

CHAPTER 30 : ON THE ROAD AGAIN OR WHERE ARE WE?

Rush's Pip-Boy, misplaced under his coffee table after last night's impromptu redecoration, began wailing at 0500. The loud snoring coming from his bed kept him up all night: Rush only got three hours' rest. He sighed and rolled off of the couch to fish it out and silence it. Strapping it to his left forearm, Rush noticed his reflection in the glossy black display. He tried to rearrange his cowlick, but it was far too excited for their upcoming journey to behave. He instead accepted defeat by his wild fur, threw on his leathers, and walked back to his bed. The sight was an unpleasant surprise.

Franklin had gotten sick all over his bed during the night, then continued to sleep and roll around in it. The smell of bile and gin was making the sight of Franklin tough to stomach. Rush groaned outwardly and sighed. "Wake up, Paladin. We must clean you up and get breakfast. Olivia will be unhappy if we are late."

Franklin responded by snoring and rolling over away from the noise. Rush shook him roughly, taking some frustration out on him in the most gentle way possible. Franklin snored, coughed, then complained, "who th' hell's there?" Rush replied, "Rush. Get up, we must prepare." The 32 year-old man smacked his lips, trying to abate the dry mouth and awful taste. "Wha happened las' night?"

"Does not matter now," Rush said with growing irritation, "please get up. Need to clean and get ready." Franklin threw the discolored bedding from himself and swung his legs off of the bed to stare at Rush. His wobbling indicated that he was still drunk from last night. "You didn't answer me, mutt. Wha happened?" Rush growled softly, he was swiftly losing what little patience he had.

"You came to my home and verbally abused us. Then proceeded to destroy my home. Then returned drunk to vomit on my bed," Rush growled through gritted teeth. Franklin looked around and shrugged, "looks fine to me." Rush physically twitched when he mumbled that. Rather than make more of a mess to clean up, Rush shoved Franklin back onto the bed, yelled at him to get washed up, then huffed off. On his way out of his office he added, "find me in Ida's laboratory when you sober up." He added, "*wertlos blau.*"

He kept his word, stomped down around the corner and down the hall to Ida's lab, only to find the lights off and the door locked. A neatly-written note was taped to the front: "Gone fishin'! Back next Thursday." There was more on the back

side, “No, Rush. I’m not really out fishing. You can’t eat fish, you’ll die of mercury poisoning. Very painful. Have a safe trip! – Ida”.

Rush gently banged his head on the laboratory door. He stood in place, head on door trying to clear his head, until Willis came trudging through the hall about ten minutes later. “Morning, dog. What are you doing?” Rush shrugged, “waiting for Franklin to stop destroying everything in my home,” he replied to the door. Willis threw him a confused look and shrugged. “Still? Well, good luck. If he gives you any more trouble like last night, defend yourself. And Olivia.” Rush nodded with his forehead against the door and watched as Willis left to fill his growling belly. Jenkins followed Willis soon after, unsurprisingly.

“Morning, Rush. You okay? You look rough,” Jenkins said before chuckling to himself. “Heh, rough. Sounds like ‘ruff.’ Like that sound...dogs...make.” Rush shrugged in response, keeping his head on the cool door. “Ah,” Jenkins paused and threw an arm around Rush’s neck, “why don’t we get some grub?” Rush nodded before Jenkins pried him from the door and the two exited into the dark mist-filled morning.

The sun hid beneath the horizon for another forty minutes, about the same time Franklin rolled out of Rush’s ruined bed. “Th’ hell ‘m I,” he asked himself before remembering what transpired last night. “Oh, for fuck’s sake I’m a asshole.” He sniffed around and wrinkled his nose, slightly disgusted by his own mess. “New limit: three bottles,” he mumbled. The grown man pried himself from the bed wavered and squinted around, looking for his belongings. He wasn’t sure if he remembered to grab them from his room before getting kicked out.

After a quick search, he found his bag, neatly arranged on a shelf. Franklin tore some clean clothing, including his leather harness from it and proceeded shuffle toward the bathroom.

Rush, Willis, and Jenkins were at their regular table when Olivia came, bright-eyed and ready for their first official trip. “Morning,” she said cheerfully. Erik came dragging in behind her, he didn’t look to be having such a good morning. In fact, he looked under the weather. Rush squinted across the table at him. Erik fended off Rush’s prying mind and fetched a tray instead.

Rush huffed and finished his mug of weak tea in one gulp. “Thirsty, dog,” Willis asked. Rush ignored him. After Olivia and Erik filtered through the line, they joined the others at their corner table. Olivia smiled wide with anticipations

and asked Rush, “you ready for today?” He shook his head and borrowed Willis’ ketchup to draw a big “F” on his fried eggs before stabbing them repeatedly and shoving them into his maw.

“What’s your problem,” she asked gently across the table. He stabbed his eggs harshly again and replied, “our commanding officer. He is a drunkard and irresponsible. He should not be leading us.” Erik, after finishing a bite of his own eggs, corrected Rush. “He’s got a drinking problem, sure. And he acts out sometimes, but he’s a good guy. Once y’all get out of town and comfortable with each other, it’ll be fine.” Rush dropped his fork and stared at Erik with disbelief, “why do you all make constant excuses for his behavior?”

Franklin responded this time, “we do the same for you, Rush. People’re put off by your behavior a lot. We know you’re a good guy, just like Franklin is. We protect him ‘cause he’s our friend. With issues. Like you. Just not...the same issues is all.” Rush wasn’t in the mood to be lectured, let alone compared to their drunk comrade; he left the table and cafeteria immediately after Jenkins finished.

Before Jenkins could complain about Rush’s rudeness, Willis stopped him, “shut up and gimme his breakfast.” Jenkins obliged. Olivia looked at Erik and asked, “is he okay?” Erik shrugged, “he better be soon, y’all gotta get on th’ road shortly.”

Rush brushed past the metal-clad guards protecting the entrance. One said something pleasant that he ignored. He stomped his way across the street and back into the laboratory building to take his frustration out on something inanimate before he did something he would regret. Each step echoed on the floor, making the empty hall seem haunted. He saw movement near his suite after rounding the corner; it was Franklin. Rush backpedaled and peered around the corner to watch as Franklin pulled up his pants and pick up a bundle of soiled linens. He was heading to opposite end of the hall.

“Where are you going with my things,” Rush yelled with anger, “would you like to destroy anything else?” Franklin stopped mid-step and paused before responding as calmly as his rough vernacular would allow, “goin’ t’ go an’ get this washed up. Thanks for lettin’ me stay th’ night. Was kind o’ ya.” Franklin added, “I packed yer bag for ya. It’s by th’ inside door.” Rush watched as he disappeared around a distant corner, dragging his fluid-stained bedding drag on the linoleum floor.

“Huh,” he mumbled, his sour demeanor lessening a little. Rush entered through his office to see what Franklin said was true: his leather bag was packed and waiting for him. Rush perched it on a workbench and examined its contents. Franklin was wise enough to pack a handful of pencils and a few of his black notebooks. More surprising was that he neatly folded and the map they printed after adding some fresh handwritten notes on it. Portions of jerky, Nuka-Cola, and water flasks rounded out the bag. The only thing out of place was Rush’s microscope. “Why is this in here,” Rush wondered aloud.

He put it back in its place near the petri dishes and shouldered his pack. After locking up, Rush waited for Franklin to return. After ten minutes, Rush’s boredom took hold and directed him outside. His feet knew where to go, as he bumped into Franklin leaving the laundry room on the back side of the laboratory. Franklin cleared his throat and re-shouldered his pack. “Let’s go get Journeyman Brown and get on our way. Journeyman.”

Rush was hoping for an apology, but decided that getting their mission underway would be a suitable alternative. Olivia met them just inside of the commons building, near the stairs. “Mornin’ gents,” she said carefully. “Are y’all ready to go?” Rush nodded and Franklin saluted, “let’s go ma’am.”

The trio exited and began walking south to hit the eastern highway. Jenkins and Erik met them at the crossroads, near Tom’s garage. They exchanged warm wishes salutes before watching their loved ones walk toward the rising sun. Erik turned to Jenkins, “we’ve got our own work to do, let’s go.” Jenkins nodded in Rush’s typical way and strode side-by-side with Erik past the common building, laboratory, fields, and kennel, before arriving at the radio tower in the western-central area of their base.

They saluted to the singular guard on duty and let themselves in. A scraggly scribe that clearly needed something stronger than the tea was draped over a wooden chair near the radio stack. She yawned widely and swiped a few stray black hairs from his view before turning to greeting her guests. “Hail Paladins. Why’re y’all in here this mornin’?” “Relieving you, scribe. Report to your quarters, rest up, then go learn how to make Journeyman Hawthorne’s new satellite stuff work,” Erik answered. Jenkins added with a slight mischievousness, “then write directions so that even the front line can do it.”

The scribe half saluted, chem herself out of the chair, and lazily saw herself to the second deck of the commons building before collapsing into her bunk. Erik

plopped himself into the warm chair and said, "I'll take first. Bring me a bite 'round lunch, would you?" Jenkins nodded, "what'm I supposed to tell the Elder?" "I already did," Erik said lazily while waving him off. "Go do whatever it is you medics do when there's no one to cut up."

Jenkins waved and left Erik with the single guard in the small building; he'd pick up Erik's regular rounds for him and Erik would take care of his afternoon duties twice a week. That way, they'd be able to keep an eye out for their brethren on the road.

Erik placed the worn muffs on his head and listened to different stations before broadcasting on the one that Franklin agreed to for their mission. "Hail, Paladin Franklin, this is Erik. Do you copy?" Rush's Pip-Boy notified him of the broadcast. "One moment," he mumbled to Franklin, pausing their journey in the middle of the road. Erik's voice came through with his message.

Franklin quickly turned and took Rush's Pip-Boy, arm and all, to reply. "Paladin Franklin here. Copy. Is there a problem?" "Nope, just checking that everything's working, Paladin. Delta out." Rush stole back his arm and relayed their position to Erik. His tinny voice came through the tiny speaker again, "Roger Journeyman. Update us every 12 hours, Delta over and out." "Roger," Rush said, "over and out."

He smoothed down his arm fur and looked at the back of Franklins' head, "where is yours?" "Not here," he responded to the broken road in front of them. Olivia looked over and shrugged before closing the distance between she and Rush. The two Journeymen Knights dutifully followed their Paladin until noon when Rush's stomach began angrily rumbling for sustenance.

It'd been cramping before that, but Rush didn't want to show weakness in front of his new commanding officer. "Th' hell's that noise," Franklin asked behind himself to his subordinates. Olivia spoke up, "sorry sir, getting hungry. You mind if we take a short lunch break?" Franklin nodded. Rush kept waiting for a snide remark about how she was a female and therefore needed it more than they did. He was surprised when Franklin said, "sounds good. Need t' sit for a bit. Don't do much hikin' in th' kitchen."

