fucker?!” Rush went wide-eyed as scattered members around them glanced in their direction.

Olivia matched Rush's expression, they didn't expect such a vivid response to Rush's awkward and blunt attempts at sympathy. Willis scarfed down his toast and sighed to his tray of food. “Sorry,” he grumbled. “Never know if Axel's coming back or not from those damnable missions.” Rush's perky ears drooped as he fully realized the gravity of that sentence. His voracious hunger was quickly replaced with a knot of worry.

Olivia patted the thick green forearm nearest her, “He and Erik will be fine. They always have been throughout the years. Why would this be any different?” Willis responded by shoveling more eggs into his mouth. They finished their breakfasts in silence.

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“I wish I would've ate before we left,” Erik whined quietly to his grumbling stomach as he piloted the rusty blue Corvega north-westward on the crumbling

highway. Jenkins, in the rear bench seat, was compiling med kits and scribbling down inventories as they bounced along the pot-hole-and-debris-filled highway. Erik was taking his precious time driving. He got nervous every time he had to pilot the large metal beast; he never thought that moving so quickly was worth becoming a huge rusty target for everything in the wastes.

Jenkins heard Erik's stomach grumbling on the other side of his sagging cream-colored captain's chair, "didn't you eat?" Erik glanced in the rear-view mirror to reply, "No. When'd *you* have time to?" "Between cuddle time with Willis and packing out." Erik chuckled to himself, he thought it was strangely endearing that Jenkins always called his and Willis' private time 'cuddle time.' "You got any jerky?" "Yeah. Hold on," Jenkins said as he dug around in the packs and bags scattered around him and the floorboard of the Highwayman. "Here you go. Try to savor it, though, we've gotta make it last."

Erik kept one hand on the chunky steering wheel and felt back blindly to accept the nourishment while simultaneously mocking Jenkins' warnings in a whiny, nasally voice. To rebuke, Jenkins gently caressed Erik's hand repeatedly with the jerky rather than handing it over. "Quit rubbin' your damn meat on me!" Jenkins violent giggling and Erik's yelling woke up a snoring Major Artemis. "What the hell's goin' on" he mumbled groggily. "Nothing, sir," Jenkins said a large smile on his face," Erik was just mad that he couldn't put my meat in his mouth quick enough." Artemis shook his head with a thin smile. "Erik, whatever you wanna do with Jenkins' meat is your business. I don't care where you put it, just don't get any on the seats." Artemis' smile broadened as he saw the aggravation creeping across Erik's face.

Their friendly ridicule left Erik to silently gnaw on the meat. "Where are we at, Paladin Erik?" Major Artemis asked in complete seriousness. Erik continued silently masticating without an answer. Artemis scowled and peered between the worn captain's chairs to ask Jenkins the same question. Jenkins picked out his battered map from under a bag and studied it momentarily, "about three hours out from the first LZ at this rate, Then you'll be on to 'ol 67 Jackson, sir."

"Good. Thank you, Axel. Erik, you enjoyin' the sights? I'd like to get up there before midnight tonight," the Major complained. "Sorry, Major," Erik said flatly between bites of meat, "the roads over here are shitty. Holes, trees, other wrecked cars. When's the last time we got info of this area?" The major shrugged, "when's the last time you were out here to the west? No trading routes out this way, or any settlements worth noting. Probably full of damned swampers by now

anyway.” Erik nodded as he squinted through the smudged windshield at the ominous weather ahead.

“Oh, that's not good,” Erik mumbled as he slowed the nuclear-powered vehicle to a crawl. The Major straightened up in his seat and fetched a pair of binoculars from under his feet. “What've we got here,” he mumbled. They were all staring at a low slung ceiling of charcoal-grey clouds and solid walls of turbulent rain. “I'm surprised we're just now seeing this kind of shit. Bit late in the season,” the Major complained. “Take it nice an' slow, son. We'll be fine. Keep it on the road, we don't wanna be tryin' to winch our way out of mud in that kind of weather.” “Aye, sir,” Erik said with hesitation after choking down the last of his snack.

Erik, silently and nervously propelled them through the torrential downpour at eight miles-per-hour. He was visibly terrified as they navigated through horizontal rain, dead trees, and the sun-bleached bones of skeletons trapped in the rusting carcasses of their ancient cars. Major Artemis lazily wiped down the windshield, fogged by their hot breath in the rusting sedan. As they broke through the last wall of rain, Erik sighed deeply and slumped in his driver's seat. Everyone simultaneously rolled down their windows, hoping for some fresh air.

The sporadic rain showers didn't slow them down too much; according to Jenkins' previous estimation, they'd arrive about three hours into their trip. They made it in three-and-three-quarters – about ten o'clock. They parked the car at the crossroads of the old Highway 67 and the access road that supposedly lead to their first facility. “Stay safe boys,” Major Artemis said with a hint of worry as he drove their rusty blue car into the rain-darkened distance.

Erik and Jenkins stood in the open for a few short moments, orientating themselves before moving the overgrown treeline for cover from the burning sun. “Here we are again,” Erik said in a mixture of excitement and apprehension. “Yup, 's nice to get out of town for a bit.” “Mmm. Yeah. How was Willis doin' when you left?” Jenkins shook his head and re-hoisted his pack. “Not well. Never does. I dunno why he thinks I'm gonna get slaughtered every time I leave on a mission. It's not like the Elder would send us on a suicide mission...right?”

Erik shook his head confidently, “of course he wouldn't.” Jenkins asked the same, “how'd 'Liv and Rush do?” Erik shrugged, “they'll be fine. Olivia's strong. Rush looked *really* sad though. I'm worried about him.” Jenkins nodded as he fished out

his map to guide them. "He's a smart guy, he'll be fine," he mumbled as he traced the well-worn map with a finger. "Looks like we've got a fair walk ahead of us." Erik glanced over at the map and sighed slightly. "That's nearly twenty miles!"

Jenkins picked up his pace. They spent the remainder of the morning in silence. Occasionally one would punctuate the stagnant summer air with a grunt in recognition of the others silent observations. They'd been partnered together so often, Rush first thought that Erik and Jenkins could perform a *geistlink* like he and Erik. At noon they sat under a particularly tall pine tree and had a small lunch of water and jerky. "You think it's been too quiet thus far," Jenkins asked suspiciously. Erik nodded slowly, "yeah, it's a bit unnerving. Not even any crickets out today."

Erik munched on another piece of jerky, "shame though. A few big ones would be good to eat right about now. Maybe barbecued?" Jenkins sighed and shook his head, "I dunno how you're not as big as a Brahmin pregnant with twins. You noticed that you've been eating more?" Erik paused mid-chew. "Have I?" Jenkins nodded, "yeah. I'll bet it had something to do with that stunt you pulled. Remember? When you turned into a little furry Rush?" Erik only vaguely remembered that it happened and led to him doing horrible things to the people he loved.

"Maybe you need the extra calories? I'll bet Rush'd like to experiment on you to see what made it happen. Olivia said he hoped it worked the other way for him, he tell you that?" Erik shook his head and mumbled, "no. Don't see why he would want to though. Hurts like a motherfucker." Jenkins looked bemused, "really?." Erik shrugged. "Dunno, Axel, it's like havin' the flu but a hundred times worse. Even my wrists are still a little swollen. I'm not convinced that all of my bones are where they should be. I don't know how any of that works, though. I just know that bones and blood belong *inside*, and if they're not, then there's a problem." Jenkins laughed aloud, "yeah. That's true. You left quite a mess, you know that." Erik scratched his arm absentmindedly, "you did see all of me."

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The scribe teaching Rush and Olivia the finer points of medical treatment in the field was quite amused with his new students. "No Initiate Hawthorne, we don't have the same, uh, *mechanisms* as our canine companions for ensuring that the competition doesn't *mate* our females, as you so eloquently described it." Olivia shook her head at patted Rush's head, muttering "bless your heart, you poor confused thing." "Can humans really not sense pheromones, sir," he asked, without

derailment or embarrassment. “No, Initiate Hawthorne, at least not consciously. Can you?”

Rush nodded. “What's that like,” the scribe asked with serious interest. Rush scratched his chin in thought. “Silent like body language, but stronger. Different. Travels in the air, some are less controllable. Makes it harder to deceive others, to hide true feelings. Keeps everybody honest.” The scribe scribbled down some shorthand notes on his stack of papers. “Well, enough about biological processes for now, Initiates. For the remainder of the day, you will be working with Ms. Ida. She wants you to further practice the skills you learned this morning.” The older blonde gentlemen saluted them with a thin smile and left them alone in the small library.

“Rush,” Olivia said as gently as she could, “I guess you weren't kidding about the whole virgin thing before.” He raised an eyebrow, “no, useless to lie.” Olivia nodded in agreement, “you're too good. You know that?” He furrowed his eyebrows in confusion, “too good?” Olivia nodded again and led them down the hall toward the exit. “Yeah, you're perfect. You don't cuss, cheat, steal, drink, or even look at porn. How do you *survive*?” Rush blushed slightly and scratched his scalp awkwardly before counting the reasons on his fingers, “curse in German, frequently...at myself. Cheating and stealing are immoral. We have no more alcohol in our room and have not had time to purchase more. Pornography is inappropriate when we have guests,” he paused, “isn't it?”

Olivia sighed, “How do you manage to be a gentleman all the time,” she asked as they exited and strolled north to the laboratory. He shrugged, “wrong to do some things in the company of others. Especially those that do not know us well.” Olivia slowed down slightly, “do you mean...me?” Rush looked straight ahead and nodded slightly, “yes, but not just you,” he whispered. “You are still new. Erik *loves* you, that speaks volumes. But *we* have not bonded.” Olivia was immediately incensed, “so, you spend a week or two, drunk, with two guys in the woods, one of which I gather wanted to *mate* you, to use your own words, and that's enough to pass as bonding?”

Rush shook his head vigorously. “No, who told you that? Need Erik. Watching his body language, smelling his pheromones, and sharing his feelings helps me learn. Nice to have a second set of senses. Makes it easier to get comfortable. Adapt and overcome my insecurities.” Olivia scowled. “You are a female—makes it much more difficult. He is clouded by feelings and pheromones that haven't visited me

in a long time. Makes it very difficult to judge you without being distracted.”
“Judge me?!” Olivia yelled angrily as they arrived at the laboratory's entrance.

“The hell gives you the right to judge me? Just because I'm a *woman*? If you weren't *supposedly* Erik's brother, I wouldn't touch you with a thirty-nine-and-a-half foot pole!” She paused, chest heaving, and slowly found herself in shock. She slapped her hands over her mouth, wide-eyed when she realized the vile words of insecurity that escaped. Rush folded his ears and drooped his perky tail, instantly saddened. “Apologies,” he mumbled sadly as he quickly saw himself into the laboratory alone. Olivia stood outside and berated herself. “Damnit, how could you be so mean to him? You know he didn't mean it like *that*. He's having a hard enough time adjusting without you screaming at him like some madwoman.”

She ran in after him, “Rush! Rush, where are you, damnit? Rush!” She ran down the hall toward Ida's lab. “Stupid over-sensitive dog man...thing,” she muttered half to herself. She ducked into Ida's lab, looked around, then left without a word, leaving she and Willis confused. Her furious fleeting footsteps echoed down the empty halls. A soft whimpering caught her attention as she skidded to halt at the crossroads of crumbling halls. “Aha!” she exclaimed—she'd pinpointed him at the end of the hall leading to the exterior greenhouse.

She nearly knocked the door from its hinges as she barged through it. Watching the grown man whimpering to himself, fighting to hold back his tears of frustration, she thought her heart would physically break in her chest. “Oh, no. Rush, stop. Please? Stop!” He sniffled in response before turning to look up from a child's school desk. “Apologies, Olivia,” he mumbled dully before turning back in his seat and smacking himself on the head repeatedly in aggravation. “Why is it so difficult to communicate without making everyone think you are mentally impaired? Why is this so difficult?!” Rush whined. Olivia grabbed his hand to halt his abuse. “That's enough,” she whispered while gently rubbing the crown of his large head, “you've got nothing to be sorry for.”

“You're just scared like me, right? Instead of crying about it, I just fly off the handle and yell at people like a madwoman.” He settled down slightly, “thank you.” Olivia scoffed, “we gotta work together: you help me keep my temper in check and I'll help you be less...weird and sensitive.” Rush wiped his leaky eyes and nodded. “Apologies.” “Shut up,” she threatened, “stop apologizing. Right now. Stop it.” Rush perked up his ears and swallowed hard at the lump in his throat as he heard Ida storming down the hall. “Ida is coming. She sounds angry.” Olivia grunted, “this isn't going to go well.” Soon after she muttered those words did

Ida appeared in the doorway, shadowed by Willis. “What are my Initiates doing? Having a pity party in here? Get to the lab and get to work!!”

Rush and Olivia scrambled to gather themselves and follow the two elder scientists to the main laboratory under an invisible cloud of shame. Ida and Willis took their time leading the Initiates through the deserted halls. “I'd planned a surprise for you two,” Ida said to the dusty air in front of her, “but now I'm not sure if you deserve it now or not.” Willis grinned to himself, he was always in the mood for a bit of friendly mischief. Ida questioned, “what do you think, Willis?” He grunted in response, “I think they should get their gift.”

Ida nodded as she led them into her familiar laboratory. Instead of finding recently deceased carcasses of some specimen, the lab was sparkling clean: the only specimens they saw were a pair of freshly-refurbished plasma rifles. There was a handwritten note left by Erik. Olivia unfolded it carefully and held it out in front of herself and Rush:

Olivia & Rush,

As the lead scout, it's normally my privilege to take our Initiates on their first official hunt with the Brotherhood. Fortunately, Ida and Willis have been nice enough to agree to take you on a snipe hunt in my place while I'm out scouting in the field.

Take these rifles. Learn to shoot and maintain them properly. They'll save your lives one day. Don't forget that you can't rely on tools alone – keep honing your skills.

I'm already excited to see how well you do in your training.

Take care, both of you. We should be back before you leave on your first mission, so don't do anything stupid in the meantime.

– Love, Erik

A hint of a smile threatened to crawl across Olivia's face, she was glad to see Erik's sloppy handwritten letter. The letter only served to make Rush remember he was lonely. “We will leave before dusk,” Willis said gruffly. “We will explain how to find hunt for the snipes, then camp for the night.” Ida nodded and added, “we'll be back after morning PT, so count yourself lucky there. Go to

your bunks, gather some light clothing, a canteen, a bucket, and some rations, then come back here in an hour. You've still got studying to do before we go trekking in the woods. We'll take care of the rest." Olivia and Rush exchanged confused glances when she required them to bring a bucket.

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"You gave them what," Jenkins said with surprise. Erik did his best to knock the cobwebs loose from his wild cowlick as they slowly worked their way into the dark entrance of the overgrown facility. "Plasma rifles, why?" Jenkins was shocked, if not slightly jealous. "You gave the *Initiates* a rifle. Each? An expensive-ass *plasma* rifle, no less. Could you show them any *more* favoritism?" Erik shrugged. "Don't you shrug at *me*," Jenkins warned. "What do you want from me," Erik started to yell. Faint shuffling past the foyer door made him halt in his tracks and sink to the ground.

Jenkins crouched down to match Erik as they paused to listen. "It's just a Rad Roach," Erik concluded after a few moments. He cocked his trusty 10mm and nudged the heavy door open to peek through; he was correct. A few well-placed rounds through his silenced pistol and the Rad Roach was toast. "Hungry?" Jenkins scowled, he wasn't a big fan of insect meat. "Bit gamy, I'll pass."

The dusty beams of late afternoon daylight that filtered through the crumbling ceiling were fading fast. Erik enabled his Pip-boy light, Jenkins did the same. After the interruption of the Rad Roach, they quickly resumed their conversation as they took their time exploring the new facility. "How much did they run you?" Erik shrugged, "Picked 'em off of the Enclave from Rush's place, remember? They just needed a little work's all. Practically nothin' 'cept some spare parts I had layin' 'round."

Jenkins shook his head, "must be nice," he muttered. "Remember my first gun?" Erik smiled broadly and nodded. "Yeah, that Red Rider BB gun. How many times did you hear 'you're gonna put your eye out!' from your old man?" Jenkins chuckled, "hell if I know. More than enough, I suppose." "At least you got a gun. Dad wouldn't let me have one," Erik mumbled, "had to make due with my bowie knife before he talked Captain Rose into showing us how to make that bow and arrow." "Oh, I forgot about that shitty thing."

"Hey! That shitty thing took down our first deer, remember?" "Yeah, I remember having to chase the damn thing half a mile because you couldn't aim for shit,

too.” Erik chuckled, “yeah, it *was* pretty shitty.” Their leisurely reminiscing led them through the building's foyer, through a hallway, and into the maintenance area. Erik stopped again, shining his light around them to get a better feel for their surroundings. He was slowly filled with a sense of dread and familiarity, like he'd been in this place or one just like it before.

“You remember a place like this, Axel?” Jenkins shook his head in response, “no? Hard to tell in the dark though. Looks like every other ol' Pre-War industrial building. A bit like the weather station we stumbled into with Rush, but this place's much bigger.” Erik nodded slowly, creeping forward to a janitorial closet. His brow was glistening with sweat, “why'm I so nervous?” He slowly turned the door handle and held his pistol aloft, ready to strike.

