

CHAPTER 31 : WHO AM I? WHO ARE YOU!? OR WE SHOULD'VE TAKEN THE LEFT

He watched from high in the sky as a small cluster of humanoids trekked slowly on an ancient highway. It was vaguely familiar in the way that all highways are. Unable to ascertain who they were, Erik watched them creep eastbound with a bored gaze as their shadows grew long in the setting sun. When the sun finally dipped below the horizon, curious lights and sounds erupted from the encroaching darkness.

One of the three broke out ahead, chasing a long twisting shadow, beckoning for more to follow. The other two took defensive positions and appeared to be fighting more of the same mysterious shadows. Erik squinted and strained as he uncontrollably floated high above. He watched them struggle for what seemed like hours before they melted into dark stains on the asphalt, becoming parts of the swirling shadows.

After the two melted away, Erik switched his astral gaze to the remaining actor. It slowly doubled back to where the other two disappeared. Erik stared long and hard at the vague shadow of a man he swore he recognized. Just as Franklin's limping outline began to emerge, a blinding light erupted between he and Erik, followed by crimson red.

The young Paladin awoke with a start. He sat up panting in Rush's comfortable bed, confused at the sudden lights and sounds. A blinding strobe flashed repeatedly on the ceiling, accompanied by a klaxon over loudspeakers. The ground shook as an eerie vacuum filled the air followed by blinding light and searing heat. Erik tried to scream, but nothing came.

Erik found himself being shaken by Willis in a crisp white lab coat. "Wake up! Stop screaming!" The super mutant covered the screaming man's mouth and repeated, "Stop screaming! Some people are trying to work here!" Erik caught his breath and patted Willis' hand, silently requesting he let go. "Why're you in Rush's apartment and what's the commotion about?"

Erik sighed and rubbed the heels of his palms into his eyes, "ah. Yeah. Long day. I was nearby and decided to crash here rather than go home." Willis narrowed his gaze in suspicion, "yeah. Well, stop screaming like you're dyin', it's

distracting. *We've* got enough work as it is." Erik nodded with mild embarrassment and watched Willis leave without another word. "The hell was that dream all about," he asked himself aloud after further calming down.

He tried to recount the fuzzy details, but could only remember the faint outline of Franklin before he exploded into white, red, and radioactive bits.

The peculiar dream had Erik distracted until he met with Elder Redding for lunch. "Good news," he was told, "we have a solid lead on the leak." Erik sighed with relief, "that's great sir, who is it?" Elder Redding shook his head and said, "not to worry. I've got it...taken care of. Just resume your normal duties." Erik nodded and said with hesitation, "whatever...you say, sir."

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The noon sun hung low overhead, making the air above the asphalt shimmer as the lingering remnants of last night's radiation storm evaporated. Olivia swept the sweat from her forehead and sighed at the back of Rush's head. His loud panting and Franklin's frequent pit stops were working to whittle down her patience. "Remind me again why we left so late Rush?"

"Apologies," Rush panted breathlessly again. Franklin nodded and yelled in front of himself, "damn dog, you slept like a fuckin' rock." "Trippin' balls and committing mass murder must be *exhausting*," Olivia quipped angrily at her furred friend. "I'm surprised you didn't raise any ghouls from the dead!" He winced in response, but remained silent, hoping the impending argument would evaporate into the summer heat.

Franklin again diverted toward the thick woods along the highway as they trudged along. "I'ma go water a tree. I'll catch up." Rush paused mid-stride, causing Olivia to crash into his sweat-soaked back. "Blech," she gagged. "What the hell's wrong with you, dog?!" she yelled. He pointed ahead of them to the odd arrangement of cars in the distance. Some were standing on their trunk or nose while others rested atop or underneath, forming a rough circle. "Strange," he panted, "why would they be arranged like that?" Olivia squinted past him and shrugged. "Hell if I know."

Intrigued, he lazily loaded his plasma rifle. “Just in case,” he grumbled. Franklin joined them in the middle of the deserted highway. “They hell’d y’all stop for? My lil’ knights scared all by themselves?” Olivia rolled her eyes and pointed to the strange arrangement of cars ahead. “Who the hell’d do that?” She sighed in response and loaded her rifle. “Only one way to find out.” Franklin shrugged and joined them as they resumed walking eastbound.

The area surrounding the display of cars was well kempt. Someone took the time to keep the grass cut to an even length and even swept the stray dirt and grime from the asphalt. Rush sniffed around as Olivia and Franklin investigated a single black Corvega convertible in the center. A holotape was squarely positioned on the white leather driver’s seat. As she jammed the holotape into her Pip-Boy, Rush made his way to the trunk of the car.

He sniffed vigorously after latching onto a fading scent. Just before Olivia pressed “play” on her Pip-Boy, Rush cried out. “Wait! Do not play it! Something is wrong. She hovered over the play button and squinted in his direction again, waiting for further explanation. “Something in here smells wrong. May be explosive?” After deeply sighing, she complained, “are you serious? You think someone rigged up explosives to go off when someone plays this tape?”

Rush shrugged and said, “better safe than sorry.” Franklin agreed and led them another hundred yards past the cars. “Okay, let ‘er rip,” he said to Olivia. She clicked the play button and waited for something to happen. Her Pip-Boy wailed angrily as garbled text and graphics spewed across the screen. “What the hell?” Its speaker screamed a series of squelching beeps. Something far away near the cars responded with similar beeps before falling silent. Her Pip-Boy followed suit before the distant switched to beeping at regular intervals.

Rush’s sensitive ears picked up every sound. He paled slightly and grabbed his friends to drag them in the opposite direction. “Bad!” he shouted hoarsely. They got far enough away to watch the explosions light up the horizon with tall orange-and-red mushroom clouds. The sonic boom followed shortly thereafter, bowing the nearby trees like a hurricane-force gale. Olivia’s Pip-Boy spoke up again:

If you're hearing this, then you ain't as stupid as I thought, Jay.
Good luck finding another rag top, you sister-fuckin'-bastard.

I hope you die of dick cancer.

Rush smiled awkwardly to Olivia who stared in confusion at her Pip-Boy. "What. The. Actual. Fuck?" she whispered aloud. Franklin shrugged and scratched his head, "that's a first." "Nearly our last," Rush added. While she and Franklin drove headlong into another argument, Rush took the opportunity to double back to the explosion site. He'd never seen a nuclear explosion before and his curiosity agreed that it would be an awesome sight.

Franklin and Olivia nearly reached blows before they realized Rush wandered off. "That fuckin' dog!" Franklin yelled at Olivia, "weren'tcha watchin' 'im?" "Me? Why am I his keeper? He ain't a baby!" She screamed back. "Children," Rush mused to himself as he carefully approached the fresh wreckage.

The towers of cars toppled from the convertible's explosion. Some of the ones perched on top also failed to contain their nuclear excitement and exploded as well. He was quite surprised to see that out of the eight columns of wrecked and damaged cars, three of them were in usable condition. They were now covered in dirt, soot, and fresh chunks of pavement, but Mr. Tom would be ecstatic for such a haul of parts.

He would have stayed longer and probably gotten distracted by disassembling some of the vehicles, if Olivia hadn't sprinted by and dragged him out of the freshly irradiated pit. "What the hell's wrong with you?! Didn't you hear your Geiger counter? It was going mad in there!" He tapped his Pip-Boy gently, unsticking the needle. It swung up to 500 rads before dropping down to 150. "That is not good," he mumbled. "Maybe you do need a keeper," she growled at him while she roughly dug through his bag for some meds.

"Where's your RadAway?" "Used it yesterday after the storm, remember sister?" "How about Rad-X?" Rush nodded and freed himself from his pack to search. "Small tin of them somewhere," he mumbled, slowly unpacking his goods in the middle of the road. Franklin joined them shortly thereafter and immediately began

complaining about the same things she was: a lack of drugs and his severe lack of concern for environmental threats. “Your fuckin’ lucky this lady likes you,” Franklin yelled in frustration, “I’d a let your dumb ass melt into radioactive goo for runnin’ in there unprotected.”

Rush patiently took his browbeating from both of his comrades and managed to choke down a handful of Rad-X. “Much better,” he grumbled as he reorganized and repacked his backpack. As they continued to lament and loudly complain at him, he dropped a pin on his map for later and quietly said, “Apologies for my enthusiasm. However, sister, it would have been much worse if you did not heed my warning; your decisions have also been rash today.”

She stared at him, slack jawed. Franklin chuckled to himself at her awkward silence and led them back toward their intended destination. The remainder of their long walk was much less exciting. They traveled in near silence until dusk when they’d arrived at outskirts of the small village near their second LZ.

Growing tired of the silence and not wanting to further enrage anyone by poking around in their brains, Rush turned and walked backwards to smile at Olivia. She dully stared back without a hint of humor; she was still sore at him. “Sister, please say something.” She didn’t. He even went so far as to make funny faces, but had no result. She was superiorly angry.

After he turned around, defeated, she studied her Pip-Boy, anxious to see how much longer she was going to be stuck with those two idiots. “At this pace we won’t make it to our next stop by nightfall,” she growled to herself. Only the sound of gravel and detritus crunching underfoot accompanied them southeast-bound as they fell into another awkward silence.

They didn’t stop again until Rush nearly collapsed. “Would like a short pause, please,” he panted to Olivia who was now leading the way. “No way,” she spat, determined to make up lost time. Franklin picked up his pace and grabbed her shoulder roughly to halt her. “Hey! We’ll die o’ heat stroke runnin’ round like this. Ain’t no use to anyone dead, now are we?” She spun around and instead of berating him as she’d planned, stopped and saw Rush’s poor condition. He was panting constantly and his muzzle and face were pale. His coat was completely matted to his hide with sweat, making him look much skinnier than normal.

"You look like shit, Rush," she muttered. "Thank you," he replied, punctuated with heavy panting. "May we...break now? Please...sister?" "Oh, shit," she muttered, looking at him then at herself as she trembled. "Oh no," she muttered, dragging them off of the road and disappearing into the woods. Franklin looked at Rush, who was busy digging in his bag for a drink of water. "The hell's wrong with that girl? She ain't got no reason to be so bitchy." Rush gulped down the warm water and poured a bit on his head.

"Not surprising," Rush said after finishing his first canteen. "She just realized it." "Realized what, dog?" Rush smiled proudly and said, "I will be an uncle soon." Franklin's face looked like it wanted to escape his skull as it twisted from surprise to shock to worry before it finally stopped with an awkward smirk. "She an' lil' Erik, huh?" Rush nodded affirmatively. "Well, how the hell's she gonna do field work like that?"

"She's gonna do what like what?" she asked, skulking out of the woods. "Any woman can do this job as well as *you* can!" Franklin bit his tongue. "Not what he meant," Rush replied, "he is concerned about your health." "Fine time for him to start," she scoffed in response. "You done dying?" Rush nodded, even though he was still panting. He thought it best not to make her mood worse.