"Maybe Erik was right," Rush thought to himself, Franklin seemed like a completely different person out here. They found some shade from the harsh noonday sun in an abandoned pull-behind camper trailer. Its silver body was

mostly gutted except for a few wooden boxes. Someone went through the trouble to make striped curtains for the round trailer from a patio umbrella, Rush thought it was an excellent idea.

Franklin kicked off his boots and rubbed his feet after everyone finished their light meal. Rush and Olivia both looked at him inquisitively. He shrugged and asked, “what, y’all got a problem?” They both shook their heads slowly and continued to stare at him. He stared back awkwardly for a few moments before turning his back to them to resuming his therapy.

While his back was turned, Franklin quickly swallowed two white pills from his chest pocket, hoping the Initiates didn’t see him. Eagle-eyed Rush did, but thought it wise to find a better way to ask than call him out directly. After Franklin laced his boots back up, he led them back out onto the trail. “A few more hours, Journeymen, and we’ll be at our first stop.”

During those hours, Franklin would stop them in random places and ask them to point out various things they could use to survive: herbs, tools, loot. That afternoon, Rush had almost completely forgotten he was angry at Franklin. Franklin, however, was slowly becoming frustrated with his slow progress. He didn’t expect to be the one slowing down their travel.

“Journeyman Rush,” Franklin said as they walked toward an abandoned and overgrown village, “get out our map. Let’s see where we can camp for the night and head that way. We’ll stop a bit short today and hit our first site in the morning. Rush paused and walked into the soft grass before complying. He unfolded the map and spread it on the ground between them. “Here looks good,” Olivia said, pointing at a small village two hours away from them named “Bearmont.”

Franklin grumbled to himself, unhappy that they were two hours from anywhere of notoriety. “How ‘bout this creek here,” he suggested, “it ain’t but a hour away. Ought t’ find some fresh meat ‘round there, too.” Rush shrugged, he didn’t care either way. Olivia nodded to Franklin, making the decision.

The span of highway between them and their planned campsite was strangely devoid of debris of any kind, aside from the broken and crumbling asphalt that crunched underfoot. It was typical to see a handful abandoned vehicles every few miles, but as far as Rush could tell, there wasn’t anything for the next handful.

“Strange,” he noted as he told his companions of his thoughts on the lack of pre-war debris. Olivia shrugged it off as coincidence, but Franklin thought was a bit

strange as well. Another hour and no debris later, they found themselves at a small creek fed by a nameless river. The woods near the creek were thick, providing a difficult time for the Brothers in Steel to clear out a sleeping space.

To make matters worse, Franklin managed to startle and anger a fat male hog by looking at him like a delicious roast. It was soon trying its best to gore him with its grotesquely mutated tusks. Rush shook his head and gestured for Olivia to kill it so they could eat. She loaded her plasma rifle and whistled shrilly to Franklin. He broke out of his circle to run perpendicular to their position, allowing Olivia to place a single gooey green shot into the hog's face from fifty yards away, sending it sliding into a tree and its ultimate demise.

Franklin huffed as he tried to drag it back in their direction. After watching him struggle for a bit, Rush moved chem it over for him with minimal effort. "Good job, Journeymen," Franklin panted. "Get me a fire goin' and I'll get us a early dinner on." Rush and Olivia gathered wood and tinder from the nearby thickets while Franklin disassembled the recently deceased hog.

The wet and sloppy sounds that accompany the disassembly of prey always made Rush hungrier. He and Olivia arranged a small teepee of sticks on top of a huge stump. "That'll do nicely," Franklin said with an oddly cheerful tone. As Olivia went to strike the tinder underneath with a lighter, Rush paused her; he was sure he heard something creeping through the nearby grass.

Franklin walked over from his bloody mess and began complaining about the lack of fire before Rush shushed him. "Something is here. Please shut up." Rather than get angry, Franklin obliged and listened as well. The only sounds were the calm creek, a gentle breeze in the tops of the trees and squirrels sporadically barking downstream. The three of them surrounded their pile of kindling for a few minutes in silence before Rush gave up: whatever he heard, it was long gone now.

"Never mind," Rush sighed. "It must have left." "What was it," Olivia asked. He shrugged in response and sniffed the air, "don't know. Don't smell...anything." "One of them," he concluded quickly before sprinting off to the North along the creek. Olivia grabbed her gun and ran after him; Franklin watched them both run off without warning. "More pig for me then," he yelled with some irritation.

They ran North for a quarter of a mile before Rush stopped, cursing in German under his breath. "Rush," Olivia asked, "are you *sure* you heard something?" He nodded and yelled northward, "we will find you!" "You bastard," Olivia added.

Rush smirked at her as they turned to help Franklin with the fire. "Ought not run off like that," Franklin greeted them with an aggravated growl. "Doing our duty," Rush replied curtly. "What duty's that, dog," Franklin responded, "you'll get yourself killed like that." Olivia ignored them both and went back to lighting the fire. The kindling lit quickly with the help of her flip-top lighter.

"Now then, let's get some food going," she said, hoping that would be enough to derail their impending argument. There was a slight, uneasy tension between Rush and Franklin throughout their meal. Neither said anything, but Olivia could tell they both were still brooding. Having ate her fill, she nudged Rush gently in the ribs, "c'mon, let's go get some bedding set up. We can go lookin' around after." He nodded; it would be much easier to get their gear set up while the sun was still out.

They worked until the sun began to set clearing out and setting up their tents. Three in all, two blue and a yellow one. Olivia wondered why Franklin had a yellow tent and asked as much. "'s my favorite." "Favorite what," Olivia inquired further. "Favorite color," grunted then questioned, "that a problem, Journeyman," "No...sir, just curious." "That there's what went an' got th' cat killed." She shrugged. "Curiosity," Rush said from behind his notebook. Franklin nodded and busied himself studying Rush's map.

"C'mon, let's go," Olivia said, nudging Rush with her boot. He clapped his notebook shut and threw it in his tent with its chewed pencil. "Where to?" Olivia shrugged, "just wanted to take a quick survey before bedtime." Rush nodded, "wise." They left Franklin to his own devices while the sun set over the horizon. They strolled a quarter mile to the east before Olivia started badgering Rush with questions.

Most were about their mission, his expectations. The only one he couldn't answer: "are you afraid?" He gave her an inquisitive look and scratched his scalp, "no. Of what?" "Just being out. It's our first mission. What if something bad happens?" Rush shook his head, "elder would not send us on a dangerous mission so early. Would be irresponsible." "I guess so," Olivia muttered, "then what's Franklin's problem? What's he so scared of?"

Rush shrugged again, "PTSD. Medical condition. He is on medication." "What? No. How do you know," she asked in disbelief. "Saw him take pills earlier." "Maybe they were Rad-X or something." Rush shook his head, "he would have told us to take Rad-X as well." "I hope so," she said, pondering. "You think he's sick? Like a physical problem? He does seem awfully worn out lately?"

Rush shrugged again and switched to scratching his chin, "we stopped frequently for bathroom breaks. Kidney issues, perhaps?" "Sounds solid to me," Olivia nodded before turning to walk back to camp. "Let's get back before last light." Rush followed her obediently as she requested. Rush sighed when they got back: the fire was nearly dead and Franklin was already in his tent, snoring away. Olivia shook her head, "he didn't do that last time. Is that why you set up our tents over there?"

Rush nodded again before making himself comfortable near what was left of the fire. They fed the glowing embers and talked shop near the dying embers for some time. An hour later, after the sun had long disappeared beneath the horizon, they both climbed into their tents, anxious to put the day behind them.

Rush commended himself on earning four hours of interrupted sleep the next morning. "Thirty per-cent improvement," he thought sluggishly. He watched through the roof of his tent as thin rays of orange sunlight spread across the horizon. He climbed out, and after dusting himself of pine needles and rocks, took stock of their surroundings again. He sniffed the humid air, still hoping for a whisper of a scent from yesterday's mysterious visitor.

He tooled around for a little bit after packing up his tent into a neat package and stuffing it in his bag. The commotion roused Olivia, to his surprise: he figured she could sleep through anything. She peeked out of her tent to see her furred comrade standing very close to some trees. It took her a few moments to realize he was peeing. "Mornin' Rush," she said, just to scare him. He jumped just as she expected he would.

"Good morning," he replied with a touch of sourness after making himself decent. "What's go you grumpy," she asked with a grin, knowing full well what his problem was. "Did not sleep well," Rush said, nodding in the direction of Franklin's tent that was still gently rumbling. Olivia nodded and followed with a strange query, "feel like wrestling? The mud should be nice and cool. You want some Sugar Bombs for breakfast?"

He responded with a look of confusion, then he realized he'd dozed off standing up. Olivia was speaking to him, but it wasn't about wrestling. "Hey, you only get three shakes before you're having too much fun playing with that thing," she joked from her tent. Rush gathered himself and shook his head to clear his mind. "Apologies," he responded. "You forget what you were doin' over there," she asked as she began tearing down her tent. He walked to the opposite side to give her a hand. "Fell asleep, Franklin makes it difficult to rest."

Olivia caught him gazing at her un-holstered chest. "You here to help or stare?" "Apologies," he grumbled with embarrassment, "day dreaming again." "What about?" Rush blushed under his fur and tore the tent down on top of himself in his embarrassment. He struggled momentarily before simply whining in defeat. "Hold on in there," Olivia said tearing the tarp away from his head. "Get of out of there, sleepy head. Go do some exercise to wake up. You'll be useless if you're like this all day."

Rush wondered aloud, completely missing what Olivia was saying. "Did he always snore? He didn't snore the first time we went out, did he?" Olivia stopped and asked Rush, "did you hear me at all? Get out of my tent so we can pack up and leave, Rush." "Okay," he replied, not moving from his position. "Rush," she yelled, "get. Out!" "Huh? Oh, apologies, daydreaming again," he mumbled before fighting out of the blue tarp. Her yelling was enough to wake Franklin.

"Dog, quit bein' a perv an' get outta the girl's tent. Don' make me come in there or I'll make you regret it," Franklin yelled. Franklin mumbled to himself as he leaned out of his tent, "uh, on second thought...". Seeing Olivia mostly dressed and Rush in the epicenter of her shelter's collapse halted Franklin's thought. "Damn," he mumbled aloud and exited his tent. Olivia wasn't surprised to see him exit naked, but Rush was.

"Hot last night," she asked nonchalantly. "Yup," he responded on his way to go pee on a tree. Rush looked at the two adults holding a normal conversation and looked up to Olivia, "he is not wearing clothing..." Olivia stopped him id-sentence, "yes, you still have to wear yours. He'll get decent soon. It's not like I've never seen him naked before, and I'm sure you have before too." Rush thought for a moment, then shook his head.