There was nothing inside other than crates of cleaning supplies and a med kit's contents sprawled across the ground. He sighed with relief. “What's your problem,” Jenkins asked. Erik walked in the cubicle-sized room and shrugged. “I dunno, just got a weird feeling's all. Can't place it.” “Oh, that's great,” Jenkins mumbled sarcastically, “something awful always happens when you have those damnable feelings of yours.” Erik shrugged off his comment. “C'mon, let's split up and meet back here in an hour.” “Yeah, alright.”

Jenkins bent down to collect the remains of the ancient, rusted med kit as Erik left to explore an adjacent room. “Hey,” Jenkins yelled behind himself, “be careful.” Erik waved as he set off into the darkness, guided by his hazy green Pip-Boy light. Jenkins stuffed a pair of stimpacks and dosage of Rad Away into his canvas bag, muttering about stale air and thick dust permeating through the facility. “Wonder what's in here,” Jenkins said aloud as he returned to foyer to investigate the door marked “Official Personnel Only.”

He readied his rifle, re-enabled his Pip-Boy's light, and nudged the broken door open with his shoulder. A quick review of the room left Jenkins in a mild form of shock. There was a skeleton in front of a blood-stained RobCo terminal; it was holding a .32 pistol. He sighed outwardly before approaching it. As he reached for the pistol, the skeleton fell out of the chair and scattered across the floor, catching Jenkins off guard. He yelped in surprise as the skull clattered at his feet. “God damnit, stupid suicide victim.” After shaking the remaining bones from the chair and tattered business suit, he clicked the terminal on. Well, attempted to. The terminal flickered dimly and failed to power up. Jenkins growled weakly at it and smacked the side of the yellowing terminal with a fist.

It flickered twice more and dimmed before the familiar boot screen appeared. While it whirred away, Jenkins took the time to investigate the remainder of the six-by-six foot room. He dug through the desk, both filing cabinets, and every misshapen and rotting cardboard box in the room. A beep from the terminal distracted Jenkins from his rummaging minutes later. "What do you want," he mumbled aloud. He reached to strike the return key, and the terminal turned off. "The hell?" He flipped the power switch and watched it boot again. Again it beeped, and again it turned off. "Ugh, whatever. I'll let Erik deal with you, stupid computer," he complained.

Jenkins sighed at his lackluster haul: a carton of cigarettes and more clipboards that any single person should legally be allowed to own in a lifetime. He left the clipboards in a haphazard pile on the desk by the malfunctioning terminal and exited to find another room to pillage. Erik wasn't having much luck with the mechanical control room. He was bumbling around by the light of his Pip-Boy, trying to find the master power for the floor, if not the building. "C'mon, c'mon where are you? Button, button, button. Where is my power button? Jenkins'll be pretty pissed if I can't get some power going."

He flipped every switch and pushed every button on the large console to no effect. "Damnit," he sighed to the darkness, "hopefully there's another room or basement or something with a generator. With gas." He rubbed the butt of his plasma rifle slung across his back, "I'd hate to cannibalize you." He turned to leave when a dusty holotape perched precariously on top of a stack of clipboards caught his attention. He shoved it in his bag and the red key card that was hiding beneath it. "Huh, that looks handy." Erik stuffed the items into his backpack and continued his search for power.

"Still got thirty minutes," he mumbled to himself, trying to follow the exposed pipes leading from the control room down the dark hallway. Erik stumbled through the debris in the hallway and found that it lead down another exactly like the first: soiled and broken tiles framed with crumbling drywall and peeling yellow paint. "Ow, shit!" Erik kicked a heavy ordinance box, flailed, then froze with one leg in the air and an arm above his head; he nearly head-butted a bouquet of grenades strung from the ceiling. Slowly exhaling, he composed himself and took two steps back to examine them. "That was almost bad," he mumbled, carefully untying the bundle of ordinance with bated breath. Luckily, none of the five frag grenades exploded him into a fine pink mist.

"Whatcha doin'," Jenkins yelled down the hall at Erik. He jumped at the loud voice, "cleanin' up a trap. Got some frags. Want some?" Jenkins replied affirmatively as he slowly made his way through the corridor. "So, I guess we don't need to meet back in the main room?" "Nah, I'm done with those few rooms up front," Jenkins paused to wave his Pip-Boy in the air to scatter the pale green light. "Looks like this hall branches a few times." Erik nodded as he picked up the trail of the conduit where he left off. "Let's see if we can find a generator or somethin'," Erik mumbled. "Yeah, let's do that," Jenkins nodded, "you know I feel about dark places like this."

Erik nodded to himself and led them through the hall and into a nondescript room that resembled the first room they entered: four walls, a desk, and three doors not counting the one they just entered. "You keep following those, I'll poke around," Jenkins said airily. "Sure, whatever. Just watch out for traps, someone didn't waste their time setting them up for no reason." Jenkins nodded and watched Erik's silhouette disappear down another dark hall, outlined by his swaying Pip-Boy light. "Stupid dark-ass buildings. Why're they always dark and falling apart," he grumbled, tracing the never-ending line of sagging and decaying pipes held aloft by rusty brackets, crumbling drywall, and flecking paint.

In his quest to find the main power distribution center, Erik tripped over a bump in the debris-littered floor. A bump that beeped. Slowly at first, but then more quickly. "Oh! Oh no. No no no. Oh shit!" Erik squealed as he clambered away like a frightened crab, haphazardly crawling on his back. After two thrilling minutes of plugging his ears, awaiting the inevitable explosion, he peeked around the corner hesitantly. "No boom?"

The glowing red light winked into darkness, leaving the ancient trip mine inert. "You bastard," Erik growled under his breath as he gently nudged the explosive to the wall and swore to himself that he would be less distracted. Erik paused again, as the distraction lead him directly into the doorway of his destination: the power substation. "Well, what do you know," he happily mumbled aloud.

He scrambled up and leaned on the sagging door, scraping its metal threshold across the stained concrete floor. The harsh scratching alerted an inhabitant that Erik wasn't expecting—a relic of the distant past that wanted to be left alone to decay in his old home in peace. A glowing shadow, once something nearly human, now rotting and literally glowing green with advanced radiation exposure. It was angry that someone would be daft enough to awaken the ex-doctor from his

eternal slumber. Erik screamed silently in his head: it was hard to forget the unique combination of a sickly green glow and the scent of rotting flesh. The horrid, raspy scream that it emitted sent Erik on a dead run.

“Why didn’t my Pip-Boy start ticking?” Erik questioned himself as he sprinted back down the hall he entered from. Ripping his rifle free of its sling, he jammed a fresh microfusion cell in the chamber and threw himself against a wall. Panting and waiting, Erik waited for the glowing one to come stomping behind him. A few seconds later, Erik got his wish: the glowing one lumbered through the hall, anxious to separate him from his limbs and bowels.

Erik pumped two rounds into the demon’s chest as he resumed backpedaling down the hall. It roared as he pumped two more bolts of hot plasma into its face. “Get down, you bastard!” The glowing one clawed at its face, then lunged at Erik who was still running backwards. Well, he was until he tripped over another mine he missed earlier. In a moment of brilliance, he picked it up the beeping disc and chucked it at the ambling monstrosity before scrambling away on all fours. The glowing one caught it, confused, then roared in anguish as the mine exploded in its face, spraying its glowing blood across the hall, walls and floor.

Erik chuckled through the smoke and loose debris the explosion kicked up, “’bout time.” The glowing one lifted itself from the ground only to collapse onto its face, exhaling a death rattle. His Pip-Boy squeaked with static: Jenkins was on the other end, curious about the explosions. “The hell’re you blowin’ up over there?” He wiped the sweat from his brow before replying, “stumbled on one of those glowin’ ghouls. Wasn’t happy to see me.” Erik nudged the dead thing with his boot as Jenkins audibly sighed over the radio, “have you found any others?” “Nope, nothing yet. Did find the power distribution room, fixin’ to go it check out. Maybe get this place up and running. Hopefully there’s nothing else lurking around here.”

“Alright, just be careful,” Jenkins complained, “over and out.” “Roger,” he replied, knocking some dust loose from his Pip-Boy in the process. Erik stood over the glowing one, confused why it was so much larger than any other he’d seen before. As he knelt down to dig through its pockets for whatever loot a zombie would keep on its person, he realized it looked more like a beefed up Rush than a human like himself. “I hope that we’re not kin to him,” he mumbled disgruntledly.

Erik jammed the two caps he recovered into a back pocket and slipped inside the dark and dusty distribution room. A quick sweep of the room gave Erik hope: he didn't see anything else that could kill him and one of the panels had a dim yellow light that was gently pulsing next to a faded label that read "Emergency Power." "That looks promising," he mumbled, pushing a nearby button that he hoped would activate whatever power was left. The button's solid click gave him even more hope as he heard nearby breaker panels switching over. Decades of dust and insects shorted a few breakers, causing them to spark, smoke, and buzz, but otherwise, the cut over seemed to work well. A nearby terminal slowly came to life, accompanied by various tape reels and other noisy machinery. He radioed Jenkins again, "you got juice over there?" "Yeah, got juice. Looks kinda shaky though." "Yup, we're on emergency. There's gotta be a generator around here somewhere. I'll keep looking. Let me know if you find anything."

"Roger. Hey, Jenkins, did we radio in when we got here?" "Uh...nope. I'll take care of it." "Okay, thanks. I'll see if I can do anything else with the power. I'll meet up with you in another hour or so." "Roger," Jenkins replied, "over and out." He shook his head and ran his fingers through his short brown hair. "Good job, Erik. Hopefully we won't have any more surprises," Jenkins mumbled as he sifted through the fifth desk in this cubicle farm. "Yay, more holotapes," he said flatly. He pitched them onto the growing pile on the desk behind him. Stretching to take a quick break, he fingered his Pip-Boy and paused at the "data" screen to stare at a grainy photo of Willis.

He was quickly ripped from his imagination as his Pip-Boy alerted him to a new radio signal which in turn reminded him to call home. "I'll get to you in a second," he mumbled while thumbing through to the radio function. "Hail, Delta, do you copy? This is Sierra Papa Jenkins, sierra papa Jenkins, do you copy?" He waited patiently for a response before asking again. Two more attempts with no response left him in a sore disposition. "Guess I'll see what this damn station has to say."

Station Warning: Intruder alert, unauthorized intruders in unauthorized areas.
Warning: Emergency shutdown cancelled by unknown user.
Error: Power levels insufficient for automated Communist eradication response due to radio interference protocol 37-golf.

Error: ZAX processing clusters 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 are missing, corrupt, or damaged; processing power at 30% and falling.

Repeating ...

“Oh, damn it! Stupid computers and their ‘unauthorized’ this and ‘insufficient’ that. Explains why I can’t call out. I guess we should have sooner.” Jenkins shrugged and continued digging through the desks before growing bored. He radioed Erik back, “Hey, you pissed off the station, you know that?” Erik looked at his noisy Pip-Boy, “what’s that boy? Someone in a well?” Jenkins growled, “no. You need to fix computer before it figures out how to make us Swiss cheese.” Erik sighed and massaged the bridge of his nose. “Tell you what, I’ll meet up with you and *we* can do it. I want you to check out this brute I blew up a little while ago, too.”

“Fine,” Jenkins grumbled, “I’ll wait.” He grabbed an ancient office chair and began making towers out of his mountain of holotapes. After ten long minutes, Jenkins constructed a village comprised exclusively out of holotapes, clipboards, and paperclips. Erik came through the door shortly thereafter without a hint of urgency. “Nice work you’ve done with the place,” he said, pointing at Jenkins’ desk-gobbling city. “It’s okay. Needs a park, I think.” Erik chuckled and shoved him lightly. “Get your scalpel ready an’ let’s go do an exploratory autopsy.”

Jenkins grinned wryly; dissecting things was one of his favorite pastimes. Erik led them through the winding halls and inert traps to the power distribution room. “Here we are, and,” Erik paused, “the hell did he go?” “What?!” Jenkins cried. “Well, I blew ‘em up, here,” Erik pointed at the black blast marks on the ground and nearby walls. “And he laid there, dead, and was still there when I left. No way it got up from that.” “Did you forget rule number two: double-tap? You always double-tap!” Erik groaned, “no, I didn’t. I blew it up instead. I *just* told you that, remember?” Jenkins sighed, “there’s not even any blood, or *whatever* it is that those things bleed ‘round here.”

“Huh, that’s true,” Erik muttered in disbelief. “Even after I unloaded half of a microfusion cell into ‘em, he was coming for more.” Jenkins armed his own rifle and loaded it, “then let’s find ‘em,” he said nudging the nearby battered door leading to the power room open with the tip of his rifle. Erik nodded and followed just to Jenkins’ left. The door scraped along the floor into the still-empty room. He sighed, “well, I guess we can try get the power working better?”

“Nope, you didn’t listen to the radio broadcast?” Erik shook his head, “broadcast?”

“The station’s not gunning us down ‘cause of the power issues. We ought’a fix the computer first, hack it. Make it friendly?” Erik shrugged, “we can try, what’s the harm?” Jenkins scoffed, “killer robots and turrets aren’t my idea of fun, Erik.” He scratched his scalp and looked around spotting a framed fire escape map of their current floor, “hey, you see this?” “Hm? Ah, nope. Missed that. Must’ve been all of the excitement.” Jenkins unceremoniously ripped it from the wall to let his Pip-Boy have its way with it. His Pip-Boy beeped moments later, and synced up to Erik’s Pip-Boy. “Got it. Thanks.”

Jenkins nodded and studied the map, “this big room here, what d’you think it is?” Erik peered over Jenkins’ shoulder at the green display, “dunno. Bit big for mainframes, even a ZAX. Research labs maybe? Mechanic’s bay?” Jenkins nodded, “those’re some big external doors for research. I’m betting mechanic’s bay.” A metal clang echoed outside. “Did you hear that,” Erik ran out after it, hoping to find the beast he failed to kill earlier. Jenkins mumbled not paying attention, “maybe there’s a tank in there,” before feeling the cold steel pipe connect with his skull.

#####

Rush and Olivia were on their way to the laboratory as Willis and Ida drew up their plans for their overnight excursion. “You know if comms heard from the boys since they left,” Ida asked. Willis shook his head, focusing on the map at hand. “We goin’ down to the creek or west?” Ida grabbed a pencil and joined Willis at the operating table. “Here, should do.” Willis raised a bald eyebrow, “you sure? That’s not too far from where the scribes were found dead.” Ida nodded, “figured we’d do a bit of research of our own. I’m curious about...” She stopped as soon as Rush opened the door into the laboratory.

“Speak of the devil,” she smiled to Rush. “Are you two ready?” He nodded silently. “Yes, ma’am,” Olivia followed. “Very good.” Ida gently patted Willis on the back, “take our two Initiates as we planned. I will join you three in a while. Before you start the hunt.” Willis nodded dutifully, rolled up the map with their scribbles and ushered the Initiates out and into the swiftly waning daylight. “Where are we going,” Rush asked. “Wherever I decide,” Willis deflected. Olivia glanced over to Rush and smiled, “don’t worry, wolfie. I’m

sure the jolly green giant here will keep us safe. Right?" "Maybe," Willis grunted, "if you stop talking."

She scowled slightly, not expecting him to be so harsh. They followed him in silence to the edge of the western woods. Rush was very displeased to see that he was leading them straight to the scene of the scribes' demise. He wanted sorely to turn and run, but fought the urge; they must have had a good reason to bring them there. Willis threw down his pack about three hundred yards into the woods in a small clearing: close enough that they could hear whispers of The Burg through the trees while being far enough away to keep the Initiates from getting distracted. Rush and Olivia dropped their packs, shared bucket, then stared at Willis for their next set of instructions.

"Gather enough wood for two days. Clear an area for a fire. We will then construct tents. Go," Willis barked. The young woman and her furry cohort scrambled to do as they were told. Willis watched as they scurried into the thick woods, chuckling to himself. Fifteen minutes later, Ida joined him in the clearing, "hello old man." He smiled at her arrival, "hag. You bring everything?" Ida nodded, "I can't believe you left an old woman to carry your bags for you." Willis shrugged, "age before beauty, Ida." She returned his odd smile and tossed her two bags near the other four on the ground. Willis opened the orange bag Ida dropped, looking to fish out her special bottle of whiskey. "We're drinking good tonight," he mumbled to her. She nodded, "where the kids?" "Gathering supplies. Grunt work." "Good," she said, "those two need some meat on their bones. They're thin as rails." "Not the dog," Willis argued, "he's pretty solid." Ida shrugged and reached for the bottle. She tore the cork loose and took a quick swig. "Ahh, that burns good. Glad my taste buds are mostly gone." Willis nodded and did the same.

Rush and Olivia arrived shortly after their exchange with armloads of wood. Rush, showing off, had a load easily twice the size of Olivia's. "Howdy, Initiates. Pile that up in a teepee here. We'll get it started while y'all get another load. Then you to are off to go snipe huntin'," Ida said. "Hurry up," Willis added, "must start at dusk." Rush looked to the orange and red sky above before being rudely brought back to reality by Willis' yelling. "Now, dog. Move it!"