His plan quickly went to bust as Franklin blurted out his awkward congratulations. "Who's the God Father?" "Who's what?" she asked with aggravation, "The hell're you talking about old man?" Franklin panicked and looked at Rush. He simply shook his head and sipped on his canteen. Franklin stuttered, "uh, you know. If you had kids. You an' Erik. Who'd be the God Father?" She stared at him before slowly replying, "Jenkins.... Why?"

"I said God *Father*, not God Mother, Knight." She scoffed again and walked off into the dusk. "Hurry up or the Yao Guai'll eat you," she yelled behind herself. Rush finished his second canteen and sighed a German insult as he passed Franklin to join his sister-in-arms.

They reached a small town near their second site by nightfall. "You know this place?" Olivia asked Franklin. "Naw, but it looks okay. Don't see no Jet houses or nothin'. Nobody hangin' 'round in the streets that looks dangerous." She halted their approached a few hundred yards from the entrance to make Rush put on

a hooded poncho to hide his features. He protested strongly, but her moodiness squashed his complaints quickly. The guards at the gate gave them little trouble, quickly recognizing them as Brotherhood.

“Don’t go getting’ drunk and shootin’ up the place,” one guard cautioned them. “We know how y’all Brotherhood are.” For the second time that day, Franklin bit his tongue and only nodded a response with a strong “fuck you, you fucking fucker,” in his head. Rush sensed the overly loud thought and chuckled to himself, amazed at the versatility of that word. “What’s so funny back there?” Franklin asked. Rush replied, “nothing, sir” from under his rough burlap hood.

The three paid for a pair of rooms at the local tavern. Rush was displeased with the thick scents lingering in the beds. “Do not sleep on the sheets,” he mumbled to Franklin. They’d opted to let Olivia have a room of her own; Franklin insisted it was the proper thing to do. Again, Rush found himself disagreeing with their strange notions of what was proper. If Olivia was pregnant, like Rush thought, it was his job as her closest of kin to protect her, not be stuck with a large, smelly man at the other end of the second floor.

“You sleepin’ on the floor like a good dog,” Franklin said as he stripped off his sweat-soaked armor and undershirt. Rush wrinkled his nose at the strong musk. “No. Will go rent another room before sharing that tiny bed.” Franklin sat down on the bed to pry off his boots, “good luck. They’re all sold out for the night.” “The weather is nice outside,” Rush mumbled, “maybe there is an alleyway to sleep in.”

“You can always rent a whore for the night,” Franklin mused, “but there ain’t no one’d offer you service. You’re a fuckin’ dog. Dog.” Rush’s patients were growing thin. “Stop calling me a dog. There is more human DNA in me than canine. My flesh is much stronger than your own,” he growled. “What’s the matter pup? You gettin’ agitated?” Franklin prodded in a whiny, drawn-out timbre. “Whatcha gonna do ‘bout it? Cry? Piss yourself? Go whinin’ to your little wannabe girlfriend? Too bad your brother knocked her up first!”

That broke Rush’s last straw. He pounced the bulky man from the bed onto the stained carpet. They rolled around and wrestled for dominance for a few moments before garnering attention from the surrounding rooms; the sounds of rented sex

quickly faded to people trying to knock down their door. The two Brothers of Steel were so loud that the owner of the bar came up and made Olivia break them up. “Those two you brought with ya’re are either fightin’ or fuckin’ like a hurricane. It’s bad for business. Get in there an get ‘em to settle down or you’re all out on your asses!”

Olivia nodded and muttered her obscenities under her breath after the bartender let her into their room. In a few minutes’ time, they’d managed to smash a lamp, end table, and topple over the bureau. “The hell’s wrong with you two?!” They ignored her and continued to punch and smash each other. She pulled a fire extinguisher from the hall outside and pelted them with the foamy chemicals until they stopped fighting each other and instead fought for air.

To add insult to injury, she chucked the metal cylinder at them. “That’s better,” she said. “Now get clean this place up and go the fuck to bed. We gotta leave early.” “Idiots,” she sighed to herself as she slammed the door and walked back to her own room. Rush and Franklin sat in the foam for a few moments until their senses returned. “Sorry, Rush,” Franklin said first, “went a bit too far.” Rush nodded. “Apologies, sir. Was uncalled for.”

After beating each other senseless and earning a fire extinguisher bath, they settled down and behaved amicably for the remainder of the night. After they took turns in the tiny bathroom, they awkwardly tucked into the twin-sized bed back-to-back. Rush though it wouldn’t have been so bad if Franklin didn’t angrily insist on sleeping nude.

While Rush was trying not to imagine all of the horrible diseases consuming their bed, Olivia found that she couldn’t sleep. It wasn’t the disgusting bed that bothered her, it was Franklin’s odd questions that afternoon. “Why was he so curious about our plans for kids?” she wondered to herself. She pondered on that for a long time before the reality dawned on her. “He knows,” she thought of Rush, “that fuckin’ dog knows. He told Franklin. Oh, God damnit.”

After a long night of not sleeping, Olivia knocked on their door at 0700. “Get up boys. We’ve gotta hit the road.” She knocked again to no response. “I hope they didn’t kill each other,” she thought as she cautiously opened their unlocked door. “Oh, well, okay,” she muttered to herself. Rush was on the floor, curled up

with a blanket and pillow, snoring gently. Franklin was spread eagle, snoring as well. She took the time to get an eyeful of the body she'd often heard stories about at the bath house. "Not bad at all," she said to herself, studying the farmer-tanned Paladin in front of her, "those wicked scars are pretty hot."

Rush's ears twitched as he groaned and yawned, noticing Olivia. "Good morning, sister." She blushed and yelped. He looked up at her from the floor and grinned slyly, "studying? He is impressive for a human of his age." Olivia's fears were realized: her yelp roused Franklin awake. "The hell're you talkin' to, dog, er, Rush?" Rush sat up and scratched his head fur. "Olivia. She was kind enough to wake us up."

Franklin looked wide-eyed with alarm at Rush, then looked over to see Olivia staring at his crotch. "Uh, my face is up here," he said awkwardly. She yelped again and spun around, staring at the door. "Just came to wake y'all up. Paladin. We have to. Today. On the road, go." "Get out, Knight," Franklin said coolly, "We'll be down in half an hour." She saw herself out and down the hall, red with embarrassment after getting caught ogling her commanding officer.

Rush studied the Paladin as he trod to the bathroom for his morning piss; thankful Franklin didn't notice. The pocked bullet wounds and faint lines of surgeries over the years contrasted with the jagged lines that ran from the left side of his neck and face down to his right hip. "Major Artemis does impressive work."

He and Franklin soon exchanged places before heading down to meet Olivia. After Rush finished brushing his teeth, they met her at the front desk. An angry balding man yelled at them for last night's interruptions to his business and demanded to be compensated for it. "Th' hell we will," Franklin yelled back. Olivia sighed, shaking her head. Rush mirrored her as they both dropped a pile of caps onto the desk. "Here," she muttered, "that'll take care of our stay plus the damage to your furniture."

Franklin growled his protest to Olivia who glared back, shutting him up. "We're done. Goodbye, sir. Thank you for the rooms." She led them from the shoddy hotel and toward a patch of vendors at ramshackle wooden stalls. Each hawked their own pathetic wares: meat jerky of dubious origins, smelly leather items, and blood-

stained sundries. "Did you find these like this," Olivia asked a scraggly vendor about his blood-stained items, "or did you cause this?"

The vendor shook his head fiercely and insisted he found the sundry items in that condition. She harrumphed, disbelieving the man. "Fine, give me all the microfusion cells you have. He'll pay for them," she finished, pointing at Franklin. Predictably, he objected. "The hell I'll pay for your shit, woman!" Rush could feel her patience slipping and decided to intervene. "Sir, she paid for our childishness at the hovel. We should repay her kindness."

"Then you pay for it," Franklin yelled and stormed off. "I ain't havin' no woman bossin' me 'round, tellin' me what I can and cain't buy," he muttered angrily. Rush smiled sadly to Olivia and paid the man for the handful of ammunition. "Here, sister," he said gently, splitting up their small purchase, "they appear mostly charged." She gladly accepted them and jammed them into an external pocket of her pack. "Go grab some jerky while we finish looking around."

Rush nodded and soon found a boy, no older than thirteen, selling unscrupulous cuts of dried meat. "What kind of meat is this," Rush asked. "What's it matter, weirdo? It's meat!" His pubescent voice squeaked. "We do not eat human flesh," Rush concluded after examining the large strips of hanging meat. "What're you trying t' say?! We ain't sellin' people!" Rush shook his head and replied calmly, "this looks like back strap. Marbling is not correct for Brahmin. Not deer. Nor canine. Is it Super Mutant, ghoul, or wastelander?"

The boy paled and lowered his voice, "hey look. Whoever you are, Mr. furry freak, I don't need you getting' me in trouble. I just buy meat from one of th' travelin' traders. I dunno what is it, but it's cheap." "You will make people very ill with this product," Rush warned him before leaving.

Olivia was less than pleased to see him return without the sustenance she requested. "Where's the jerky?" Rush looked behind his shoulder to the young man, closing up shop. "Not fit for consumption. Was most likely made of man or mutant." She shuddered, "Ugh. Good catch. Let's just go then, we'll find something later." He nodded and joined her to find Franklin at a stall specializing in handguns and ammunition.

“Why’s it so cheap,” he grilled the saleswoman. “My husband refills ‘em himself. He just finished these here last night,” she pointed at a box of lackluster 10mm rounds. “Pass,” he growled, inspecting a round closely. It wasn’t completely sealed and was sitting crooked in the jacket. “Your ol’ man’s gonna get someone killed with this bullshit.” She scoffed and ordered he leave her stall, loudly proclaiming that the Brotherhood tin cans wouldn’t know good ammo if they were shot with it. Which, of course, she threatened as well.

“Let’s go!” Franklin growled at Olivia and Rush. “Fine,” Olivia agreed, “let’s get back on the road.” After strolling past the remaining vendors with lackluster wares, they exited the chain-link fence surrounding the small settlement and headed back to the highway. “That was a fuckin’ waste o’ time,” Franklin spat. His subordinates nodded in agreement as they walked to the strangely clean highway.

“They must like their roads to keep them this clean,” Rush muttered. The highway was respectable and nearly debris-free all the way to their second destination. Rush tried to radio in their position when they arrived about noon, but found his Pip-Boy was unable to cut through the dense radio interference. He explained his findings to Franklin. “Whatever. We’ll radio in later,” he shrugged, “happens sometimes ‘round heavy industrial sites. Somethin’ inside’s probably causin’ it.”

Their second site roughly resembled Rush’s home at Station Magnolia. They approached the first building from the northwest side. Franklin guessed it was a shipping and receiving warehouse, given the row of giant roll-up doors and scattered carcasses of pre-war freight trailers. Rush sniffed around, but found little of interest: a pack of wild dogs ran through here a few weeks ago. He also caught hints of ozone on the air. “That is odd,” he thought aloud as he followed Franklin and Olivia through the exit door into darkness.