"Not *completely*," he responded. "You know," she said, turning away from her nude commanding officer, "he's not that bad on the eyes." Franklin yelled back through his tent as he pulled on his gear, "I heard that. Don't look too long, or you

gonna realize you wanna date a real man.” Olivia scoffed and chuckled, Rush furrowed his brow, confused and concerned.

He thought he should be angry that Franklin was taking a swipe at his brother’s manliness, but Olivia laughed about it, so Rush let it go. “Strange sense of humor they have,” he mumbled to himself. The remainder of the day, Franklin’s remark stuck with Rush, combined with the verbal beating and physical destruction Franklin gave him the day before, he was getting irritated again.

After packing up and walking for another slow six hours with no less than ten bio breaks, they reached the outskirts of a small town. Calling it a town was really a compliment: the northwest side was blackened by fire and scarred with gunfire. Given its state, the Journeymen assumed it would be abandoned, but Franklin knew better. He instructed them to wait and observe. “This kinda shithole’s where y’ find raiders holed up.” He looked around and pointed out some relatively fresh graffiti, skulls on spikes, and the overall dilapidation. “They ain’t afraid t’ shed blood. Them skulls’re a warnin’.”

“Lot’s o’ chem-heads in there, too, I bet. There, see?” He pointed at a very faint whiff of smoke or steam rising from a distant building on the southernmost side. “Prolly where they’re cookin’ Jet. Or maybe something else. Ain’t all o’ ‘em as dumb as they look.” He paused to study the scene closer, “looks like vipers, guessin’ by th’ graffiti. Them bastards love green paint for some reason.”

Franklin looked down to Rush, crouching in thick bushes near his left leg, “dog, you sure this is the right place?” Rush nodded affirmatively, “positive.” Franklin sighed and ran a hand through his short cropped light hair, “damnit. Fine. Go back down the trail a quarter a mile and radio home. Make sure you’re downwind o’ us. Tell ‘em we got company at th’ homestead an’ we’re sendin’ ‘em out on their asses.” Rush rolled his eyes at the stupid message and did as he was instructed.

He took his sweet time walking down the narrow, occluded trail, hoping to avoid any nasty surprises along the way. The odd quietness of these woods made him uncomfortable and wish he didn’t leave his reassuringly heavy plasma rifle with Franklin and Olivia. He stupidly assumed that the gun and gear would slow him down too much. “Stupid,” he muttered to himself, “not running a race.”

He poked his PipBoy to open a radio channel after he verified he was downwind of his previous position. "Delta base? Do you copy?" A crackly voice responded through the miserable little speaker, "Yeah, Delta here. Who's this?" "Knight Rush," he replied. The voice on the other side paused awkwardly. "Roger Knight. Uh, Delta copies. Whatcha want?" Rush stopped and scratched his head: these conversations were always much more formal. They even forgot to repeat their call-sign. "Never mind Delta. False reports," he mumbled, closing the broadcast to check his Pip-Boy's radio parameters.

"Strange," he mumbled. His settings were correct. "Should tell Franklin. Something is wrong here." He walked the quarter mile back to find his comrades and give his report, but found only footprints and their lingering scents. "That is not good," he thought with worry. Movement near the settlement made Rush crouch back into the brush. He felt out for Olivia's mind and found her nearby. "Tell Franklin our radio communications have been intercepted. They are not secure." She shook her head violently and rather than yell back, relayed the message to Franklin as he requested. "How'd you know what?" "Rush just told me," she said, digging at the deep itch in her left ear that always appeared with Rush's voice in her head.

Franklin replied, "I don' wanna know how. Let's see if we cain't get a idea of how many there are 'round here." Rush popped up behind him, having followed their trail of scents, prepared to provide the necessary information. A stick crunched underfoot by Rush nearly earned him a hole in the head as Franklin spun around, rifle cocked and loaded. "Damnit, dog! I nearly fuckin' blew your god damn head off! You lost your damn mind!?" "Apologies, sir," Rush mumbled, carefully pushing Franklin's rifle from his face. He sniffed around and said, "thirty-seven. No, thirty-eight people in the settlement. Plus us makes forty-one." Franklin blinked in disbelief. "Are...you serious?" Rush nodded, "within five per-cent error." Olivia shook her head and smiled, "such a geek," she thought.

"So what's the plan," Olivia asked, "should we make contact or skip around? We'd be at ten-to-one like this." Franklin shook his head, "neither. It's our job to clean 'em out." Olivia and Rush both looked at him with apprehension, "slaughter them, you mean," Olivia whispered. "If we don't take 'em out, they'll go rape an' pillage an' murder good, innocent folks. 's our job to stop 'em." Rush shuddered at the thought of murdering for the sake of what they *might* do.

"No," Rush said defiantly. "Will not murder anyone." Franklin stepped close to Rush, reached up and pulled him down by a pointy ear so they eye-to-eye. He was

so close, Rush could feel his every hot word on his face. His commanding officer's eyes were on alive with excitement.

"You gonna let some bastard rapist live jus' 'cause you ain't got no balls, dog? I'm sure they got slaves too. Good people treated worse 'n animals; beaten an' lef' t' die in a ditch when they're down-right useless. Damn radier'll kill ya' just for lookin' at 'em crossways. Or if it's too bright out. Or 'cause they're bored." Franklin gripped Rush's ear tighter and shook it, making him whine in pain. Franklin whispered, "or just because. They like t' watch your pretty red blood leak outta you." Franklin scoffed and shoved him away, "you're gonna kill 'em 'cause it's what you was made for. You an' me too," he said to Olivia. "gotta kill 'em dead 'cause they'll do you in without a second thought."

"That's what the Brotherhood is, Journeymen. We all get our hands dirty an' damn ourselves eternally so th' good folks of the Wasteland get t' live. Ev'ryone from the front line t' th' scribes got blood on 'is hands. Now pull on your big girl panties an' ready your weapons!" They continued to stare at him, strangely invigorated and frightened by his speech. "Now!"

Rush was shaking so fiercely from fear and anticipation, he couldn't get a fresh microfusion cell into the bail of his rifle. Olivia gently patted and stroked his thick forearm the same way she did for Erik to calm him, "hey," she whispered, "you can do this. You'll be fine. *We'll* be fine." "Right. Ready ladies? Don't shoot kids or folks that ain't armed unless they're comin' at ya with a knife or somethin'. We just wanna kill the raiders."

Franklin continued, "you see anyone hurtin' or whatever, move 'em t' a safe spot if ya can. After th' raiders're done an' gone, ya'll gonna practice makin' Jenkins proud. Got it?" Rush and Olivia nodded again. "Good. Olivia, how d'you feel about bein' bait?" She sighed. "Yeah, I wondered when you were going to ask. Draw 'em out? Play defenseless? Damsel in distress?" Franklin nodded, "yeah, see that dumpster over there? That's where I'ma stash your rifle. Rush'll go in from the south at dusk. I'm comin' in from here once you get their attention." Franklin took a steadying breath. "Good luck Knights. Ya'll're gonna earn that rank. Right. Now. Go!"

The three split up as they planned: Franklin stayed at the western side and Olivia skirted to the northeastern side. Rush made his way to the southern side, waiting anxiously for his cover of darkness. He had a great view of the main street that bisected the settlement diagonally. What he saw didn't impress him:

the boarded building and few standing stalls were heavily weathered and neglected. A few people, sparsely clothed in metal-adorned leathers wandered around. Some argued in small groups around barrels of bonfires, others were slumped against walls, seemingly dead. "Must be the drugs," Rush thought to himself, "to sleep on concrete and asphalt."

Olivia readjusted the pistol in her boot before she slowly approached from the northeast corner, directly in line with Rush's vantage point. "Hello," she called out innocently, trying hard to ignore the strong stench of many unwashed humans from a nearby broken building. "Hello, I'm lost. Is anyone here? I need some directions." Her innocent calls got traction soon enough; a grizzled, well-built man in rough and blood-stained leathers resembling Rush's sauntered up to her. "Hey 'lil lady. What you doin' all the way out here?"

"I was walking up the highway, trying to get to the south but I think I took a wrong turn. Can you help me find my way to USS Bama?" The sunbaked man chuckled gently and threw a strong arm around her, "why you wanna go all th' way down there?" "Oh, well," she paused coyly, "I've been looking for a special medicine." "Oh yeah darlin'. You ain't gotta go all th' way down there, I got all the medicine you need right here." "Oh, really," she squealed, "do you have what will help my sick daddy?" "Sure, sure," he replied with a mischievous chuckle, "let's just go in here an' see if we can't fix what ails ya."

"Oh, sure! I've got plenty of caps. I can pay as much as you need." The man's relaxed chuckle turned violent the moment he grabbed her shoulder and shoved her into a nearby building, "oh, I don't think you'll be paying with caps, 'lil woman." She screamed bloody murder to garner as much attention as she could. Unfortunately, the raiders outdoors were busy arguing or too incoherent to pay much attention.

"*Scheisse*," Rush swore to himself, irritated that she didn't wait longer. He hurried as quickly as he could while sticking close to the slowly growing shadows. "Backup is on the way," he thought to her. Rush snuck into a burnt building and found his way to the top, perfect for jumping across the rooves undetected.

Franklin, too, cursed her for blazing in so quickly. He waited patiently for some patrols to leave before he sprinted down to leave Olivia's rifle in the dumpster a few hundred yards away. Unfortunately, his heavy tread crunching through the gravel caught a patrol's attention. Before he could call out, Rush leapt from a

rooftop onto the man's back, knocking him out. "Shit!" Franklin exclaimed under his breath. "Good job, dog. Let's get the slip on th' rest o' these guys." Rush nodded and accompanied Franklin as they slowly went from building to building looking for anyone that would pose a threat.

The first building went well; it was abandoned. Rush wrinkled his nose at the strong stench inside. It was a torrid concoction of fear, drugs, and pheromones. There was another smell that was vaguely familiar, but it was poisoned with hate, anger, and shame. He quickly realized what this was: a breeding pen for humans. Franklin thought the leather skins on the ground were a nice touch, even if they were stained with blood and other fluids. "Better than getting' fucked in dirt," he thought sadly. Rush struggled not to vomit as the realization washed over him. Franklin noticed he was paler than normal. "So you figured it out, dog? See what I tol' you? I can even smell it. Mus' be worse for you. I'll bet you can even tell how old they were."

Rush nodded weakly, swallowing down another jolt of vomit. "How old, dog?" Rush shook his head violently, unwilling to speak. Franklin stood next to him, making sure to stay out of the potential projectile puke path. "Jus' think if that was your 'lil ones back home. What'd you do then?" The mere mention pushed Rush over the edge: he shook violently before ejecting the meager contents of his stomach across the worn animal skins on the floor. Franklin lowered his voice to a deadly whisper, but his tone changed from harsh and angry to harshly sympathetic. "'member ev'ry time you kill one o' them bastards, you're savin' someone's kid."