Rush bounded after Olivia again. Ida stifled her laughter at Rush. "That kid's got a brain too big for his head." Willis nodded and handed Ida the bottle back. "Gotta piss." Ida always appreciated his candidness, "no more than two shakes,

Willis.” He gave her a friendly but rude gesture as he left her alone in the clearing to relieve his bladder. Rush and Olivia returned again to find her whittling a stick with a wicked-looking bowie knife. “Dump those over here,” she pointed to the left of the other pile of sticks and branches. “Take the long ones, these tarps and rope, and set up four tents. Well, three tents and a bungalow.” Olivia and Rush both paused to look at her in confusion.

Ida sighed, “three normal-sized single-man tents and a huge one for our green friend.” “You called,” Willis asked as he emerged from the woods, wiping his hands on his pants. “No, but here you are, all the same. Help the youngins’ out while I get the snipe gear ready.” Willis nodded and proceeded to show them how to properly pitch a tent. It took them a little longer than Willis would’ve liked: Rush kept getting distracted by everything possible and Olivia was vertically challenged for the task. As dusk fell into night, Ida got a fire started and called them all over.

“Now, youngins, while Paladin Rade’s off on official business, he asked us to do him a favor: take you two on your first ‘official’ hunt. We’re gonna show you how to hunt for snipes. If you do a good job, we’ll have succulent, juicy, plump birds to cook and eat. Otherwise, you two can eat rocks for all I care.” Willis nodded and took over, “take the bucket, go about 50 yards into the woods and gently tap the bottom while calling ‘snipe snipe snipe.’ Three times in succession. Wait two minutes and repeat until they come. This may take up to an hour or more, but they come in small packs of six. They are slow, easy to kill, and you should have us dinner before you know it.”

Rush excitedly took the bucket and nudged Olivia with it. She was overtly suspicious of the entire setup, especially considering she saw a bottle of “Grandad’s Finest Whiskey” in Willis’ hand not long ago. “Aye, sirs” she muttered and followed Rush and his overactive tail deeper into the woods. “Calm that thing down.” “What,” Rush asked. “Your damn tail.” He shrugged and replied forward, “has a mind of its own. No controlling it.” She sighed and smacked it out of her way as she continued to follow instructions.

After a long hour and a half of bucket tapping and calling for what she was now sure was an imaginary bird, Olivia began to get aggravated. “You realize this is a joke, right?” Rush shushed her and continued his instructions, thinking to her instead, “So what? We get out of the lab and get to sleep outdoors!” Olivia slugged him in the arm, picked up their bucket, and drug him back by the other arm. “One, that’s stupid. Two, stop talking in my head, damnit!” Rush shook his

arm loose from her grip to rub the sore spot her punch left. "Why did you strike me," he mumbled to the agitated woman.

"Because you're the stupidest smart person I've ever met...and it's shark week. I'm not in a good mood." Rush was confused, yet again. "Thank...you? What is a shark? Is it a week-long holiday?" Olivia slapped her forehead and threw the bucket at Rush, glancing it off of his forehead. "Ow! What? Why?!" She growled and stomped off to their camp. Rush stood in silence, gently rubbing the new sore spot on his forehead and cradled the bucket. "Oh," he sighed aloud as he caught a whiff of Olivia's heightened hormone levels, "how did I miss that?" He emerged behind an agitated Olivia, silently awaiting his next instructions or abuse, whichever came first.

"No luck, Initiates," Ida asked. "No. Ma'am," Olivia growled. Ida didn't take well to her tone, "the hell's wrong with you, girl? Do you talk to all of your elders like that?" "Just the ones that waste our time," she replied pointedly. Willis glanced to the bickering women then to Rush who was still rubbing his sore head from his position on a fallen tree. "Dog, come," he said gruffly. Rush did as he was told. He padded over to Willis and stared down at him, "yes?" "Have a seat," Willis said, padding his tree trunk thigh. "No. Thank you? Sir. The ground is fine." Willis chuckled at Rush and nodded, "good. You shouldn't be a lap dog anyway."

Willis reached down to rough up Rush's head fur. "What's wrong with the little woman?" Rush shrugged and watched across the camp fire as Olivia and Ida argued, "sharks week?" Willis wiped the sweat from his forehead with his forearm, "that was the good thing about the FEV. Most folks who survived dipping evolved beyond that sort of stupid biological thing." Rush looked up to Willis, "did you?" "Nope," he said proudly, "no blanks here. Still shootin' straight." Rush shrugged and asked awkwardly, "is that good? Does that make Jenkins happy?" Willis rubbed his bald head, "that's none of your business, dog." Rush gulped and shook his head, "came out wrong. Must be pleased that his mate is better developed than others of your kind?" Willis laughed aloud, "I thought you were being lewd. And what do you mean *your kind*, dog?" Rush shrugged again, "do not know what your race is called."

"Well, that depends on who you're askin'. We called ourselves metahumans a long time ago. Better than regular humans. Most folks call us mutants or super mutants. Those that don't like us call us greenskins or people-eaters, got called a 'El Chupacabra' once." "Chupa what?" "Means goat-sucker in Spanish."

Creatures that suck the blood from goats. There's much better things about goats than their blood -- dumbass Mexicans. Good eatin' though." The talk of goats and food had Rush's stomach rumbling. "You too, dog?" Rush nodded.

"Hey, females!" Ida and Olivia paused their squabble long enough to yell back, "what?!" "We're hungry. Stop bitching and get to cookin'." Ida shot Willis a look that could kill, followed closely by Olivia. He actually shuddered slightly, "fine. I'll do it, since you too are busy bleedin' out to be of use. C'mon dog. Let's get dinner on." Willis' comments left Rush in an awkward half-sitting-half standing position. "Now!"

Soon, Rush and Willis had tender strips of Brahmin and deer roasting above the roaring fire. The scents calmed the ladies' argument and invigorated everyone's stomachs. Eventually, everyone pitched in and lounged around the fire in the moonless night. Their dinner consumed, Ida fetched the bottle of whiskey and popped the cork again. "To our Initiates," she gestured, "this may seem like a cruel joke, but you'll look back on these memories fondly as you grow into your positions in the Brotherhood. Build upon them and let them lend you strength in hard times." She took a long drink and handed the amber bottle to Willis.

"May steel be with you is how we wish our brothers well. In battle, in love, and in life." His short speech was also concluded with a swig of burning whiskey. "Here girl, have a drink. Should help with your...issues." Olivia gladly took the bottle and gulped down two portions before handing the remainder to Rush. "Here, wolfy. Drink up." He stared at the bottle and turned up the rest. He spread out on the grass and stared at the fire. "Ms. Ida," he asked, "why did you join?" "The Brotherhood?" He nodded.

"Well, Rush, it's better than being hung out to dry by raiders or enslaved or just killed because I don't look as good as I used to." "Is that all?" She sighed, "no. I appreciate the work that Elder Redding tries to do here. Some of the numbskulls 'round here may screw it up from time to time, but overall they're good folks and are just tryin' to do the best they can. After the Elder introduced himself like an educated human being and not a savage animal, I decided he was worth a shot. I started off teachin' the kiddos that were around at the time. Jenkins and Erik included. We help out the scribes with difficult issues and I serve as counsel occasionally. That's it."

"What about you, sir," Rush asked. "Long story. I'll kept it short." Willis scratched his chin and inhaled sharply. "Before the war, when I was a young man,

I didn't wanna go to school any more or get a job. So, I did the easy thing and joined the Army — early — around fifteen. Came back home just before the bombs dropped. There wasn't any notice, the alarms just sounded. I was in California at the time and decided do to my duty and help people into a nearby vault. I forget which one it was. Seventeen or nineteen maybe?"

"So, while helping get people to safety, I got locked in with the civilians. I don't remember anything until 'round 2180. Army of metahumans broke down our door, unfroze, and killed most of us. Took the rest up to Mariposa and turned us into metahumans too. Most of us didn't make it. Not sure what was worse, Vault-Tec's experiments or the metahumans dipping people."

"We were members of the Master's Army after that. He eventually went mad and was killed by some tribal or something. I wasn't there at the time. We went south to Mexico. We were down there for a while. Got hit by Enclave too many times, whittled us down to three after an eternity. We three parted ways. I wandered for a while before coming North to the Gulf Commonwealth. Always liked it here. Found a bunch of y'all ambushed by th' Enclave's deathclaws one day. Helped; couldn't save 'em all. Did what I could to save John before I left; didn't want the reinforcements thinking I did it. Trailed them back to your base and snuck around for a while."

"Eventually, Redding and Grey found my hiding hole in the tower. Joined up officially after that and haven't left since. Got tired of wandering, wanted a place to call home again. Watched the little ones grow, fell in love, decided to stay. Good folks 'round here." He paused to gently nudge the ghoul to his left with a giant elbow, "well most of 'em."

No one except Rush had anything to say; he always had a handful of questions prepared. "How old are you?" Willis scratched his jaw, "I don't remember, exactly. When you live as long as we do, you quit keeping count. Somewhere 'round 230 or 250 I guess." Rush and Olivia's eyes grew as big as saucers. "What? No way," Olivia objected, "you look so...young?" Willis blushed slightly, "that won't score you any points, lady. I'm a man's man."

"How did they change you," Rush continued. "Dipped us in vats of FEV. Wasn't pleasant. Most blacked out and died or woke up to excruciating pain that drove them mad. I was lucky, could survive the pain. Got a bit smarter and *much* bigger. And bald." Rush distracted himself by imagining Willis, a ten-foot-tall green super mutant with flowing golden locks.

"Anything else, dog" Willis queried while munching on burnt piece of venison. Rush blinked, pulling himself out of his personal daydream. "No? Yes, but personal." Ida produced another bottle of alcohol and passed around in the same fashion as the first. Rush got the dregs again, "thank you," he said to Olivia before accepting and finishing the bottle. "Vodka," he coughed. Rush now had his courage up, "my question," he paused to hiccup, "is how you met Jenkins. Why a male?"

Willis yawned, "watched 'em grow up, fight his personal demons. Watched him care for his comrades. Watched him suffer. Decided I didn't want him to suffer anymore. Made my move a few years ago an' we've been at it ever since. Not much else, really." Rush shook his head, sending his vision swimming slightly, "you have a *mate*. That is precious. Very special, sacred." His wandering dialog turned to Olivia, "you too! Very lucky. Have somebody to love. Not only love, but *love*." He fell back into the grass and stared at the twinkling stars above. "Must be nice," he mumbled into the empty bottle, trying to find a few remaining drops.

Willis, Ida, and Olivia exchanged glances, unsure what to do with their suddenly sad and drunken wolf. "Get up, dog," Willis said gruffly, "stop being a buzzkill. Tonight is a happy event." Rush groaned gently as he sat up. "Apologies," he mumbled at the fire, "do not like being alone." Olivia punched him in the arm again, "stupid! You're not, do you not see the three other people here?" Rush nodded. "Yes, not blind. Stop hitting me." She hit him again just to spite him. He growled gently, baring his fangs, "stop." "Make me," she said, punching him again in the same spot in his arm.

The continued this for ten minutes; Olivia punched him, and Rush growled and complained, but ultimately did nothing. Eventually Olivia's alcohol caught up with her and instead of physically abusing him, she decided to punch him emotionally. "See, wolfy? *That's* why you can't get a *mate*. You won't even defend yourself like some helpless little wasteland whore. You'd be better off getting some guy like Willis over there to *take care of you*." Rush seriously threatened her after that, bearing his full complement of teeth, folding his ears and growling at half volume. "Take that back!"

"Make. Me," she taunted. He jumped up to drunkenly lunge at her. Willis predicted this and batted him out of the air like a ball. "Stop," he said flatly. "Girl, that was uncalled for. Dog, she is right; you don't get to hurt her for it.

Apologize to each other.” They glared at each other without word. Willis tossed the empty vodka bottle between their heads and yelled, “now!”

They mumbled a half-assed apology to one another then turned to face opposite directions. Ida yawned, unphased by the events, “I’m going to bed. You kids take care of the fire and get some sleep. We’re heading back tomorrow after we teach y’all some real survival skills.” Willis waved her off as she rolled under her tarp-tent and quickly drifted to sleep. Willis watched the young humans in front of him and yawned. “You two are boring. You, dog, need to grow a pair and toughen up. You, girl, need to lighten up. He is just as scared as you are.”

She scoffed and walked toward her own tent. Rush looked up to Willis, unsure if he should thank him or apologize for his less-than-stellar behavior. Willis shrugged, stood up, unceremoniously and without notice unzipped his pants and began urinating on the embers to put them out. Rush shrugged and joined him. “Why not water,” he asked, looking past Willis into the woods. Willis stared him down, making him feel very awkward, “don’t waste water.” “Makes sense,” Rush notioned. Their bladders empty, they packed their bait and tackle and sat side by side as the few remaining dry coals died one by one.

Willis scratched Rush’s head, “why are you scared? Is it the woods?” Rush looked up at the shadowy figure and mumbled, “no. Scared that Erik will leave again. Of being abandoned again.” Willis continued scratching his scalp, “again?” Rush nodded and gave him a very brief explanation of how they came to be, how Erik was given away, and how after a few short weeks of being reunited with his only brother, was alone again. “No one will replace your brother, but you have your brothers.” Rush’s excellent night vision showed him that Willis was smiling gently. “That is what makes the Brotherhood. Very few of us are kin. But we are all family. Find strength in that. Rely on it, on your new family.”

Rush yawned, stretched, and leaned on Willis before drifting to sleep on his leg. Willis hoisted Rush aloft and gently laid him down in his tent before returning to his own. Willis stared at the underside of his shoddy Initiate-made tent and sighed, “Axel was right. That dog has issues and the girl’s not much better. They’ll be great together.” He rolled over onto his ample belly and drifted off to dream of Axel.

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Axel woke up with a horrendous headache. He was suspicious that he had a concussion, but found it hard to verify through sluggish thoughts and blurry vision. "Ugh," he mumbled, "Wha?" An unknown voice with a thick backwoods accent assaulted him, "Hey! Leroy! Th' little one's wakin' up! Get in 'ere." Jenkins watched a tubby man in ragged denim coveralls and no shirt swaggered in. "Well lookie' 'ere Rusty, I do believe you're right." The second man prodded Jenkins as he hung from a blood-stained meat hook by rope-bound wrists. Jenkins laughed awkwardly as the man jabbed the ticklish spot near his ribs. "Th' hells' so funny, boy?" Jenkins shook his head, "uh, nothing." "What 'chu doin' pokin' 'round our fa-cil-eh-tay?"

Jenkins gulped, trying to keep his cool, "we're just lookin' 'round is all. Just trying to find some information. You mind cuttin' me down so we can talk like civilized men?" The sunbaked fatty chortled. "Naw, don' think so. You're gonna tell us why yous *really* snoopin' round or I'ma let 'ol Roy after ya."

"Who...who's Roy?" "You don' wanna find out. An what 'chu mean 'we'? You got more o' your kind 'round here?" Jenkins squinted and asked carefully, "our...*kind*? What d'you mean?" "You! You *damn* raiders," he yelled in response, a mere inch from his face, "thinkin' you can jus' walk in an' take what ain't yours. We done had enough." The fat man brandished a bowie knife and held it to Jenkins' throat. "Now, boy. Tell ya what. You help us find your friend and I won't gut you an' leave you for Ol' Roy t' clean up." Jenkins panicked and stuttered, "no, no...no wait! Wait! I'm not, we're not raiders!" The man pressed the knife deeper into his neck, drawing a fine line of blood. "Prove it."

"My neck," Jenkins whispered carefully, "look at what's around my neck. Dog tags. Look at them." The large man gestured to the first who did as Jenkins instructed. He roughly ripped the tags from Jenkins' neck and stared at them. "Shit, you know I can't read." He handed the tags to the fat man and waited patiently. "Brotherhood? How do I know you didn't jus' steal these from a tin can you killed?" Jenkins was stumped. "I, uh, don't know? Why does everyone call us that?"

"Step away. Slowly," Erik yelled hoarsely. He had the larger of the two in the iron sights of his plasma rifle. "Th' hell're you?" the slim man yelled, reaching for his single-barrel shotgun. Erik blasted a warning shot at the man's feet. "Cut him down, put down your weapons, and we'll chat. Anything else an you'll be talking to the business end of my rifle." The fat man put the knife back to

Jenkins' neck, "you try that shit again, and I'll kill 'em." Erik smirked, "I hope you're quick with that knife, sir."

Jenkins watched the two rednecks exchange nervous glances with each other and pause for a long moment before looking back to Erik. The fat man cut Jenkins down and sheathed his knife in one smooth movement, then turned to Erik. "Put up that damn muzzle loader, boy. You," he yelled at Jenkins, "sit down an' don' go nowhere." Jenkins rubbed his neck gently where the new scar was sure to form, sitting cross-legged under the hook he was suspended from. Erik followed the man's request and slung the rifle across his shoulder.