Rush and Olivia fumbled with their Pip-Boys to activate the lights. The olive green ordinance boxes with white stars hinted at their military origin. The warehouse was packed with miscellaneous parts for aircraft, vertibirds, and robotics, as far as the Brothers could see. Franklin looked around suspiciously, “this place is way too clean to be abandoned,” he said to his subordinates, “keep an eye out for surprises.”

He produced a flash light to light his own way as he ordered that they spread out. “Dog, get some lights goin’ in here. Olivia, you’re with me.” The two kept looking around the uncomfortably neat facility, unable to find anything interesting. Rush, however, managed to pick his way into a small, square office. It smelled strongly a male human and tobacco. An investigation of the wooden desk revealed a holotape, a half-burned cigar, and a snub-nosed magnum pistol.

He powered on the RobCo terminal on the desk and waited patiently while it booted. When it finished booting without complaint, he sighed with relief and jammed in the holotape. A letter soon appeared onscreen:

Colonel Summers,

We are highly pleased with your relentless efforts to further the Enclave’s goals in the Gulf Commonwealth. We would like to applaud you for your most recent capture of the two escaped members from your home base. Use them as you see fit to accomplish your goals.

If our reports are correct, we expect you will be successful in gaining the intelligence necessary to further our scientific projects under your oversight. We are anxious to see them used as an additional squadron next to our pet deathclaws. All the better to wipe the wasteland clean for a new America!

Additionally, we request that you update Raven Rock with the most recent information regarding our projects in Jackson as soon as possible. We have seen interference from the Brotherhood in that area and further south.

God bless the United States of America and the Enclave!

Signed,

John Henry Eden

President of the United States of America

Rush saved the holotape his Pip-Boy before ejecting the disk and pondered what the letter meant about “additional squadrons” while he pilfered the remainder of the office. “Those people must be the same ones that ambushed Franklin’s

squadron,” he surmised aloud. “My what?” Franklin asked, boorishly barging into the small office.

He handed over the tape and gave Franklin a synopsis. “Someone named Colonel Summers is conducting experiments and missions on behalf of the Enclave in the Gulf Commonwealth.” “Summers?” Olivia asked, crowding in behind Franklin. “That’s the same name as the scribe that’s the elder’s aide, right?” Franklin nodded slowly, turning the faded tape over in his hands. He stared at it and jammed it into a pocket.

“Let’s get back to lookin’ for anything useful,” he said soberly as he shouldered past Olivia, leaving them alone. “Find anything?” Rush asked. She shook her head. “Nothing yet. Lots of doors that don’t open. They don’t have knobs or keyholes or anything. They must be electronically locked, I guess.” “Do they have black panels nearby?” She nodded again, “yeah, how’d you know?” Rush scratched his chin, “radio technology. Had some doors like that at home. Very secure.”

He would have delved into the complicated radio signaling used by the transmitters, but he was interrupted by the sound of a heavy metal door lurching upward. They left the office to find one of the cargo bay doors slowly inching upward and no one in sight to activate it. Olivia yelled for Franklin, but received no response. “That’s odd,” she thought aloud. Rush saw a shadow move in the peripheral of his vision and cried, “look out sister!”

“Huh? What’s wrong?!” Rush didn’t have a chance to answer. Smoke grenades flew at them from unknown assailants, obscuring their vision with tears and making them choke. Before they could coordinate, the invisible Enclave aggressors targeted Rush. A staggering mental interference made his senses swim. Unable to focus and defend himself, he was soon rendered bloody and unconscious through blows to the head, gut, and knees. Panicked, Olivia fired rounds of plasma any direction she could face.

She made contact with something, but whatever it was, it was unphased by the toroid of overclocked plasma. The thick clouds of smoke erupted with stars as she received a sharp blow to the back of her head. Just before she fell unconscious, she thought she smelled Rush’s familiar scent through the smoke.

Four humanoids resembling Rush shimmered into existence like they deactivated Stealthboys. Franklin watched from behind a congested shelf of armaments as the Rush-like hit squad milled around, waiting for further instruction. Franklin fought to control his breathing as he fell into a PTSD-fueled rage. He leaped out of cover and screamed incoherently, firing wildly at the humanoids.

They calmly dodged his rifle shots and slowly closed on his position. Their lifeless expressions drug him further into incoherence. Franklin threw his rifle at the nearest one wearing a large plasma burn in its singed fur and followed after it with his knife brandished. The female that took a blast from Olivia's rifle was severely burned; her blonde fur was singed and melted around the fist-sized burn. Franklin swiped at the burn a few times unsuccessfully as the being dodged his swipes gracefully.

"Hold still you fuckin' abomination!" he spat. The other three circled them menacingly, waiting for someone to make a call on how to deal with their human nemesis. Franklin got too close the next time he tried to attack; he received fresh claw marks across his face to join the aged ones on his left. Franklin howled in pain and successfully landed a laceration across her already tender wound. The female whined and swiped at him again.

As he ducked, Franklin grabbed her arm and tossed her over his shoulder before stomping at her ribs, trying to incapacitate her as quickly as possible. A small whimper called the others into combat. He tried his best to slit the furry woman's throat, but was halted when her largest black brother dive tackled him to the floor. After wrestling so much with Rush, Franklin found this arrangement strangely comforting.

He kicked wildly at the male's groin and tail, trying to get it off of him as quickly as possible. A swift kick with his steel boots made the giant pause and groan long enough for Franklin to jam his knife into its ribs. It howled with pain and ripped at side to rip the knife out. Franklin jammed it deeper and twisted it harshly as he ripped it free to stab him again. The female and her two remaining brothers punched and swiped at Franklin until he was slick with blood.

His leather armor was tattered and he doubled over, panting. "Well, c'mon then *bitches*. That all you got?!" The three that were free of stab wounds tackled and

beat him unconscious. He made sure to leave them each with new scars to remember him by. The largest took the alpha position and continued beating the unconscious man until a blonde man in red robes emerged from the darkness. "That's enough, Number 86," he said sadly. The large furred male paused mid-swing and stood perfectly straight near Franklin's crumpled body, awaiting further instruction. Summers gazed in despair at his Brother in Steel, then up to the wall of muscle. The poor male was bleeding from deep lacerations drawn by Franklin's blade. "Come here," he said gently to the male, producing a handful of long cloth bandages from his pocket. "You too, number 82. Are you okay ?? 79?"

After wrapping up their bleeding lacerations, he ordered his slaves to strip Rush and Olivia before carrying them to their Vertibird on the roof. They left Franklin in a puddle of his own blood on the cold concrete floor, surrounded by Olivia and Rush's things. Scribe Summers sighed sadly, kneeling down next to Franklin. His face and upper torso resembled hamburger, but the strong man was still breathing. The scribe pulled out a snub-nosed revolver matching the one in his father's desk. He spun the chamber, cocked the pistol, and held it to the back of Franklin's head.

The young man began weeping, "I'm so sorry," he cried before squeezing the trigger. Tears streamed down his face as he led his enslaved pets to their escape vehicle on the roof.

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Erik sat on one of Rush's couches, pouring through the Scribes' latest discoveries from his familial home at Station Magnolia, when Jenkins knocked at the door. "Erik you in there?" "Yeah, what's up?" "Jus' makin' rounds," Jenkins replied flatly, "probably shouldn't be puttin' them off. Whatcha got there?" "Data," Erik shook the handful of documents. "They're great if ya can't sleep. Harder'n Hell t' understand."

Jenkins picked up the topmost sheet from the coffee table, "Oh. Yeah. This is way above you. Me, too. You show Ida these?" Erik nodded, "Got 'em from her. Wanted some study material." "Studyin' what?" "My...our...history. Been curious an' Rush ain't here to ask." Jenkins nodded again, "everything okay?"

Erik sighed and shook his head before standing up and walking to the small galley kitchen. "Not really. Been feelin' bad for some reason. Franklin an' them ain't radioed in over 24 hours. It ain't like him t' keep quiet that long. I don't like it."

"You think something's wrong?" Erik shrugged. "Dunno. Hope not," he muttered at the stainless-steel sink. "Let's go get some fresh air," Jenkins suggested, "it'll do you good. You look like you need to get out." Erik nodded and locked up behind them on their way out into the early afternoon sun. Their stroll was mostly silent, punctuated with the occasional snuffle from Jenkins.

"What's wrong with you?" Jenkins shrugged, "sinuses? Been cooped up in the lab nonstop with Willis and Ida. You knew that." Erik nodded dully. "Yeah, sorry. How's it going in there?" "Painfully slow. We're not even a quarter of the way done." "Sucks," Erik sighed. They turned down the main road and wandered toward the bar behind the Caravaneer's motel, the Stump Jumper. "Wanna duck in for a drink?" "Yeah, I guess."

Jenkins followed him through the heavy oak doors into the bar-and-hotel. A familiar round-bellied man jovially hailed them from behind the counter. "Well, butter my ass an' call me cornbread! Erik! Ain't seen you in a coon's age! Mr. Jenkins too! Where's that tall, furry friend o' yours?" Erik's flat demeanor picked up a bit with Ernie's general excitement. "Mr. Ernie, when'd you start workin' here at th' Stump Jumper?" "Been a few weeks now," he said, setting them out napkins and placing a fresh beer on each, "Linda's still runnin' th' little hotel on th' other side of th' highway there. She took over th' bar an' made it into a sittin' room, so I bought this one here!"

"You boys celebrain' somethin' this afternoon?" "Takin' a break," Jenkins answered for them. Erik nodded in agreement behind his stein of beer from his favorite corner stool. "Well, that's good y'all get t' take a break ev'ry now an' again. Let me know if ya kneed anything," the larger man said as he turned to serve his other sparse patrons in the bar. Ernie added over his shoulder, "An' tell that Mr. Rush I need a hand in here when he gets a chance; need s'more stuff fixed." He soon wandered off to see if any of his other early-afternoon patrons needed anything.

Jenkins watched Erik silently sip his beer. "So, any better?" Erik shook his head and took another swig. "Uneasy in my skin, ya know?" Before Jenkins could answer familiar patron entered the bar: Major Artemis. He caught Erik's attention immediately, "sir? When'd you get back?" "'bout ten minutes ago. Who's the new barkeep?" "An old friend."

"Welcome to th' Stump Jumper! Name's Ernie. What can I get ya an' what can I call ya?" "Major is fine and whatever these two are having." He sat on the other side of Erik with a satisfied sigh. "Damn, I'm glad to be back." "Good to see you sir," Jenkins spoke up. "How're your sister and niece?" "They're as well as can be expected, running a skeleton Brotherhood outpost and medic center. They got a nice little militia now, helpin' keep the slavers and raiders at bay." Major Artemis took a swig of the cold beer and grinned, "aah. Nice. Got a surprise for Franklin too. Where's he at?" Jenkins choked down his swallow of beer, "uh, well. He's out in the field!"

