

CHAPTER 32 : CALVARY'S ON THE WAY OR HE CAN FLY?!

Elder Redding, Erik, and Jenkins spent the next two hours formulating a plan of attack. At the conclusion of their meeting, it was decided that Jenkins would join Major Artemis to Station Magnolia to retrieve the remaining members of Rush's clan. Erik would wait for their safe return before embarking to Mobile with Jenkins to extract Rush and Olivia.

Erik, more anxious than ever, wanted to do a parallel run and infiltrate the Enclave base himself while Jenkins was busy down south. Elder Redding disagreed: he would have no backup on such a perilous mission. "Son, I understand your haste, but we can't afford to be rash." Erik agreed for the moment. "Very well. Dismissed Paladins. Jenkins, assemble your gear and be ready to disembark within the hour."

They saw themselves out of his quarters and down to the first deck, past the cafeteria, and into the armory. A tired scribe nodded in their direction. "Requisitions?" "Don't need 'em," Erik replied, handing him a short note signed by their Elder with one word: "unrestricted." "Lucky bastards," the man scoffed. "I never get to have fun with the good stuff."

Erik grinned mischievously and requested a half-dozen fusion cells; explosive ammunition for his trusty 10mm; a bundle of fusion grenades, plasma grenades, and single mininuke on top of enough goods to keep him and three others feed for a week. "Sir, is that enough?" Erik nodded happily, shoving everything into a rucksack. Jenkins requested the medical equivalent of Erik's heavy armaments: a dozen Med-X, Rad-X, RadAway, Mentats, and three boxes of overcharged plasma cells for his rifle. "Oh, throw in a Stealth-Boy, too." "Oh! Me too," Erik chimed in, "can't believe I forgot that." Jenkins shook his head, "it's amazing how much crap you can shove in these rucksacks."

The officer behind the counter shook his head in jealousy, "this shit don't grow on trees, you know. Bring as much of it back as you can." They nodded and left through the shipping door to cut their jaunt to Tom's Garage in half. "You ready?" Erik asked. "Yeah, it's not like you were going to listen anyway." He laughed and clapped Jenkins on the shoulder, "you know me well."

They turned up to Tom's Garage and knocked on the office door. The namesake proprietor opened the door with a slight buzz. "Hey boys! What's goin' on?" "Hey dad," Jenkins replied, hugging his father. "We're off again. Need a car. Should be back in a few days. Which one's good to go?" Tom scratched his head, "Well, there's the problem. We jus' got Henrietta back yesterday, ain't worked her down yet. The other one's distributer cap's goin' out, can't drive 'er far unless you wanna push. That an' nobody said nothing 'bout y'all getting' a car." Erik peered around the corner into the garage, "what about the pickup?" "That's the caravan's. Ain't for official business."

"It is now," Erik replied, tossing his bag in the bed of the truck. Jenkins followed suit. "Keys, dad?" His father shook his head, "I ain't givin' 'em up. Th' pickup ain't for rent, son." Jenkins whined, "C'mon, dad! We don't have time for this. We're trying to save lives. Remember Rush and Olivia? The Enclave's got 'em and we're going t' get 'em back." His father looked around suspiciously and grunted something about leaving the keys above the driver-side visor and kissed his son on the forehead. "Be safe, son. Bring 'em home, okay?"

Tom waved to Erik and walked back into his office to finish off his beer. "You got thirty minutes before I gotta tell Marshall," he said sternly. "Thanks dad, that's plenty of time." With that, Jenkins cranked the truck and steered them southbound on the highway. Once he cleared the southern checkpoint, he slammed the accelerator to the floor, anxiously chewing up the miles as quickly as possible.

As he promised, Tom walked up the three flights of stairs of the Common Hall to report the theft of the caravan's pickup truck. He knocked roughly on the oak door labeled '310', "Marshall, you in?" "Yes, please, come in." His tired smile faded slightly when Tom slinked through the door. "Tell me they didn't steal a car." Tom smiled awkwardly, "well, not a *car*, exactly." Elder Redding sighed deeply and tossed a pencil onto the stack of maps and papers on his coffee table, "why do I even bother?"

"Did they say where they were going?" Tom nodded, "yeah mentioned somethin' 'bout savin' Rush an' Olivia, I believe." Elder Redding nodded, "very well. *If* they make it back in one piece, they're doing time in the brig. A lot of time." "You sure jail time's a good idea, Marshall? They're doin' good." He nodded with a

sullen and exasperated look, “they have to stop disobeying me like this. It sets a terrible precedence and will surely get someone killed. It’s not very befitting for high-ranking officers to act out like they have been lately.”

Tom nodded and stood awkwardly at the door. “Thank you Tom, for telling me. Unless you have anything else I can help with, I need to reformulate my plans. Again.” “Nope, that’s it. G’night.” “Good night, Tom.” Elder Redding waited a few minutes to collect himself before walking down the hall to find Major Artemis. “Major? Are you decent?” Artemis called back, “yeah, c’mon in.” “We have a change of plans,” the Elder sighed upon entry. The Major shook his head. “They took off?” Redding nodded. “Figures. So, what. You want me to go save the other furry folks?”

Redding nodded again, “I’m coming with you.” “Me too!” The third voice caught them both off guard. The exclamation came from Willis. “Willis? What’s wrong? What are you doing up here?” He grunted and repeated himself. “I’m going too. That’s why I’m up here. Axel asked me to make sure they made it up here safe and sound.” “So, you knew of their plan?” He nodded in reply. “And you couldn’t persuade them otherwise?” “Didn’t want to. Sounded like a fun time.”

Elder Redding rubbed his eyes, he was getting far too old for this. “Very well, Mr. Willis. You, the Major and I will go to Station Magnolia and persuade the Hawthornes to give up their ancestral home and return with us. It should be a *cakewalk*.” Willis nodded, “when are we leaving?” The elder man looked over to Artemis who sighed, “uh. Give us an hour or so to be ready. We’ll meet you by the lab?” Willis smiled widely and promptly left.

“Really?” Artemis asked Redding. He nodded. “Couldn’t hurt, I guess. He *is* a good shot.” Artemis shook his head and laughed, “damn kids remind me of us in our younger days.” Elder Redding left to pack his own bag while Artemis did the same. He found a patrolling knight and ordered she find Captain Penn and send her up immediately: black protocol was now in effect. The knight saluted him and ran downstairs and out of the building. Twenty minutes later, Captain Penn was standing in his doorway.

Her polished armor shone brilliantly with the fluorescent lights above. “Ah, Rose, please come in.” “What’s the problem, sir? Knight Reese said you put us

under black protocol?” He nodded, “yes. You are to assume control of this base until my return. If I don’t make it back, you will assume the role of Elder of our chapter.” She stared at him, both honored and shocked at the same time. “Sir? I’ve stood in for you before, but this feels...different. What’s wrong?”

“Same as last time when we had to go find Erik. The Enclave’s afoot and I have to go play politics. We aim to bring our family home from the Enclave’s clutches and bring more of Mr. Hawthorne’s clan here. Then we’ll become one big happy family, if they are willing.” Captain Penn shifted uncomfortably, “is that wise, sir? Do you know these people? I mean, Rush is weird enough. You wanna bring in more of ‘em?” He smiled confidently, “Yes. I have faith in them. I also have faith in you, Rose. Do the Brotherhood proud. *Elder.*”

She blushed slightly. “We’re leaving in the hour. You may use my quarters for whatever you need,” he added. “Keep an ear to the ground, Captain. I don’t trust that our trip will be easy and I wouldn’t be surprised if they try to make a move while we’re gone.” She nodded firmly and shook his hand strongly. “Godspeed, Sir. Ad Victorium, Rose. May steel be with you.” He shouldered his duffel bag and saluted her. She saluted back and suddenly felt the weight of nearly a hundred people’s lives and safety on her shoulders.

“Oh, Rose? There’s a nice bottle of brandy in the cabinet there by the kettle. Help yourself, dear.” She smiled as he left, “always thinking of others,” she muttered in disbelief. He met Major Artemis and the car between the commons building and the laboratory. It was idling smoothly, just as he’d grown to expect from Tom. “Tom sends his regrets, Marshall. He didn’t get to detail ‘er after I got back.” Redding shook his head with a grin, “he’s a damn fine mechanic.” They listened to the radio for a few minutes, waiting for Willis to arrive.

“Who’s the one that sings this one, Marshall?” He shrugged from the passenger seat, “I dunno, but I think I’d like to settle down one day with a lady that sings like that.” Artemis nodded, enjoying the scratchy jazz flowing from the car’s deteriorating speakers. As the last verses of the song, “The difficult, I’ll do right now / The Impossible Will Take A Little While” dissolved in the air, Willis burst from the lab the same excited smile on his face. “Pop the trunk, doc.”