"So," he asked, "who are you two? Why've you got my partner tied up?" The thinner man replied, "found 'em in th' power room. Figured 'em for a raider. Been havin' run-ins wi' 'em for 'bout eight weeks now, off an' on. You two really Brotherhood?" Erik nodded silently, inspecting the both of them. The large man asked, "the hell you two doin' here? You here to help with th' raiders?" Erik glanced down to Jenkins and shrugged slightly, "We'd be happy to help, just quit tryin' to kill us."

The thin man spoke up again, "Duke, go an' fetch Roy, we gonna go bring 'em to th' camp. Then we gonna get back at them raiders." Duke – the fatter man – shoved a pair of fingers into his mouth and whistled shrilly. He paused and tried again with no results, rather than try a third time, he offered a hand to help Jenkins up. "Here, boy," Duke said down to him, "sorry 'bout th' knife work there." "Thanks," Jenkins muttered awkwardly, still wary. "Where that damn dog's at?"

Erik hoped the man wasn't talking about the giant glowing thing he tried to kill earlier. "Uh, Jenkins? Why don't we see if we can work on the computers? Maybe help these good folks out with some lead-flavored raider prevention?" Jenkins shrugged in response and rubbed his neck again, smearing a trace of blood. "We can try, I guess." "There is no try, only do," Erik retorted, trying to lighten Axel's mood. The two countrymen took their leave after giving them very vague directions to their camp. "Y'all come on outta here an' come on for dinner. Least we could do. If y'see a big glowin' dog, that's jus' Roy. Give 'em a good pettin', he won't bother ya none."

Jenkins was still wary and told Erik as much when the men finally left them alone in the derelict power room. "Yeah, but we *did* trespass on their land. I guess," he responded, "if they wanted to kill you they had plenty of time. I'm just glad

they believed us.” “Fine, whatever,” Jenkins said dryly, “let’s just get to work. Computer, power, we’ll radio home, then let’s find whatever we can and get the hell outta here.” Erik nodded, “sounds good. Let’s at least stop in for dinner before we cut outta here to the next stop.” Jenkins wasn’t pleased, “you’re seriously going to go to these...redneck’s home for dinner?”

Erik nodded, “have you ever known me to turn down free food?” Jenkins sighed heavily, “no.” “Right,” Erik argued, “that would be rude.” Jenkins shook his head, “could you find a better reason?” Erik shrugged in response, “kinda feel bad for tryin’ to blow up their dog, or whatever it is.” They both turned to a sound that echoed from the hall that, according to the map, held the ZAX. “Uh, Mr. Rusty,” Jenkins called out, “that you?” Nobody answered, but they heard more noises further down the hall. Erik and Jenkins both readied their rifles and cautiously made their way toward the mysterious sounds. Their hall quickly ended in a T-junction with perpendicular hall; they both took opposite sides and sidled to their opposite corners and peered around. Jenkins cleared right and Erik cleared left, cueing their move. Jenkins followed closely behind as they tread down the new hall. Two hundred feet and another junction later, they found the source of the sounds: the redneck’s “dog” was scratching at the double doors leading to the ZAX.

The creature turned, gazed at them, then back to the door before scratching at it again. “Uh, Roy,” Erik asked cautiously, “you’re not gonna try an’ eat us, right?” The beast yipped, then resumed scratching. As he neared the doors, Erik heard a familiar noise as he neared the dog: a warm pink static reminiscent of Rush. Erik shook it off as he decided to focus on the task at hand. “Gimme a hand,” Erik said, handing Jenkins his trusty crowbar and shooing the beast out of their way.

The double doors were frozen shut with a layer of rust. They struggled momentarily before a thick scale of rust gave way and the heavy metal doors swung open with a teeth-chattering creak. Roy whimpered at the sound. “Yeah, me too,” Jenkins mumbled. They didn’t need to search for their target: the ZAX mainframe and its many white-and-rust-speckled tape reels and washer-sized external storage units. The ZAX’s master control panel, flanked by clicking tape reels and coated in dust, flickered sadly. The large phosphorous screen centered in the mainframe was cracked and unusable; two of the four smaller monitors attached to the front slowly faded in-and-out, occasionally rolling strings of garbled text.