Artemis alarmed for a split second before melting back into his beer. "Ah, that's good. It's good to hear he's comin' 'round." Artemis chugged the rest of his beer. "I'll hit y'all back, boys. Thanks for the beer!" Erik watched him leaving them with his tab. "Later Major," Erik said flatly through the foam and dregs at the bottom of his mug. Jenkins shook his head, "that's gotta make a dozen now, right?" "Well, thanks for the distraction Jenkins," Erik said abruptly, "but I need to get back to researchin'." "Are you sure? Why not have another?" Erik hinted at an odd smile as he paid for their beers and left without another word. Ernie yelled at him through the door left, "Hey! Don' forget t' send Mr. Rush in!"

Erik threw up a hand in acknowledgement before descending the familiar wooden porch and stomping around in the grass. He meandered north through one of the Burg's crop fields back to the laboratory. Some of the non-enlisted field hands hailed him and received no response. They grumbled to one-another in surprise and disgust at his rudeness: he'd always made a few seconds to chat.

Their words were lost on him: Erik was preoccupied with the recurring thoughts of the stationary green blip on Rush's terminal. He suddenly took off in a sprint back to the lab, his breaths turned from smooth and controlled to ragged pants. He skidded on the concrete sidewalk and slammed into the heavy metal doors,

clawing them open. “Damnit!” Ida locked up early. He sprinted to the rear of the building and burst in, scaring the scribes on duty. “Sir!”

A nearby scribe, loading a dryer gasped. Erik’s eyes weren’t grey like normal. She swore they were glowing. They yelled after him in worry, their cries rousing Willis from a nap in his own room. “They’d better not’ve set another dryer on fire,” he growled as he rolled out of bed. The mostly-naked super mutant stuck his head into the hall in time to see Erik fly by at an alarming pace. “That’s not good,” he grumbled and quickly followed, shirt be damned.

“Rade,” the hell’s goin’ on?” Erik locked himself in Rush’s apartment. Willis pounded on the door, “Erik! Answer me, little man, or I’ll take the door down!” A cacophony of smashing furniture and animalistic noises brought Willis’ threat to fruition as he kicked the exterior door in. The ancient solid-core door dented a few times before the door frame splintered and gave way under his force. The sight he glimpsed through the secondary door were alarming: Erik was shredding his garments with fresh, bloody claws. He fell on the linoleum of the galley kitchen and writhed as his bones cracked and snapped, rearranging themselves. He howled in pain, trapped in his light metal armor as his legs bent and twisted into odd shapes. Willis was giddy and horrified at the same time; he’d seen similar transformations from human to super mutant many years ago.

Erik cried and howled again, fighting angrily to tear himself free of the constricting metal garments. He half-yelped, half-gurgled for assistance. Willis vaulted over the couches and nearly effortlessly stripped Erik free of his armor, pulling most of his tanned flesh with it. He cried with relief the bones in his legs and feet finished creaking and elongating into their new shapes. If Willis hadn’t seen it for himself, he’d be convinced he was looking a shorter Rush. “What the hell was that Rade?!” Erik shook his head, trying to calm himself and clear his mind. His dormant instincts were fighting for control. “Don’t know,” he panted and growled through his bloody gums and fresh razor-sharp teeth.

“Felt it...coming this time. Had to get to a...safe place,” he panted heavily, “didn’t wanna hurt anyone.” Erik tried to stand up, but slid on the discarded skin, blood, and various fluids his human form melted to on the ground. His metal armor clinked and clattered as he struggled for solid footing. Willis gingerly helped him up. “Easy, easy. That don’t look good,” the green giant whispered in

awe and worry. "I'm fine," he panted less this time, "or will be." He sucked a deep breath in through his new moist nose and held it before shakily exhaling.

He wobbled unsteadily as his senses grew to match their new sensory organs. His vision was now so clear and sharp, the contrast was quickly giving him a headache. He could smell the many days of chemicals, sweat, and worry from Willis. He could hear the giant's every heartbeat like a thunderous boom in his pointy ears. Even the gentle draft from the tired air conditioner was exhilarating him as every strand of fur in its path gently waved. His taste was the last to catch up; he could taste his own blood: thick and coppery in his maw.

He looked up slightly to Willis with bright orange eyes and grinned. He started to worry Willis with his sudden silence and creepy grin. "Let's get you to the tub. If you start peelin' flesh off again, it'll be less mess to clean up," Willis concluded. Erik nodded slightly as Willis carefully aided him to the small bathroom and into the clawfoot tub. The fresh wolfman sat down gently before yelping: he'd sat on his new bushy tail.

For the large doses of sudden strangeness, Willis' nerves calmed quickly: he was in scientist mode. Without asking permission, he started poking and prodding Erik like a test subject, but with a modicum more of respect. He stared in awe: the FEV was an amazing compound, able to create so much with so little warning. It only took the young man five or six minutes to become something completely different.

Jenkins told him of the first time he'd seen Erik transform, "utterly disgusting and amazing," were his exact words. Willis gently patted Erik's head, "good boy," he grinned awkwardly, "don't bite me now, but I wanna do s'more examinations." Erik emitted a low, threatening growl in response. Willis withdrew his wandering hands quickly, legitimately afraid of being of the receiving end of a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth. "Well, fine then, prude," he harrumphed.

"Get washed up. I wanna see how quickly you adapt to that new shape o' yours. You remember how to bathe?" Erik shot him a sideways glance; his new orange irises were even more threatening than normal. "Good boy!" Erik growled slightly as a grinning Willis left him alone in the cold tub. As he ran warm water and slowly cleansed himself, Willis stole one of Rush's many notebooks and a chewed pencil

to scribble down everything as he'd just seen. He was even digging through the viscera left on the kitchen floor, deftly estimating the amount and types of fluids that accompanied the flesh. He was very excited to see that the transformation even had him losing his finger and toenails.

"Claws must burst through the skin? How'd he have enough calories to do that?" He spent the next thirty minutes scribbling down his questions and conjectures before realizing that Erik was still in the bathroom and he'd grown suspiciously quiet over the last five minutes. Willis knocked on the door. "Rade, y'okay?" No answer. Willis knocked again, "answer me or I'll come in there an' finish my exam!" Erik splashed water out of the tub as he ripped himself free of the water: he'd been testing how long he could hold his breath underwater.

"No. Thank you," he growled at the door. The young wolf-man marveled at himself, inspecting every inch of his new body. His strange new feet were the most interesting at the moment: they would never fit back into his size 11 boots, now elongated with thick pads on the bottom and deadly black dewdrop claws at the end of his five toes. Ten in total. He flexed every muscle from his pinkie toe up his legs, abdomen, arms and each digit on his new, wide paws. He inspected those next. He thought they were still very hand-like: five digits, thicker than before, but now some with thick, dark padding on the heel and ball. The claws on his fingers resembled those on his toes, just longer and just as sharp.

Willis opened the door and stared at him like Rush did so many weeks ago after they'd first met. "Studying me?" he grumbled. "Yes," Willis responded flatly, "you did somethin' amazin'. Can Rush do that?" Erik shook his head, sending rivulets of water flying across the tiled bathroom. "He says no. Or can't yet. He doesn't know. I think he wants to, just the other way 'round." "Interesting..." Willis mumbled, scratching more notes onto the quadrille notepad.

"How d'you feel?" "Wet." Willis scowled slightly, "just wet?" Erik paused, "strong. But in control. I think." His friend nodded slightly. "Erik," he asked, "do you know how to get back or why you changed at all?" The wolf in the tub propped his feet up on the end near the faucets and reclined backward, pondering for a few moments. Willis scrutinized everything he could see over the tub while he waited for an answer.

“Felt like I was weak. Need to be stronger. Hard to put a pin in.” “How ‘bout a fuckin’ mop,” Jenkins yelled from behind Willis. He’d silently snuck in, curious why Rush’s exterior door was in splintered pieces. “You doin’ your new trick again, Erik?” Erik growled playfully from the bathroom, “maybe? Why don’t you come find out? Damn greenskin can’t keep his hands to himself, so I must’ve done pretty well.”

Jenkins grimaced at the disgusting mess on the floor before gently rubbing Willis’ back as he leaned around him to peer at the voice coming from the bathroom. Only Erik’s snout and the tops of his clawed toes were visible. “All I see is a nose and toes, buddy. That all you could manage this time?” Erik pulled himself out of the tub and dripped in his full glory in front of them. “I see why Rush hates wearing clothes now. It’s like goin’ ‘round commando, but a hundred times better.”

Jenkins was having trouble stringing words together now that his childhood friend, nearly doubled in muscle mass and covered in fur, stood sopping wet in front of them. “I...uh... What? Commando? Not me, I did laundry.” Erik shook off, doing his best to imitate how Rush showed him to, spraying the walls and his comrades with water. The agitation left him dizzy. After a few moments when the dizziness didn’t go away, he got worried. Erik stumbled toward Willis and Jenkins, tripping over new feet and smashing into them.

“Erik? What’s wrong?” Jenkins asked as he and Willis caught him and ferried him to a couch. “Dunno,” he mumbled, trying to get the three Jenkins’ into focus. Willis wrenched open an eyelid before forcing Erik’s maw wide open. His gums were nearly white. “Blood loss?” Jenkins shook his head poking all of the available squishy bits on Erik, “nothing distended.”

“When’d you eat last,” Jenkins questioned. Erik tried to think, “breakfast. Then had beers with Axel.” Willis threw his notebook on the coffee table and hoisted Erik back into the kitchen, dropping him into the middle of his fleshy mess. “Eat,” he instructed. Jenkins gagged forcibly as Erik obliged without question, chowing down his own flesh and lapping at unidentifiable liquids. After three grotesque mawfuls, he felt worlds better.

“That’s fucked up,” Jenkins groaned. Willis shrugged, “makes sense. Needs the calories.” “But he’s...eating people!” Willis shrugged again and smacked his lips, “y’all’re pretty tasty.” Jenkins quickly saw himself to the restroom to relieve himself of the two pints of beer he’d had earlier. Eating his own flesh felt natural to Erik in his current state. In fact, he wondered why he didn’t think of it in the first place.

After Jenkins finished vomiting and washed up, he wiped his hands on his medical coat and wondered, “well what do we do now?” Erik scratched his chin fur, “I have research to do.” He stood up and disappeared behind the divider to Rush’s bedroom. They waited patiently while they heard the sound of cloth rustling against fur. He emerged in a pair of green boxer shorts. “Really?” Jenkins laughed, “you look ridiculous.”

Erik shrugged in a Rush-like manner and replied, “yeah, well. Company’s over. Gotta wear something an’ there ain’t much here. I don’ even know why these’re here. They’re mine.” Jenkins thought of the most logical reason he could: “maybe Rush was practicing?” Erik raised a furred eyebrow, “practicing what? Wearing clothes?” “Sure, why not?”