Rush's noisy vomiting caught the attention of a pair of passerby Raiders. One called out sing-song while brandishing his rust-scaled knife, "get it all out little one! You're gonna need the room for when you swallow our..." He didn't get to finish. The second he stepped across the threshold into the small square building, Rush relieved the first man of his jugular vein. Warm blood gushed across Rush, the ceiling, and the raider's burlier partner who had no time to react as Rush did the same to him. Franklin chuckled grimly, "that's right, dog, drink up. That's what you's made for." Rush, blinded by instinct and muddled by chem-infused-blood, he pounced his own teammate.

"Do it!" Franklin laughed manically as Rush's full weight landed on him, "you know you wanna do it dog, drink my blood! Do me in th' way Cain did his own!" Rush bared his fangs with a guttural growl and closed in on Franklin's neck. Millimeters before plunging his sharp canines into the man's neck, Rush got a taste of his beading sweat. He sniffed deeply and blinked before quickly

withdrawing. Confused but happy to see Franklin, he licked his commanding officer's forehead after he came around. "Get the fuck off o' me, dog!" Rush obeyed. "Very bitter," he Rush noted after spitting the raider's blood from his maw. Franklin looked to Rush with relief after wiping off his saliva and asked as Rush offered him a hand up, "you remember doin' it? Th' thrill of killin' a man?"

Rush shook his head negatively, "blinding red, deafening noises, blood in my mouth, then heard you. Tasted you. Came back." Franklin scoffed jealously, "missed all th' fun, huh? Clean up this mess an' we'll make our way to Olivia," he said before peering around the open door and disappearing into the waning daylight. Rush watched him leave before adding insult to the raiders' injury by dragging them through his fresh bile patch.

While Rush was busy rearranging corpses, Franklin took out two more raiders on his way to a second den of filth: "the fun house," the raiders nicknamed it. The squat, two-story building was littered with pasty raiders. A thick grey haze hung low in the air, blanketing the handful of men and women laying on every available flat surface as they rode out their highs. "Mercy killing time," Franklin mumbled distantly, wasting each sickly addict with a quick, humane headshot. It was pitiful, he was sure they didn't see it coming. He chuckled grimly at the sight of their exploding craniums.

His repeated fire alerted the chemists on the second deck, who scrambled downstairs to have gobs of glowing green goo gravitating toward them. The first chemist took a torrid to the shoulder. "Motherfucker," he screamed in pain and surprise. The second and third shots missed them both. Rush came through the door to see Franklin sprint forward to stab the first one through the eye then dispatch the second chemist, a thin, sullen-eyed female, with a quick slice across the neck with his trusty buck knife. Her blood gushed across the faded blue floral wallpaper as she slumped to a broken heap on the stairs.

She slowly slid down the worn stairs before finally resting next to her partner on the bottom casement. Rush looked at the roomful of murder victims momentarily before asking, "you...killed them all?" Franklin nodded, wiping the blood and gore from his face and knife on the dead woman's tattered wife-beater. "Yup. Problem?"

Rush replied grimly, "they do not look armed." "Nope. Mercy killin' them are," Franklin replied and mumbled, "well, except these two idiots," climbing over them to reach the second deck. Rush extricated himself from the building as soon as he

could. He paused to gain his bearings before Olivia screamed again, this time she was cut short by repeated gunfire from a small-caliber pistol. Concerned, he attempted to bombard her consciousness for information, but she blocked him. After that, Rush decided to give up slow and sneaky and switch to emergency mode; running down the broken and littered street in the remaining daylight.

The sight of a man-sized wolf running through their village gathered the attention raiders: many leaned out of windows and around dirty alleyway corners to shoot at the anomaly.

That much gunfire and commotion was always over drugs, or caps for drugs, or someone killed another's favorite rape victim or dog. Sometimes both. Once the small chem-manufacturing raider village had a knife fight over someone stealing another's lunch. The sight of Rush sprinting down the street, moved the less chem-addled ones into action. They began pouring from every filthy crevice, guns, blades, and chains in hand, ready to kill the giant dog-thing.

Luckily, Rush avoided the handful of raiders that Franklin missed from the second deck of the chem den. He tried to count the dying bodies as he ran to where he last sensed Olivia. "Two rapists, plus five chem addicts, plus two dead chem makers is seven," he counted, "three more there. No now four, makes eleven. Where are the other thirty-aught?" He was still wanting for answers after knocking open the wooden door separating him from Olivia and her captor.

Rush was pleased to see that his sister-in-arms had things perfectly under control. She locked the grizzled leader into a makeshift cell the Raiders kept in the main room for "entertainment." He was nursing a couple of gunshot wounds to non-lethal locations. His second-in-command had a bullet in the forehead and three peons had pissed themselves, quivering in a corner. "Howdy, Rush," she said, spinning her 10mm on her finger like a western gunslinger. "Hello," he responded carefully before slamming the door behind him.

"We have company," he said, vaulting over the solid wood desk she was reclining on. "Figures," she mumbled before jumping over it to join him in the back. The moment she landed and ducked, the weathered wooden door splintered into a million shards with a hail of gunfire. One of the raiders was welding a machine gun! "What is that," Rush cried. "Beautiful piece of pre-war machinery," Olivia responded. Three more raiders fired past the first into the dark home. The three urine-stained raiders in the corner felt this was a good time to evacuate. "You worthless bastards," their boss screamed over the stream of bullets, "get your

sorry asses back here an' set me loose so I can kill an' fuck this broad! In that order! God damnit!"

"This'll be interesting," Olivia mumbled as she jammed another clip into her pistol. She peeked around the side of the desk to see the group of three had doubled in size. One of the three fleeing raiders took a round to the gut in the crossfire and laid in the middle of the floor, weeping and bleeding out. The other two located a Chinese 9mm pistol each and were trying to coax the bullets into the building through the exterior wall. A tough task, for such a pathetic pistol.

The hail of machinegun fire paused for a reload; Olivia took the chance to lean around the desk to fire at the madwoman carrying it. Rush dove into an adjoining room between bursts of small-caliber weaponry and tried to find a way out to attack them from behind. He didn't need much time, as Franklin was soon blasting holes through windows and thin walls containing them. This time, Rush was pointing the plasma rifle at Franklin. "I'm not one o' them, you idiot mutt, let's go!"

Rush jumped through the new portal in the wall to blast his rifle in the crowd's general direction. His marksmanship was pretty pathetic, given he winced and pulled wide to the left with each shot. "Crist's sake, dog, can't you hit nothing?" Rush howled in frustration, throwing the gun at Franklin, and bounded wild-eyed at the growing group of raiders.

He howled again, continuing their shock of seeing a man-sized attack dog, and went to town, dismembering them one by one. He used his razor-sharp teeth and claws to rend most of them lifeless in short order. After single-handedly razing half of their growing crowd, the rest scattered, screaming in every direction. The only one left was the machinegun lady: the raider's third-in-command.

Olivia watched, wide-eyed as Rush tossed her gun aside like a sheet of paper and impaled, her wielding his arm like a lance. She whimpered as he freed himself with a wet slurp and kicked her to the ground. She tried to say something smart, but Franklin quickly ended her suffering with a well-aimed to the brainpan.

Rush howled again, asserting his dominance over the dead raiders. Unsatisfied, he chased after them into the woods. Olivia checked her line of fire again and ran from the building to stand with Franklin amidst the blood and gore. "Holy shit," she said in disbelief. "He couldn't have done all..." her statement was

punctuated by another of Rush's howls as he violently murdered another murderer. His chem-addled mind broadcasted his bloodlust, making his comrades incredibly uncomfortable as they shared his temporary madness.

"Four left," he announced, "only four. Now three," he laughed with psychotic glee as he ripped a woman limb-from-limb. Olivia was completely terrified. Franklin was quite unnerved himself, "let's uh, go find 'im," Franklin said to a trembling Olivia. "One. Two! One more left," Rush screamed mentally, "where are you?! We only want to kill the killers," he thought. "There you are!" he screamed, twisting and ripping the raider's head clean from his shoulders, lapping from his gushing neck like a water fountain.

After the carcass' bleeding settled waned, Rush stopped to sniff the disembodied head. He stared deep into the eyes of head and shook violently. The chem-soadked blood in his stomach affected his ability to think and to block out the violence he orchestrated. He screamed and pitched the head as far as he could throw it before running deeper into the woods.

Franklin and Olivia searched long into the night for him, only finding scattered remnants of his victims and his leathers. After finally giving up, they returned to the settlement around nine to find the leader of the raiders managed to escape. Not only did he escape, he saw fit to murder their human livestock.

Olivia was sick to her stomach at the sight of piles of thin, abused humans, beaten and tossed away like garbage in the center of town. "You still got that lighter," Franklin asked, staring directly at the pile of bodies in the middle of the street. "Uh, yeah. Why?" "We're burnin' this place to the ground. Sins an' all." They spent the next hour navigating by Pip-Boy light, scavenging for kindling and fuel. Olivia located a half-spent bottle of Mr. Handy fuel. Franklin found the remnants of a bar: five bottles of high proof booze.

"Four for the fire," he thought to himself, "and one all for me." They met back at the pile of bodies and lit them and the nearby buildings, hoping that would be enough to catch the whole settlement. "Let's go," Franklin said abruptly, shielding his eyes from the brilliant flames and holding his breath. "What about Rush," Olivia asked. "He'll catch up," Franklin said nonchalantly, "let's make camp somewhere up the road an' away from this hell hole."

"Go ahead an' send a report," Franklin said grimly to Olivia around eleven that night. "Roger, sir." She dialed in her Pip-Boy and called home. "Delta Base come

in. Do you copy?" "We copy, loud and clear," the man replied flatly across the small speaker, "please state your identification code." Franklin took over from there, "Paladin John Franklin of the Brotherhood of Steel serial 4198. Who's runnin' this rig?"

"Erik here. How can I assist?" he asked lazily. "God damnit," Franklin cursed under his breath, "raiders've been dealt with, Delta." Erik furrowed his brow before replying to the phosphorous green waveform on his oscilloscope, "raiders? Please repeat recon team. Did you say raiders?" "Yeah, but we cleaned house. First zone is foobar'd right to hell though, th' remainder set fire to the place on the way out."

"Ah, roger recon team. How're y'all?" "We're fine," Franklin lied, "making camp tonight. Proceeding to zone two tomorrow mornin'." "Roger recon team, sleep tight." "A'ight Delta. Paladin Franklin over and out." Olivia stared at her Pip-Boy, sorely wanting to turn tail and go back home, worn by the atrocious acts of violence they'd witnessed and participated in that day. "Why'd you lie," she asked sternly to Franklin. "Maybe they'd know what's wrong with him?"