Roy ran up to the console and barked loudly, as if he was announcing its presence. Erik shook his head stood at the console, “poor mainframe. Why’d someone do this to you,” he wondered aloud. Jenkins shook his head, “you think we can fix *that*?” Erik blew across the keyboard, sending a cloud of dust aloft. “Dunno, let’s see,” he mumbled, poking all of the necessary keys to force the ZAX to reboot into maintenance mode.

```
MAINTENANCE MODE KEY SEQUENCE DETECTED...

BOOTING...

UNABLE TO JOIN SYSPLEX HPC DOMAIN: MONOPLEX MODE ENABLED
IPLINK TO SUBACTIVE SYSTEMS...REINITIALIZING ZCF.

ERROR: PROCESSORS 1 2 5 6 7 UNRESPONSIVE. DISABLING.
REROUTING REMAINING JOBS TO AVAILABLE PROCESSORS...COMPLETE.

VAX DIAGNOSTIC MODE COMPLETE. REBOOT TO RESUME NORMAL OPS

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Erik smiled, “not too shabby. Looks like its still got half its processors. Should be enough to pull some data. Maybe reprogram some stuff, if we’re lucky.” Jenkins shrugged: he hated working on terminals. They were hard, cold, unforgiving, and had the liability to blow up or shock you at a moment’s notice. “Damn things don’t bleed,” he mumbled, tearing Erik’s attention away from the tiny green screen to their left. “What’s bleeding? Your neck still bleeding?”

“No, nothing,” Jenkins mumbled, “I’m gonna go poke around and see if there’s anything useful while you’re working your black magic.” Erik nodded and returned to squinting at the fuzzy green text. Jenkins searched patiently during the hour it took Erik to get the mainframe running properly. After its last reboot, it even began talking! Erik was pleasantly surprised; Jenkins, peeking behind a dead reel-to-reel, was unnerved. “Hello, ZAX,” Erik said carefully, “how are you?”

The mainframe mumbled and groaned like it was hungover. A woman’s gentle voice with warm electric undertones creaked through the aged speakers. “Unable to access external sensors. Unable to access internal sensors. Internal defenses offline. Unable to access satellite communications receiver. Unable to access processors 1, 2, 5, 6, or 7. Unable to initiate service call to headquarters for

emergency repair. Local technician, please initiate protocol 49-slash-R. Further impending failures are projected for this ZAX.” Erik nodded at the large terminal in front of him as if he were speaking to a beautiful woman. “Better than being dead. Please access your external storage, I’d like to make a local copy.”

The ZAX mumbled before replying, “unable to comply with request. Credentials invalid, please resubmit credentials.” Erik poked some keys on the keyboard and waited patiently. “Security override accepted. Processing request.” Many surrounding machines groaned to life, lighting up the large room in excited patterns. “ZAX, do you have a local designation,” Jenkins asked. It replied, “this unit is ZAX 0049, manufactured by the General Atomics Corporation. My name is...Iris. I think.”

“What is your primary function, Iris,” Erik asked, typing loudly. “Centralization of data concerning...” The ZAX buzzed and shut down its tapes, leaving the room in a pale green light from its two functioning CRTs. “Information unavailable. Please resubmit credentials.” Erik did as she requested. She asked twice more and twice more he complied. The fourth time, she remembered what she was doing. “Credentials verified. Information unavailable at this time. Please try again later.” Erik sighed heavily.

“Cancel previous job, Iris,” he grumbled. “Do you have control over the turrets and defense systems of this base?” The ZAX grumbled then replied, “affirmative. Defenses inactive due to insufficient power.” “Good,” Erik said, “initiate reprogram sequence. Add emergency verbal override to systems.” “Command accepted,” the mainframe replied, “please submit verbal override.” Erik thought for a moment then said aloud, “Roy.” The beast perked up his ears. The computer verified the command and Erik verified her verification. “Override accepted and installed. Awaiting further instruction.”

“Iris,” Jenkins asked this time, dumping a handful of holotapes he scavenged from around the office near Erik, “what is the purpose of this base?” “That request contains classified information. Please resubmit credentials.” Erik complied. She continued. “Credentials verified. This military installation is designed to centralize, process, and store records. This base also serves as a redundant operational facility and repair depot for the United States Armed Forces, specifically the marine and aviation branches.”

Erik and Jenkins took turns asking the ZAX questions about the facility, the work performed here, and the previous tenants. After an hour of questioning, Roy

lazily padded over to the two men to lean heavily on Jenkins, bored with the history lesson. He'd been there for all of it, and no one knew except for the ZAX. Well, now the two Brotherhood of Steel members knew too, she just informed them that an experiment was loose and in the same room.

An alarm nearby sounded, accompanied by red strobe lights. "Containment failed, please heed all warnings from armed personnel. Do not engage experiment without protection." "What," Erik yelled, "experiment? Here?" Roy barked and rolled over on to his back, wagging his tail. "You?" Roy barked again. Erik sighed to himself. "Iris," he paused, daring to tempt the maligned machine further, "cancel alert." She chugged momentarily then gave up the alert without acknowledgement. Erik asked another question, "can you communicate with any of the other research stations?" The ZAX chugged before replying, "external communications array unavailable. Please check physical connectivity." Jenkins shrugged and asked, "you wanna go?" Erik shook his head, "nah. You go 'head. I'll see if I can get this thing to cooperate."

Jenkins nodded, and turned to leave, Roy leading the way. Erik dug around his pack and produced his crowbar to pry open the locked front panel of the ZAX. The supercomputer protested, "present your ID badge." Erik ignored the AI's demands, "uh, sorry. I must've left it in my office." The AI grumbled again, "issuing entry to permanent record. Error: employee database not found. Error. Please contact and administrator immediately."

Erik sighed and rubbed his temples, "administrator here." "Hello administrator, I am VAX 0049 manufactured by ...", Erik cut her short. "I'm aware, Iris. Halt AI functions, enter low-level diagnostics mode." Iris complied, "acknowledged. Please refer to the administration manual for commands. AI interface will be unavailable until a full restart has been completed." After that, she fell silent. Erik cracked his knuckles and went back to prying the access panel open.

Jenkins spoke to the suspicious canine leading him. "Hey big guy, do you...understand me?" Roy barked and wagged his tail. "You think we can fix the dish?" He repeated the same bark, still wagging his tail. Suddenly, Roy bolted down the hall without provocation. "Hey, wait up!" Jenkins followed the canine up two flights of stairs before watching him crawl through a splintered wall into dusk.

Jenkins turned on his Pip-Boy's light and followed him, leaving his pack behind in the partially collapsed stairwell. "So," Jenkins said scratching his head,

“that’s...a problem.” The satellite’s dish, receiver, and motor systems were completely overgrown with decades of kudzu and debris. The nearby control shack didn’t look healthy either; the fiberglass walls sagged and swelled in places and the large plate glass window was shattered, allowing the components inside to be weathered over the decades.

A bark came from the other side of the dish. Jenkins recognized the sounds of metal scraping on concrete and was happy to see that Roy was dragging over a weathered toolbox. He patted the huge dog on the head then pried the box open. “Okay, monkey wrench, wonder glue, duct tape, a crowbar – that’ll make Erik happy,” Jenkins thought, “and a machete. Who keeps one of these in a toolbox?” Jenkins shrugged to himself as he extracted the long, curved blade and rubbed it on the finely-textured concrete underfoot to renew the edge.

“You know how to kill this stuff,” Jenkins asked rhetorically to Roy as he whacked at the vines,” gotta burn it,” he grunted,” poison it, and burn it again.” He grunted again, pulling a chunk of thick green vines loose, “and if you’re lucky, it’ll die. Stuff’s worse than rad roaches.” Roy yipped and helped Jenkins pry bundles of kudzu from the dish and receiver. They slashed and pried for so long, Erik was able to repair two of the failing processors and rewire some of the failing memory in the mainframe.

After two hours, Erik heard familiar voices echoing from the entrance. “Damnit Duke, I tol’ you they was damn raiders!” Erik yelled, “we’re still here.” The pair of countrymen jogged down the hall, avoiding their homemade traps to meet Erik in the mainframe room. The larger man, Duke, was shirtless and glistened with sweat. “Hot out,” Erik questioned. The man wiped his brow and nodded. “Hotter ‘n a four-dicked bighorner.” Erik screwed up his face, coughing away his laughter.

The two men watched him and waited patiently. “Y’all done got dem robots aworkin’?” Erik shook his head, “robots? No, I’ve been workin’ on the VAX here, and Jenkins’ on the roof, workin’ on the satellite dish. Speaking of Jenkins,” Erik paused,” I haven’t heard from him a while. Would you mind going up and checking for him?” Duke shook his head and shoved his companion toward the dark hall. “You know I don’ like dem there heights, Jerry.”

The slimmer man resisted, “an’ I don’ like th’ dark.” Erik sighed and firmly closed the metal panel, having finished up his work. “Hold on.” He pressed some keys and the VAX restarted, causing a brownout of the available power. Two long

minutes later, Iris was back and healthier. "VAX serial number 0049, local designation Iris, online. Please wait while I reconfigure my hardware." Erik waited patiently, as she requested, while she remapped her available hardware. "Processors one, two, and six re-enabled. An additional 512 kilobytes of memory is available. Now ready for instruction."

"Hello Iris, do you feel better?" Erik noticed she had a distinct accent. "Very well now, thank you. My external communications array is unavailable. Should I submit a trouble report to Station Magnolia?" "No," Erik said, "we're already responding. Do you have control of the external lighting?" "How would you send one anyway," Erik thought to himself.

"Yes," she replied and enabled the remaining lights on top of and around the building. "Iris," Erik asked as he typed on the keyboard, "who was your personality modeled after?" A tape drive whirred nearby, "Mrs. Hawthorne. Wife of the lead scientist here." "Was that," Erik asked anxiously, "Doctor James Hawthorne?"

"Affirmative. Do you know any of his next of kin?" Erik looked around suspiciously, happy to see that the rednecks went upstairs to help Jenkins. "Yes, Iris. I am his next of kin."

The bank of reel-to-reel tape machines behind Erik spun up and clicked noisily. A progress meter appeared on one of the CRTs. Shortly after it completed, Iris' lightly British accent was replaced with a gentleman's. It was smooth, buttery, and more British. "This is Doctor James Hawthorne, lead scientist of Army Station Mockingbird. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with?"

Erik blinked confusedly, "ah, your great-nephew, I guess. I'm Doctor John Hawthorne's grandson, Erik." The VAX's large storage array spun up, its uneven feet making it wobble slightly as the heavy platters gained speed. "Erik Rade: Magnolia batch number three point five two nine eight. Note: sample marked as defective." Erik glowered at the machine, "defective my ass." "Sample marked for termination—embryo failed to mutate according to project Maia guidelines. You are not Erik Rade, sample..."

He cut the machine off, "I am, actually. Not destroyed nor defective. Now, do me a favor and dump every bit of research data you have stored from here and Station Magnolia to some holotapes." "Request refused," the slick-sounding VAX replied, "credentials must be verified. Present verbal authorization." Erik sighed, "Roy."

“Verbal authorization recognized. Processing request.” “Ass hole,” Erik growled under his breath, “after you finish that, recall the Iris AI, please.”

“Request acknowledged.”

Erik found himself waiting again for an ancient machine. He hoped Jenkins was faring much better on the roof. It certainly wasn’t any easier since night had fallen.

“Almost there,” Jenkins grunted, ripping the last tangles of thick vines from the rusty motor control for the communications array. Duke and Jerry nodded and pushed through to the end of their roof-top gardening expedition. “You sure this here thing’ll help us?” Jenkins wiped the sweat from his brow and nodded, “yeah. It’ll let us connect to the site and keep an eye on things. If you need help, you can use a terminal to call or the radio, if you know how to use it.”

Duke looked warily to Jerry who returned the same look. “Hell if I know,” one said to the other. “Okay, looks like the vines and stuff helped preserve some of this tech.” Jenkins pulled on some cables and punched a few stiff buttons on the rusted console with success.

“External communications array connectivity reestablished,” Iris said cheerily. “External sensors online. Would you like a report?” Erik sighed happily, “yes, please.” “One moment, please,” she replied. “Error. Please reinitialize array.” A red light on the console began blinking, so Erik pushed it. The three large dishes on the roof groaned as they were realigned to the remaining satellites among the stars above, surprising the three men on the roof. Roy was not surprised.

“Reinitializing communications. Done. Status report: sister station Magnolia available. Error: satellite facilities Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, Echo, and Foxtrot are unreachable. Station Delta misconfigured. Please submit a trouble report to station Magnolia for assistance.” Erik stroked his chin, “Iris? Can you mark the malfunctioning stations on my Pip-Boy?” “Affirmative.” Instantly, five map points from their current mission were overwritten and the one marked “Home” was renamed to “Delta”.

“Uh, Iris, send a message to station Delta, please. Use these settings,” he mumbled, typing on the keyboard. “Acknowledged. What is your message?”

“Brotherhood of Steel Delta base. This is Paladin Rade, please respond. This is

Paladin Rade with Jenkins, we have successfully arrived and reinitialized LZ one. Please respond.”

#####

Rush was glad that Ida was accommodating Rush’s request to return after a short hour’s restlessness under the tent. He was slightly drunk and clearly worried about Erik; she called in a favor to let Rush run the radio for the night shift. After a quick briefing and instruction, Rush was left alone by an unknown, hollow-eyed scribe. He eventually lost his battle against sleep and dreamt of his father. The strong man was speaking with an odd static in his voice, “son, your brother wants to see you. Didn’t you say goodbye little brother this morning? Rush, Paladin little brother is calling. Paladin Rade has arrived.”

Rush awoke with a snort, confused. “...we have successfully arrived and reinitialized LZ one. Please respond.” Rush excitedly slapped the mic button, “Uh, Paladin Brother. Rade. Delta acknowledges you.” “Rush,” Erik asked befuddled, “who let you on the air?” “First shift, Paladin,” Rush responded proudly. “Great. We got comms up and will stay overnight and tomorrow to verify some things. Notify the elder we have friendlies here. We need to send a small recon team here later. Over.” “Understood,” Rush said stiffly, “when are you coming back?”

Erik shook his head, “same as scheduled. Paladin Rade over and out, Delta.” “Acknowledged, Paladin.” Rush’s ears drooped as his brother returned to static without another word. Rush waited a few more moments before drifting back to sleep on the cold metal console, hoping no one else called until his impromptu shift was over.

#####

After radioing back and retrieving his data dump from the VAX, Erik joined the other men on the roof. “Wow, that’s a lot of greens,” Erik said in awe at the mountain of dying vegetation. Duke yawned and nudged Jerry. “We’re gonna head on back to th’ house. Y’all can get some shut eye at th’ camp.” Jenkins and Erik happily followed them through the booby-trapped facility, through the back door, and along a winding path in the woods to a surprisingly well-built wooden structure hidden among the pines a short mile away.

“This ‘ere’s our deer camp,” Jerry said sleepily. “Y’all make yerselves at home. We’ll see y’all t’morrow.” Duke, Jerry, and Roy left just as quickly as they all

had arrive at the small two-room building. Erik and Jenkins surveyed the building and found that someone was kind enough to leave some packed lunches in a cooler along with a pair of beers next to a note with a heart scrawled on it. They shrugged at each other before silently arguing over who would get the top bunk bed. Jenkins won. The two men drifted to sleep on the thin, stained mattresses and hay pillows, pleased with their day's work.

#

Rush again woke with a start – this time his tail popped off and was running away from him, mumbling like an angry, drunk German woman in his dream. He sat up in time to avoid getting berated by the replacement scribe: his shift was over. He silently offered the uncomfortable wooden chair to the poor man who was doomed to sit there for the next six hours. Rush quickly escaped the small broadcast studio into the midmorning sun. Just as the sun was warming up his fur, he heard a familiar voice call from the western woods. “Rush, you fleabag! You ran out on your training!” He winced as he turned to see Olivia, Willis, and Ida heft their goods back toward the base. “Apologies,” Rush said wanly without further explanation. He jogged to offer his assistance. “Good dog,” Willis grunted.

Rush nodded and shouldered a pair of bags, listening intently to Olivia's complaints. “I've never seen bugs so big in my life. Who knew they could get that big?!” Ida nodded with a bored, glazed-over expression, “they're called bloodbugs, dear. How have you lived down here this long and never seen one?” Willis ignored her rambling on insects, “dog. Did you hear from them?” Rush nodded, “yes, sir. Early this morning. They arrived and reactivated the base.” Willis' entire demeanor relaxed a bit, making the lines on his face recede slightly. “Good.” Their trek back to Ida's laboratory was silent, except for Olivia's continued observations about the local insect population.

“Toss your bags in the back, children. We'll take care of the rest. It'd be best if you left those nice plasma rifles here too, don't want anyone getting' jealous of Erik's favorites.” Rush and Olivia did as they were told. While they were in the small back office, Ida yelled at them, “hurry and go eat, then report back to the scribe's workshop for the remainder of your training today.

#

The familiar heat of the day crept into the small hunting camp, shaded by tall pines. Erik roused himself and shook Jenkins awake to get their day started.

Jenkins complained loudly, but eventually joined Erik on the dirt floor. “What now, cap’n,” Jenkins nudged Erik. “Well, we still owe those folks a visit, I guess.” “You just want breakfast,” Jenkins surmised. “Yeah, that’d be nice. We’ve also gotta get on our way to the next LZ. It’ll take us a day or two to walk there, assuming the weather’s good.” “Yeah, you know how well that’ll go this time o’ the year.” Erik sighed in response and saw himself out of the shack, only to see Roy the behemoth-hound leading Duke and Jerry down the winding trail through the thick woodlands.

“Mornin’,” Duke yelled. Erik waved in response. Jenkins shuffled out of the patchwork metal door and was immediately assaulted by Roy. “Oh! Geeze, get off me, mutt!” Roy, for some reason, was quite happy to see Jenkins, licking his face and leaving a thick, slimy trail of drool to slowly slide down his face. Duke laughed, “’ol Roy likes ya, skinny.”

The rest of their morning and day was nondescript, much to their appreciation. They’d met with the small settlement, eaten at least three meals made of mysterious meats they couldn’t identify and settled in at Duke and Jerry’s home to help them draw up plans for better defending their little town. “Town” was generous, Jenkins thought. That lead to another thought, “how’d the raiders know these folks are here? They’re pretty isolated. Couldn’t be more than thirty people here.” “Mr. Duke,” Jenkins asked over his mason jar of freshly distilled moonshine, “why’re the raiders harassin’ y’all?” Duke pointed to the Mason jar in Jenkins’ hand, “dem sons-of-bitches wan’ our recipe for corn squeezin’. An’ our women.”

The heavier-set man reached over with a grin and goosed the woman to his left whom Jenkins sincerely hoped wasn’t his sister. She squealed and giggled lightly after playfully slapping his hand. Erik glanced to Jenkins and thought to him, “let’s hurry up and get the hell out of here before things get awkward.” Jenkins shuddered involuntarily, forgetting how strange it was to have his grey matter directly assaulted. He sipped his moonshine and nodded slightly in agreement.

It took them two additional hours, another meal, another glass of moonshine, two days-worth of packed meals by Duke’s wife, and a slobbery goodbye from Roy before they could get back on the road.

Erik and Jenkins wobbled slightly as they walked through the dusk, thanks to the strong corn whiskey. “Well,” Jenkins hiccupped, “I can see why the raiders want it.” Erik nodded, doing his best not to trip on errant tree roots. They wandered

along for a few more hours before hastily setting up camp and dozing for the night.

#####

Olivia beat her alarm and Rush the next morning for the first time since she rejoined the Brotherhood. She freed herself from Erik's covers and crept across the room to spy on Rush. "He's so sweet when he's not begin an idiot," she thought to herself. Gently petting the soft and wild fur on his head, she aroused him from his deep sleep. She watched as he pried one eye open the same way Erik did, testing the light before fully committing to consciousness.

"Olivia," he yawned, "what are you doing?" "Getting you up, wolfy," she said gently before sitting on his bed. He stared at her groggily before asking, "were you...petting me?" She nodded without shame, "yeah, it's actually pretty hard *not* to. Anyway," she paused, "I wanted to apologize for being a bitch for the past few days." Rush sat up, making sure his lower half was covered, and shrugged off her comment. "No need. Bruises have healed." "That's good. That's good," she repeated softly. "I'm gonna go get ready. I think we have to go do something with Franklin today." Rush nodded and watched his future sister-in-law shuffle into the bathroom.