The trunk sprung open, allowing Willis to toss his large rucksack on top of the other two. "Sorry for wait," he grunted as he squeezed into the back of the Highwayman, "Had to give Ida my notes. Let's go save some mutts." Artemis nodded and wheeled them southbound and onto the highway. "Ain't been out of town for years," Willis said with cheer, "bein' on a mission makes it like Christmas." Artemis activated the car's headlights and settled into the driver seat, preparing for the hours it would take to get them south.

Marshall rolled down his window and leaned an elbow out, "Willis?" "Yeah?" "You know any super mutants that would want to join us?" "Tonight?" "No, just in general." He rubbed his bald green head in thought. "Nah. Most of 'em just wanna rebuild the Master's army or don't want nothing to do with you fleshbags. Y'all did blow the world up, after all." "Then why do you stick around?" Willis scoffed. "You damn well know why. You don't up an' abandon folks you love."

Elder Redding smirked to himself, "no. Of course not. I've been meaning to thank you for the hard work and hours of research you do with Ida and Axel. I'm sorry I haven't been able to get to you sooner." Willis shrugged, "I do it 'cause it's fun. That an' Ida's slowin' down a bit these days." "Really? I didn't think she'd ever slow down," he said sadly. "Yup. She's gettin' old. Me too." Marshall chuckled and patted Artemis on the shoulder, "we all are."

"The hell you say," Artemis replied with mock anger, "I ain't stoppin' 'til I'm dead. I'll be damned before the Enclave get the best of us in the meantime." Elder Redding and Willis nodded in silent agreement. Their conversation waned as each reflected on his thoughts and the fading jazz from the car's ancient radio. Now that dusk had given way to night, Artemis had to slow roll. All manners of creatures wandered out in the cover of darkness, and none of them were too kind to sprinting automobiles.

"Should'a left sooner," he grumbled, slowing them down to 50. Nearly three hours into their trip, a small herd of deer blocked their path and stubbornly refusing to part way. Willis gruffly requested to be let of the back before picking the largest buck in the pack and shoulder bashing it to the ground. After he ripped off an antler and screamed a war cry, the pack couldn't get away faster. Where there had been 50 deer, no trace remained except for the bloodied, discarded

antler and shed fur. "I swear they're getting smarter every year," Artemis mumbled.

Willis got back into the car with a satisfied sigh and wiping the blood off on his pants, "that was fun." With the hooved blockade out of the way, they were able to complete their final 20 minutes of driving. They entered through by a dilapidated guard shack and turned onto a two-lane road. "Up here a ways, then around the right of the big building, past the bridge," Elder Redding directed Artemis. "Aye," he muttered. "All right. This is it." Artemis killed the car and got out to stretch, "doesn't look like much, Marshall." Elder Redding mirrored his friend, "I think that was the point.

Willis fought to extract himself from the rear bench seat. "Yup. Pre-war government-military complex. I think I've been here before." He spun around to look at the rest of the visible buildings from their hilltop vantage point. "Yeah! I was stationed here for a few years when I was a young man. They did weather and top-secret research, if I remember right. Should have some good tech 'round." Elder Redding nodded, "yes. Unfortunately, that's not our mission today. We've got lives to save."

"I'm gonna look 'round," Willis said, wandering in the opposite direction. "If you hear the horn, that's us," the Elder yelled after him. He threw up a hand in acknowledgement and continued on his way. "There's a freight elevator 'round back we should take. It'll bring us straight to them." Artemis nodded, "How many are here?" "Three was my last count. An older female, their elder, and two children. I've had a trader drop off supplies for them since Jenkins' been busy."

"They're all like Rush?" Elder Redding nodded as they crunched through loose gravel on the remaining asphalt. "Physically, yes. Their elder is a hard-nosed woman. She will take no quarter if threatened. The children are perfect sweethearts, though. I hated to leave them last time, but I couldn't talk her into leaving with us last time. She would only part with Rush." Artemis smashed the call button for the elevator once they arrived to rear of the building. He was quite pleased to see it light.

"You sure this is the building the Enclave attacked?" "Yeah, most of the damage is to the lower interior decks." After a few minutes, the old elevator met them

at the first deck with a loud **ding**. “Ready?” Artemis nodded. “Let’s go.” They quietly mounted the elevator and waited as it lowered them into the depths of the ancient building at an agonizingly slow pace.

“We’re going to the fifth subbasement. That’s where they live in nifty apartments.” “Nifty?” Artemis chuckled. “The hell’s that?” “They made apartments from shipping containers. I thought it was resourceful. They probably moved the equipment and goods in them when they were constructing the building. Rather than lift them out, they made homes.” Artemis shrugged; he rather liked his apartment in the commons building.

“They speak English right,” Artemis asked. Elder Redding nodded, “what’d you expect?” Artemis shrugged, “I dunno. I ain’t spent much time ‘round Rush. I just assumed he didn’t just bark all the time or something. He’s been damn quiet every time I’ve seen ‘em.” “He takes time to get used to you, but once he does, he livens right up,” Redding replied. “Like Axel, then?” Artemis replied. “Yeah, actually. They’re quite a lot alike.”

Artemis leaned on the rust-flecked metal wall of the elevator and asked, “You think they’ll come back with us? We got a contingency plan, Marshall?” “We won’t need one,” he replied, “she’ll listen to reason.” Artemis shrugged. “Hope so, or this was a wasted trip when we could be savin’ our own.” “Don’t be like that, Artemis.”

The Major furrowed his brow slightly and changed the direction of their conversation. “What’s today’s date?” “July 11th I believe. Why?” “That scribe ‘o yours? His birthday’s comin’ up, ain’t it?” Marshall realized that he hadn’t in briefed the Major about the mole situation yet. He took the three remaining floors to fill him in: how he’d figured out Scribe Terry Summers was a mole and how he’d “persuaded” him to double-cross the Enclave for information.

“Damn,” the Major spat as the cargo elevator announced their arrival, “it’s always the quiet ones.” Elder Redding put an arm in front of him to pause his walking. “Hold on.” “Elder Elena?!” he yelled through the open grates, hoping she was within earshot. Fortunately, the elevator and its occupant’s scents caught her attention before he even thought to announce their presence.

Elder Elena directed her pups to stay in the apartment while she investigated the loud humans in their home. In a few short minutes, she was sprinting up to them. Elder Redding held his ground. The Major flinched when she stopped a few inches short of them. A quick sniff test later, and she extended a well-groomed paw to the Elder. “Why do you come to my home late and unannounced?”

She followed, “Why has the smaller male doctor not visited? You have not held up your side of our agreement.” He took her warm paw and shook it. “Good evening Elder Elena. This is my best friend and second-in-command Major Artemis Grey. Major, this is Elder Elena of the clan Hawthorne.” He released her paw and quickly explained, “I apologize, about the lateness and Jenkins’ absence, but we are here to escort you and your children to safety.”

She glowered slightly, but could easily tell he was being completely truthful. “Who endangers our home?” “The same people that blew it up last time, the Enclave. They’ve abducted my Rush and his partner, and are planning to come wipe out the rest of your clan.” Elder Elena growled fiercely and spun around to face away from them. She slumped slightly and growled over her shoulder, “thirty minutes. We will be ready.”

He nodded and thanked her before apologizing. “Thank you Elder Elena. And I’m sorry. I know you don’t want to leave your home, but we can offer you the protection your clan needs. We want to make you all part of our family.” She nodded to his thanks and sprinted off to gather her pups and their meager worldly possessions.

True to her word, she returned to their exact spot near the RobCo recharging stations thirty minutes later with her pups in tow. Each had a small suitcase. The pups were obviously anxious about the prospect of leaving their home. Their elder did little to coddle them, except give them a quick synopsis of the situation: “we are going to live aboveground with cousin Rush.” “Is cousin Rush here,” Dorian squeaked. Elder Redding gently shook his head and patted the boy on his head, “no, he couldn’t make it, Ian. He and his friend are away on an important mission. He asked us personally to come help y’all move!”

Ian smiled widely, happy his favorite cousin didn’t forget about them. Harmony was less than impressed and glared slightly at him before looking back to her

elder. They had a mental exchange of the actual situation, leaving her to stare at the ground sadly. Dorian's patience was thinning, "can we go Elder? Can we go aboveground now? Please?" She smiled slightly and nodded, looking at Elder Redding, "Let us go."