Franklin shook his head, "nah. They cain't help us all th' way out here anyways. I know what th' problem is." "Oh. Do you now," she replied sarcastically. "Yes, *Journeyman*. I know exactly what's wrong. Th' boy's got too much of their poisoned blood in 'em. He didn't look right, he wasn't killin' like he did before." Franklin led them down the road as he explained his theory.

"I seen him kill right in front o' me. Quick an' efficient. No muss, no fuss. I figured them raiders' full 'o jet or whatever they was cookin. After the first few he killed, he probably got a belly full o' that shit." Olivia shook her head, "but he's like Erik, chems don't work on him." A loud explosion from the vestiges of the town two miles behind them gave credence to Franklin's theory: the raiders' storage tanks of methane and other delicious chemicals exploded, lighting up the pitch-black sky in a brilliant blaze of orange, yellow, and red.

Franklin sighed, "when's the last time you saw Erik do Jet? Or Med-X or anything that ain't a Stimpack?" "Never, but...", he cut her off. "Right. Then you don't know. Stop getting' your judgement all fucked up jus' cause he's your fuck buddy's brother. He'll come 'round and find us. Don't worry. He tracks better'n I do, an' that's for damn sure."

Olivia took a deep breath and sighed, “yeah. Sorry. That was just...” Franklin nodded, “a lot, Yeah. What we saw tonight, Journeyman, was what they’s designed for. T’ be the best murderin’ machine. All in the name of democracy an’ the United Commonwealths of America an’ its continuin’ fight against communist aggression.” She involuntarily shuddered again. Without warning, her Pip-Boy ticked loudly as the ambient radiation rose due to the chemical explosion and an incoming storm.

A second boom, this time miles to their South, signaled a summer thunderstorm. The ominous green heat lighting accompanying it made it much more of a threat. A radiation storm was on a war path. “Fuck,” Franklin sighed and pointed at the overpass they were hiking toward,” let’s hurry an’ settle down over there for th’ night.” Olivia agreed and picked up her pace, lugging her and Rush’s bags toward safety.

“You pack any Rad-X, woman?” “Ah. Damnit, no. I’ll bet Rush did though,” she replied. “Yeah? Good. How ‘bout RadAway?” She nodded affirmatively, unpacking some tinder and her sleeping bag. “That’s just as good. Hard to take ‘an run, though.” He took her tinder, added his own, and borrowed her lighter to get a small fire started for dinner.

“A’ight. We’ll be dry and pretty safe under here. You hungry?” Olivia shook her head, poking at her Pip-Boy absentmindedly. “No, thanks. Lost my appetite a while back after what we saw in town.” Franklin dug out a bottle of absinthe he lifted, “thirsty then?” “Now that you mention it,” she muttered, “A drink sounds good, yeah.” Franklin nodded and fished out a pair of tin cups from his pack and kicked a nearby milk crate and wooden bucket near their small fire.

“There,” he grumbled, nudging the more comfortable of the two in her direction. She gladly accepted the bucket and began working on getting her boots off while Franklin poured them two fingers each of the pale green liquid. “So, if you don’t mind me askin’, you on meds for something? Are you sick?” Franklin did a poor job of hiding his shock from Olivia’s inquiry. “Why th’ hell you think I need meds?” Olivia shrugged nonchalantly. “We saw you tryin’ to hide them. Nothing to be ashamed of, so long as they’re good for you.”

He dropped the conversation immediately by digging out a small saucepot, some greens, a canteen of water, and jerky from his bag. She looked at him suspiciously, waiting for an explanation. “What? Ain’t you hungry? I sure as hell am.” Olivia shook her head, “so you’re not gonna tell me?” “Brahmin stew with

garlic greens,” he said to the pot while roughly chopping up the wild greens and jerky with his buck knife. “Shame I didn’t find no mushrooms.”

“No,” she said, “the pills. Is that why we had to stop for you to pee a million times on the way down here?” Franklin slowly nodded while he swirled the pot atop the small fire. “Yeah. Ida gave ‘em to me. Helps t’ even out th’ mood swings,” he muttered with shame. “That’s what he thought,” she said aloud. Franklin asked, “he who? Th’ dog?” She nodded after sipping her drink and asked, “why do you keep calling him a dog? He obviously doesn’t like it.” “‘cause I can. Someone’s gotta remind ‘im he’s lower on th’ food chain. Him an’ ‘is kind’re tools. They ain’t people, an’ they ain’t pets. They’re guns with claws. Expendable.”

Olivia shook her head, “he’s smarter than both of us put together. He’s strong and kind.” “You wanna tell that to th’ scum he ripped apart today? See if that brings ‘em back and sews ‘em together? Maybe they’ll be nice enough t’ shoot at us again.” Franklin retorted and swirled his pot with more passion, “chems or not, that boy’s a natural-born man killer. You’d be best t’ remember that.” Another clap of thunder and bright lightning derailed Olivia’s response as the rain finally broke free and fell from the sky. “Oh, shit,” she sighed as her Geiger counter began chirping intermittently.

“That time o’ th’ year,” Franklin said sadly, “damn radiation storms come up from ‘th Gulf, south o’ here. Jus’ pop a couple o’ Rad-X. Unless it’s a hurricane, then we’re fucked.” After she chugged the last of her alcohol to calm her nerves, Franklin filled her tin cup with warm stew. “Here. This ought t’ help.” The tin cup of watery cow-flavored water and slimy green stuff with oddly shriveled chunks of meat didn’t look very appetizing. “This is good, right?” she asked, counting the slimy green bits. “Yeah, good for ya too. Now eat up, Journeyman. Gotta keep your strength up if we’re gonna get back t’ work in th’ mornin’.”

“Yes, sir,” she mumbled, sipping on the watery soup. After serving himself, Franklin took to kicking items around the underpass to clear a spot to roll out his thin sleeping bag. “I’m a sleep over here so you don’t go gettin’ any ideas.” Olivia scoffed, “ideas of what? How to wash my eyes after seeing you naked? You’ve got a reputation at the bath house for being rough on the eyes after you get your clothes off.” He scoffed this time and responded proudly, “I may be rough an’ battle-hardened, but I’m tender an’ gentle where it counts. Just ask Candy why she keeps comin’ back t’ my place after work.” Olivia shuddered with mild disgust in response.

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A massive explosion miles away caught Rush's attention. He was coming down from an overdose of Jet and Psycho that would have easily killed a human twice over. His head and heart pounded with every sluggish beat, every joint ached, and his muscles fatigued under the weight of a hundred gravity wells. "Why do I feel so bad?" he questioned a nearby tree who did not respond. The treetops shook from the shockwave and spooked him. "What?! Where?" The perfect silence in the woods served to fuel the remnants of his chem-induced paranoia. He couldn't place it, but he was absolutely sure someone was watching him.

He bear-hugged the giant pine to re-center himself. "Safe. Grounded. Like this thing. Where is everyone?" he thought. After catching his breath, Rush turned to the north where the explosion came from. "Maybe there are people there that can help. Hope they aren't exploded." The muscular fatigue slowed him down to half his normal speed, making the trek through the woods arduous. The scattered bits of raiders and thick stench of blood on and around him wasn't helping much either.

A loud crash from above accompanied with lightning saw Rush dive to the ground in fright. He stared wide-eyed at the dark sky; the thick cloud cover streaking the sky looked foreign and bizarre. He thought it loomed above suspiciously, spying on him. Another boom and crackle sent him running for his life, ignoring the brambles and brush that scraped and lacerated his flesh as he sprinted north. He wheezed, doing his best to ignore the pain in his chest and limbs.

He arrived at the woods' edge to see the entire town engulfed in dancing flames. Thick black smoke from the burning buildings billowed upward and further darkened the sky, smeared by the incoming storm front. The shimmering flames mesmerized Rush until another clap of thunder brought him back to his senses. The smoke and heat were oppressive and made each heaving breath more painful. His body chose this particularly awful moment to purge his stomach of the remaining curdled contents.

To make matters worse, rain pelted him from the sky and the metal thing attached to his arm was making crackling noises. He ignored the stupid contraption. Something told him going through a burning town wasn't the best idea, so he jogged as quickly as his body would allow to the western outskirts of the village. A few of the buildings there hadn't fully caught fire on that side, but that didn't mean much to him. A rusty green dumpster behind them captivated his

attention. "Why are you important," he muttered, raising the lid. Inside was a plasma rifle, a handful of ammo, and some familiar scents.

Fighting to focus, he stuck his head in the container and sniffed around again. "Smells good," he mumbled, reaching for the plasma rifle. He sniffed its leather strap and grips to remember to whom the scent belonged. The heavy rain and chemical smoke made the lingering scents difficult to sense and distinguish. He sniffed again, thinking he smelled a second scent on the gun.

Rush looked around aimlessly for a few moments before catching a slight whiff of a scent matching one of the gun's. Whomever it was, they were north of him. He set off in excitement and was quickly disappointed. The irradiated rain combined with his withdrawals made him increasingly weak. He whined loudly as he smashed his knees and face on the hard asphalt. The gun jammed in his gut on the way down, bruising his short ribs on the left.

He laid on the warm asphalt for a few moments atop the gun before deciding to try again. Rush slowly picked himself and resumed trudging through the rain toward the mystery scent. Progress was slow as he shuffled through the quickly forming mud in the dirt surrounding broken asphalt. Another crash of lightning overhead made him gasp and wince at the new pain in his side. "The outside sucks," he thought sourly.

The sporadic showers gave him long enough breaks to recapture the scent and adjust his course. After what seemed like endless hours of shuffling and dragging his sore feet, he found himself approaching an overpass. The rain broke again and he caught a fresh burst of the same scent as before. He hobbled as quickly as he could toward the scent, sincerely hoping whomever it belonged to could help him.

"Hello?" he called out weakly, drowned out by another wave of rain. He grumbled at the clouds above and shot at them as retaliation for their rude behavior. The green toroid of plasma lit up the dark moonless night and caught Olivia's attention. She grabbed Rush's gun and yelled to Franklin, "we've got company!" He cursed under his breath, readying his own rifle in nothing but underwear and socks. "I'll be damned if some asshole's gonna steal my shit an' I'm in my skivvies," he complained to Olivia. She ignored him, trying to find something in her scope to aim at.

Another shot fired upward and Olivia shouted to the mysterious shadow two hundred yards away. "Who goes there?!" He heard her and replied weakly, "I don't know!"

Who are you? Are you friendly?" She couldn't make out what he was saying over the fierce downpour. "Stay right there! Put your gun down and we'll talk!" Rush did as she said, tossing it as hard as he could in her direction. In his condition, it wasn't far. A flash of lightning overhead lit his silhouette against the dark outline of trees flanking the highway. "Rush!" she screamed happily, sprinting to him.

Franklin watched her run into the hazardous rain from the underpass. Not wanting to get his undergarments wet, he waited for her to drag their sopping wet comrade back to their dwindling fire. She shouldered the two plasma rifles and beamed down at Franklin, "see who I found?" "Y' mean who found us," Franklin asked flatly. "Good job dog, feel better after runnin' away?"