After the shock of his transformation finally wore off, he tried to resume studying. Willis was kind enough to clean the sticky remnants off of the kitchen while Jenkins continued *his* work of examining Erik. He took measurements of everything he could without causing too much aggravation. He wrote it all down and finally satisfied, sent Willis back to the lab with the notes. “You get measurements of what was left in the kitchen?” He nodded affirmatively. “Good. Compare these with Rush’s and his old file. I’ll be there in a few. Just need to pull some blood to go with those numbers.”

Erik flattened his ears and bared his teeth in Jenkins’ direction when he mentioned drawing blood. “Hey, hey. C’mon, don’t be like that. I’m your *doctor*, remember? We’ll just call it a late checkup. You did miss yours in February. Again.” They scowled at each other – each on a separate couch – for a few moments until Erik relented slightly.

“Glad to see that your physical change hasn’t affected your dickishness,” Jenkins sighed sarcastically, digging for his medkit. Erik growled gently in response.

"Shut up." Erik grew louder. Jenkins screwed a fresh needle in to the syringe and shook it in front of his friend. "You gonna keep bitchin' or you gonna let me do my job?" Jenkins muttered under his breath, "What is it with you two growlin' at everything?"

"Gimme an arm." Erik crossed them in protest. "Arm. Now. Or I'm taking it directly from your neck." Erik growled again. Jenkins gritted his teeth and growled back. "Arm!" Erik bared his teeth. Jenkins matched him, leaning on the coffee table to meet him in the middle. "Now kiss," Willis said from the doorway with a lewd grin on his face. His interruption caught them both off guard.

"How fuckin' long's it take to get blood samples, *sweetheart*?" "Ain't got 'em yet. Some furry bastard's begin' difficult." Willis strode in and squatted down to meet Erik and Jenkins above the table. "You gonna be a good boy for me? Huh?" Willis cooed, scratching Erik's head to calm him, "atta boy." Erik caught himself strangely enjoying the attention. "I am not a dog!" Willis laughed, "sure as hell look like one."

"Now be a good boy for th' lil' doctor here." Erik breathed a sigh and nodded. "Sorry." "What's that, dog?" Erik bared his teeth and half-growled. Willis switched from petting to roughly grabbing an ear, "That's enough. Get your shit together and quit actin' like a child." Erik yelped and whined in pain. Willis gave his ear a rough shake before shoving him back onto the couch. "Give him an arm. You missed February. Get over it," Willis said flatly.

Jenkins reached for his ready needle and gently took Erik's extended arm to draw five vials of rich, dark blood. "There. No muss. No fuss. That wasn't too bad, was it? I didn't even have to stick you twice." "No," Erik groaned. Jenkins smiled and roughed up his head fur and joined Willis in the lab, "'Atta boy. I'll send a scribe in to fix this mess," he yelled back as he carefully strode over the splintered door.

Furry Erik sat on the couch, holding the crook of his elbow to stem the puncture wound from Jenkins' needle. He sat in silence, trying to explain his recent absurd behavior to himself. "What the hell's gotten into me? I'm not crazy about needles, I really wanted to hurt him before he could hurt me. Latent instinct?" He shivered at the thought of eviscerating his best friend. A pair of scribes

came to the apartment at Jenkins' behest; he claimed that Rush had a small medical emergency due to an allergen and they had to knock the door down.

They were too busy cleaning up the mess in the outer office to realize the furry man on the couch wasn't Rush. "Get to feelin' better, Mr. Rush," one called back through the gaping wood frame as they left. "Idiots," he thought bitterly. Erik got up from the couch and closed the interior apartment door, sealing himself in with the millions of data points to entertain his new senses. No longer content with merely reading datum, the young man found himself sifting through Rush's meager belongings, sniffing, touching, and taste-testing everything from Rush's sickle-like polearm hung over his bed to the worn couches.

The framed drawing from Dorian hanging near Rush's bed caught his interest. He could smell the sadness from the child and Rush both; the sudden swell of emotions was nearly overpowering. "What is *wrong* with me?" Before he could formulate a satisfactory answer, the scribes opened the door with a third person in tow. To Erik's horror it was his father. He paled and nervously panted. Elder Redding smiled to the scribes and thanked them for their hard work before seeing himself into the apartment and closing the door between them.

"Who are you, and what do you want?," the old man asked threateningly as he drew a familiar silenced 10mm pistol from the folds of his red robes. "Are you with the Enclave?" Erik blinked, unable to string a full sentence together. "Uh, no. Sir," he stammered, sitting on a nearby couch, picture frame in hand. "Then answer the question. Who are you and why are you in this apartment Do you know who's it is?" he asked coolly, sitting on the opposite couch. "It's familiar." "How's that?" "Smells. The darkness of it. The cold floors," he gently petted the frame, "the memories."

The elder patiently asked him again, "who are you? Do you need help? Why are you here? Do you know where Mr. Hawthorne is? Is that why you've come?" A knock came at the door, "Sir? Paladin Jenkins is here, he requests entry. Says it's urgent." The elder glanced over his shoulder, then back to Erik, "Don't move."

Redding walked to the door and cracked it open to chat with Jenkins in abrupt words. It only took a few seconds for him to string together what was going on.

He pulled Jenkins in roughly by the ear and pointed him next to his furry friend on the couch. "Sit. Explain. Now."

Jenkins looked down at the ground, he certainly didn't want to be present for this conversation. They all sat in silence for a few moments. Instead of explaining, Erik found himself making tea for them. The Elder kept his hand on, carefully watching him for unexpected movements. The elder squinted at Jenkins. "Axel. Where is Erik. Where is my son? I've been looking for him all afternoon."

Jenkins gulped, "That's...uh...that's him in there, sir. It's a new trick he picked up...recently." Elder Redding's face momentarily lost its stern composure and he shuddered slightly. "Son?" he asked quietly, "what...have you done to yourself?" The simmering water in the pot was his answer. As the water came to a boil, Erik turned to his father and stared in silence, unsure of what to say. In his typically clumsy fashion, he spilled scalding water on himself and across the kitchen, causing him to yelp in pain.

Elder Redding shot up from the couch and made his way to the kitchen, Jenkins on his tail. "Hey! Are you okay?" His son chuckled sadly in response, "yeah. I'm okay dad," he grumbled. His father lovingly swept the familiar cowlick from his new orange eyes and asked again, "what'd you do to yourself? How'd you get like this?" Erik steeped the tea in the little remaining water and replied, "I think it's always been here. Just latent." Jenkins chimed in, "we suspect it was brought to fruition at the complex." Elder Redding narrowed his gaze slightly.

"We? We who?" Jenkins gulped again, "me and Rush. And Willis. And Ida had suspicions after Rush joined up and she started the culture projects. Their DNA and whatnot." The elder sighed, "when were you planning on telling me? Is this a permanent thing? Do you know how to...turn normal?" Erik narrowed his gaze, "normal? Are you saying my brother's not normal? Why isn't *this* normal?" His temper was growing rapidly. "Maybe, *dad*, I've been *abnormal* all my life! I haven't looked like anyone in my family until now!"

Elder Redding was shocked at his outburst. "I don't care what you look like, I just want you safe and healthy. Rush too, that's why I've been looking for you all day..." Erik's temper flushed with his color as he grew concerned, "what? What's going on dad? What's wrong with Rush?"

“We got a radio,” he explained quietly, “from that little town near their second LZ. A pair of young scavengers found BoS equipment and one man shot in the head near an industrial storage facility. There were verified reports of Enclave Vertibirds in the air this afternoon.” Erik shuddered fiercely. “Oh, God. No.” Jenkins stared glassy-eyed at the linoleum floor. “Was...was it John?” he asked the elder flatly. “Yes. I’ve already dispatched the Major to retrieve his body and their goods.”

#

A beaten blue Corvega sped southwest on old 98 through the waning daylight, skidding on patches of mud and bouncing through potholes. Major Artemis was driving as quickly as he could to verify the reports from the tiny town near Mobile. He cursed himself and the Elder for throwing Franklin back into the field the entire three hours it took him to get to his destination. Not wanting to waste time, he radioed ahead to have them prep the goods and prepare the body for retrieval. Two scraggly men, no older than 20, met him at the town’s gates with bulky packs over their shoulders. “What’s the reward, old man,” one taller one asked as the Major exited the running car. “5,000 caps each, provided everything’s there. Where’s the body?” They looked at each other in confusion. “Body? The hell you on about ol’ man? Ain’t got no body, jus’ these goods.”

The Major walked up to the man and got in his face, “I want two rucksacks, three plasma rifles, ammo, a pair of Pip-Boys, a weeks’ worth of goods for three, and a body. Right. Now.” The scavver’s younger brother spoke up, “sir, we ain’t got a body! Everything else is right here. That dude we found’s in the clinic. Ol’ Doc Red says he’ ain’t dead. We couldn’t tell no different.” Major Artemis demeanor lightened up instantly, “show me. No wait,” he paused to pay his promised tender, “throw that shit in the car first.”

They did as instructed and led him to the small clinic at the center of town, conveniently located next to the combination bar, brothel, hotel, hair care, and tire center. A grizzled and angry doctor met his acquaintance, “the hell you want? You best be dyin’ or you’re wastin’ my damn time.” “These two told me you have a gunshot victim in here? Male, early thirties?” The ancient man straightened his glasses and hiked a thumb to the eight ill-kempt beds in the back, “take your pick, *Brotherhood*.”

Artemis wandered to the back and found Franklin in the furthest bed, under a broken window. Artemis watched as he breathed shallowly. He carefully inspected him and quickly found the trauma at the rear of his skull. There was serious damage, but Artemis was happy to see that there wasn't too much swelling. "What happened to 'em?" he asked the old doctor.

The angry man shrugged and took a drag on a cigarette, adding smoke to the lingering dust in the stale air. "Hell if I know. Ain't no sheriff, Jack, just a doctor." "Clearly a skilled one," Artemis grumbled sarcastically, "why's this wound not been cleaned?" "Ain't got the goods. Had just enough to stabilize 'im. Speakin' of, who's payin for the chems I wasted on that sorry Brotherhood asshole?" The Major grit his teeth and yelled as quietly as he could, "You son-of-a-bitch! If not for us, this place would a fuckin' hole in the mud!" He slammed a few hundred caps on the rickety cart serving as the man's desk and stole an overturned wheelchair. "I'm takin' this too," he grunted, carefully loading Franklin into the chair.

He took a quick glance around at the other patients and shook his head, knowing they would most likely die under this hack's care. "C'mon John, let's go home." He quickly pushed the grown man, limp in the chair, through the quickly deserting town as night fell. "In...you...go," he strained, hoisting Franklin's dead weight into the passenger seat and strapped him in.

Artemis checked the back seat, happy to see that the two scavvers didn't try to make off with his money and goods. He cranked the Highwayman and listed to the V8 angrily gurgle in time as it idled smoothly, anxious to eat up more miles of asphalt. Artemis tweaked some knobs on the radio on the floorboard, forcing the yellow dials to sweep up and down before casting static through the single torn speaker.