The five of them boarded the cargo elevator. Dorian, ever curious, interrogated Major Artemis on why he was a different color than Elder Redding. "We're just like you and your mamma there. Different colors on the outside, same on the inside." "Can people be purple?" "Ah, no, sorry kiddo," The Major chuckled, "mostly just shades of brown. And green," he added, remembering that Willis was with them. "We've got a friend with us that's green. That's kinda close to purple I guess."

Dorian's eyes lit up, "green?! Oh wow!"

The child's innocence brought a welcome calm to the elevator's occupants. Unfortunately, that short-lived as they exited their craft to the outside world. In the distance, Elder Redding and Major Artemis recognized the telltale whip of Vertibird blades through the humid summer air. "Let's go!" Elder Redding shouted, scaring the children.

Their elder was fighting the shock of being aboveground, but scooped up her pups and followed quickly behind their Brotherhood escorts. The drone of the rotors crept ever closer as they rounded the last building, they spotted the aircraft. Its conic spotlight swept across the thick forest surrounding the base, looking for suspicious activity. Another one came from the distance to join the first.

Before they could react, a third rose from the roof of a nearby building. The large green man piloting it yelled something unintelligible and sped off in the direction of the other two. The Major and Elders took the opportunity to quickly load up the car and get back on the road. Major Artemis cranked the car and disabled the headlights, hoping to go unnoticed by the Enclave as Willis served as a distraction.

Elder Elena joined her whimpering pups in the rear of the Highwayman. She was just as terrified as they were, but refused to show it. Elder Redding smiled and said as calmly as he could, "nothing to worry about, kids. Major Artemis' the best driver we have and we've got our best pilot in the skies." She chose to

ignore his platitudes and growled angrily, “get us out of here!” The Major stomped on the gas, peeling out. While he expertly weaved through the small streets of the base, Willis strove to keep the Enclave’s attention.

They called to him over the radio, asking for a call sign. He let their hails go unanswered. The three Vertibirds swept through the sky, making near passes at one another. Willis was having the time of his life: he howled with laughter as he buzzed one of the Enclave’s rotors, sending them spinning in the wrong direction. The second Vertibird broke from Willis and turned its attention to the Highwayman that was quickly accelerating past the shambling guard shack.

Willis growled in frustration and followed suite, hoping to send this Vertibird off course as well. He smashed some buttons on the console, calling down a pair of machineguns. His large thumbs flipped up a pair of caps on the top of the yolk near buttons labelled ‘fire.’ Within seconds, the second Vertibird found itself under fire. It swerved and dodged the hail of bullets, only to unleash its own upon the ancient car.

Their friend in the sky gritted his teeth and drove his attack closer, pinging bullets from the Enclave’s rotor mounts, hoping for a catastrophic explosion. He wasn’t having much luck. To make matters worse, the first Enclave aircraft swung around and sandwiched him between them both. He simultaneously riddled the craft in front of him with bullets and tried to avoid the bullets from behind.

Artemis swore under his breath, trying to dodge as much damage as he could. He swerved across the four-lane highway and strove to keep as much cover between them and their assailants in the sky. Elder Redding carefully leaned from his passenger seat and through the window to distract the Vertibird above with his plasma rifle. He never got a solid hit, but a few across the nose of the craft seemed to help Willis from behind.

Willis’ cockpit was screaming: more than half of his onboard sensors weren’t reporting and he wasn’t wearing his seatbelt. He ignored all of them until the faded green radar beeped angrily: the Vertibird behind him launched a pair of rockets in his direction. The skilled pilot ripped the yolk backward, sending himself skyward. It was close, but the dumb rockets kept their trajectory and

smashed into their faction's Vertibird ahead. The brilliant explosion lit up the black sky.

Artemis clenched the wheel and kept his foot to the floor, hoping the explosion wasn't their super mutant friend. Elder Redding slapped the top of the car in excitement, "One down, one to go!" Artemis glanced down at the dashboard, the speedometer's needle was hovering at 100 miles per hour. After squinting as long as he could, Artemis reactivated the headlights, making them a brilliant target for the remaining Enclave attacker.

Willis righted his craft and descended upon the remaining Enclave Vertibird. They didn't expect his remaining bullets from above. He focused his fire on the hub of the rotor, hoping to bring down the aircraft as soon as possible. Unfortunately, his stolen vehicle was soon out of munitions. There was a button hastily labeled 'SKD' that looked out of place on his console. "The hell's this?" he muttered. Willis activated the mystery button and was quickly pleased to see a message pop on his radar panel reading "Skyhook Deployed." The pilots watched in horror as he miraculously managed interrupt their left rotor with his skyhook. The screaming metal immediately ripped itself from the hub of their rotor and sent their craft spiraling out of control. He watched with a grim satisfaction as the second Enclave Vertibird streaked to the ground and exploded in a beautiful fuel-engulfed fire.

Elder Redding, still hanging out of the passenger window, whopped with excitement as their nemesis caught fire and fell quickly toward the Earth. Willis covered them from the air as they drove home to the Burg.

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With Number 86's assistance, Rush found himself outfitted with a fake slave collar and Olivia in a drab grey Enclave uniform. 86 gave her a list of names to remember and their positions in case they ran into trouble. He kept in constant mental contact with both of them as she fake-directed them through the winding halls of the battleship. They were currently on their way to the laboratory on the bottom deck of the ship, protected by 86's family and the dregs of the Enclave soldiers.

Olivia saluted the young men guarding the door. "Tell them you are here to escort the splicers back to their holes," 86 told her. She relayed his words with a hint of spite to make the lie believable. The young man on the left nodded and spat on her furred friends, cursing them. "Fuckin' splicers." Rush bit his tongue so hard it was bleeding in his mouth.

The other young man punched a code into the nearby panel to allow them access. "Thanks," Olivia said sourly, ushering 86 and Rush in front of her. 86 stood in place and glanced around at the cluttered lab: it was nearly unstaffed. Their resident scientist and geneticist, Dr. Reed, was analyzing data on his terminal. It took him several minutes to realize that three new people were in his lab.

"Hello, 86," he said with genuine cheer, "how are your ribs and knees feeling after Mr. Stevens'...overreaction? Has the swelling settled?" He nodded. "Very good," Dr. Reed replied, gently patting 86 on the head. "Now," he said with curiosity, "I don't recognize you, solider. Nor do I know this specimen." "Are you two from the complex up North?" Olivia took off her hat and tossed it on the floor. "Recognize me now?" The doctor shook his head. "No, I'm afraid I don't. Should I, ma'am?"

"You had me under the knife recently. Stole my kid!" Doctor Reed paled. "No, my dear. I would never do such thing! You must be thinking of my twin brother, Clifford. He's head of the medical staff. I'm Norman Reed, lead geneticist and caretaker of our furred friends. They are, more or less, my children." "So, who are you," he asked Rush while attempting to disable his slave collar. "Strange," he muttered, "it appears to be malfunctioning."

"Rush scratched his freed neck and stood awkwardly next to Olivia. "We are here to free the Hawthorns you have imprisoned here." The strange doctor's face lit up. "Are you now? That's a lofty goal, sir. How do you plan to do that?" Rush looked to 86 and shrugged slightly, "not sure yet. Wanted to enlist assistance. Number 86 said you would help." Dr. Reed smiled sweetly and patted Rush's head. "It would be nice to be out from under the heel of these awful people."

"My children are used as slaves by the Enclave. I want to see them free and safe from their abusers. Can you ensure that?" Olivia spoke up, "we can try." She extended him a hand and shook his, "I'm Olivia and this is Rush. We're

Brotherhood.” The doctor nodded and walked back to his desk. He presented her with a black plastic card, identical to the ones Rush found previously in his home. “These are radio identification tags. They’re used to open doors around the Enclave facilities. This one is encoded with my credentials. They’ll get you in nearly any locked door.”

“Okay?” she replied. “This facility has a self-destruct plan. Your friend here can go with Number 86 and prepare the others for their release.” He paused and smiled at 86, “go find all of them and send them back here. They should all be at hand, except for Emily. I believe she’s in the ICU two decks up. Mrs. Olivia here and I will fetch her.” He quickly scrawled a note and handed it to 86, “this should help.” The handwritten note read, “All splicers are to be immediately returned to the research laboratory for immediate weyrloc syndrome assessments. Very contagious, possibly deadly.”

“Please, send all fourteen down here as quickly as possible. If you find them in...compromising conditions...you have my permission to...do as you see fit,” he gulped. The doctor sighed then smiled sadly, “this has been a long time coming. Let’s get it over with.”