Rush looked to the excited Journeyman, then down to the mostly-naked Paladin and shrugged. "Who are you? Why are you not wearing clothing? Should I leave?" Olivia furrowed her brow in concern, "stop playing Rush. You know who we are." "Who is Rush? I am sorry, but I do not know who you are. Are you friendly? I think I may need medical help, I am unsure." Olivia gently set their guns aside and guided Rush to her bucket to warm him up near the fire.

"Well," she said gently and full of worry, "that's the first time you've ever said 'I,' Wolfy. Lots of times too. You learn that after taking a bunch of chems?" He shook his head, sending his vision swimming. He was so soaked that the previously dried blood, dirt, and mud dribbled down his coat and into a growing puddle around the bucket and under his feet, leaving a disgusting dark stain. Franklin rolled his eyes, growing mildly frustrated with the turn of events.

"Journeyman," he asked Olivia, "you finish your dinner?" "Did I what? No. Why?" "Warm it up and give it to the dog. Get some warm food in 'is belly and give 'im some RadAway. Take some Rad-X yourself. I'm goin' back t' bed." Olivia was shocked to see him so nonchalant about one of his subordinates clearly suffering from what she assumed was a chem overdose or deliria. "That's it? You're going to bed?" she asked angrily. "Yeah, *Journeyman*, I am. Do as you're told and y'all get to bed too. We'll get sorted in th' morning," he replied in increasing aggravation and anger. "Now! That's an order!"

He got up, kicked his milk crate in her direction, and stormed off to his sleeping bag. "Who are you?" Rush asked her again. "What's wrong," Olivia asked his bag as she tore through it looking for his medkit, "you don't remember? Do you remember who you are? Anything?" Rush stared at the fire and gently shook his

head. "No. I do feel underdressed though." Olivia stared at the floppy bag of RadAway before looking over at Rush, only just realizing he was wearing less than Franklin. "Yeah, well, we found your leathers earlier. Why'd you take 'em off?" He shrugged in response.

"You remember the town? It's probably burned completely down now." Rush shrugged again and asked, "is that your weapon?" "Yeah, thanks. I forgot to get it after ..." Rush unconsciously raised an eyebrow in question, giving her a little hope after she trailed off. "After the raiders got wily. We had to put them down. I think they did something to you with their chems. You disappeared off into the woods. We searched for hours." She added with disappointment, "we couldn't find you. Just your stupid pants."

She handed him the tin cup of half-eaten soup with a smile, "eat up." He carefully accepted the vessel and leaned over to deeply sniff her hair. "You smell nice: mint and rose. Familiar. Safe." She blushed slightly at his awkwardness. He sipped the cup and after swallowing the warm broth blinked and said, "Olivia!" "What?" she replied in excitement, "I mean, yes!" He took another sip of the broth and looked to his right at Franklin.

"He...is good too?" Rush asked the fire. He finished his cup of food and walked over to Franklin, standing above him and demanding he wake up. Franklin rolled over and propped himself up on an elbow before glaring at the wolf-man. "Go the fuck to sleep, dog. What part of 'go to bed' did you miss? Forget English, too?" Rush shook his head, ripped away the man's sleeping bag to sniff his neck and an armpit. "You!" Rush said, excitedly jumping on and bear-hugging him against the asphalt. "You are John Franklin!" "Yeah, now get the hell off me, you fuckin' mutt," Franklin struggled to push him off as Rush licked his face. Olivia chuckled to herself and shook her head while preparing another portion of Franklin's stew. "Rush, c'mon, let the old man have his sleep."

The burly man punched at Rush's head as he pulled away and grumbled, "stupid dog, gettin' me and my bed all dirty and shit." He was secretly relieved that Rush found them and was mostly in one piece. Rush obeyed and rejoined Olivia at the fire, pleased that his temporary lapse in memory was closing; his tail violently wagged through the air. Olivia stoked and fed their small fire, coaxing more warmth and light out of it, trying to fight the dampness from the heavy rains.

After stoking the fire to a respectable blaze, Olivia mustered the courage to administer the RadAway. Rush winced when she missed the first two times. "Hold

still you bastard,” she muttered to the large vein rolling out of her reach. After the third miss, he took the needle and pushed it into the thick vein himself. “Fuck. Sorry,” she mumbled. “You handle the guns,” Rush said with a gentle smile, “I can handle the fine work.” “You still hungry, Rush?” she asked, taking his empty cup. “Yes. I could not keep my stomach down this afternoon. I must have eaten something foul.”

She couldn’t tell if he was joking or not. “Yeah, something like that,” she mumbled, refilling his cup and handing it back. “How much of today do you remember?” He sipped the warm watery concoction and shrugged. “We left home to explore something early this morning. We walked for hours, but we had lots of breaks. That was nice. Then we found a town.” His face sunk and he whispered, drooping his ears and tail, “Oh. Then things went very bad.” “Yeah...” she muttered, nudging the cup of soup back toward his maw and holding his intravenous bag of RadAway aloft. “They did unspeakable things there,” he shuddered. Olivia nodded, “They’re raiders, Wolfy. That’s what raiders do. Rape, and pillage. And lots of drugs apparently.”

Rush sipped his soup and murmured sadly, “I was one of them today, after what I did to them.” Olivia reached around him and pulled him close to pat his back, “no. If you were, you wouldn’t feel bad about what happened. You wouldn’t have remorse.” She continued patting him and leaned into his broad shoulder, “you had me worried. I was afraid we’d lost you. I don’t know what Erik would have done if you’d seriously gotten hurt, Rush.” “Brother,” he said into his cup. “He would do the same as I would. Punish whomever harmed me. Severely. Without remorse or mercy.”

“Finish your dinner. You’re almost done with the RadAway. Probably not good to take this stuff on an empty stomach,” she instructed. He quickly gulped down the last bland dregs and leaned back into his sister-in-arms, happy to be safe again. They stayed shoulder-to-shoulder until the droning rain on the asphalt above lulled Olivia to sleep, forcing her to drop the empty IV bag to her side. Rush yelped loudly as the needle ripped loose from his vein, then yelped again as his sore ribs complained at his sudden outburst.

She jumped with a start, smacking the already ailing man in his thigh. “What? What’s wrong?!” He whimpered, putting pressure on his bleeding arm. “Nothing I cannot fix, sister. Please to go bed. I will be okay.” “Sister?” she asked. He nodded, “best I have ever had. Please get some rest. I keep watch a while longer.” She felt terrible about hurting the gentle giant and pushed his mud-

clumped cowlick out of his amber eyes and gently wiped some dirt and grime from his bruised muzzle. "Goodnight Rush. I'll get your bed out for you, okay?" He nodded appreciatively.

She rolled out her bed on the opposite side of the fire and rolled his out next to it. "I know you don't like sleeping alone. I'll keep you safe," she said with a smirk. He nodded again, matching her smirk. He turned and watched from the corner of his eye as she stripped out of her leather and metal armor down to her wife beater and jeans before crawling into her yellow sleeping bag. He spent most of the remaining morning hours staring into the fire, meditating on her words and listening to the droning rain above. An hour before dawn, he turned in as well. They all slept soundly to the patter of rain. Rush didn't dream much that night, but had a lingering feeling in his gut that something was still watching them.

He was right.

###

In the early daylight, a scribe came knocking at the weathered door to the radio tower. Erik, having worked a double shift the previous night, was fast asleep on the counter below oscilloscopes, waveform generators, and various radio parts. The scribe pounded on the door again before barging in. "Paladin? Paladin! Wake up!" "Hm. What's wrong," Erik slurred as he squinted at the mousey-haired young man yelling at him. "Elder Redding wants you in his office ASAP. Paladin Jenkins is already there waiting."

"What? Why? What's going on?" Erik complained and questioned. The scribe only shook his head and waved him through the door. "I'll finish your shift," he said as Erik jogged past him. "Nice outside," Erik thought to himself as a gentle breeze filtered through the trees and buildings of their base. Knight Captain Penn was corralling a large group of Knights for their morning run near the crops and dog kennels. "Five miles to start with, maggots, let's go!" he heard her shout. He paused to watch them run single-file northward on the highway. One of the newer ones from Fruitland made the mistake of complaining. "That's it! Fifteen!"

Tom and Marie were out for their regular morning stroll as well. Erik waved to them as he continued to jog to the Commons building. A quick salute and he was in. The scribes standing in for Franklin were already ruining breakfast, from

what he could smell. Erik quickly rounded the first corner to their shared office and knocked on the double wooden doors.

He stood there awkwardly for a few moments in the hall waiting for a reply. The Elder answered sharply, "enter!" Erik pushed the door open to see Jenkins slumped on the couch, half-asleep. "I said enter, Paladin," the Elder repeated with aggravation. "Aye, sir," Erik said cautiously before closing the door behind himself. "Take a seat next to Paladin Jenkins there. We all need to have a chat."

"Is everything okay, sir? What's wrong?" The Elder sighed and asked, "Paladins? What makes the Brotherhood work?" Jenkins looked to Erik and grumbled, "chain of command, sir?" "Right. Chain of command. What happens when we start ignoring our superiors' orders?" He paused for dramatic effect. "Paladin Erik? Care to answer?" "We stop being effective, sir." "Very good," Elder Redding replied.

"Now, Paladins, do either one of you care to explain why you are doing the scribes' radio tower rotations this week? After I gave the both of you very clear orders?" Jenkins opened his mouth to respond, but the Elder cut him off. "Think very hard before you answer, son." Jenkins gulped and hesitated. He looked to Erik for the answer. "Yes, sir. We were worried about the wellbeing of our brothers and sisters in the field."

"A noble effort," the elder said gently, "but that brings me to another question. Do you feel that the people assigned that duty by their superiors, your peers, are incapable of performing it?" "I, uh," Erik hesitated, "of course not, sir. They're normally great at it." "Normally?" their Elder asked suspiciously. Jenkins decided to grab a shovel and help Erik dig. "We just wanted to make extra sure, sir. That's all. We didn't mean any disrespect." The Elder leaned back in the quilted leather chair for a few tense moments.

"Paladins," he said sternly, "I give you assignments for two reasons. One: you are the best suited in the Brotherhood to perform that job. Two: I trust that you will perform that job to the best of your ability, and without question of my motives. Now which of those two things am I wrong about, that you decided to overrule me?" Erik and Jenkins tried to sink as far as possible into the couch: it had been quite some time since their Elder seriously scolded them.

Their continued silence was the answer he was looking for. "That's what I thought. I trust we won't have this problem again. No matter *who* is in the field, *I* put them there for a reason." "Yes, sir," they said in tandem shame. He sighed

heavily and raised his voice a bit more, “it also sets a terrible precedence when you two pull rank like that. If you, my own son and his best friend disobey me, eventually no one will continue to follow my orders. So help me, if you do it again, it better be to save a life!” He finished by slamming his mug of tea on the wooden desk, spilling it. “Yes, sir,” they mumbled again.