"Hail, Delta. Major Artemis. I'm en route. ETA is three or four hours."

"Roger Major, Delta copies. Elder bids you Godspeed," a woman replied through the static. "Copy that, Delta. Tell 'em that he ain't out of the woods, but we ain't digging a plot tonight, either. Major out."

After turning the radio off, he leaned across Franklin and reclined the seat, hoping to keep him from bouncing around too much on the rough ride home.

#

Jenkins, Elder Redding, and Father Murphy met Major Artemis as he drove the car directly through the base to the laboratory. "Hail, sir," he called out with a hint of cheer in his voice to their Elder. "Hail, Major," Jenkins and the Elder replied. Artemis jumped out of the car and ran to the other side to get Franklin out. "Gimme a hand here, we got our work cut out Axel!" "Aye, sir," Jenkins replied, hastily running to his side to haul Franklin into Ida's laboratory.

"Oh, Lord above," Father Murphy muttered, "please do not force your loyal shepherd to go through this again. You know how hard it is to lose a son, let alone two." Elder Redding gently clapped the Father on his shoulder. "They're the best medics on this side of the Mississippi: they've saved him before, Murphy, they can do it again." "Perhaps the Lord would be kind enough to lend them his strength," he said before crossing his heart and silently sending up a prayer. After raising his head, the Elder ushered him in the lab building and past Ida's laboratory. "Mr. Hawthorne has been kind enough to see your needs until we find out more about John."

The father nodded calmly and thanked the Elder for escorting him to Rush's apartment. He knocked gently, "Mr. Hawthorne? It's Father Murphy, are you in?" Erik, still in his furry form and clad in his regular khakis and shirt, answered the door. "Evening." The Father was confused, "I'm sorry. I thought you were taller." "The clothing suites you well, Mr. Hawthorne." Erik nodded his thanks with a slight grin, trying to stay in character, and offered him a seat on a couch. "Ah, thank you," he said kindly. Erik quickly set to making them a cup of tea.

"I am truly sorry, Mr. Hawthorne, for taking so long to return this. It proved much more difficult to repair than I anticipated. I also want to apologize again for John's behavior." Erik peered from the kitchen and saw he was holding the urn of their clan's first mother, skillfully reassembled with fine silver gluing the many shards together. He carefully set the piece on the coffee table.

"He was not well," Erik grumbled gently. Father Murphy sighed slightly and said, "Yes, well, he hasn't been in the right state of mind since his brother passed, God bless his soul. It may not mean much, but I blessed the urn as well."

"Thank you," he grumbled appreciatively, "it is beautiful." "We feel it offers a form of protection. A way of feeling closer to God," he explained. "But I'm sure you don't believe in such things." He handed the Father a warm mug of tea and sat on the couch across from him and replied, "we believe in...similar things. When a clan member dies, they go to live in stars with the gods of the Earth. Each one lives on in the memories we pass down from generation to generation. They watch over us, lend us strength, remind us to be kind and to put others' needs before our own. It is the only way for the pack to survive."

Father Murphy smiled and nodded, "that is an admirable belief." "I'd like to know more, if you don't mind: few people believe in things greater than themselves these days...a fresh perspective would be a pleasant distraction, given the circumstances." Erik chatted with the Father for hours, thankful he took the time to snoop through Rush's many notebooks for clues about their clan.

"Sir, have you eaten lately? You smell hungry." Father Murphy thought for a moment. "No, I don't think I've had a bite since I heard about John." He paused to look at his watch, "about six hours ago now..." Erik jumped up and dug through Rush's kitchen to find something to offer. "No, son! Don't fret about me, I'll be fine. Mrs. Penn will be by in a few short hours, she's always kind enough to bring me breakfast at the chapel." "Knight Penn?" The father nodded, "oh, yes. She's been a member of my congregation for quite a number of years."

A tired knock came at their door, "Father?" The man stood up so quickly, his habit threatened to launch itself skyward. "Yes? Yes? Who is it?" Elder Redding let himself in and smiled in response. "Ah, Elder. Why have you come by so late?" "To deliver a little good news for once," he said. "John's been cleaned up and is stable. Axel, Ida, and Major Artemis have been skillfully removing shrapnel from his thick skull for some hours now, but he's looking much better." Father Murphy visibly sagged with relief. "Oh, joyus Lord. Thank you," he said solemnly. "May I see him?"

The Elder frowned slightly. "I'm sorry, but that's not a wise idea at the moment. He's doing better, but he's not out of the woods yet, sir. Let's wait until tomorrow or the day after, if Artemis clears it." Father Murphy nodded slightly and hugged the elder man. "Thank you, Marshall," he said before giving his thanks

to “Mr. Hawthorne” for his hospitality. “I will be praying in the chapel, should anything change.”

“Understood. Please remember to rest as well, Murphy.” After he left, Elder Redding looked at Erik, drifting to sleep on Rush’s couch. “Son, we’re not done working yet.” “Ah, what? It’s gotta be two AM.” The Elder nodded and helped him up from the couch, “Ida’s got a plan, and it involves you and your blood. Let’s go.” Erik was wide awake. He wanted to protest, but under the circumstances, fought his more base instincts and followed his father to Ida’s laboratory.

Erik knocked gently on the door waiting for someone to open it. Ida answered in short order -- the dark circles under her eyes were much darker than normal. “Morning Ida.” “Well, hello Erik. She smiled under her surgical mask at Elder Redding. “Neat trick your boy learned there.” The Elder smiled warily without response. “Well, c’mon Erik. Let’s get you hooked up.” “Hooked up?”

“Yeah. We compared your latest blood samples to older ones and discovered something very interesting. In your new form, your body heals *much* quicker than normal. Which, well you already heal abnormally fast, so I was quite surprised. Since your friend on the table there has A positive blood, and you have A negative, I thought it’d be a good idea to let him borrow a pint. At the least, he’d be back up a quart and at best maybe some of that magic in you will work on him.”

Erik looked around for Jenkins to explain this nonsense, but didn’t see him anywhere. “Lookin’ for Axel?” she asked. “I sent him and Willis to bed. Poor things were nodding off with scalpels in-hand.” She led Erik to a gurney next to Franklin’s and bade him to lay down. “Up here. Get comfy,” she said in a gentle, maternal tone. “Marshall, you need to go to bed as well. You won’t be able to do us any good, dead on your feet like you are now.”

He smiled, kissed his son on his forehead, and hugged her on his way out. “You’re the best, Ida.” “I know, she replied. After he carefully closed the door behind himself, Ida went back to working on Erik. “Okay, my boy. You know how this goes.” He gulped and shivered as she retrieved a sterile needle leading to a fresh blood bag. “Just a...pinch,” she said, directing the needle in to the same juicy vein Jenkins punctured some hours ago.

She watched his rich, almost-black blood flow from the tube into the bag. Satisfied, she pulled up a stool near his gurney and hummed, petting his new head fur, “still got that damn cowlick, bless your heart.” Erik recognized the tune as he drifted off to sleep, it was the same one that Rush sang to him before their clan was nearly wiped out of existence.

He slept for a few hours before waking up, moaning in pain. Jenkins was monitoring them in the lab the morning, “Erik? What’s wrong?” He panted and wheezed in response as his muscles rippled under his fur: he was transforming back to normal. His bones and muscles shrunk without much coordination, leaving him in a twisted mess. “Ida! Get in here! Hurry!” Jenkins yelled to the back office. She threw her reading material across the room and hustled to them “What? Oh. Oh! He’s doing it?” Jenkins nodded, watching as his best friend’s furred flesh splayed open to reveal the fresh tanned skin underneath. Erik moaned and whined until the worst parts came, then he writhed as his organs shifted.

After coughing up his sharp teeth, his eyes bulged slightly and bled profusely as his normal grey ones fought to replace the orange ones currently in his ocular orbits. His animal eyes escaped with a *pop* before bouncing on the tiled floor below. “Christ! How does he survive this?” Ida exclaimed. Jenkins watched in horror for the second time. “I dunno,” he whispered, “but he’s doin’ better this time at least.” In half the time, Erik shifted back to his old form.

He fought to breathe steadily, his heart was still racing. Once he calmed down slightly, he shuddered in disgust: his clothing trapped most of his old fur and remnants to his fresh skin. The sticky bloodiness of it made him sick to his stomach. “Oh, that sucked,” he panted, “and I’m gonna be sick.” He paled and rolled to the side to vomit over the gurney. Ida stood by, amazed at the physical transformation. She was running calculations at a hundred miles an hour in her mind. “Jenkins,” she whispered, “get me some of his furry dermis.”

Erik then proceeded to vomit, splattering what little contents were in his stomach across Ida’s clean floor. “Some of that, too,” she added. “I want samples of everything.” Jenkins shuddered, took a deep breath, and offered Erik a hand. “Okay, let’s get you cleaned up, bud.” Erik wiped his mouth on some left over fur and nodded. “Yeah, thanks.” Jenkins helped him off of the gurney and stripped him down before handing him his medical coat.

The sloppy wet sounds of flesh falling to the floor threatened to make Erik vomit again. “Not in my jacket, you don’t,” Jenkins threatened, further helping him back to Rush’s apartment. “You okay?” Erik nodded. “Well, that looked like it was better than last time.” “Yeah?” Jenkins nodded, “no seizure this time. Happened a lot quicker, too. The first time we watched over you, it took you forever to change back.” “Must be why I didn’t hurt last time?” Jenkins shrugged.

“Makes sense, though. What made you change?” “Dunno. Just felt like I needed to be normal again.” Jenkins opened the doors and followed Erik in. “Do you like it? Bein’ like Rush?” Erik walked into the bathroom and clicked the light on, “yeah. I do. I felt stronger and smarter than I’ve ever been. I felt kinda out of control for some of it though. I’m sorry.” Jenkins accepted his medical coat from Erik’s arm poking around the bathroom door. “Sorry for what?”

Erik turned on the warm water and replied, “I wanted to hurt you. Badly. When we were arguing and you wanted some blood. I did too, but not in a good way.” Jenkins looked at his stained coat and shuddered slightly. “That’s uh...that’s okay, Erik. You didn’t mean it. Right?” “Right.”

By that afternoon, nearly everyone was back into their normal routine. Jenkins, Willis, and Ida checked on Franklin constantly while working on the newest samples from Erik’s recent transformation; Erik was harassing the scribes for their latest data; and the Elder was drawing up fresh maps with Major Artemis in his quarters.

After Erik was satisfied with his new data, he joined the Elder and Major on the third deck of the common hall. “Sirs? Permission to enter?” Elder Redding allowed it and waved him over to the printed maps scattered across his coffee table. “Afternoon Paladin. Sir. Major.” Artemis nodded. “Any news?” “Perhaps,” Erik paused, “but I would like to have a quick word with the Elder, if you don’t mind.” “No. And if it’s about the stunt you pulled earlier, he already told me.”