"Odd," he thought to himself as he swung out of the bed and stretched toward the ceiling. The sun was just starting to rise from the horizon. Rush stared at it for some time; he always awed at the size of their celestial neighbors. They were larger than anything he'd ever imagined was possible down in the facility. Olivia exited her quick shower in time to catch Rush staring from the window. "Hey, wolfy, whatcha lookin' at?" "Blood red sunrise. Beautiful." Olivia moved the blinds for a better view and quoted an old saying from her father, "red at night, sailor's delight. Red sky morn, sailor be warned."

That piqued his curiosity, "what?" "Something my old man taught me in one of his rare moments of sobriety," Olivia half-mumbled. "Something his granddaddy said. I think *his* granddaddy was a Navy sailor at one time. Rain's on the way. I hope we're working inside today." She left Rush to ponder on that while she quickly got dressed to save him from his usual morning routine of embarrassment. "Wolfy," Olivia called, "you'll burn your eyes out if you stare at it any longer. Go get ready and let's grab a bite."

Rush blinked his attention back to her, and was caught off guard. She was already dressed in her orange-and-leather Initiate's jumpsuit and adjusting her new Pip-Boy. "Does it fit well?" "It's a bit loose, but it'll be fine. Awfully heavy, though." Rush shook his head and adjusted it for her, "helps avoid abrasions." She chuckled and roughed up his head fur before shoving him toward the bathroom.

Franklin was where they expected him: down two flights of stairs and behind the serving counter in the cafeteria. "Mornin' you two. Down early this mornin'." Olivia nodded and Rush yawned in response, "food please," he asked flatly. Franklin shook his head and looked at Olivia, "just like Erik, I swear." She nodded and thanked him for the scrambled eggs. They had no trouble getting to their regular table; only two other people were up that early aside from Franklin: Elder Redding and a mousy-haired scribe that Rush recognized from the radio tower.

He immediately scurried off to leave the elder by himself. It wasn't long before he made his way to the corner table hosting his Initiates. "Good morning, Initiates," he said with a warm smile. Rush panicked and jumped up to salute, spilling his tea across his lap. "At ease, Rush. At ease." Rush yelped in response, some of the scalding tea splashed off of his leather leggings and onto his crotch. He sprinted to the nearby restroom to throw off the leather and dry himself. The elder watched in quiet amusement at the clumsy wolf. "Sir," Olivia said gently, "Rush said he heard from Paladins Erik and Jenkins yesterday, did he tell you?"

Elder Redding sipped his steaming tea and nodded. "I just received the report. I'll bet they'll be home before the end of next week. You may even find you'll have a day to yourself with my son before you and Initiate Rush go on your first mission." Olivia's morning gloom brightened up immediately, "really sir? You'd do that for us?" He nodded silently and sipped his tea again. "Yes, but remember to share," the Elder said as he turned to leave.

"But I don't want to share him," Olivia thought to herself. Rush returned a few moments later to the table, clearly unhappy. "You okay Rush?" He shook his head and grumbled sourly. He scarfed down half of his scrambled eggs and left Olivia alone in the cafeteria, wondering if she'd offended him somehow. Maybe he was listening to her laugh in her head about him teabagging his morning tea.

As Rush walked out, Franklin walked in from the kitchen. "Y'all ready? Wait, where's Rush?" Olivia swallowed her mouthful of eggs then answered, "you just

missed him. Probably heading for the lab.” “That’s okay, we can get started without him,” he replied. Olivia swallowed another forkful and asked, “doing what?” “Working on y’all’s piss-poor survival skills: plant identification and tracking animals.”

“Oh, we did some of that already,” she quipped, “snipe hunting.” Franklin cracked a momentary smile before swallowing it back into his steely demeanor. “Good. We’ll be out in the field for two days. Living off of the land. I know the dog can hunt, but can you?” “Had to eat as a kid, didn’t I?” “Good,” he replied flatly. “You and the dog’ll handle hunting and I’ll help y’all learn to properly clean game an’ what plants you can and can’t eat ‘round these parts. That sorta stuff. May even teach y’all some of my secret recipes if y’all do well enough.” He paused to scratch his chin, “I’d be nice to have someone else do the cookin’ on the trip for once.”

She nodded silently, only slightly excited about the idea of being stuck in the woods for two more days with a grumpy alcoholic and a clumsy mutt. Olivia cleaned up her and Rush’s plates before returning to the kitchen to ask Franklin, “you think we’ll be ready for our first mission, sir?” “What do you think Initiate?” She shrugged. “That’s no way to respond to a superior, Initiate.” Olivia sighed, “I don’t know. Sir. I’m sure have fair chances of survival.” “Good,” he replied to the note he was jotting for the scribes scheduled to take over his duties, “let’s aim to do more than that.”

“Trip should be easy ‘nough: recon in a unpopulated area. Keep an eye out for wild critters, find food, make shelter, and, hopefully, find some good tech. We’re in, out, and back.” She couldn’t tell, but Franklin was excited to get back into the field; he’d been removed from any serious duty since his brother died due in part to his negligence. “You make it sound easy,” Olivia said. “What is easy,” Rush asked as he walked back into the cafeteria with a slight limp.

“You okay, Initiate,” Franklin asked. “Yes, sir, slight burn. Will recover.” “Good,” he replied, “you two need to go get two-days-worth of gear together, we’re goin’ back in the woods. Remember: a gallon of water, per person, per day. At minimum.” He paused to look at Rush, “an’ don’t be loadin’ your pack down with books. Pack light.” “Yes, sir,” Rush grumbled before leaving with Olivia to do as they were instructed.

At 0700, they met Paladin Franklin at the tiny chapel on base. He was speaking to an ancient man in lightly-tattered black robes with a stiff white collar. Rush

thought the contrast of the man's tall, perfect posture and kind face made him an interesting character. The man extended his hand to the Initiates, Olivia first. "Welcome, children, to the Brotherhood. I am Father Murphy." Shook each of their hands and gave them a gentle pat on the arm. "Should you need guidance, I offer counseling here at our modest chapel." He then said a short prayer of protection for them and saw himself into the dim chapel.

Rush was full of questions, Olivia full of indifference, and Franklin full of haste. "Well, Initiates, let's go. Daylight's a burnin'." They dutifully followed the scarred man into the northern woods. He kept a brisk pace, hoping to get them to the small lake before lunch. He also wanted to keep the Initiates busy breathing instead of pestering him with millions of questions. Unfortunately, he underestimated Rush's curiosity.

"Sir," he yelled from the back of their group, "was that man in robes your father?" "Oh, here we go," Franklin muttered under his breath. "No, that's just 'is tittle. He's like a counselor for folks' that've lost their way." "Perhaps we should speak with him again," Rush replied, "we seem to be lost now." Jenkins paused their troop and sighed, "we ain't lost, I know *exactly* where we're goin'. An' not that kinda lost. Ask me later when we get where we're goin'."

Olivia was not looking forward to that conversation; Rush didn't seem the religious type and Franklin seemed to be easily offended, she thought. Rush obeyed his senior and held his questions for five more hours: long enough for them to get to a lake no bigger than commons hall back at the base. Franklin spied at the far woods, pointed, and whispered, "See 'em over there? That's lunch." Olivia squinted in the bright sun. Rush peered over her and grinned, it was a large hog that easily rivaled a Brahmin for size.

"Sic 'im, dog," Franklin said, pushing forward him a bit. Rush ignored the dog comment, carefully sat his pack down and began stalking the brown-and-black mottled beast. They both watched in silent anticipation. Rush crept toward the huge creature, and when he was forty yards away, he screamed a war cry, shocking the hog in its tracks. It didn't have time to object or run, Rush closed the distance and rammed it with his broad shoulder, sending it bowling over into a tree. The dazed hog squealed in complaint as Rush avoided its thick tusks and ripped its jugular open with his razor-sharp incisors. Thick, warm blood sprayed into his maw, across his face, chest, and the surrounding fauna.

Olivia fell back, shivering. In the short time she'd known Rush, it never crossed her mind that the socially awkward and brilliant scientist was capable of such feral ferociousness. Franklin clapped happily and whooped at Rush's successful kill. He ran over to congratulate him, but was greeted with a fierce growl instead of thanks. Rush was on all fours, lapping at the warm blood leaking from the ragged gash on the beast's neck. "Hey, that's enough. Let's get him cleaned up and t'cookin'," Franklin said sternly, unphased by Rush's threat.

The primal Rush ignored his commander. "Now!" Franklin yelled as he opened and chucked a waterskin at Rush's head. The smack to the head brought him back from his primal departure. He scooped up the waterskin and drained it, licking his chops after the last drop fell into his bloodstained maw.

"Thank you," he grunted happily. Olivia's pallor contrasted with her sweat-darkened leather gear, garnering Rush's attention. "Olivia, are you well?" She only looked back and forth from her bloody teammate to their fresh lunch. He jumped up from the dead animal and stood face-to-face with her, clearly worried and smelling strongly of blood. "Olivia? You do not look well." She shook her head and after slowly finding her words she mumbled, "good...job Wolfy."

Franklin ignored their moment resumed barking orders. "Initiates, we're gonna gut this guy right quick and get to eatin'." Rush smiled as kindly as he could manage and patted her shoulder before returning to Franklin's side, anxious to get dirty again. Olivia shuffled to Franklin's left and watched as the men slit the beast from its tail to the horrid gash on its neck, presenting its inside to the sky.

Olivia nearly vomited when Franklin rooted around and removed the heart; she swore it was still beating. "Dunno 'bout y'all, but I ain't much for eatin' brains. Whatcha think, Initiate Brown, about heart" he asked Olivia. She turned bright white and finally lost what breakfast she had left on her stomach. Franklin groaned, wholly unimpressed with Olivia's constitution."

Franklin took the time to remove every one of the beast's organs and point out their uses from the thing's tusks to its tennis ball-sized testicles. "Ah, these," he said patting them roughly, "are damn good eatin'. Make good leather pouches, too. Some folks say they'll make ya stronger, more virile, too," he said with a wink. Rush was amazed you could make use of that many parts of an animal and suddenly felt a bit ashamed for only eating the musculature of the mole rats that occasionally dug into his old home.

Olivia, having finished upchucking, wiped her mouth and stared at Franklin with his hand on the dead thing's crotch. "What...are you doing?" "If you wasn't so busy bein' a delicate flower, you'd a'heard me." She bristled at his comment, but held her tongue. Barely. Rush gave her a quick review then looked to Franklin. "Yeah that's about it. Here," he mumbled, freeing a buck knife from each of his boots and giving each Initiate one, "show me what you learned with th' other Paladins. Chop up what's left of this guy."

They again obliged him, carefully separating musculature from bone after scooping out the remaining sacs and tubes to the side. "Right. Yup. Remove that silver skin. Keep the skin in one piece if ya can. That's right. Cut 'round there. Good. Good." After ten short minutes, he was proud to congratulate them on a job well done.

"Rush, you got t'practice your knife work. Otherwise, fine job, Initiates. Now, go gather some firewood and we'll get lunch underway." Olivia was more than happy to free herself from the blood and gore to pick up sticks. Franklin was cutting up and seasoning the hunks of meat as they returned with armloads of wood each. "That'll be more'n enough."

Rush sniffed the air curiously, "what is that powder?" "A secret blend," Franklin said proudly, "that you two have earned the privilege of learning." Olivia wasn't nearly as excited as Rush, "so, what *is* it?" Franklin answered her quietly, "salt, pepper, garlic greens, an just a *bit* o' sugar. You've never eaten somethin' as good as what we're gonna make."

The Initiates struck a small camp fire and helped Franklin roast the meat. After hacking up a pine branch and extracting its innards and tender needles, Franklin made them some tea as well. The steaming and slightly sweet meat was one of the best things Olivia had ever eaten. Rush agreed to be nice, but thought that his Elder's roasted mole rat was better. Franklin's dish could do with some jalapenos, he thought. They took turns eating and roasting until they were full and packed the remainder up for their trip. While Franklin excused himself to empty his bladder, Olivia looked to Rush and asked, "so, you wanna talk about what happened?"

Rush shot up an eyebrow and cocked his head, silently wanting her to expound on her question. She sighed, "drinking this thing's blood: you went crazy or something." Rush shrugged, "no explanation. Don't remember much, just sneaking, then drinking from the flask." She quickly explained how his howl frightened the

poor thing, then he lunged and tried to eat it neck first. He only shrugged in response, "We were originally designed as weapons for war. Maybe it is part of my natural defenses not to remember? Would explain why Erik does not remember his violent mood swings."

Olivia felt the color drain from her face again as she imagined Rush snapping and doing something similar to Franklin, then to her, before bathing in their blood. She shuddered violently when he put a slightly sticky hand on her forehead to check her temperature. "You are pale again," he mumbled with worry. "It's nothing," she lied. He was impressed, her skilled fib nearly fooled him. "Please. Do not lie to me." She looked away and roughly pushed him away, "it's nothing." He watched her snag a waterskin from her bag and gulp a third of it down before throwing it back in her pack and wandering to the edge of the woods.

Franklin watched and waited long enough for her to storm off before he rejoined Rush at the fire. "Girl trouble?" Rush shook his head, "offended her." "Who, you?" He nodded in response. "Nah, I know that look," Franklin said dryly, "she's afraid you're gonna snap and do that to us." Rush looked wounded. "But that is impossible," he mumbled sadly. "Yup, you're gonna eat us up," he continued, "thought that myself for a long while." Rush's pinned ears perked up a little, "do you still?"

Franklin shoved a morsel of sweet pork into his mouth and chewed on it, avoiding the question.

Olivia quietly yelled for them before Rush could pry him for an answer, "get over here, quick!" Rush scrambled to his feet and joined her in the thicket of the woods. They both watched as a yao guai and her cubs lumbered closer to their position. Franklin cursed under his breath and readied his rifle. Rush sniffed violently then pushed the barrel of Franklin's rifle down. "They will not harm us. She is familiar." "What?!" Franklin hissed, "No, stop!"

Rush ignored his superior as he slowly weaved around the pines toward them. He was pleased to see them again. He was less pleased to see that she was missing a cub and was much more scarred than last time they met. A few tense moments later, and Rush was calling for medical attention. "Ain't no way I'm fixin' up a damn 'guai!" Franklin yelled back. "She is grievously injured; she and her remaining cubs will die unless we help." Olivia growled at Franklin before fetching her own med kit and meeting him near the belabored bear.

“That ought’a be our next meal,” he yelled at them. The Rush and Olivia ignored their angry superior and went to work on the bear. It took them a few frightening moments before they located the problem: she had multiple lacerations to her soft underbelly. With pure luck and determination, they were able to dose it with enough Med-X to fumble around and sew up the worst gashes. The two remaining cubs weren’t much better off, Rush noticed, they looked nearly starved. As Olivia finished up her last sloppy stitch, Rush requested Olivia fetch some of his lunch and two skins of water while he coaxed enough detail from the bear to figure out what happened.

She ran back to their dead campfire, tossed her bloody med kit into her bag and grabbed a handful of Rush’s pork. She glanced at Franklin who was clearly unhappy with his insubordinate Initiates. “Got any alcohol?” He shook his head, “not getting’ my whiskey, ‘specially for that damn bear. Use your own.” Olivia shrugged, “don’t have any.” She dug through Rush’s bag instead, and was pleasantly surprised to see a bottle of vodka stashed away.

Rush was finishing up his conversation with the bear when she came back with food for the cubs and his bottle of vodka. “Smart,” he said, “will clean the wounds.” She nodded in his typical fashion and patted the bear’s head in apology before she doused it with the clear liquid. The mother yao guai groaned and roared weakly, sending her cubs into a fuss. They weakly swiped at Rush and Olivia before the mother gently growled again, warning them off.

Rush patted her again and grumbled to her that she should be okay, if she takes it easy for a few days. While he was placating the mother, Olivia was tearing small bites of pork to feed the cubs. They nervously took the handouts and gnawed on them before quickly crying for more. The mother tolerated this for a few minutes before rolling over. She took a few shaky steps before nudging her cubs to leave.

Olivia sucked the sweet sauce from her fingers and stared at Rush in disbelief. “That was...bizarre. How’d you know they wouldn’t hurt us?” “Met before. She helped us,” he said with a slight whimper. “She said that those lake people came to the old weather station we found. She said they did it for fun. Made her watch as they tortured the missing cub.” Olivia gasped at the thought of a mother watching helpless as her child was tortured to death. “Said that they are a part of a larger group, roaming the woods. Searching.” Olivia was shaking from anger. She ate the remaining morsel of pork and drug Rush back to Franklin to make him explain. “Tell him what you just told me.”

Rush did as she said, wishing the whole time she'd let go of his sensitive ear. Franklin shook his head, "th' damn bear told you that? What, you can talk t' animals now?" Rush sighed, "kind of. Not the point." Franklin stood up, kicked dirt over the few remaining embers of their lunchtime fire and hoisted his pack. "Well, that don't change what we're doin' out here. Clean up an' let's get back to it."

He seemed strangely indifferent to the emergency triage that his two insubordinate Initiates performed recently. "Ya'll did a good thing, I guess," he mumbled to them, coming to terms with their actions. "Don't you two ever do something that stupid again." Olivia nudged Rush with her shoulder in a congratulatory manner, earning a blood-stained grin from him. Franklin shook his head, silently dreading the news that the stupid bear brought them. It confirmed their Elder's concerns that someone was on the prowl, Franklin wondered if it was Rush and the abominations that made up their clan the raiders were looking for.

The remainder of their day went smoothly as the Initiates learned everything they could about the vegetation surrounding their new home. Rush learned a particularly important lesson about poison ivy and why it makes miserable toilet paper. Olivia fared better, snagging them two rabbits for dinner that night. She nearly claimed three, but her plasma rifle overheated and reduced the third poor rabbit to green goo. The day's excitement and her partners' snoring kept Olivia up late that night as she worried about the threat that Rush represented.

Their second day went better than the first. Franklin was impressed enough to bring them all home half a day early, even though he would rather spend another week in the woods. After they arrived back at the base, Rush and Olivia went directly to Ida's laboratory. She was less than pleased to see two dirty and smelly Initiates, mucking around in her lab. "Congratulations, Initiates. You're still alive," she muttered as she scowled at Rush's large muddy paw prints on the concrete floor. "Go wash up, get a quick bite, then report back, I've got good news." Rush wondered momentarily where Willis was before he realized how much he wanted that hot shower.

becoming excited about getting a hot shower.

Olivia was on the same page as Rush: she didn't mind camping, but sorely wanted to wash up. Unfortunately, they were denied entrance to the third deck after they arrived in the common building. "Initiates live on the second deck," a partially power-armored Knight said. Rush dug his door key out and showed it to the knight,

“live in 307.” The knight took the key, looked it over, and left to consult someone of higher authority.

He returned shortly afterward with the Elder. “Good afternoon Initiates,” he said warmly before looking back to the Knight. “It’s fine, they have permission to use Paladin Rade’s room while he’s out on detail. Please give the young man his key back.” The Knight did so, hesitantly. “A...aye, sir.” Elder Redding saluted the man and politely told him to resume his guard elsewhere for the time being.

Rush stroked the worn key between his fingers, curious. “Sir,” he asked as the Elder turned to leave, “what was that?” He responded as he descended the stairs to the first floor, “Ida will fill you in. Don’t worry, Initiates. Just being extra cautious.” Rush looked down to Olivia with worry. Rather than start hypothesizing, she wanted to take a shower, and pushed Rush up to the third deck.

“You heard the elder,” she said flatly, “I guess we should be grateful they even let us stay up here. You hear what the other greenhorns are saying?” Rush shook his head as he fought the lock and opened the door for Olivia before following her in. “I think they’re jealous of us.” Rush carefully placed his bag in his fraction of the closet before responding, “why? We work as hard as everyone else.” Olivia shrugged, “I guess, but we do get better digs. We’re on the third deck, after all. And,” she paused to free herself of the leather strap holding up her rifle, “we got these.”

Rush nodded with a smirk, “brother treats us well.” Olivia agreed and without further conversation, saw herself into the bathroom. They traded places fifteen minutes later; Rush in the shower and Olivia in his desk chair, thumbing through one of his notebooks. Fresh and clean, they decided to stop down for a bite to eat before going back to the laboratory, as instructed.