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Jenkins carefully steered their stolen vehicle across an ancient railway bridge that rounded to the rear of the large battleship. Erik gripped their truck so hard, he left finger-sized dents in the roof and door. “C’mon, where’s your sense of adventure?” Jenkins prodded his passenger. Erik growled something unintelligible under his breath, unwilling to take his attention away from the perilous bridge creaking under their weight.

“Look, we’re just sneakin’ in behind ‘em. You always like going in from behind, don’t ya?” Jenkins chuckled at his awful pun. Erik was not impressed and not in the mood for his jokes. “Just get us there in one piece. Dry, preferably.” Their conversation dropped with their altitude: Jenkin’s drove over a soft spot in the bridge, causing it to creak and crack under their weight. “Oh, shit. Hold on!” He smashed the accelerator into the floor, hastily speeding them along the narrow and wobbly bridge.

The weather-beaten truck bounced and bounded its way across the rickety bridge and came screeching to a halt near an abandoned trader post on the northeast side of the Enclave's base, far away from prying eyes.

Erik dove out of the truck, panting as he hugged the ground. Jenkins watched with a mix of relief and astonishment as the remainder of the bridge broke away and collapsed into the bay. "Well, we're not going back that way," he muttered to his comrade on the ground. "Feel better?" "Fuck you," Erik growled. "You promise," his best friend asked, hoping to elicit a better mood. "Not with a ten-foot pole," Erik said with a smirk as he got up and grabbed his bag from the wooden truck bed.

After calming down and readying his 10mm, Erik took stock of their surroundings. This place must have been huge, he thought aloud, staring at the numerous rotting and decaying booths. "What's a corn dog," Jenkins asked, inspecting the nearest booth, "or shaved ice?" Erik shrugged. "No clue. You can ask Franklin when we get back home, if he's not braindead from all of your prodding." Jenkins chuckled, happy to see Erik's mood was lightening up.

"Then he'll be at your level," he replied. Erik ignored his last comment as he studied his Pip-Boy. "Truck should be safe here hidden by these stands. Let's get closer and see if we can find some way in." "Maybe there's a back door?" Jenkins suggested. Erik shrugged again and squinted at dim flashlights bobbing on the ship. "You might be right," he mumbled to his medic friend, "see them there?" Jenkins stood behind him and squinted in the direction he pointed, "yeah. Yeah! Looks like a loadin' dock or something on the back. By the helipad?" Erik nodded.

"There's probably a way up, we'll just follow 'em in and if we're lucky, can snag some uniforms." "If we're *lucky*? That's your plan?" Erik nodded and handed Jenkins his newest prized possession from the armory: the mini nuke. "Yeah, and create a bit of a distraction. You got a better idea?" he smiled widely. "What, like blow up the engine or something? You think that would work?" "Or put a big enough hole in the side to create a distraction while we look for our kin an' get 'em outta there," Erik suggested.

"Oh, man, I dunno," Jenkins whined, "I don't like giant nuclear explosions. Isn't that how we got where we are?" Erik shrugged and replied, "let's go see if we can

stir up the hornet's nest." Jenkins checked the bail on his plasma rifle and nodded. "Let's go!"

As the two Brotherhood soldiers skulked through the dark night toward the looming ship, Rush and Number 86 were making progress rounding up the splicers. For the most part, they weren't having too much trouble tricking the Enclave soldiers into giving up their slaves. Number 86 silently handed each one the note and each time the soldier recoiled slightly, frightened of whatever "weyrloc syndrome" was.

Number 86 paused to sniff around the next bulkhead door. Behind the door was a friend of the doctor's and their clan. He was more than a friend of Number 86's blood sister. From the wisps of scents he could differentiate from decaying metal and unwashed humans, they were *occupied*. "What is wrong," Rush asked. Number 86 shook his head and turned to leave. He took two steps down the claustrophobic hallway past Rush and froze, "back against the wall, don't make eye contact."

A ranking officer of the Enclave stormed down the hall toward their friend's barracks. Number 86 tried to stop him with the note, but was instead knocked away carelessly into the metal wall. "Fuck off, splicer!" The grizzled man hammered a ham-sized fist on the bulkhead door, "drop your cock and grab your socks! Let's go! Colonel's tired o' waitin'!" He pounded on the door again and received no answer.

Number 86 politely coughed in the man's direction. "The fuck you want splicer?" "First Lieutenant is not here," Number 86 lied. "Doctor Reed called him away." "Fuck!" the lieutenant's partner shouted, "Stupid splicer-fucking bastard's prob'ly got that weyrloc whatever-it-is and someone's jus' reported a pair o' stowaways." Rush was relieved to see the man storm off as quickly as he came. "Who was that?" Number 86 sighed, "Lieutenant McDaniel's partner, Stevens. Terrible man. Alcoholic. Abusive." Rush sensed a deep shame accompanying his explanation.

"Apologies," Rush grumbled, "You should be made to do such things against your will." 86 nodded and replied grimly, "That is what we were made for: serve and service to the Enclave. Besides, what's done is done. We need to hurry and fetch

the remainder of my clan.” Rush nodded and waited while 86 relayed their message to his sister mentally. “They will meet us at the laboratory. Let’s go.”

###

“Next time,” Jenkins growled under his breath, “bring a plan, you idiot.” Erik gave him mischievous grin before disappearing around a corner to surprise a pair of lowly guards. Jenkins cringed with each blow they received. He peeked around the corner, “you get ‘em?” “Yup,” Erik replied, tossing a borrowed pipe aside, “help me get ‘em out of these uniforms. We’ve got a ship to sabotage.” Jenkins nodded and did as he asked. “No funny business,” Erik joked, “ain’t got time for you to be foolin’ ‘round with some unconscious guy.” Jenkins glared back at his best friend, “not cool.” Erik smiled widely, quickly stripping his victim.

“Ugh, you’d think they’d wash more often,” Jenkins complained as he pulled the smelly grey top over his wife beater and dog tags. “At least yours was wearing underwear,” Erik replied, “There’d better not be any skid marks in these pants.” He glanced past the sweat stains and sighed with relief. In a short time, they’d hidden and hog-tied the two unconscious grunts, dawned their grey uniforms and were back on track to cause some mayhem.

They watched various officers running through the halls with an aura of panic. One slammed into the two of them and yelled, “outta th’ way, dumbass! We all got the weyrlocs! We all gonna die ‘cause o’ them damn splicers!” Erik glanced to Jenkins and asked, “Splicers?” His friend shrugged, “more like Rush? The hell’s werloycs?” Erik mirrored his shrug and suggested they plow forward into the unknown. They passed a large atrium-like room, scattered with trays and tables. Another frazzled Enclave grunt was screaming nonsense about the “godless creatures bringing death” at someone resembling Rush. “Hey!” Erik yelled, “th’ hell’s wrong with you, lady?!”

The woman turned her rampage on Erik and Jenkins, launching metal trays and silverware in their general direction. The gentle furred giant, clad in a white apron and chef’s hat that blended with his grey fur, swiftly bound the woman’s arms with the apron and carefully inserted his hat into her mouth to muffle the nonsense spewing from it. Nonplussed, he asked who the men staring at him were: he didn’t recognize their scents. “Friends,” Erik said softly, clearly impressed

with the man's swiftness. Jenkins picked up his conversation, "have you seen a brunette woman and someone like you, but not from the Enclave 'round here?"

The splicer pointed behind them toward the doorway, "like him?" The mock-Enclave soldiers spun around, pleased to see Rush and his new friend standing in the doorway. "Brother?!" Rush exclaimed, "and Axel? This is my new friend, 86." He turned to Number 86 to introduce them.

"Brother, Jenkins, this is Number 86. He is a...cousin of ours. 86, this is my brother Erik Rade and Axel Jenkins. We are all from the Brotherhood of Steel." 86 nodded silently and paused to stare at Erik before looking to his clan mate in the back of the kitchen. "Number 92? Why is she eating your hat?" The three Brothers in Steel watched as the nearly-identical splicers had a civil chat about hats amidst the chaos slowly unfolding around them.

86 asked, "what nonsense was this one shouting about?" His brother, 92, shrugged, "she thinks we are spreading some sort of disease. Something deadly? We're not, are we?" 86 shook his head, "no, it is a ploy that father designed to generate a distraction. We're here to bring you to the lab, we're leaving this place." "My shift's not over yet." 86 shook his head again, "no, we're leaving the ship. Permanently." 92's demeanor lightened up immediately.

"And we're to help," Erik said, hiking a thumb into his chest. Rush nodded in agreement. "Go back to the den, 92. We will meet you and the rest of the clan there very soon." The woman on the floor managed to spit out his hat and instantly continued yelling. "You damn splicers! It's all your fault! The wrath's comin' and you brought it! You soulless devils!" The splicers and the trio of Brotherhood left her alone in the deserted cafeteria. "What if she tells people about us?" Rush asked. 86 shook his head, "She has a reputation for instability."