Erik was surprised, “Oh. Okay. Well, just one thing then. We have reports of a possible attempted attack from the Enclave. The scribes said they noticed something strange happening on their networks.” The Elder nodded, seemingly unsurprised by either piece of information. “I have no doubt they saw the traffic, Erik. I was the intended recipient.”

“Sir? What do you mean?” “My terminal made some peculiar noises earlier. Someone left me a message of some sort, it appears to be broken or encrypted. I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. I figured you’d be heading up this afternoon; I thought I’d have you take a look.” Erik slumped slightly, “I, uh. Aye, sir.” “After that, we need to scrounge your scouts and get feelers out for where the Enclave went with our friends.”

Erik nodded and sat at the terminal. He stared at the green screen and scrolled through the impossibly long message. “This thing should be overflowing the buffer, it’s too long...” It was a garbled mess, thousands of lines in length. Erik scratched his head in thought, “Is that hex? Memory locations, maybe? No, they’re not aligned,” he mumbled. “Character encoding, maybe?” After poking at the document for an hour, Erik coxed the following from it:

```
TheyhavecapturedRushandhisfemalefri\
endIcannothelpthemfromhereIknowwhat |
theyareplanningPleasegobacktomyhome |
andsave\_____ \|
therema |
inderof |
mychild |
\_____ \|
renMrMarshallIbegofyoupleasebefore\
\_____ \|
theydestroytherestofmyprogenybring\
\_____ \|
themtoyourhomeandkeepthemsafeYoudon\
\_____ \|
otoweme\
butyouo |
yourson |
sthatmu |
chIwillcontinuetomonitortheiractivi\
tyandintervenewhenpossibleCoordina |
tesareNorth30.684053,West-88.017533 |
\_____ \|
```

“What the hell is this mess?” Erik’s lack of muttering caught the Elder’s attention, “have you got something?” “Yeah. Looks like a message was encoded in that crap. I think it’s Doctor Hawthorne. He says they got Rush and Olivia. They’re going to...wipe out the rest of my clan. He sent some coordinates. Dad, we’ve gotta go, now!” Predictably, the elder scowled.

We don't know if that's true. We don't even know if that's really from the Doctor. We'll wait until our inside source sends a message. He's due to send something in the next day or so. "What?! My brother and girlfriend are been abducted by the Enclave, and all you can say is 'we'll wait for tomorrow'?! We have confirmed reports of Vertibirds! What more do you need?!" The elder sighed and roughly plunked his mug on the coffee table. "Son, stop and think before you get so riled up."

"If that's a trap," Elder Redding explained, "and *you* get captured or worse, then we'll be in a worse bind. I can't keep chasing ghosts and sending people on snipe hunts, Erik. More, now than ever, I need those in my command to trust their Elder. Good Paladins wait for their orders." Erik scoffed and yelled, "fine! I quit," and stormed off. Artemis looked in concern to the Elder; he'd never seen level-headed Erik act out like that. "Marshall?" Elder Redding shook his head sadly, "teenage years came late, apparently. Damn it." "You gonna stop 'em?" "Nope. He's on his own this time."

Erik went to his room for the first time that week to pack up his travel gear. Jenkins found him some time later, "hey! Good news!" "What?!" he growled, still fuming. "Franklin's up! He's talking and eating! I think you fixed 'em!" The surprising news caught him off guard, "he, what? How? He was nearly dead last night." Jenkins nodded, "yeah, I know, I was the one pulling shards of bone and brass from his brain."

Erik threw the overstuffed bag on his back and followed Jenkins out and downstairs. "Where're you going?" "To save my family!" he spat. "What? Did the Elder send you?" "Hell no, he wants to wait around for some spy to report back before we make a move. I ain't got time for that."

#

"There, that should do it," a young man said to himself, clacking away on an old RobCo terminal. The blonde man was dressed in a drab grey uniform with an "E" surrounded by stars on the left chest. "Send," he sighed, "I hope he moves quick." A sharp knock rapped at the metal bulkhead door, he quickly turned off his terminal and said, "Enter." A man, five or six years younger than Elder Redding, crossed over the threshold into the young man's room.

"Afternoon, sir." "Mr. Summers." "What do you need, dad?" Colonel Summers, dressed in a sun-bleached overcoat replied with a hint of excitement, "a reward for bringing our newest test subjects here with minimal losses. Your sister is waiting to see you." The ex-scribe shot up from his makeshift desk and followed his father through the winding and rusty halls of their battleship home. The USS Alabama had seen better days since the second and third world wars, but it was a tough ship, serving as the Enclave's second home. Their first in the Gulf Commonwealth was the Lockreed Martin Industrial Complex near Valdosta, Georgia.

At times, Terry Summers missed the small bustling town, a joint venture between Lockreeed, Poseidon Energy, and West Tek. He'd grown accustomed to the lax lifestyle of living on the coast. As they approached the quarantine area, Terry snapped out of his daydream. "Colonel, Mr. Summers," an armored guard greeted them. "Level three clearance required, sir," he said to the Colonel, looking at his son. "Temporary access for today only," he replied. The guard nodded, scribbling something on a clipboard. "Go ahead, sir."

The young man dreaded this part of the trip: they had to walk past the prisoners and test subjects before they got to the experimental labs in the back. The people that were still human screamed and cursed them. Those that were less than human snarled or screeched angrily, depending on which experiment they were undergoing. He mentally took count as he passed the cells: Mr. Rush, Ms. Olivia, four Brotherhood scouts, twelve townspeople, seven dogs, twelve deathclaws, two super mutants, and a swamper. "Productive few months," he muttered to himself.

"I agree, and we have you to thank for most of it," Colonel Summers replied. "In here," he gestured to experimental lab two: advanced genetic manipulation for biological warfare assets. Officially, "AGMFBWA," the lab was often referred to its creatures: "splicers." Terry honestly thought they were wasting time and causing needless suffering until he met Rush. After reading and stealing the reports from Station Magnolia, he hoped he could help reduce the suffering the Enclave was inflicting on innocent people.

"In here," the colonel knocked on a glass enclosure. A humanoid, half-woman, half-canid, lifted herself from the concrete slab bed and stood patiently at the glass. She was wearing a dull silver collar around her neck. Her green eyes were emotionless and glazed over. "She's proving to be quite resilient, Terry," their

father replied, "I expect she will complete the trials successfully." "Emily? Emily! What'd they do to you?! Emily say something!"

The woman with straw-colored fur stood motionless, awaiting orders. Colonel Summers pressed a button on a controller in his pocket, temporarily turning off her control collar. "Hello, dear. Your brother has stopped by to wish you well." She blinked numerous times, trying to clear her senses from the fog of control. "Terry? Terry! Go away! You shouldn't be here!" "Now, now, dear. I brought him here it *is* your birthday today." She began weeping, "no, please. Just go away."

"Nonsense," Colonel replied, pressing another button to open the door to her cell. He ushered Terry in, "go spend some time with your sister. It's a special day." Terry slowly walked in, "no! Get out!" she cried. "Get out Terry!" He refused, instead hugging his sister for the first time in over five years. "Happy birthday, Emily," the Colonel said darkly.

He pressed the same buttons again, closing the door on her cell and reactivating her collar. Before she could warn Terry, she lost control of her body. "Emily? What's wrong? Emily?" She couldn't move, she couldn't even control her own breathing. Under the control of the collars, the splicers weren't much more than brains on sticks. They sense everything that happens around them, but have no control.

She fought the collar as hard as she could, but only managed a slight whimper. Another button press had her stalking Terry. Another button press and the magic word from their father sealed the deal. "Emily, dear? Kill the traitor." "What? NO!" were Terry's last words. His sister was forced to rip his throat out on the spot. His warm blood sprayed across her and her glass enclosure. Unable to stop herself, she gorged on him.

Colonel Summers watched the entire scene and sighed to himself, "you knew better, son." Another button press brought Emily back out of control. A split second later, she was weeping so hard that she made herself sick. "Daddy, why?" she managed to whimper after some time. "We don't tolerate traitors, dear. Thank you for your hard work. Someone will be in to clean this awful mess up in a few moments." His voice turned from oddly paternal to dark and threatening, "if you make a stupid choice I'll have one of the others do the same to you."

Colonel Summers strode out of the splicer lab without a hint of emotion for the absurdities he conducted. As he exited he shot a look to the lead scientist, “clean up that mess.”

Pleased with ridding the Enclave of a traitor and the clear advances in the collars, Colonel Summers entered the second set of cell blocks. During the early days of their occupation, the Enclave turned a portion of the bulkheads into solitary confinement. That’s where he was heading to start interrogation again on the two Brotherhood Knights his now-deceased son brought him.

He knew how crafty the Brotherhood was, and took caution to separate them as far as possible: Olivia near the entrance and Rush and the far end of the deck. The solitary deck was in constant darkness. When the grunts brought their near-rotten gruel once a day, he had them deliver it in paper plates using night vision goggles. For extra cruelty, he changed up the times of food delivery so they couldn’t easily discern the passage of time.

He also had random cell checks, and especially loved to perform them *just* after the occupants drifted off to sleep. They carried a firehose and sprayed the occupants from their wall-mounted cots and nearly drowned them before ending the cell sweeps with a gentle beating. “Nothing life threatening,” he reminded his cruel officers, unwilling to spend more than necessary to keep them alive and useful.

Rush and Olivia had already endured three days of this torture but were proving to be exceptionally feisty. “The Brotherhood are tougher than I give them credit for,” he thought aloud. “Prisoner 42. Wake up!” He was yelling at Olivia. She snorted awake, “huh? What? Who’s there?” “It is *him*,” Rush replied to her mentally. “Damnit,” she cursed under her breath. “I’m up, what do you want, *Colonel*?” He slid a plate on the front of her solid metal door and peered into the darkness through his goggles. “I have a few questions for you, prisoner 42. Are you willing to cooperate, or do you need more...persuasion?”

She laughed hollowly, “I’ve got nothing to tell you. Bastard.” “Well, that’s a shame. I was hoping you would be more cooperative today. That’s fine.” He left and returned with a pair of scientists and a mesmetron. “Open it.” The first scientists opened the cell and stood well away from the door. Before Olivia could

figure out what was going on, she was knocked silly by the microwave blast. The scientists quickly retrieved her and drug her limp body to laboratory one.

During their short visit to the battleship and its solitary confinement, Rush coaxed Olivia to let him in and share her mind. At the very least, he argued, it would keep them strong. He could redirect some of the pain to himself if necessary. Predictably, she argued that no man needed to protect her, but after the third and fourth ruthless beatings they both endured, she was more than happy to share her consciousness. Now that she was out of his range, the isolation settled in around him. The thick iron hull, decades of rust, and thick stench of defeat muffled his senses, driving him stir-crazy.

He had no idea how long it was before he heard from another living soul. He heard the far door open, a new set of feet slowly tread across the diamond-plate floors to his cage. Rush noticed the stride was too long and awkward for a standard human. "Hello?" he called out. "Who is there?" A tendril of curiosity slowly reached out and prodded his mind. "Hello?" he broadcasted mentally. The tendril recoiled slightly, scared, but pressed on. It reached out to him in friendship. "Hello, prisoner 43."