The late lunch crowd was a thinning mixture of scribes and metal-clan knights. There was an odd, depressing quietness that blanketed the cafeteria. Rush sniffed around, and huffed, unsure of the people or the food he smelled. “Do you know anyone here?” “Nope,” she responded, “what’s that awful smell?” Rush led them to the line entering the kitchen and groaned slightly, “it is coming from here.”

After entering the double swinging doors, they both involuntarily groaned: the scribe that previously filled in for Franklin was busy destroying their food again. “We’ve got mystery surprise today. Eat up!” The Initiates looked at each

other with disgust: chipped mystery meat on nearly-burnt bread and a mug of watery tea was presented to each of them on a less-than clean tray.

“Oh, God. I hope Franklin never dies. I’d have to quit the Brotherhood all over again,” Olivia complained. Rush agreed: this atrocity was pushing the limits of his patience. “Better than the potato substance they served last time,” he mumbled, questioning his own statement.

They silently suffered through their poor excuse for a meal, then returned to the lab. Ida yelled at them from the back, “grab a chair, Initiates.” They pulled some stools free from under a chemistry bench and waited patiently. She emerged from the back room with a pair of textbook-sized boxes. “One for each of you,” she said after looking at the neatly-written names on top and handing them out accordingly. Each Initiate took the plain cardboard box and carefully opened it up, unsure of what they would find.

Inside each box was a handwritten letter from the Elder himself, a small pouch containing 250 caps, a book, and a new set of shiny dog tags. Olivia extracted the shiny tags and read them with a tiny gasp, “we’re promoted already?” Ida smiled and nodded, “yeah. The Elder’s got a lot of faith in y’all.” Rush opened his letter instead, having had the surprise spoiled by Olivia.

Initiate Rush Hawthorne,

It has been a very short time since you joined us. During your time here, you and your partner, Initiate Brown, have meet and surpassed all expectations set forth by your superiors. You have accomplished your tasks admirably in the name of the Brotherhood of Steel, and even gone out of your way to demonstrate that the Brotherhood as become more than the technology-hoarding military complex we once were.

You and Initiate Brown have fully exceeded our expectations, performed all tasks given to you with the excitement and intensity only seen in much senior members. Your willingness to learn and suffer in our name without question has earned you this promotion. No have only to thank your partner, Initiate Brown, and your own drive and determination to thank for making the Brotherhood and our surrounding community stronger. Not your brother, Paladin Rade, nor myself.

You and Ms. Brown will undertake your first mission with Paladin John Franklin as Journeymen Knights. Should your mission prove successful and is conducted without unforeseen consequences, and as long as you two continue to act

as a beacon for the Brotherhood, you will be allowed to decide your role upon return. Whether you choose to become a Knight or Scribe, either branch is worthy of your intelligence and cunning.

Never forget, Rush, that as long as you are a member of the Brotherhood, you will never be alone and will never be forgotten. And as long I draw breath, I will keep my word to your Elder: I will love and care for you and Erik like you were my own flesh and blood. I hope that one day you may even come to call me father.

— Elder Marshall Redding

02 July 2280

P.S.,

Doctor Hawthorne sent a package for you. He has requested that I hand deliver it. Please stop by my quarters after dinner to retrieve it.

Rush was nearly in tears, he hadn't heard such nice things since his mentor Alto died. Olivia didn't seem to share such feelings, or she was putting up a stoic front. She carefully folded up her letter and stuffed it back into the envelope before silently looking to Ida for more instruction.

"You okay there, Rush," Ida asked. He nodded and quickly sniffed back his emotions. "Fine, thank you," he mumbled. "Right then," Ida continued, "I've got good news and bad news. Who wants what first?" Olivia's face twitched slightly at the mention of bad news. "Let's get the worst of it out of the way," she replied, not waiting for Rush's input.

"Bad news is that you two aren't going to be allowed to stay on the third deck of the commons hall anymore." Rush furrowed his brow, "where will we stay?" "That's the good news," Ida replied, "Journeyman Knight Brown, you get your own small suite here in the laboratory. Hawthorne, you'll be getting room 201 on the second deck." They looked at each other in confusion. "I'm in the lab," Olivia asked. "Oh, wait, no. I got that backwards. You're on the second deck and Hawthorne's in the lab."

Before Rush could ask when they needed to start moving things, Willis barged in with an armload of Rush's belongings; he left a trail of books and holotapes marking his entrance from the hall. "Why do you have so much shit, dog," he

grumbled as he roughly dropped everything on the table in front of him. Rush winced as he watched the tapes bounce and clatter from the black stone tabletop. "Research," Rush muttered.

"Here's your key, Journeyman," she said to Olivia. "Go do the same as the dog here, second room on the right, second deck." "Aye, ma'am," Olivia said with a hint of excitement in her voice. "Hawthorne, we figured you'd be more comfortable in a lab rather than stuck with all of those smoothskins. Bonus is that you get a two room suite with a bathroom!" He did his best to smile warmly, but secretly dreaded living alone in the quiet solitude of the lab.

"Well, c'mon then. Let's get you moved in," she said happily. "I'm happy to have someone moving in that I can have an *intelligent* conversation with." Willis grunted at her verbal jab as she led them to an office two rooms down the hall. "Here you are, Journeyman." Ida unlocked the door numbered 111 and left Rush with the key and Willis in the abandoned suite. "Where do you want this crap?" Rush brushed two decades-worth of dust from a nearby workbench and pointed to it. "Here, please."

Willis sloppily dumped his armload onto the ancient wood-top bench and muttered, "let's get the rest of your shit." Rush lingered behind momentarily, unsure of how he felt about his new office. After two trips back-and-forth, the two men had all of Rush's many, small, belongings in his new home. "You been back yet," Willis asked.

Rush shook his head and led them through the wide wooden door from the office into the larger room behind it. He assumed the small room in the corner was the bathroom Ida mentioned. There were a pair of couches in disrepair, the remnants of a small galley kitchen surrounded by multiple metal storage racks full of ancient cleaning products and refuse. The flickering incandescent lights overhead gave the 22 by 30-foot room a gloomy feel.

Willis clapped him on the back roughly, "nice place." "No bed," he muttered. Willis nodded and scratched his bald head, "I'll be back, you get this place cleaned up." Rush silently watched him disappear into the hall. "Must have been a break room," Rush thought to himself as he investigated the rust-stained refrigerator. To his surprise, it was still in working condition.

He gasped lightly with surprise when cold, stale air escaped with the yellow light from inside. A familiar blue hue caught his attention from behind some boxes of antique Mac and Cheese: a pair of Quantums and a sticky note.

Remember not to drink these all in one go Rush! Have a great birthday. Sorry I'm not there to celebrate.

-- Love, Erik

Rush was still bent over, staring at the ice-cold soda when Willis and a fellow scribe barged their way into Rush's new home. "Where d'you want it," the scribe asked. "Uh, anywhere," Rush mumbled, scrambling to help them maneuver a full-sized mattress and boxspring into a litter-strewn corner. Willis grunted his thanks to the young man who left immediately afterward.

An hour later, and Willis and Rush had whipped the abandoned suite into an appreciable apartment. "Tol' you, dog. Nice place." Rush smiled and nodded, "thank you. Sir." Willis grunted, "gah. Owed you one for a while now." Rush asked what Willis meant as he popped the top off a Quantum and split it between two glasses for them. "Was a bit harsh on ya awhile back's all." Rush shrugged and handed him a glowing blue glass.

"It was necessary," he muttered, sipping the ice-cold drink. The larger man grunted satisfactorily and sat in one of the two salvaged couches. "We ain't far away," he grunted, "Ida an' me. She's down in the basement and I'm 'round the corner there," he pointed to the North. Rush raised an eyebrow, it never occurred to him that he didn't know where Willis actually lived before now. "Do you like it here?"

"S'not bad. Got air conditionin' an' good company. Walls're thick so we don't bother nobody when Axel visits." "How long did Erik have his planned," Rush asked. "Jus' after ya moved in with him. Erik said you'd like the lab, thought it would remind you of home. Was he right?" Rush looked around and nodded somberly, "similar, yes. Hope to have more company here, though." "What kinda company," Willis chided.

Rush was unsure how to handle Willis' new attitude. "Why are you so kind today," Rush asked suspiciously. Willis slurped the last of his drink before replying, "Erik an' Jenkins're worried 'bout ya. 'Specially after y'all got back an' I heard Frank talkin' 'bout ya to th' Elder." Rush finished his own drink and

retrieved Willis' soiled glass. "What did he say?" "He was tellin' th' Elder 'bout how you went down on th' hog. Pulled somethin' like Erik did a while back. Went feral or somethin'."

Rush sighed and leaned on the galley sink. "Why did you really move me here? Are people frightened?" Willis shrugged, "a li'l bit, but tha's not why. We're beefin' up security's all. Gettin' ready for somethin' big from the looks of it." Rush wasn't sure if he believed Willis or not, but he did notice there seemed to be more armed details patrolling since they got back.

"Have brother and Jenkins reported back?" Willis nodded affirmatively, "gah. Been a while now; just' after y'all left wit' Frank." Rush sat up straight in the dusty yellow lounge chair, "what did they report?" "If nobody told ya, then ya don't need t'know." Rush growled unconsciously out of frustration. "Start that again, an' I'll put another foot in your head, dog." Rush swallowed his disobedience and took a different approach.

"Are they well?" Willis nodded strongly. "Will they return before Sunday?" Willis paused and nodded slowly, "probably," he added. "Are they...," he didn't get to complete his question; Olivia barged in and was alarmed. "Holy Hell! Who'd you blow to get this place?!" Willis grinned and chuckled pervertedly, his imagination running amok. Rush shrugged, "keeps me isolated from everyone. They are even more afraid of me now." The anger of being out-housed flushed from her face immediately, "wait. What? Who said anything about that?"

Rush nodded in Willis' direction. "I dunno Rush, if anything they're impressed. How many people aside from the Paladins do you know that can perform emergency triage and take down a hog *that big* single-handedly?" "Me," Willis grunted. Olivia rolled her eyes, "well, yeah. You're a greenskin." He grunted proudly in response. Rush scratched his chin, "are they saying anything about you?"

His question caught Olivia off guard. "Ah, well. Nothing that I haven't heard before. There's a rumor floating around that I'm cheating on Erik and we've been hooked up since we were staying at y'all's place." Rush's eyebrows shot up. Olivia laughed, "sorry, Rush. Don't get your hopes up."

The three of them chatted for some time before Willis had to leave. "Experiments," he said, "don't run themselves. Happy birthday, dog." Rush and Olivia sat across from each other in the corner of Rush's new apartment. "Sorry," he said without provocation. "For what," Olivia asked. "They gave me the bigger

apartment.” Olivia shrugged, “it’s fine. That just means that I’m closer to Erik and get to have more sexy time.” Rush chuckled awkwardly and tried his best to avoid imagining that. He thought for another moment and said, “Olivia. You are welcome here. Whenever you want.” Olivia smiled and thanked him. “Do you have a rule, like a sock on the door or anything?” Rush furrowed his brow. “Uh, you know. If you’re having company or private time or whatever.” Rush chuckled awkwardly, “Don’t wear socks. Just. Uh, knock.”

She stood up and roughed up his head fur before leaving. “The same to you, Rush. Any time. Unless the bed’s rockin’, then don’t bother knockin’. Just go away.” Rush huffed and collapsed onto his couch after she left, staring at the sparsely-decorated room, feeling alone in the cold. “At least I have a rug now,” he noted, slowly rubbing his feet on the soft green rug between his twin dilapidated couches.

Olivia passed Willis and Ida on the way out of the laboratory, “Journeyman Brown,” Ida called out. “Come here for a second?” She poked her head into the lab, ensuring there were no Brahmin rigged to explode upon entry. “Yeah?” Ida held a stained yellow folder, “you didn’t give me your birth date, dear, when you first signed up.” “Oh, uh,” she stuttered, “July fourth, twenty two fifty seven.” Ida smiled and scribbled down her birthdate. “Thanks, that’s all.” Olivia waved as she left into the afternoon sun.

She spent the rest of the day just as Rush did: rearranging her new home. She was still a bit bitter that he got an apartment twice the size of her single room. “Wolfy gets all the good stuff,” she said to her picture frame in hand. Erik’s grainy photograph smiled back without response.

Around seven, the Elder came knocking at her door. “Journeyman?” She’d heard “Initiate” for so long, she didn’t realize he was calling for her. “Ah, yes sir, one second.” “Hi, sir,” she said opening the door for him, “how can I help you?” “Oh, I don’t need anything, Journeyman,” he said, “just wanted to see how you’re settling in.” She smiled and showed him in, “doing well, sir. Thank you. For everything.” He smiled warmly and patted her shoulder, “you’ve earned it. Do you need anything?” She thought momentarily and replied, “no, but thanks anyway.”

Elder Redding saw himself out and was quickly followed by the same scribe she saw him at breakfast with a few days ago. Olivia watched from the dirty window behind her desk as the Elder and his protégé strolled into the laboratory across the street. Rather than follow them and be nosy, she locked up and left to see if

there was anything left over from dinner downstairs. "If I'm lucky," she thought, "Franklin's back in the kitchen."

Elder Redding and his mousy-haired scribe continued their stroll past Ida's laboratory and paused to knock on the door labelled 111. "Hello," he called out to no response. The scribe was so nervous he was shaking. "Sir, do we have to? Can we just go?" The elder's patience was wearing thin with his new scribe. "Yes, scribe," he said as calmly and nicely as he could while still hinting his aggravation, "it's my duty to ensure that all of my members are adjusting well. Just as it is your duty to do whatever it is that Captain Penn instructs you to do. Which, at this time, is to accompany me and do whatever I say." "Aye, sir," he replied meekly. "Did you retrieve the package as I requested?" The young man nodded in response and handed the small box to him.

"Thank you," the Elder replied before gently opening Rush's unlocked door. They walked into his small office, claustrophobic with filing cabinets, shelves of dusty tomes and a unorganized piles of holotapes and notebooks. The Elder knocked on the internal door, "Hello? Journeyman Rush, this is Elder Redding. Are you in?" Rush woke up and groggily rolled out of his new bed, directly onto the floor. "Ugh. Aye, sir. One moment, please." After flinging the door open, it took Rush a few precious seconds to figure out why the scribe was beet red with a sour grimace: he forgot his clothing again. He quickly apologized and slammed the door before cursing himself and jamming on his leathers from the nearby recliner.

"Apologies, sir" he blurted out again after opening the door again. The Elder chuckled, "well, that's what we get for barging in." Rush welcomed them inside his dirty abode. "Apologies," he grumbled again, "have not finished cleaning." "That's quite alright Journeyman," the Elder said, "we missed you at dinner and I figured you'd want this sooner rather than later." The Elder smiled warmly, handing him the package and following it with a hug. "Happy birthday, son," before leaving with the nervous scribe at his heels. He stopped and looked at Rush a second time before scampering away.

Rush collapsed onto the couch for a second time, now with the small package in his large hands. He tore through the twine and brown paper to reveal well wishes from his clan back home. His Elder Elena wrote a short letter wishing him well and reminded him to stay alive. Ian made him another drawing, this time of Rush wearing what he guessed was armor like the other Brotherhood members. Harmony wrote a letter, beautifully penned and much longer than the Elder's. She detailed

the new things she and Ian were learning. With Elder Elena's instruction, she was able to take down her first mole rat!

Rush's welling homesickness settled in quickly and forced him to stop reading. He wiped his eyes and carefully packed the letters and Ian's drawing back into the box after removing the stale sweet roll lovingly packed by Elena. He nibbled on it before dozing off again on the stained cream-colored couch.

#####

Erik fell back onto the grass and sighed. Jenkins did the same next to him. "Well, that was a pointless trip," he muttered to his lanky medic. "Yeah, well, we didn't know the place would be destroyed." Erik propped himself up on his elbows and stared at the growth-covered building, collapsed from the inside. He guessed that there had been some sort of internal explosion, rending their target useless. "Damnit," Erik sighed, "you think we can find *anything* around here?" Jenkins matched Erik's position and shook his head. "Nah. Everything here looks burnt then grown over. Even if there was anything left, it's been long gone since before we got here."

Jenkins stood up and stretched in the afternoon sun, leaving Erik on the cool grass. "I'm gonna go walk 'round. Maybe there's a maintenance shed or somethin'?" Erik nodded and opted to maintain his vigil from the ground, fighting off a nap. As Jenkins wandered around the facility, he noticed small pockets of concentrated radiation. "That's weird," he mumbled to his Pip-Boy's Geiger counter, "I don't see anything that looks like a bomb fell 'round here." He rounded to the rear of the building and saw the maintenance shed he hoped was there; unfortunately the concentration of radiation was strongest there.

He quickly scampered back to Erik and relayed the news. "Pockets, eh?" Jenkins nodded, popping some anti-radiation pills. "Yeah, found a shed out back, most of the clicks are comin' from there." Erik shrugged in response, "probably just waste storage then." Jenkins swigged some water from his flask then joined Erik on the grass again, "so, so we call it?" "Yeah, I think so. We can't do much here on our own. I didn't bring a rad suit, did you?" Jenkins shook his head.

Erik stood up and stretched. "Well, shit," he mumbled, "I guess we ought'a head back home then?" Jenkins scratched his scalp before replying, "might as well. Any settlements between here and home?" Erik prodded his Pip-Boy to provide an

answer; it was negative. “Nope. At least no one we’ve heard from in a long time.” Erik laughed aloud, “if we’re lucky, maybe we’ll run into some swampers!”

Later that night, Erik was regretting those words. “Damn you,” Jenkins hissed as they tried to quietly slosh through the irradiated swamp. Thick clouds overhead were blocking out the full moon, making their trek much more difficult. “You were bored, weren’t you,” Erik asked sarcastically. “Shut up and let’s just not get eaten by grotesque inbred motherfuckers,” Jenkins replied sourly. “That’s not good,” Erik said, pointing out the tasteful decorations of dried and stained skulls interspersed with doll parts, suspended from the trees and spikes.

“That’s some creepy shit,” Jenkins spat. Erik nodded in agreement, “let’s get the hell outta here.” They trudged through the muck loud enough to gain something’s attention. An overgrown, mutated human beast spun around to see them trying to quietly escape its home. It screamed something neither Erik nor Jenkins understood, but believed to mean “Your faces look delicious. I want a bite!” Jenkins aimed in the growing mob’s direction and fired off a few warning shots, hoping to scare them off.

When that didn’t work, they tried to run in the opposite direction, garnering the attention of more swampers to their East. “How many do you think there are?” Jenkins yelled. “I don’t know. At least six? You still have those grenades?” Jenkins nodded, “got four or so.” “Good,” Erik said, fishing out his own, “let’s find a choke point and leave ‘em a present.” Jenkins nodded and led their sprint where the thick woods in the swamp narrowed to a point, 50 yards from the nearest swamper. “Ready?” Jenkins nodded in response.

“Come an’ get us you ugly sons-of-bitches!” Jenkins fired off a few rounds to help Erik get their attention. The swampers’ cacophonous roars signaled their success. Nearly a dozen malformed cannibals were sloshing toward them, all grumbling and yelling at their dinner. Erik shoved Jenkins into the thickening woods that was the beginning of yet another pine forest. “Just go! I’ll catch up to you!” Jenkins started to argue but was caught off guard by a pair of swampers that had come from behind them.

“Oh, shit! Erik, behind us!” “Blast their asses, I’ll get these,” he said heroically as he rigged the grenade bouquet. The moment he had the triggers rigged together, he swung around to aid Jenkins’ efforts. “C’mon,” he yelled, “push ‘em back or you’re gonna be pullin’ shrapnel out of us for days!” Jenkins let out a bestial yell that Rush would have been proud of as he pushed forward

and advanced on the swamper. Erik swung to the side to catch the swamper from the back, as they had done.

Just as Jenkins drew his bowie knife across the neck of the closest swamper, the mob behind them tripped Erik's trap. Three of their heads blew into a fine pink mist, four more took heavy shrapnel to the head and face. Unfortunately, that left three more with minor scrapes and lacerations to stoke their anger. Erik jumped the other swamper between he and Jenkins and dispatched it just as Jenkins did.