###

Doctor Norman Reed and Olivia carefully avoided as many of the manic soldiers as they could on their way to the medical bay, two decks above them. "Looks like that fake disease you made up really has these folks in a state," she whispered. "Yes, the grunts around here are quite dull. I'm afraid it's that same reason that our splicer population sees so much needless abuse. Physically and mentally. It's terrible; the Colonel knows how his charges treat these kind souls and, if

you ask me, promotes it. 'Anything to keep the saviors of America happy,' he says." Olivia spat in disgust.

He swiped his black radio tag across a reader: it beeped and flashed green, opening the way for them into the medical wing. It was chaos inside. A swarm of men and women alike bombarded the nurses and Doctor Clifford with questions and concerns about the mysterious weyrloc syndrome that suddenly broke out aboard their ship. "You!" Doctor Clifford exclaimed as they strolled into his surgical wing, "th' hell've you been telling these idiots?!" Doctor Norman ignored his brother as he parted his way through the clamoring crowd to the holding cell.

The glass door beeped in acknowledgement of his ID and slid open. He smiled warmly to the occupant. "Are you well enough to go, Emily?" She looked up from the cot, eyes puffy from hours or days of heavy crying. He walked in, disabled her collar and let it clatter to the floor, ignoring the dried blood across the floor of her holding cell. "Come along, dear. Let's go." As they stepped out of the chamber, the crowd of grunts piled to the opposite side of the room, as if Emily was emitting an invisible barrier.

He ignored his brother's continued yelling across the clamor between them, "You can't take my patient! Where do you think you're going?!" The doctor, Olivia, and Emily calmly strolled out of the surgery wing, through the medical unit, and down the stairs to the clan's "den".

Olivia and Emily sat side-by-side on a sunken couch while clan members trickled into the lab and stood around, aimlessly awaiting orders. "Nice to finally meet you," Olivia said cheerily to the sullen woman. Emily took her hand and placed it on her fresh abdominal scar, "this is yours. He misses you already." Olivia choked, "what? How can he know?" Emily sighed, "Our children grow quickly to the point where they can hear things and sense their mother's thoughts. They stay in that state for a long time before the rest of them catches up. Twenty months on average for one of our clan, born naturally. Your little one is confused and doesn't understand why his mother is different now."

"Can you," Olivia paused, "tell him...I'm still here?" Emily shook her head and replied flatly, "No. If you were compatible enough to create him, you can figure out how to share your mind with him." Olivia gently placed her ear next to the

surrogate mother's abdomen and concentrated as hard as she could. She tried to remember how it felt when Rush invaded her mind the first time. After some time fruitless minutes, Emily gave her a little mental push to get her started.

"Little one," she whispered gently, "your mother is here. Come say 'hello.'" A tiny shapeless voice squeaked into Olivia's brain and floated around. It didn't speak, but she felt his emotions as strongly as her own. She gasped and cried quietly with relief and excitement for her tiny son, growing strong in Emily's womb. "My little man," she whispered. "My little Alto. Your daddy will be proud to meet you. Your uncle Rush too. They're both here. We're all going to go home soon."

While Emily and Olivia cared for the psychological health of their child, Erik, Rush, Number 86, and Jenkins ushered the remaining handful of the splicers back into the lab. Jenkins followed the last one in as Rush, Erik, and Number 86 discovered the doctors Reed arguing in the stairwell near the medical wing.

"Damnit, Norm! You can't be fuckin' serious! You can't just take your work to up and leave us. It's treason! Especially for the *Brotherhood*! Our family didn't join the Enclave for nothin'! The Enclave taught us everything we know an' kept us safe from the diseased and the impure! So what if a few experiments suffer to rebuild America?" Doctor Norman flushed with anger, grabbed his brother by the lapels of his dirty and wrinkled lab coat. "A few experiments?! You're supposed to've treated them in my absence! You know of the abuse and neglect they receive at the hands of the soldiers and turned a blind eye! How many pregnancies have you joyfully terminated over the years? How many times has one of my precious children come to you broken, and battered at the hand of those monsters, and you turned them away?! How many of my children have you cut up just for *fun* when they couldn't defend themselves?!"

"Children?!" Doctor Clifford Reed cried, "you ain't got children. All you got is experiments. Godless, soulless experiments! They're living war machines..." He didn't get to finish. Doctor Norman shook and shoved him hard. He watched in horror as his brother lost his balance and tumbled over the railing in slow motion. He fell down the two flights of stairs, breaking his neck and back, killing him instantly. He landed with a sick thud near the entrance to his lab at the bottom.

"Oh, Christ! Cliff?! Oh, god, no, Clifford!" 86 sprinted from the hallway to pull him away from the railing, afraid that he would follow. "Father," he gently grumbled, holding the man close, "it is okay. He won't cause anyone else to suffer." The doctor wept into his son's chest. "Damn," Erik muttered, "that sucks." Rush instinctively pulled Erik close. The splicers slowly poured from their den to view an instrument of their own suffering, dead. Any of them would have happily abused the distasteful doctor's cadaver, but the overwhelming devastation of their father-creator kept them polite.

A pair of younger clan members lifted the broken man from the ground and removed him to an occluded spot, leaving him in a somewhat dignified position to be found later. "Come father, we must continue your work of escape. We have more help from the Brotherhood." The remaining Doctor Reed stifled his emotions as well as he could before patting his favorite son on the shoulder in thanks and wiping his swollen eyes. "I'm sorry 86. Thank you," he mumbled gratefully.

86 nodded and gently patted his father's head. "Come father, we need to hurry. We can mourn later if we are still alive." Their friend, Lieutenant McDaniel and Number 87 soon arrived under the auspices of returning a slave for weyrloc appraisal. The giant bloodstain and drag marks caught their attention. "Doctor? What happened?" the Lieutenant asked cautiously. "Doctor Clifford fell over the railing and broke his back. To death," Number 86 answered curtly.

The remaining Doctor Reed gulped a whimper and nodded sadly. "Damn," McDaniel muttered, "Sorry Doc." "Thanks Colin," he replied, "Let's get into the lab and figure out what we're going to do." McDaniel and Number 87 joined everyone in the lab and shut the door behind them. The doctor was pleased to see his children, free of their collars and was even more pleased to see the Lieutenant behaving amicably toward the Brotherhood intruders.

McDaniel extended a hand to Erik with a reassured grin. "Brotherhood." "Enclave," Erik replied with a confident smirk of his own. "What's your plan? How're we gonna get twenty folks outta here undetected?" Erik asked. McDaniel shrugged, "I'm only responsible for sixteen. You can figure out how to get you and three out." "We got room back home for y'all, if you want," Erik responded, "you're gonna need somewhere to set up camp. We can bring y'all in and keep y'all safe."

McDaniel turned to Number 86 and stared silently, surely asking him a question mentally. After a few short moments, Number 86 nodded and responded, "We splicers will accompany you. The Lieutenant will assist in our escape, but he and Number 87 will not be staying." Erik shrugged, "if that's what you want. We could really use someone capable in the field." McDaniel shrugged again, "I'm ready to hang this shit up. Got a family comin' along and wanna be around a little while longer to raise 'em," he said, throwing an arm around Number 87.

"Good, '86 and I will fly a pair of Vertibirds out of here with most of the splicers and the Doctor. You four can take the last two splicers with you; we'll follow you in the air. I'm guessing that ratty truck still runs?" "No funny business? You ain't gonna do something stupid like attack us, are you?" Erik asked. McDaniel narrowed his eyes and spoke to Erik mentally, "you tell me. Do I *sound* serious? I wasn't kidding about getting out." Erik nodded, fully convinced of his ambitions. "Sounds good. You mind if we blow this place up a bit on the way out?"

McDaniel shrugged again. "I don't care. Just make sure we're well clear of the boat. Put a bullet in the asshole Colonel, if you get a chance." Number 86 spoke up, "May we also shoot your partner, Stevens?" McDaniel smiled widely, "yeah. I hate that bastard. Especially after he..." Number 86 cut him off quickly, "Thank you, sir." They took some time to divide the splicers into teams of two and gave them instructions to follow them to the helipads on the top deck.

"Don't answer any questions and if someone tries to stop you, you have my express permission to do whatever you want to them," Lieutenant McDaniel directed. "Group one and Doctor Reed, you're with 86. Group two's with me. Emily and 92're with the Brotherhood. As soon as we see you get to the truck, we'll fire at the other two Vertibirds to disable them and make a nice show of fireworks for your getaway. We'll follow you to your destination after we play decoy for a bit."