“Now,” the Elder sighed lowering his voice to its typical calm tenor, “let’s go have a bite of breakfast. I have a new assignment for you two.” They glanced at each other with worry before following the Elder from the comfortable couch to the cafeteria with their tails between their legs. Their leader paused at the wooden doors exiting the office, “You two need to take your punishment with pride, stop looking so browbeaten.”

They all filed in for an early breakfast of dry scrambled eggs and watery tea with a side of nearly-burnt toast. “Well, at least it’s not charcoal today,” the Elder mused. “Maybe they’ll be half decent by the end of the month,” Erik said into his mug. Jenkins poked his unappetizingly squeaky curds around on his plate. “You heard from Major Artemis yet Elder?” He nodded in response, “yes. I got a report in day-before-yesterday. Everything is going well in Jackson for a change.”

“His sister’s clinic is doing well, they’re almost fully staffed now. His niece is a doctor now, just like her mother before her. They’re working on recruiting a small Brotherhood detachment up there to help fend off the slaver ring up there and straighten the place up. Hopefully they’ll have them beaten out by the end of the year. I expect the Major back in a few weeks. He says that his highwayman has broken down again. Fuel regulator I believe.” Jenkins shook his head, “dad’s not gonna like that.”

“So, Elder, what’ve you got us working on,” Erik asked tentatively. “Paladin Jenkins will be rejoining Ida and Willis in the laboratory. I have some interesting samples I would like examined. You’ll be doing some recon work for me nearby. Test your skills.” Erik raised an eyebrow in suspicion. “We’ll chat at Ida’s.” The Elder’s scribe peeked through the doors, spotted them, and immediately disappeared. “Wasn’t that what’s-his-face?” Jenkins asked the Elder quietly. “Yes, I’m afraid it was. I wonder where he’s off to.”

The Elder excused himself to chase down his scribe and told the boys to meet him at Ida’s laboratory in an hour. Willis joined them at their corner table shortly after the Elder left. “Mornin’,” he grumbled sourly at Jenkins. “Uh, morning

Willis,” he replied awkwardly. “What’s up,” Erik asked. “You wanna tell ‘em,” Willis asked Jenkins, “or should I? I’ll bet he’d like to know.” “No! No. No, that’s okay. Let’s not worry about it. We’ll talk about it later, okay hon?”

Willis scoffed, “don’t start tryin’ to make up to me. You know what you did.” Erik was in an awkward position: on one hand he was certainly curious about the lovers’ quarrel, on the other he really didn’t want to know all of the gritty details. Erik looked around awkwardly, “Willis? Did they forget your ketchup? Let me go get it!” They both watched him scamper off into the kitchen.

“Why’d you have to do that,” Jenkins asked with agitation. “You broke your promise and didn’t see me yesterday. Then I caught you doin’ what you were doin’ in that man’s room. If you were that bored, why didn’t you just ask for a quickie? I’d never said ‘no.’” The longer his questions drug on, the louder and more agitated Willis became. “What can’t I do for you that you think he can? It’s them ears, ain’t it?! That tail maybe?!” Jenkins was flush with anger, “nothing! It’s not like that!”

They were both loud enough now that the handful of occupants in the cafeteria stopped their own conversations to turn and listen in. Even Erik was peeking around the kitchen door with a bottle of ketchup in hand. “Well, good,” Willis bellowed, leaving their quarrel in an odd state. “You can explain what that was to Erik then, if it’s ‘not like that.’” Jenkins went from pale with anger to translucent embarrassment. “No. I’m not doing that.” “Do it, or we’re done. Permanently.” Willis said with dead seriousness.

Jenkins was at a loss for words. “Everybody,” Willis bellowed, “get back to your own damn business!” Plates, glasses, and cutlery clanged as the eight other occupants, Erik, and the four cooking staff quickly resumed whatever they were doing. “Where’s my fuckin’ ketchup, Rade?” Willis bellowed again. Erik sighed and exited the kitchen with the glass bottle of red paste. “Sorry Willis. They had it stuck way back in the cooler for some reason, couldn’t find it.”

Willis shook his head, took the bottle, and pounded on the bottom until a flood of ketchup covered his pathetic breakfast. “That’s better,” he said to his plate. “Sit down Rade. Axel here needs to tell you how bad he’s been.” Erik raised an eyebrow, afraid of the impending conversation. “So,” Jenkins started awkwardly, “after I finished my shift and did your rotations with the Knights, I went to the lab. Nobody was in and I was kinda tired, so I figured I’d go crash on one of

Rush's couches. I didn't think he'd care." Erik nodded and agreed. Rush would have probably been offended if he didn't.

"So, you napped on his couch? What's wrong with that Willis?" The super mutant was too busy choking down a mouthful of eggs and ketchup to respond but pointed at Jenkins and wagged his finger. "Right, well, I didn't sleep on the couch," Jenkins said, "I ended up sleeping on his bed." Erik shrugged uneasily, unsure about the course of their conversation.

Willis gagged and dislodged his food with a swig of tea. "That's not all you were doin', Axel," Willis said. "Oh, no. You two didn't...on his bed. You know he'll know." "No," Jenkins squeaked, "not the two of us. Just...me." Erik screwed up his face and shook his head. "That's gross. I'd better never catch you doing that in my bed." Willis shoved his tray to the middle of the table and glared at Jenkins. "Finish the story."

Franklin blushed and said, "yeah, so. That was happening. I didn't hear Willis come in, and he heard me talkin' to myself." "I'm done, thanks," Erik said. "I don't need the details. I've heard too much already, Axel. I don't care what you think about when you're doin' that. I really, *really*, don't." Willis shook his head, "even when it's about your big brother? You want me t' tell you all the things he said he wanted 'im to do to 'em?"

Erik physically gagged. "No! I don't! Why!? Oh Christ, now I'm thinking about it!" Willis laughed at Erik's anguish. He was rubbing his palms into his eyes, "I told you before, Jenkins, as long as you don't make a move on 'im, I don't care what you imagine in your head. Just...leave me out of it!" He shuddered and left his tray at the table, sorely wanting fresh air to cleanse the lurid images in his mind.

Willis watched him leave and shrugged, "huh. I figured he'd be angrier." "What!?" Jenkins exclaimed. "What was all of that?!" Willis shrugged his shoulders again with a grin, "That's what you get for being creepy without me." Jenkins sighed and gently banged his head on the table in defeat. "Sometimes I hate you," he mumbled to the table. "No you don't," Willis argued playfully before stealing Erik's toast and dunking it in his tea.

Erik stood on the concrete entryway to the Commons building and stared across the sidewalks and thin street to the laboratory. "Ugh, gross." he complained to himself. One of the two nearby armored Knights sniffed his armpit and shrugged,

"I showered three days ago sir!" Erik stared at the Knight momentarily, slowly processing his statement. "Every other day, Knight. Every other day," Erik muttered. The man in metal saluted him as he walked across the street; his partner at the door shook her head and complained, "See? I told you. You stink."

He pushed his way through the thick steel exterior doors and let his feet carry him down the familiar hall to Ida's laboratory. The security glass had paper taped behind it, making the window glow the same cold white color as the fluorescents overhead. Just as he raised his hand to knock on the door, it swung inward and he saw Ida. Her remaining straggly hair was more unkempt than normal and her lab coat was wrinkled and lightly stained with organic colors.

"You okay, Ida?" She peered down each direction of quickly alarmed: her tables of experiments were as disheveled as she was. "Ida? What's going on?" "I'll explain once Redding and the others get here." He took a nearby stool and sat on it near her, uncomfortable in the familiar lab.

Within the prescribed hour, Elder Redding followed by Willis and Jenkins came to the lab and peered around. "Hello Ida," Elder Redding said slightly sadly, "are you well?" She trembled slightly while replying, "I've seen better days, Marshall. I'll feel better once we sort out what's going on." He nodded and gestured for Willis and Jenkins to take a seat next to Erik.

"I have some bad news, Brothers," he said solemnly. "We suspect a mole in our ranks." That statement raised eyebrows and hair. "Any suspects, Elder?" Erik asked. "A few Paladin, yes. Honestly, we're all suspects until we can catch him or them." Ida stood up from her chair and stood next to the Elder, "someone broke in and stole some...important files and samples that Willis and I were working on."

Willis' eyes widened slightly, "When? Everything was locked up tight when I left last night." Ida nodded. "Must've happened sometime between ten and four, I guess," she said, "I walked in to this mess around four thirty and woke up Marshall with the news." The Elder nodded again, "needless to say, this is a grievous transgression and puts us in an awkward position. Erik, you need to start investigating the scribes, look for anything suspicious."

Erik scoffed, "that won't be easy, they're all a bit odd." Elder Redding nodded slightly, "even so. Get it done. Axel, you, Willis, and Ida will be rebuilding the samples. I should have duplicate copies of the documentation in my safe."

Erik scratched a sideburn, "Sir? What samples did they take, exactly?" Their leader sighed slightly, "well, we were trying to reverse engineer some of the work that Doctor Hawthorne and his team pioneered. We're looking for a way to use the gene splicing technology they developed for crops, livestock, radiation resistance and such."

Jenkins squinted with suspicion, "is that *all* you were researching?" he asked Willis. "Well, we wasn't tryin' to make more of 'em, if that's what you're askin'." Jenkins nodded, "good. We shouldn't be experimenting on people. Tryin' to make super soldiers is how you ended up the way *you* are." Erik found himself offended. "Fine, I'll go start staking out the scribes. When do you want a report?" "A preliminary by dinner, if you can, Paladin."

Erik nodded to his father and peers before quickly setting off through the lab and out the back near the makeshift laundry center, leaving a handful of scribes to wonder why he was in such a hurry. Willis and Jenkins glanced at each other, then to Ida. "That's not all we were studying is it, sir?" Jenkins asked. "No, paladin. It's not." The elder nodded to Ida and saluted them before leaving on his way. The shaken woman sighed and said, "Well? Culture plates won't coat themselves. We'll start there and get back to square one once the Elder comes back."

Elder Redding took his time walking up the three flights of stairs to his home, careful to inspect everyone in view. He found his right-hand scribe sitting on his couch studying a clipboard. "Scribe? Where have you been all morning?" "Covering Paladin Rade's shift at the radio, sir. I was already up and didn't want to bother the other scribes just for them to listen to static for a few hours."

"Very well," Elder Redding sighed, "that was thoughtful of you. Would you please make me a mug of tea? I have a lot of paperwork to prepare." The scribe nodded and quickly whipped up a mug of steaming tea while the elder disappeared behind the fabric dividers near his bed. "Sugar, sir?" The scribe asked. The Elder mumbled his negative reply while inspecting his safe: it was recently opened.