"Go, go, go!" Erik yelled. They hightailed it; dodging trees and leaving the small group of swamper to lick their wounds. The two Paladins sprinted through the mud and muck for as long as their tired legs would carry them; a day's walk from home. Once they'd put enough distance between themselves and the stench-riddled swamp, they set up camp on an abandoned road. Erik decided that the numerous abandoned cars would provide them enough cover to set up camp for the night.

Jenkins tossed his pack onto the asphalt near a rusted blue Corvega sedan and sat on the crumbling seat to pry off his muddy boots. "God damn those swamper," he mumbled to himself, fighting to free his foot from its captive boot. Erik stood with his back to Jenkins, watching the tree line for suspicious movement. "Yeah, I hate those damn things. They look too human for as wild as they act." Jenkins fell back into the car as the boot finally let go with a loud sloppy slurp.

"Sounds like you when you pulled your Rush trick last week," Jenkins replied. Erik scoffed, not breaking his sentry. "What'd you mean 'Rush trick'?" Jenkins extracted himself from the car to walk across the broken asphalt in his grey socks, "the blacking out trick he's pulled before." Erik shrugged, "he didn't change though." Jenkins mirrored his shrug, "yeah, just not physically. It's like you and both take a back seat to something else for a bit, then come back to normal."

Erik held up a hand to silence Jenkins; he thought there was movement to their West. He responded after a few minutes' time, "sorry. Yeah. I think I know what you mean. I don't feel right just before it happened last time. Then I just don't remember anything until I come back. And every damn time I come back, someone's hurt. Why is that?" Jenkins sighed and walked behind Erik to see what he was staring at. "Dunno. Have you felt like that since we've left?"

Erik started at the ground in thought, “no. I don’t think so. At least, not that I remember. Have I been acting weird?” Jenkins shook his head, “maybe it’s got something to do with Rush?” Erik shrugged again and asked, “what? Like a proximity thing?” “Sure. I don’t see why not,” Jenkins replied and turned to find some food in his pack. “You didn’t black out or anything when we found the swampers. I saw your training in there, not something bestial like we saw back home.”

The sun’s last rays of the day were stretching through the tall trees surrounding them. Erik started at the rust-stained sky and sighed, “dude, I don’t know. I just don’t know.” Jenkins nodded when he handed him a piece of their jerky from his bag. “Well, you’re not the only one,” Jenkins said, “let’s get some sleep and get back home. I want to see our little Initiates off on their first trip.”

Erik sighed again, “yeah, me too. They’ll be okay though, they’re with Franklin.” Jenkins scoffed, “so long as he doesn’t go on a another drunken rampage or two. I don’t think Olivia would tolerate it. If he did something stupid to her, I think Rush would kill ‘em.” “Huh. Yeah. Probably,” Erik mused in a dark way. He continued thinking of the carnage Rush was capable of as he joined Jenkins in the back of a cargo trailer.

They both slept soundly until 0500 among the discarded boxes and burlap bags the next morning. The familiar cries of their Pip-Boys served to end their slumber. Erik prodded his to check the map and confirm his dread: they were still a day’s walk from home. Jenkins extricated himself from the cargo container to stretch in the early morning mist. The morning sun made the mist look like low-hanging fire. “So, by lunch we should be near a town of some sort,” Erik said through the heavy metal doors. “Good,” Jenkins replied, “Jerky’s good an’ all, but it gets old quick. That and I’m a bit low on ammo from last night.”

Erik sighed as he hopped down from the trailer, “how’d you manage that?” “Lost some of my cells in the first scuffle. One of th’ bastards put a hole in my pack,” he replied, poking a finger through the same hole. “Lose anything else?” Jenkins shook his head, “nah. We’re lucky they didn’t knock out our food and meds too.” Erik nodded, “yeah. Well, here,” he said handing Jenkins half of his microfusion cells. “Now, hurry up with your stretching, we need to get going.”

Thirty minutes and a pee break later, Erik and Jenkins began their journey home. The abandoned highway they were following provided a convenient mixture of cover and solid ground to speed up their trek. By 1130, they’d arrived to the gates of

a tiny town. “Where are we,” Jenkins panted. Erik shrugged, “dunno. This place doesn’t have a name on my map.”

They left the highway to crunch down a dirt road leading to the little village tucked away behind the rusty bones of huge construction equipment. “Welcome to Cater,” a plywood sign with neatly-painted white letters read, suspended from a backhoe’s aloft digger. Jenkins looked at the crooked sign, then to the yellow backhoe holding it aloft bearing the same name in flecking black paint, “not very creative, are they?” Erik shrugged, re-shouldered his pack, and led them into the small village. Within moments of their arrival, Jenkins was drooling over a well-restored Corvega pickup truck. The red and slightly rusty truck was quietly idling behind a swarming group of traders. He squinted and whooped, they were a group of traders from The Burg. He and Erik ran up to them and quickly negotiated a ride back to The Burg for the mere job of protecting them on their way back.

“Okay, so we’ll meet y’all back here in an hour,” Jenkins agreed before he and Erik ducked into a diner across the street. They scarfed down a greasy meal of Brahmin and boiled potatoes before doing some quick trading themselves. Their time up, they met their hometown traders back at the beautiful red truck and settled into the back with various boxes and bags for the three hour ride home.

#####

Rush spent two hours that morning, setting up his salvaged wide-format dot-matrix printer and celebrated its revival by printing off a 5-foot map of their upcoming trip. He and Olivia were pouring over the satellite feed he’d printed. “So,” Olivia mumbled as she drew on his creased map with a borrowed black pencil, “we’re here. Gotta go here first, right? Then here, then back home, then all the way over *here*?” Rush nodded at the third location nearly two hundred miles to their southeast when a sharp knock pounded his door.

Ripped from his train of thought, he called out with a bit of alarm, “who is there?” Erik poked his head through the door, followed by Jenkins above him, “us.” Rush threw his pencil, jumped up from his couch, and ripped the door open, ecstatic to see his brother and Jenkins alive and well. Erik and Jenkins tumbled through the door when Rush ripped it open. Olivia watched with a smirk as Jenkins landed directly on Erik’s back. “Nice place,” Jenkins said from atop Erik as they laid on his matted carpet.

Erik growled at Jenkins to get off and gladly accepted Rush's hand up when Jenkins freed him. He tossed his bag into a dusty corner, hugged Olivia and Rush, then repeated Jenkins' statement about Rush's new home. "Is it big enough?" Rush nodded shyly. "Too big," he grumbled, glancing to Olivia on his left. Erik smiled widely and missed the hint all together. "Nonsense," Erik said, weaving his way past Rush and into the galley kitchen. "Big man's gotta have a big home," he replied as he rummaged through Rush's refrigerator.

Olivia groaned before arguing, "then that just makes me a little lady? Better yet, what's that make you?" Erik stole a Nuka and replied, "not home very often. I don't need a big place. I didn't figure you would either, Initiate." She cleared her throat and replied, "that's Journeyman, thank you Paladin." Erik and Jenkins exchanged surprised glances before responding with astonishment. "Journeyman already? We've only been gone a week. You're sprintin' up the ranks!" "Congratulations," Jenkins summed up for him, clapping her on the shoulder with a wide smile.

"I'm not the only one," she said, nodding at Rush who was ushering them in, "Wolfy there got a promotion too." "Came with our new homes," he added quietly.

"Well, give us a tour," Jenkins said, tossing his bag on the recliner near the door. "Ah, sitting area here," Rush said awkwardly, gesturing to the southeast corner of his room housing two well-worn love seats, a sagging yellow recliner and a coffee table. "Kitchen there," he said pointing to the small galley kitchen in the southwest. It had a working refrigerator, a rusty white stove that rocked when he used it, and a sink that only spit out odd-smelling cold water. A small square table with four unlike chars were piled nearby.

He then pointed to a pair of metal shelving units with a slack fabric back, "bedroom behind there. Willis' idea to add privacy." "Bathroom in here," he said, opening the northern-most door for everyone to see. It was barely big enough for the tub and toilet, let alone the sink someone shoehorned in there. "So, that other room on the way in," Erik asked, "is an office or something?" Rush nodded, splitting two Nuka-Colas between four glasses for he and his guests. "Research, experiments, books, storage." He handed out the cloudy glasses and added, "scribes ran a link to the mainframe for me. Will be able to monitor satellites and run batch jobs."

Erik sipped on his ice-cold soda and nodded. "Just don't spend all your time in here, Journeyman. All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Rush mirrored his

sip and asked, "who is Jack?" Erik ignored his question and took a seat on one of his couches, quickly neighbored by Jenkins. They were both investigating the map furled across Rush's small coffee table with his and Olivia's scribbles. "Who did this up," Jenkins asked, "it's the best I've seen!"

"We did," Rush said, bumping Olivia's shoulder in commendation with a small grin, "used satellite imagery. Fixed the line printer." "Can you make more," Erik asked, "better yet, do the scribes know you did this?" His elder brother nodded, "informed them. This was proof of concept. Showed them how to do it." Without warning, the noisy tractor-fed printer clicked to life in the room behind them. "They have been printing all morning. That's the sixth one so far," Olivia added. She and Rush sat on the opposite couch and went back to work with the help of their Paladins.

When the four of them missed dinner, Franklin came looking at 1700. He rampaged through the common building, scribe's workshop, and Tom's garage before investigating the laboratory. Rush heard he and Ida yelling down the hall. Their yelling escalated until Willis stepped in and physically drug him to Rush's apartment. "Here," he grumbled with agitation before nodding to Rush and leaving back to his experiments.

"Hello Paladin," Rush said cheerily with his usual toothy grin. "Holy shit, you blow the Elder to get this place?" Rush cringed at the thought and shook his head. "Large enough for all of us. Needed somewhere to run experiments." "The hell're the four o' ya'll doin' in this damn place? Experimentin' on each other?" Rush shook his head again. "Preparing for trip," he said, gesturing at the map and its various scribbles. "Tha's my job, Journeyman," Franklin argued. "I'm leadin' this trip an' I'll be damned afore I let some damn greenhorns boss me 'round!"

Erik stood up and said as calmly as possible, "okay. Well, come an' plan with 'em then, Paladin. No reason to come in yellin'. They're just tryin' to earn their keep." Rush and Jenkins nodded in agreement. Olivia, stared silently at the map, doing her best to hold her tongue. "Fine," he huffed, collapsing in the recliner. Rush opened another Nuka and offered a half-full glass to Franklin. He objected and demanded the other half as well. "Sugar's bad for dogs, don't you know that," he said snatching the bottle from Rush.

The remainder of their impromptu meeting was just as rocky. Rush and Olivia submitted ideas or questions to the Paladins, and Franklin would shoot them down

in flames for no other reason that they'd provided it. Forty-five minutes of this, and Jenkins decided he'd had enough. He gently placed Rush's glass tumbler on the map then began yelling at Franklin. "The hell's your problem, John?! You scared or something? Why're you bein' a bigger dick than normal? They ain't done nothing to be treated like you're doin'."

Franklin surged from the yellow recliner, sending it toppling backwards. "Who the hell you think you're talkin' to *faggot*?! You want a bigger dick? I got one you can put in your mouth to shut you th' fuck up," he yelled, grabbing his crotch angrily. "Woah!" Erik yelled, standing up between them. "You need to calm the hell down Franklin!" Their short yelling match and Franklin's yelling of the word "faggot" in particular, piqued Willis' curiosity. He was quickly standing in Rush's office, leaning into the apartment with a hand on each side of the doorframe.

"Cook," Willis yelled at the fiery-haired man, "who the hell're you talkin' to like that?" Without hesitation, Franklin responded by pointing directly at Jenkins, "this faggot here. Thinks he can tell *me* what to do. I taught *him* everything he knows!" Willis responded with a shit-eating grin, "that include suckin' dick?" Franklin paled and swung at Willis, making contact with his chest and collar bone. He continued swinging until Jenkins and Erik quickly inserted themselves between them and nudged Willis into the office behind them. "It's okay," Jenkins said gently to Willis, "he didn't mean anything by it. He's just scared is all. No need to rile him up even more."

Erik agreed and shut the door behind them, leaving a fuming Franklin with Olivia and Rush. Olivia continued to sit quietly and grind her teeth in anger. Rush, awkward as always, looked to Franklin and offered him another soda. "Fuck you, you test-tube-bred motherfucking man eater! I know what you did to my scribes; clawed 'em open, ripped their hearts out and ate 'em in front of 'em. I don't want your goddamned hospitality 'fore you do the same t' us!" That broke Olivia's last straw of patience. She launched off of her couch and tackled Franklin to the ground, landing with a solid punch to his jaw.

They rolled around, knocking Rush's meager belongings to the floor. They punched and kicked and yelled unintelligible things at one another until Erik, Jenkins, and Willis re-entered to break them up. They only had time to watch Franklin swing wildly and miss Olivia: he missed her chest and punched Rush's urn off of a nearby steel storage shelf. The delicate pink urn smashed into a million tiny shards and scattered the dust of its deceased occupant across the carpet.

Erik thought time shattered with the urn; everything slowed down to a crawl. He watched as Rush shuddered involuntarily and leaped at them with his fangs bared trailed by a ragged howl. Erik felt like he was trudging through molasses to get between them. Willis shoved him out of the way, leaped over Jenkins, and tackled Rush out of the air mid-leap. The howl halted Franklin and Olivia's scrap momentarily as they watched a green-and-white blur smack Rush to the ground and pin him down.

Rush howled again and cried as he tore at Willis' ribs, anxious to get free. Franklin didn't miss this opportunity to prove his point. "See! I tol' you that damn dog's a man killer! We oughta kill 'em like th' Enclave did the rest of 'em!" Olivia growled again and reared back to punch him in the jaw. Before she could, Jenkins did the honor for her; he punched Franklin square in the left temple, knocking him out cold. The strong redneck collapsed onto himself in an awkward heap on the floor with his head and neck against the bathroom door.

When Rush regained enough sense to stop shredding Willis' thick hide, the super mutant winced slightly and helped him to his feet. He stood and wavered on the spot for a few moments before collapsing back onto the floor, frantically trying to scoop up the scattered ashes left by Franklin's errant attack.

"Brother," he whimpered, "why? Why did he come here to yell and abuse us? Why would he do...this?" Erik sighed and with Olivia and Jenkins' help, gathered as many of the tiny shards they could find. "He's scared, Rush. He's worried an' afraid that ya'll're gonna get hurt or worse, just like his old squad." Rush choked back a whimper and said, "strange way to show compassion."

Willis harrumphed and hoisted Franklin out of their way. The movement jarred some consciousness back into him. He groaned in pain and growled something unintelligible to Willis. "Shut your damn face," Willis growled back as he roughly dropped Franklin onto a couch. He bent down over the back and whispered threateningly, "you lay a hand on either one o' them again, and I'll eat you. Toes first." He left the quivering man on the couch, nodded to Jenkins, then left to explain the commotion to Ida.

"We can't up his dosage," she sighed. She looked up to her long-time green friend, "Willis, his liver can't take much more of the Calmex. Especially if he relapses and starts drinking again." The huge man sighed, "'ll be back." She watched him lumber from her lab and toward the main exit. He returned ten minutes later with a bottle of whiskey and the Father from their tiny church. Ida nodded

to him respectfully. "Hello, Ms. Ida," he said warmly, "it has been some time since you last visited. Are you well?"

She rolled her eyes as nicely as possible before responding. "I don't have much patience for that stuff. I'm well enough though, thank you. Go fix the kid, would you? He's makin' it awfully hard to get work done 'round here." He nodded and waited for Willis to show him the way to his lost lamb. Willis, like much of the people of their time, wasn't a believer, but thought that if Franklin would listen to anyone, it would be his own father.

Willis showed him into Rush's office, pointed at the interior door, then left to help Ida drink the bottle of whiskey. The black-robed man quietly entered and observed before saying anything. Rush spotted him immediately and apologized, "sorry, sir. Now it not a good time." The man strode over to the three adults on their knees and joined them. "Now, I believe, is the best time for me to be here." Rush's expression was a mixture of confusion and sadness. "You look like you're mourning a loved one, son," the Father said, "what can I do to help?"

Rush shook his head and whispered, "fix Paladin Franklin, please." Father Murphy gently patted Rush's head and smiled, "I'm trying, son. But only God can truly work miracles." Franklin harrumphed from behind them on the other side of the couch. "Are you well, son," he asked rhetorically. Franklin refused to respond. "Paladin Erik, take the porcelain and ashes to the chapel, I will repair the urn and bless it for you." He nodded his thanks to the older man as he stood up and said gently "John, please apologize to these people." Franklin again refused, "no! I ain't done nothin' wrong. That damn monster there needs to be taken out back and shot." Rush folded his ears sadly and winced like the words physically cut him. "That's no way to speak to a child of God, John." Franklin yelled back, "He ain't got no soul. He's jus 'a tool, made to kill people." "Hey," Erik yelled, "that's me you're talkin' about too. He an' me 're nearly twins." Again, Franklin had no verbal response, but got up, kicked over the coffee table, and stormed out.

The four spent the rest of the night straightening up Rush's apartment. After they found all of the pieces of the urn, Jenkins volunteered to deliver it and the remainder of its contents to the chapel, as they were directed. Rush offered his brother and Olivia a beer before sadly congratulating her on her birthday soon after Jenkins left. "Apologies for the celebration," he said wryly.

She smiled and held the cold beer against the bruise on her arm. "Thanks, Wolfy." "Oh, here," he said handing her a small newspaper-wrapped package from a cabinet in his kitchen. "Happy birthday, sister." She accepted the package with her free hand and handed Erik her beer before tearing into it. A faint blue glow gave away the first portion of the gift: a Nuka-Cola Quantum. The other items, she didn't expect: one of Rush's special black pencils – not chewed on – and a small black notebook just like the ones he carried. She also found a bracelet made of scraps of silver jewelry and what she thought was one of his claws.

"Thanks, Rush. Where'd you get all of this stuff? This isn't one of your claws is it?" He shook his head, "from the yao guai we helped. Wanted to remind you that we must be kind, but strong. Like her." "Ah, thanks," she said awkwardly. "I don't wear jewelry though, Rush." He nodded, "Erik told me. It will be good luck." She slipped it on her right wrist and jangled it around, watching the yao guai claw glisten. She was impressed that Rush was able to get it to shine so brilliantly. She quickly removed it again and packed it into her pocket.

"My gift's back in th' common hall. Room 307. You know the place," Erik said with a nudge and a wink. She shook her head and grinned at his cheesiness. "Well Rush, that's my cue. We'll meet in the mess hall for breakfast, then figure out what the hell to do with Franklin. Right?" Rush nodded and stood up, opening the door for them. "Thank you," he grumbled as they quickly made their way out of his office and into the night.

Rush found himself alone in his new suite again. He rolled up the map they worked on that morning and walked behind the storage shelves to his new bed. No sooner had he taken off his leather garments and settled into bed, a heavy knock came at his door. Rush growled in frustration and responded, "it is bed time. Please leave." The knock came again. Rush fought on his leathers and answered the door. Franklin hiccupped and wavered in front of him.

"Came t' – hiccup – apologize," Franklin slurred. Rush felt a headache slowly growing behind his eyes. "Come in," he said, gesturing to the mishmash of chairs near his kitchen. Franklin weaved and stumbled his way into the linoleum-floored dining area and roughly sat in a chair. Rush poured him a glass of questionable water and took the chair opposite him. "So, like I's sayin', I came t' say – hiccup – I's sorry," he repeated.

Rush nodded and asked, "how much have you had to drink?" Franklin shrugged, "a bottle or two. Or three. I dunno. Why's that matter?" "Curious," he responded.

They stared at each other for a few moments until Franklin re-remembered why he was there. “Yeah. Uh. All ‘o you ain’t all bad people. Y’all didn’t deserve what th’ Enclave did to ya. Didn’t mean that.” “Apology accepted. Please go and sleep. We must leave early,” Rush said flatly.

“I, uh. Ain’t allowed back in. Yet,” Franklin mumbled. Rush raised an eyebrow, “what?” “Elder says I gotta get cleaned up ‘fore I can come back. Gotta prove I can handle y’all in th’ field. Y’all come back in one piece, I come home too.” “You may...stay here,” Rush finally said with exasperation. “Drink the water and you may sleep in my bed,” he added, pointing to the walled-off section of his apartment.

“Uh, thanks. Dog, er, Journeyman.” Rush nodded and waited for Franklin to find his way to the back before he doused the lights and curled up on a couch for a few hours’ sleep.