"You said you wanted to make a 'small' explosion, Brotherhood?" Erik nodded affirmatively and replied, "A mininuke in a power plant should do the trick." The Lieutenant nodded with a dark grin, "sounds like a plan." "Jenkins? Take Olivia and her new friends to the truck, Rush and I will follow after we rig this thing to blow." Jenkins spoke up for the first time in a while, "do you people have any belongings to take? Anything you need to pack?" Most stared at him blankly.

Number 86 responded kindly, “we don’t have possessions. We are...were...slaves.” Rush smiled and roughed up Jenkins’ hair, trying to relieve him of the weight of ignorance currently crushing him.”

While they made plans, Doctor Reed was making backups of his data and the mainframe. “Do we have room for a box of tapes and documents?” McDaniel shook his head, but Erik jumped at the bit for fresh data, “Yes! We’ll make room somehow.” “Good. I’ll have them ready by the time you get situated in the power plant. I’ll give you directions.”

The teams broke off and swiftly departed through the halls, wading through the general discord of panicked simpletons. The few ranking officers aboard the vessel were trying their best to convince the Colonel to declare this outpost a loss due to the outbreak of the mysterious weyrloc and let them go back home to the Complex. Colonel Summers deftly ignored them all; he had a hunch about what was actually going on and was on his way to the laboratory to find out.

Lieutenant’s team was the first to meet resistance. His partner Stevens caught them on the way up to the helideck. “Lieutenant! What’s going on? Where’re you goin’ with all them?” He smoothly gestured to the Doctor and said, “gotta dispose of ‘em. No savin’ these. They got the weyrloc. Colonel said we can end ‘em.” Stevens drew his sidearm and aimed at one, “why not just kill ‘em here? We’ll have the grunts clean up th’ mess; why you wastin’ time?!”

“No!” Doctor Reed shouted, “you can’t! Their blood! The, uh, toxins...will become airborne! You’ll infect everyone who’s not already!” Stevens sighed and asked sincerely, “why you damn scientists gotta make everything so hard?” “It comes with the territory,” Doctor Reed shrugged. “Nonetheless, we plan to pilot them to an abandoned village an hour from here to...dispose of them properly and bury their remains.”

“You gonna do it yourself, old man?” The doctor shook his head affirmatively and gulped, “Yes. Well, not alone. Lieutenant McDaniel will be accompanying me. We’ll use the collars to keep them in line until...” “Kaboom!” the roughneck shouted as he imitated a shotgun blast to a nearby splicer. “Good riddance,” he grinned with malice. The man left them after a few more cheerful imitation gun blasts at the remaining splicers.

He laughed heartily as he walked down the hallway, carelessly shoving the lesser members of their platoon out of his way. After their unpleasant ordeal with Stevens, the small group managed to slink through the halls and out the helipad on the first deck undetected. The second group, lead by Number 86, was already waiting in the humid morning air. As the two groups escaped unhindered via a pair of Vertibirds, the Brotherhood focused on making matters worse for the Enclave.

Rush and Erik wandered down to the bottommost deck of the ship and found the entrance to the nuclear reactor unmanned and unlocked. "Convenient," Rush muttered happily. Erik produced his head-sized nuke and set to gently prizing it open. Doctor Reed entered with a beaten cardboard box overflowing with documents and tapes, as promised. "Code's forty-eight, fifteen, sixteen, twenty three, forty two." Erik dutifully entered the absurdly long passcode, retracting the thick metal shield surrounding an impressive cylindrical enclosure. A klaxon nearby activated, accompanied by a pre-recorded message.

"WARNING!

Radiation contamination imminent due to reactor shield degradation.

Restore containment or catastrophic failure will occur in fifteen minutes.

Repeating:

WARNING!

Radiation contamination imminent due to reactor shield degradation.

Restore containment or catastrophic failure will occur in fifteen minutes..."

"Fifteen minutes sounds like plenty of time," Erik mumbled aloud finishing his rewiring job and gently jamming the warhead alongside the encased cores in the reactor. "Let's get out of here before we get cooked!"

The faceless voice repeated the warning endlessly and garnering the attention of the Colonel, four decks above them in the ship's control center. "What in Hell's name is going on?!" he shouted to no one in particular. Each of his subordinates scrambled to figure out why the reactor's radiation alarm was going off. "May just be a glitch again, sir," one officer suggested. Another one spoke up, "uh, sir?" Colonel Summers glared in response, "You'd better have something better than the idiot next to you." The officer gulped and replied, "yes, sir. Doctor

Reed's just accessed the reactor. Or at least his code" "Which one?!" "Th' splicer doc, sir."

"That son-of-a-bitch!" The Colonel left his post to interrogate the doctor personally. He was quickly losing his composure and it showed: his perfectly kempt blond hair fell into his face as his icy blue eyes reddened with anger. He shoved any subordinate to the ground that was unlucky enough to be along his warpath. A deck above the Brotherhood anarchists and the turncoat Enclave scientist, the Colonel greeted Steven by punching him in the face as he rounded a corner.

"Ow! Fuck! What the Hell, sir?! Why'd you hit me?" "Where's your splicer-loving partner and where's the doctor?" Stevens rubbed his sore jaw, "you should know! You sent 'em do kill all them fuckin' splicers! Why'd you wait so long to put 'em down?" Colonel Summers swung again, this time at the metal bulkhead. "If I ordered them to do that, why would I be looking for them?" The simple man shrugged, "Lieutenant said *you* said to have them splicers killed. Damn things've been spreadin' 'round some disease, accordin' to th' grunts." "There's no disease, idiot. There's no way I would allow the doctor to keep his damned pets aboard my vessel if they were harboring disease!" Stevens shrugged, "you keep th' grunts 'round. They're pretty bad."

The colonel slammed his fist on the bulkhead a second time and turned away, catching a glimpse of an unfamiliar grunt with a splicer and the good doctor sprinting up the stairway at the end of the hall. Colonel Summers shouted after the doctor, "Reed! Get over here! Now!" The stout, educated man squeaked in surprise and urged the younger men in front to move faster. "Which way?!", Erik yelled. "Up two flights, then straight down the hall. Right at the end, then you're on the back deck."

Erik pushed Rush in front of him and yelled as loud as he could, "out of the way! We gotta get this contaminated splicer outta here!" The scattered Enclave members that weren't embroiled in panic were soon contemplating it. Rush took his cue to start growling and drooling. Inside, he was laughing with delight. It was fun to watch the simple-minded humans flee from him. A few ushered them through the complex bowels of the ship, believing they were saving their home.

Colonel Summers was hot on their tail. He and Stevens sprinted after them, weapons at the ready. “Stop them,” the Colonel shouted at his subordinates, “they’re imposters! Brotherhood! Kill them!” The mention of “Brotherhood” helped to rouse his troops. “Brotherhod?! On our boat,” one cried, “I’ll shoot ‘em dead!” Fortunately for the trio of escapees, Doctor Hawthorne monitored their progress since Rush and Olivia were taken aboard. Just before the growing crowd of Enclave soldiers at their rear swallowed them, the exterior bulk door swung open, spilling early morning light into the dark corridor.

As soon as the doctor’s fluttering coat cleared the door, it slammed shut and spun its lock. Their grandfather pinged Erik’s Pip-Boy with a short message:

Grandsons,

Congratulations on your creative escape. Hurry back to your home with the new doctor, they will not wait long to retaliate.”

-- Grandfather

Erik glanced at the message as they sprinted toward the zigzagging stairs leading down the side of the ship. “You always show up at the weirdest times,” he thought aloud. Rush’s attention turned from the chaos beating on the door behind them to his brother as he demanded an explanation. “Who are you talking to?” “Doctor Hawthorne sent me a message.”

Erik ignored his brother’s immediate barrage of questions and postulations as he scanned the rear parking lot through the dark, trying to find their ride. Jenkins saw their familiar forms on the deck, beeped the horn twice and called out, “Hoy! Let’s get the hell outta here!” “C’mon, let’s go!”

Rush took the doctor’s box of goods and ushered him between he and Erik for safety as they descended the flights of stairs to the decaying dock. Jenkins drove up to them with a wide smile. “Climb in the back, boys. It’s me an’ the ladies up front. Emily and the doctor exchanged unsettled glances at one another as Rush gently packed his box with them in the rear.

As Jenkins routed them through the empty parking lot and onto the highway, they heard a familiar sound: catastrophic failure. Erik's timed bomb went off, sending a chain reaction through the reactor and blowing up the lower decks of the ship. Instead of whooping in celebration, he sat quietly, trying to forget the many Enclave faces he encountered that he just atomized in atomic fire.