"Mr. Summer? Would you be so kind as to fetch Knight Penn, please? The tea can wait." "Aye, sir," he replied and jogged off. The elder used his absence to carefully open the safe, hoping it wasn't booby-trapped. After entering his combination and gingerly prizing the handle, he discovered the entire contents of

his safe was missing. The only items inside were an Enclave patch and black plastic RFID card, just like the ones they found at Magnolia Base.

“Good call, Ida” he thought to himself, thankful she alerted him of her suspicions months ago. He’d taken the effort to plant false documents in his safe, keeping the real copies in a hidden safe in Tom’s Garage. Redding quickly grabbed his robes, threw them on, and sprinted downstairs; hoping to get to the garage and recover his documents before his scribe had time to track him down.

Unfortunately, everyone that passed the Elder wanted to chat and say hello. He sincerely apologized to each one for his inhospitable rudeness as he hastened to Tom’s Garage. A dozen disappointed people later, he stood at the back door, searching for his spare key. “Ah, there you are,” he whispered, letting himself in. Through Tom’s office window, he spied his scribe looking for him.

Elder Redding tip-toed through the shop to reach Tom’s safe. In an uncharacteristic moment of clumsiness, he knocked off a precariously placed ratchet. It bounced off of every possible metal object before clattering on the hard concrete floor. He sighed when someone banged on a garage bay door. “Who th’ hell’s in my shop!? I swear t’ God, I’m loadin’ you full’a lead soon as I get in there!” Tom’s keys jangled on the lock as he ripped the door skyward to find Elder Redding with the noisy ratchet in hand and a worn smile on his face.

“Uh, mornin’ Marshall. Why’re you in my garage? In th’ dark?” Elder Redding handed him the ratchet and pulled the door down behind them. “I need into your safe.” Tom shrugged and obliged, opening the safe as requested. “Here, ya go. Need anything else? How ‘bout th’ light?” Elder Redding sifted through the stacks of papers and pulled out a ream of bound papers. “Come with me, please.”

Tom followed the older man into his own office with the jumble of papers and folders, “What’s happenin’?” His old friend sighed and patted the stack of dead tree carcasses, “we’ve got a mole. Someone’s been trying to steal our intel for the Enclave. My personal safe was emptied.” Tom’s look dropped from oddly happy to a sour grimace. “Who th’ hell’d do somethin’ like that?”

A blond scribe passed by the office window just as he asked. “Him,” the Elder said, “I believe. We need to corner him and make sure he doesn’t slip away. I want know what he’s up to and where my data has been going.” “Ol’ friends,” Tom spat, thinking of the Enclave. “Where’s that son ‘o yours?” The elder mumbled while reading over a file, “our sons are on detail.” A knock came at the door.

Scribe Summers was the one knocking, efficiently tracking their Elder. “Mr. Jenkins? Are you in? I saw the light on.” Tom looked to the Elder before answering, “Yeah, yeah. One sec, I’m full ‘o grease.” Tom pulled the 10mm pistol from his belt, readied it, and let the slender man in. “Mornin’ Perry. What’s all th’ fuss ‘bout?” Tom asked with a sweet tone. Summers panted, “looking for the Elder, sir. I can’t find him. He needed Knight...” Elder Redding cut him off.

“Back here,” he said from the office. “Ah! Sir? Can you come with me?” The elder deflected him, “Tom offer him a drink, we need to chat.” Tom slammed the door behind the scribe and ushered him to his office with the business end of his pistol. “In ya go, boy.” Scribe Summer’s cool exterior quickly melted as he trembled toward the office.

“Sir? What’s going on?” The Elder peered at him over the stack of papers and nodded at the chair. “Have a seat, young man.” He did as he was instructed, Tom’s pistol at his back. “Si...Sir,” he stammered. “No. I just have two questions for you.” Summers gulped and nodded silently. “One,” Elder Redding said sternly, leaning on the wooden desk, “Who are you sending my data to? Two. Why would you betray the Brotherhood?”

The already pale scribe paled further, turning nearly transparent. “What, sir?” he squeaked. “I don’t...” Tom cut him off by roughly jabbing the gun between the man’s ribs. “Try again, boy.” “Sir, I’d never! I’ve been with the Brotherhood for years now! You hand-picked me to be your aide. You took me in from the wastes and kept me alive, taught me to survive. I could never betray you!”

Elder Redding stared deeply into the young man’s watering eyes and said, “That’s enough platitudes. Answer my questions.” Summers whimpered as Tom chose another pair of ribs to abuse with his pistol. He cocked it and relocated it to a temple for effect, unbeknownst to the young man the clip was absent. “You gonna tell ‘im what he wants t’ know, boy? Or do I need t’ repaint my office with your brains?” Summers squirmed in the chair and whimpered again sending tears streaming down his face.

Tom grinned maniacally and push the pistol a bit harder, “sack up, son. Ain’t nobody got time for a puss.” Summers quivered, “th...they made me do it, sir.” “Who’s ‘they’?” “My father and the...others.” “Others who?!” Tom growled in his ear. “The...Enclave! They made me do it, sir! I’m so sorry!” Elder Redding reclined slightly, “they’ll be pretty disappointed. Most of the data you stole was falsified.” Summers looked genuinely happy, then deeply depressed.

"That's good," he mumbled, quivering much less now. Elder Redding looked up to Tom and nodded at him to ease up a bit. "What are they planning, Mr. Summers?" The scribe shook his head, "I don't know, sir. They just wanted me to send back interesting data. They were really pleased to know about your most recent Initiates. After they found out about them, they wanted me to start gathering other data."

"The samples from the laboratory?" the elder asked. Summers nodded. "They wanted to see if we'd learned anything useful." "We?" Tom asked angrily. "What'd you mean 'we' you Enclave bastard?!" Summers started shaking again, "yeah. We. I didn't choose to work for them. I...ran away from them nearly a decade ago. Then I found y'all."

"They tracked me down and kidnapped me. Said they'd found my sister. I thought she died a long time ago. They "saved" her by turned her into something like Initiate Hawthorne." "Journeyman Knight Hawthorne" the Elder corrected him. "Right, sorry sir," he mumbled awkwardly. "The Enclave's doin' to folks what those scientists were doin' before the war. Except they figured out how to make 'em untraceable. They tested 'em out on our scribes. I was with them that night. It was a show of force."

Tom threw a clipboard at the far wall in anger, "I'll splatter your brains, boy, if you don't stop your damn lyin'!" Scribe Summers grinned sadly at the Elder. "That's why I did it, sir. They wanted me to spy for them or else they'd kill my sister. Colonel Summers, my own father, said he'd do it personally and make me watch." He started weeping again. "I don't want her to die! I didn't want anyone to die!" "Are they planning another attack? Are they watching us right now," the Elder asked aggressively.

"I don't know, sir. I don't know," Summers whimpered again. "I didn't mean for anything to happen." The Elder sighed and stared at the ceiling. "Very well, Mr. Summers. You will no longer be my aide, nor will you carry the title of 'Scribe.' Frankly," he paused, "you are lucky that I'm not having you publicly executed by firing squad. At the moment, I don't think you're worth wasting the ammunition." Summers' tears began flowing again. "We won't tell anyone of this transgression, provided you double-cross the Enclave for us. I'll continue to feed you false information, and you'll do for us what you did for them."

Tom scoffed and leaned against a wall, waiting for the Elder to again prove he always had the upper hand. "Anything, sir! I still pledge my life to the

Brotherhood, sir. What do you want me to do?" "I need to know what they're planning. I want to know why they're genetically engineering biological weapons. I want to know their outpost locations and their technological capabilities. You bring me that and I'd say we're well on our way to proving your worth."

Summers nodded frantically, sending salty droplets onto his lap. "I'll do my best, sir. I promise!" "It would be in your best interests to do so," Elder Redding said without his typical compassion, "two of my scribes are dead because of your leak. If any more die because of you, I'll kill you myself, do you understand?" He whimpered and nodded again. "Good. Clean yourself up and get out of here. I don't want to see your face again until our regular 1400-hour meeting."

The ex-scribe wiped his eyes on his red robes and saw himself through the back door of Tom's garage to avoid passersby. Tom sighed, scratching a temple with the muzzle of the unloaded gun, "that a good idea, Marshall?" The Elder nodded, "it's unfortunate, but he's the best insight we have into their plans. If what he says is true, I sincerely feel remorse for him. I can't say I wouldn't do the same in his position."

###

In the mess hall during dinner, Erik finally caught up with Jenkins and Willis at their normal spot. They all looked weary. "Hey," Erik mumbled at them, plopping his tray on the table. "Hey," they replied. "How're the samples coming?" Jenkins shrugged, "as well as can be expected, I guess. Got a bunch of cultures restarted. Ida's still going through Rush's notes on the old papers we found back at their base. Willis sipped his mug of tea and asked Erik the same, "anything?"

Erik shook his head. "Not really. By the time I got done investigating everyone, I was hoping for something as stupid as a black market for drugs. I helped some of the nerds relocate some stolen merchandise and crack a black market 'Tragic: The Garnering TM' ring, but no traitors. Unless you count rampant price inflation." Erik sighed deeply and stared at his sad food. "I miss Franklin. I've been hungry since he's left."

Willis and Jenkins nodded in agreement. "At least it's not *all* burnt today," Jenkins mused. "You talk to the Elder yet?" Jenkins asked Erik. His dark-headed best friend nodded, "yeah. At the 1400 meeting. That little scribe of his looked

awfully depressed, I guess he's taking the news pretty badly too." Jenkins and Willis shrugged simultaneously.

After finishing their dinner, Erik waved to Jenkins and Willis as they departed to the lab for another round of culture preparation. He found himself wandering around the base for hours in the humid dusk before ending up at the familiar laboratory again. He quietly let himself into the building. Erik crept past Ida's laboratory and walked down the hall to Rush's apartment, letting himself in.

Rush's terminal was on, casting the long and narrow office in a green hue. "That's odd," Erik thought aloud, "why're you on?" He sat down in the comfortable chair and stared at the green phosphorus screen for a while until he realized what he was looking at: an aerial photograph of their base and surrounding geography. A dotted green trail led from their base, round about and far to the southeast. After some jagged loops and meandering paths, the trail ended in a gently pulsing green dot.

"This is about where their second LZ is. Is this real time?" He poked a few keys on the keyboard and found that he could zoom in and out to a limited extent. He zoomed as far as he could using what he guessed was the satellite that Rush was telling him about days ago. The green blob was parked near what he guessed was an underpass on old Highway 90.

Erik stared at the blob sadly and turned off the terminal. "They'll be fine," he mumbled before changing the sheets on his brother's bed and curling up in it. Erik stared at the dull beams of moonlight that squeaked past the boards over Rush's windows, before being lulled into a deep sleep by his brother's lingering scents.

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