"My name is Rush, not prisoner 43. Who are you? How do you know to perform a geistlink?" "I am Number 86," he thought back. Before Rush could investigate further, another set of feet, human this time, came down the hall. "86! I told you. No fucking around. Drop the food off and get back here! That'll be the last time you get a collar break this week!" The furred man, taller than Rush but thinner due to malnutrition, trembled in fear and whimpered apologies before the small man took out a baton and cracked the wolven splicer in his knees.

He fell hard to the floor and whimpered louder now. "No! Stop!" Rush yelled and banged on his cell door to no effect. The smaller man kept beating the gentle giant until his anger dissipated. It only cost Number 86 a few ribs, his knees, and another tooth. Breathing a sigh of sick relief, the Enclave officer yelled at 86, "get up splicer. Let's go!" 86 struggled and stood up, hobbling behind the human. "I'm sorry," Rush yelled at 86 as they left him hungry in the dark. "I know."

Rush spent what he guessed was the next six hours searching mentally for anyone he could interact with. He was even willing to put up with a droll molerat at this point. He dozed off for some time until he heard the door open again. The hint of fresh air he got alerted him to Olivia's return. "Something is wrong," he thought aloud, trying to figure out why she smelled different. "Sister," he thought to her, hoping for a reply. "Are you well?" He received drug-drenched static as a reply. He continued to gently nudge her brain from 100 yards away for the next hours as her drug-induced delirium slowly waned.

"Sister, please. Please respond. Are you well? What happened? Have you spoken to anyone?" "Oh, Rush," she finally responded, "I don't know. I'm sore though. Did that bastard Summers come in and take me?" Rush answered affirmatively. "I think they did something to me, but I can't tell. I'm sore and swollen. Feels like...cuts on my stomach." Rush's heart sank when she said that. "No. Nononono. That's why you smell wrong." He began to panic. "Sister...they took your child."

She was still too drugged to fully understand his statement, but it didn't sound good. She kept running that sentence through her mind until it was clear enough to make sense. She screamed at the top of her lungs in realization of what they did to her. "Sister! Please, you must try to calm down. You are not well," he cautioned mentally. "No shit I'm not well you stupid furry git! They took my fuckin kid! I'm going to kill every fucking bastard in here until I find one to put him back where he belongs!"

The doors opened again, Rush recognized the stride as Number 86. "86! Please be careful of my comrade. We discovered that your captors have abducted her child. She did not take the news well." 86 did not respond immediately, after walking the length of the room, he pulled the slider on Rush's door to deliver a tray of gruel. The furred man grinned maliciously as he did so. "86?" Rush took the plate and dug through the soupy gruel with his fingers. His new friend somehow managed to stash a lockpick in it.

"Oh! 86, thank you!" Again, he failed to reply, but instead served Olivia. She screamed at him and continued for so long afterward that she went horse. She cried for a while after that. She alternated between insatiable anger and sadness for quite a while. During that time, Rush studied the lockpick, trying to figure out how to make use of it. He felt along the door for a crease or crack, but was

unsuccessful. In desperation, he tried fiddling with the slider and found that 86 left it ajar.

He struggled to squeeze his thick arm in the slot and crank his arm around enough to find the keyhole. "Where are you?" he strained. Just when he found the hole and worked the pick in, he heard the door at the end of the hall open. He panicked and managed to get himself back in the cell with the lockpick before anyone noticed any different. In his excitement, he missed the one-sided conversation Colonel Summers was conducting with Olivia. "...be very proud. It's a shame we had to remove everything though. Once you settle down, you'll thank me. Awful thing, hysterectomies, but necessary: we can't have you tainted wastelanders running around breeding like jackrabbits.

"Your child is interesting. We didn't even have to modify its genetic structure to make another splicer like your friend at the end of the hall there. Did you fuck that genetically-modified mutt? That's unacceptable behavior, wastelander, sex with animals." Olivia spit at him through the slider. "More unacceptable behavior. I'll let it slide for now, considering your recent trauma. I just wanted to stop by and let you know that your son will be my new permanent personal slave."

"How do you know I'm having a son?" she asked quietly. "Splicers develop much quicker than standard humans at first, but then they slow down. You got the first trimester out of the way in, what, less than six weeks? Again, you should be thanking me. Our splicers carry for at least 14 months." In a moment of genuine kindness he paused his gloating to ask, "did you have a name planned?"

"Yeah," she whispered, "Alto Marshall Rade if it was a boy." "Very well," he said, "Number 5 will carry the subject to term. Her physiology as a splicer is better adapted. I can't *wait* on experiment on him," he added with a cackle as he walked out. Olivia wasn't sure how to feel. On one hand, she would never have another child, but on the other, her only child was supposedly alive and well. That became her sole focus. It made her stronger, as far as Rush could sense. At least it got her to settle down.

"Sister, that is good news!" She agreed. "Thank you," he added, "for naming him Alto." "It was Erik's idea. He's sickeningly sweet like that." "What did you have

in mind?” “Luke. I wanted to name him ‘Luke’ so every time I saw him I could say ‘Luke, I am. Your. Mother!’” The reference was lost on Rush. He also gave her the good news that he had a lockpick, but delivered that news in person.

After Colonel Summers left, he nearly broke his shoulder in the process, but he freed himself and soon had Olivia free as well. “We have friends,” he said quietly as he entered her cell with a smile. He quickly frowned when he saw her in the flesh: she was much worse than he was able to tell remotely. The Enclave doctors had not been kind to her; Olivia’s post-op scars were jagged and haphazardly stitched together and leaking. “That will have a good story once we go home,” he said. “Yeah,” she agreed sadly before locking him into a hug.

He returned the hug, “Happy to see you again, sister,” he mumbled gratefully. “Yeah, you too, Rush. Now how the hell are we gonna get out of here?” He handed her the lockpick and shrugged. “Well, let’s wait for them to come back in here. We’ll take ‘em by surprise and go from there.” Rush nodded, “do you want to be alone again?” Olivia smacked him in the back of the head, “no, Wolfy. I don’t.”

He sat on her Navy and patted the spot next to him, “we should try to sleep. We must be strong.” She agreed and sat down, leaning heavily on him. Olivia petted his unkempt head fur, trying to coax it into a single direction. “no use,” he chuckled. “We’re gonna save him,” she said quietly to Rush, “and I hope he has your and Erik’s stupid cowlick.”

Rush threw an arm around her, leaning against the stained concrete wall. They nodded off for a few hours until Rush heard the pneumatic door activate. He shook Olivia awake and placed a finger over his muzzle before pointing toward the entrance. They both snuck to her doorframe and waited for someone to investigate the ajar door. Rush sighed when he recognized the footsteps, it was Number 86.

He approached her cell, tray at hand. He placed the tray in front of her cell and quietly left. Rush accosted him mentally, “Wait! Number 86, come back. We need further assistance.” He left through the door and quickly returned with another tray. “Mr. Rush, you made it out. Is your friend well?” “Well enough. Can you help us escape? We need to get back home.” 86 continued walking toward Rush’s cell, hoping nothing looked suspicious to his benefactors.

"We have limited time without their control collars; only an hour or two a day. They use us to perform chores and any other work they feel is beneath them." Rush grew angry at the indignation. "We are going to come back and save you all." 86 squashed his hopes mentally on the way out, "they are planning to use you for experiments and destroy your friend in a few days." He paused by the door and said aloud, "I hope they do not choose me for the task. It was nice to chat with a splicer from the outside." With that, he left, ensuring the exterior door was slightly ajar.

"They eat, 86?" He nodded to the same handler that beat him the day before. "Yes, sir," he said gently. The Enclave officer roughly clicked the collar back on his slave and shoved him down the hall to their next destination. "Time to go clean the shitters, 86." Rush heard him whine mentally, "but it was mystery meat day."

#

Terry Summers' last living will and testament exited the Enclave network unnoticed thanks to the help of Dr. Hawthorne who was now bouncing it off of decaying satellites to Delta Base and into his backdoor in the Brotherhood's network. Seconds later, Rush's terminal bleeped with Erik at the helm. "What's this?" He waved Jenkins over and read it aloud:

Elder Redding,

Enclosed is the information you requested: the location of the Enclave's current base, the current experiments on track, and any recent events that would cause you concern.

The base is located at approximately North 30.684053 by West -88.017533, the old battleship. From what my father says about its history and the skirmish the Brotherhood lost here, I imagine you remember it well.

The Enclave is currently continuing the following operations:

- Subject retrieval and continued human capital asset acquisition from Jackson
- Continued splicer development using the Hawthorne gene, as the scientists call it. They've made impressive strides you could find useful in your own research.
- A new asset acquisition plan for Magnolia Station. The Colonel wants the remainder of the non-Enclave Hawthorne genome wiped out.

Things of note: Knights Olivia Brown and Rush Hawthorne were captured earlier this week, after the unfortunate death of Paladin John Franklin. I was unfortunate enough to be onsite during the attack and was unable to prevent his death. I sorely regret this. Please give his father my condolences. Additionally, there has been increased interest in Knight Olivia Brown; the research team that runs the Hawthorne experiment seems very excited by her. When I get more details, I will send a follow up message.

Dr. Hawthorne left me a note saying that he sent you a message and was displeased that you have not already made a move to save the occupants of Magnolia Station. I'm not sure where he is or how he knows this, but I can confirm the threat is real against those gentle people. The Colonel has a skirmish planned against that site in the next 36 hours or so. I believe he plans to strike in the cover of dark.

Elder Marshall, I ask that if you are able to save Olivia and Rush, do not kill those that look like him. They are enslaved and cannot control themselves. If anything, they deserve just as much to be rescued. They are my only friends here and I would be remiss if they were needlessly destroyed.

Also, please send along my apologies to Paladin Rade's scouting party. They were heading south from Chickasaw and I had to chase them off with Deathclaws day-before-yesterday. I believe they are well and should be back to Delta shortly. I didn't want to see them ripped to shreds by these Enclave bastards.

- Terry

Erik and Jenkins stared at the screen slack jawed. "Oh, shit. It is as bad as we thought," Erik muttered to Jenkins. "Uh, yeah. What do we do?" "I'm sending this to dad. We'll go up and sort out a plan. He was right to make me wait." After doing as he said, Erik and Jenkins left the comfort of Rush's office and sprinted to the Elder's quarters.

Erik nearly knocked down the door, "Sir! It's urgent! We need to chat, now!" Artemis opened the door and ushered the two young men inside. Elder Redding replied from his terminal, "I'm reading it right now. It does match the other message. He didn't seem to know that Franklin was alive, however." Erik nodded

dully, “yeah. He’s doin’ better, by the way.” Artemis’ eyebrows shot up, “really? That worked?” Erik and Jenkins nodded and replied in tandem, “Yes, sir.”

“Alright boys, let’s make a plan.”