Jenkins sighed behind the wheel of the battered pickup he piloted northwestward. "Shame it went that way," he said dryly. Emily shook her head and spat, "they deserved worse." Olivia half-nodded in agreement. Jenkins shrugged, "surely not all of them did. Sure, there's a bunch of bastards on there, but all of 'em can't be bad folks." "They're Enclave. That's what they get for fucking with people," Olivia replied, "you didn't see what I saw or what *she* lived through."

Jenkins nodded slowly, trying to argue his point without further enraging Olivia. "Yeah, I know. But what about th' scientists, or nurses we saw in there. They're just tryin' to survive an' help folks. Just like some of our scribes back home, they just want a safe place to live, right?"

She started to argue, but was silenced by the glare from Emily. "He is right," she said, "not all were terrible. Now you've killed more innocents, Brotherhood, along with your enemy. Isn't that war?"

"More innocents?" Jenkins asked, "we don't make it our business to go 'round killin' innocent folks, ma'am. The Enclave an' raiders're known for that 'round here." She shook her head, "I've read the reports. I know what happened in Jackson. I know what your troop did in The Crescent." Erik leaned in through the sliding glass door in the rear of the cab to interject.

"Jackson? When? We got into a nasty squabble with th' Enclave up there when they moved their pawns in to beef up the slave trade. Is that what you're talkin' 'bout?" "*More* slaves?" she pondered, "no one said anything about slaves. The Colonel's reports stated that they were up there fighting the Brotherhood as they were slaughtering the innocent townspeople under our protection."

Erik laughed heartily, "protection?! If you consider slave collars protection, then yeah. Lots of that there. We've been tryin' to free those folks up there for years. The Enclave keeps dragging in more from all over the South, trying to use

them as meat shields.” Emily shuddered at the thought of her father extending his abuse to more innocents. “What about the Crescent incident?”

“Same thing, mostly. We were there scoutin’, setting up trade routes and stuff before the Enclave came shootin’ people up just ‘cause they were born aboveground and were ‘impure’. They were all yellin’ ‘bout they were gonna cleanse the place and make *America great again*. Obviously, we didn’t let that happen.” Erik paused and sighed, speaking a bit softer. “There were a lot of casualties though. Th’ Enclave used a bunch of tribals to pose as common folks down there...they attacked us from the crowds. We had some greenhorns panic and start laying waste to everyone.”

“That bastard,” Emily muttered under her breath, “what else is a lie? Do you permit the impure to live among you as equals? Super mutants, ghouls, and their ilk?” Erik nodded, “yeah, as long as they’re peaceful. Rush, Ida and Willis live with us as equals. They’re better than normal folks in some respects, actually.”

“Is that a problem?” Erik asked, seriously doubting this woman’s intentions. “No,” she replied after some time. “It’s...a surprise. Will *we* be allowed to live the same way?” He shrugged, “I don’t see why not. When folks wander into town an’ stay, we give them the choice to join up as an active member or live in town and help it grow. So long as you pull your own you’re welcome there.”

As she, Erik and the other occupants discussed the functional differences between their disenfranchised sect of the Brotherhood and the Enclave, Doctor Reed and Rush were deep in a scientific discussion of genetic design and survival strategies.

“But the medium length coat is a poor choice for the climate down here. That’s why I chose their slick coat. It repels water better and keeps them cooler during the summer months. The lighter colors help too.” Rush nodded and replied, “our undercoat provides insulation in the cool and if wet, provides better thermal exchange.” The doctor nodded, “of course, but what about prolonged radiation exposure due to the moisture kept in the undercoat?” Rush shrugged, “we are resistant?”

Doctor Reed nodded again petting Number 92’s sleeping head, “I based my children’s design on your own. I recognized you, you know, from the files I

received nearly thirty years ago. Well, after I got close enough to realize you weren't one of *my* children. Your strain has enhanced cellular regeneration, enhanced mental capabilities, and enhanced strength: excellent killing machines," he sighed, "except I screwed up and left them a conscious, er, emotions. I could have clipped them out one DNA strand at a time, but I couldn't bring myself to introduce more unfeeling machines like the deathclaws into this scarred world." "Thank you," Rush replied softly, "you should be proud of your children. They have taken their first steps as real humans tonight. Their suffering will make them stronger and able to survive. They will need to be tough."

Doctor Reed stared at the bright sky above and sighed again as they bumbled along the bumpy road. "I hope it's worth it. It would be much easier on them if they were unfeeling, uncaring tools." Rush flinched at the mention of his kin as tools.

"Did you remove the need for a kin pair," Rush asked, trying to cheer the doctor up with more technical discussion. "Kin pair? What's that?" Rush explained Doctor Hawthorne's design and reasoning behind designing his children with a pair member to keep them sane as they grew. Doctor Reed rubbed his scalp, "it's never been a problem. It may be due to the collars they were equipped with or the few extra modifications I made to their genetic structure. I've never had a splicer act like that toward themselves or another. Not in three generations."

"If anything, they're *too* docile," he continued, "I don't want to count how many times I had to treat them with my brother's..." Doctor Reed halted immediately. "Oh. Right. Norman...", he mumbled. Rush nodded and patted his arm again, sensing the waves of crushing guilt and sadness washing over him as he recalled causing his own brother's death.

"Three generations?" Rush mumbled to himself, "why so short?" The doctor looked up and replied, "the first two...weren't really planned to be around that long. They were experiments to create expendable bio-weaponry like the deathclaws. They only needed a few years to grow and train, then off they go into battle. I changed that for the third generation – the ones based on your strain. They will live long and healthy lives, so long as the Enclave leaves them alone." Rush visibly relaxed, slumping against the tailgate of the truck. "Good," he said with more than a hint of hope in his voice.

“How did you modify their structure to selective mask their pheromones?” The doctor smiled slightly in pride, “well, it was harder than it should have been. I’ll give you my notes later, if you like. We started with the idea of chameleons – able to change their epidermis to blend into their surroundings. We train them to do the same, but with scents and pheromones. The collars took care of the physical camouflage.”

Their chatter fell into silence for a while before Erik kissed his girlfriend on the cheek and slid back fully into the bed of the truck. She yelled back to Rush, “did you tell him?” Rush, slowly drifting to sleep, perked up his ears and paused before processing what she asked. “No, sister, I did not. You should, though.” She smiled and gave Erik the unexpected good news.

“Erik?” “Yeah, what’s goin’ on?” “We’re gonna be parents, you and me. We’ll have a bundle of joy in,” she paused to confirm with Emily, “about twenty months.” Jenkins attention drifted from his task to the new of his best friend becoming a father. “What!? You managed to figure out how that works?” he chided joyfully. Rush smiled and congratulated his brother, “very proud of you, brother. He will be the first naturally conceived of our generation.”

Erik, predictably, sat stunned in the bed of the ancient truck. “I...what? What?!” Olivia nodded with a smile through the dirty glass, “yup. An’ Emily here is carryin’ him. You should make sure she has a nice place to stay when we get home. Oh, it’s a he, by the way. And he already knows that trick that you and Rush do.”

“I’m so confused,” he whined in response. “How the hell’re you pregnant?” “Technically, I’m not anymore, thanks to those Enclave assholes.” The doctor spoke up, “I’m terribly sorry about that. My brother was...overzealous...with that surgery. According to his files, anyway. It *is* in the child’s best interest as well as your own that Emily is the surrogate mother. She’s born a few pups before and is more than capable to meet his special emotional and physical needs.”

“A human isn’t meant to carry a pregnancy that long – it would cause permanent physical defects,” he added, “never mind that you can’t regenerate cells in a self-healing manner. Can you imagine how it will be once his claws start to grow in?” Emily shuddered involuntarily: she was familiar with the back pain, rearranging organs, and puncture wounds. She patted Olivia on the leg in

reassurance, “you pup is in good hands. Aunt Emily will make sure of that,” she added with a tired smile.

Erik crawled back into the window, “can I...talk to him? Does he know who I am?” Emily shook her head, “he’s sleeping right now. He’ll recognize you, don’t worry.” He sighed happily and smiled to Olivia then awkwardly thanked Emily for her “assistance” as he put it.

Jenkins directed everyone’s attention to the sights before them. Around the bend, at their prearranged location, awaited two vertibirds surrounded by a small pack of aimlessly wandering wolfpeople. Jenkins’ noisy truck startled some of them, sending them running to the relative safety of the giant choppers. McDaniel and Number 86 walked toward the road when they finally came to a stop.

“Colin,” Doctor Reed said happily, “good to see you! Did everyone make it out? Is everyone here?” He nodded with a slight grin, “Yessir. Birds flew without a hitch. Where’s our next stop?” Jenkins spoke up, “home, sir.” McDaniel scowled, “I’m not old enough to be ‘sir.’ I’m McDaniel. Lieutenant Colin McDaniel.” Jenkins nodded with his typical warm smile. “I’m Axel Jenkins, Lead Medic for the Brotherhood at Delta. Olivia’s at the other end of the cab here. The furry guy in the back is Rush. The last knucklehead in the bed is Paladin Erik Rade.” Each nodded to McDaniel as Jenkins introduced them.

“You feel like joinin’ up with the Brotherhood, Lieutenant?” Erik asked. He shook his head, “nah. I’m lookin’ to get out. Ain’t much use to my family dead.” Erik nodded, suddenly thinking about the same thing. “Ah, well. We’ve got plenty of room for all of you back at The Burg. Anyone that wants to join up or stay in town is welcome, so long as they pull their own weight.” “Even the splicers?” McDaniel queried.

“Especially us,” Rush interjected cheerfully. “Would be bad to split up the clan.” Number 86 grinned at his statement, “sounds...nice. Thank you.” McDaniel nodded in agreement. “We’ll follow y’all in. Don’t feel like gettin’ shot up this early in the mornin’.” Jenkins nodded again, “no problem. We’ll radio ahead and let them know we’re on our way back. We had a...hitch when we left. So...don’t be surprised if our Elder’s a bit pissed when we get back.”

Erik sighed audibly, “Let’s get back to it then.” McDaniel nodded and whistled shrilly, gathering his charge’s collective attention. “Load up y’all, we’re headin’ to our new home!”

#

Their detour to meet with the Ex-Enclave members took them an extra half-hour of the way on their trip back to the Delta – making their return home nearly a three-hour drive. Emily and Olivia were quietly dozing in the cab while Erik, Rush, and Number 92 were doing the same in the bed of the truck, slumped on each other’s shoulders. The drone from the pair of Vertibirds’ engines were making it difficult for Jenkins to stay awake.

He turned on the highway leading North and initiated a call to the base.

“Delta Base? Do you copy? This is Paladin Jenkins. Please respond.” “Paladin Jenkins, this is Delta. What’s your twenty? You’ve been listed as AWOL!”

“Roger that, Delta Base. We had an emergency rescue op. Returning now, successful.” “Please repeat, Paladin. We have no active missions.” Jenkins sighed to himself. “It was short notice and undercover. I’m brining in a pair of Vertibirds containing civilians.” He counted on his fingers and quickly continued, “I’ve got twenty civilians inbound. Need the standard medical checks and in-brief. I’ve also got Journeyman Knights Hawthorne and Brown. They need immediate medical attention.”

The person on the other side of the channel was clearly confused as she made Jenkins repeat himself twice more before he got irritated. “Operator! Just go fetch the damn Elder. Tell him it’s Jenkins and we’re on our way. Put. Him. On. The mic. Now!”

Elder’s familiar voice came on after ten minutes of radio static. “This is Elder Redding of Brotherhood of Steel Delta Base, to whom am I speaking?” “Elder, Jenkins. I’ve got twenty civs, Rush, Olivia, Erik, and a pair of Vertibirds. Don’t shoot when we come to the South gate. Oh, yeah. I’ve got the truck too.” He waited with bated breath for their Elder to respond. After some muffled orders on his part, Redding replied, “it’s good to hear from you, Axel. Is anyone hurt?” “Olivia’s gonna need some attention and we’ve got a bunch more friends like Rush

– Enclave specials.” Elder Redding paused again, letting the information sink in. “Very well,” he finally replied, “I’ll notify the guards and get everyone settled in. You and Erik will have a *lot* of explaining to do. Expect and appropriate punishment.”

“Aye, sir,” Jenkins replied flatly. He knew this was coming. “We’ll discuss that more tomorrow. Just make sure everyone gets here safely, Paladin.” “Aye, aye, sir.”

#

True to his word, Elder Redding stationed a cluster of armor-clad Brothers ready to greet them at the Southern gate. “Hoy, Brothers” Jenkins called and saluted. A burly voice responded under the mask. “Paladin Jenkins, sir. Please proceed directly to the laboratory. Ms. Ida and Mr. Willis are prepared to meet you there.” He nodded. “Good. Help the Vertibirds find a place to sit down, solider.” The man saluted Jenkins back and waved him through the check gate with his rifle.

As Jenkins steered them through the streets, they noticed a handful of their comrades peeking through to see who was causing so much commotion that early in the day. They soon arrived at the entrance to laboratory, guarded by Ida and Willis. Each glared slightly in his direction, displeased with their interruption of their work. Jenkins exited the truck, opened the door for a groggy Olivia, and helped Emily exit while the doctor helped himself out of the creaky bed. Erik and Rush followed immediately over the side. Number 92 remained inside, awaiting orders.

“Mornin’,” Erik said cheerily. Ida and Willis grunted in unison. “Brought some good news and more friends you’d find interesting.” Ida was quickly looking over the blonde-furred woman in front of her. Emily was unnerved at the ghoul’s appearance and stumbled backward, into Rush’s grasp. “Careful,” he said gently, “Ida is a great and wise friend. Ida? This is Emily. Emily? Ida.”

“He...hello,” Emily stuttered, still in shock at her appearance. The lack of a nose was especially off-putting, she thought. “Never seen a ghoul before, girlie?” Ida asked. Emily shook her head slowly, keeping her eyes locked on Ida’s. “That’s okay. I’m the best lookin’ one ‘round these parts. Now, quit gawkin’ and let’s

get you checked out.” She nodded uncertainly, shifting her gaze from Ida to Willis. “Y’all are bigger than I thought,” she mumbled. “You know what they say about big hands and big feet,” he replied with a sideways smile. She shook her head.

“Big gloves and boots.” She chuckled slightly, easing her nervousness. Jenkins chuckled as well, “Hey big guy.” “Hey sugar pants.” Jenkins squinted with a scowl. “No? You don’t like that one?” Willis asked. Jenkins shook his head. “No. Now’s not the time, either. We’re gonna have our hands full very shortly.” Willis grunted sadly, “fine. All work and no play makes you a dull boy.”

Doctor Reed cleared his throat and readjusted the large cardboard box he had in his hands. “Ma’am? Are you the lead around here?” “Lead what? Ghoul? Yes. Scientist? Yes. Scribe? No. Ain’t got time for the politics. Too many experiments to run.” “Good enough,” he said, “this box is full of my own research and notes on our splicers. I thought you’d like to peruse it?” Ida tried to cock an eyebrow, but remember she didn’t have them anymore.

“Splicers, eh? Like Mr. Hawthorne over there?” The doctor nodded. “We’ve taken to just callin’ ‘em ‘Hawthornes’ after the doctor himself. Hell, *Mr. Hawthorne* over there’s one of the last living descendants of the doctor himself. Well him and Erik to your right.” Erik and Rush smiled sheepishly. “Ah, well. That *is* a surprise.”

Their chatter fell as Willis and Jenkins ushered Emily and Olivia into the laboratory. “We need to do a physical and checkup on ‘Liv too, th’ Enclave did a number on ‘er,” Jenkins said gently to his muscular mate. Willis nodded abjectly, “what’d they do, girl?” Olivia sighed slightly, “ah, well...*I* won’t be having any kids. Thankfully Mrs. Emily here’s giving us a hand with that.” Before he could ask more questions, Jenkins shushed him and led them into their lab.

While the medics worked their wonders on the women, Erik, Rush, and the doctors found themselves surrounded by scared splicers. Doctor Reed spoke up, “children? Children! Come here please. My friend, uh, Ms. Ida wants to take a checkup of each of us before we settle into our new homes.” None of them spoke up until Number 86 cleared his throat – as their makeshift clan leader, he felt it was his place to do so.

“Sir? I think we’d like to sleep first. We’ve just escaped our captors and are in a strange new place. Free for the first time. It’s not in our best interest to be poked and prodded right now.” Doctor Reed smiled and gently replied, “true, son. I know we have all been through a lot, but a few more hours and we’ll have everything sorted.” Ida nodded, “that’s true. We’ll do our best to make it as quick as possible.”

Ex-Lieutenant McDaniel cleared his throat, “fine. When do I get to talk to the guy who runs this place? I’ve got a couple ‘o questions I want answered.” Ida answered again, “he’ll be this way in a bit, he’s working with his advisors at the moment. Rush, help me organize these guys into some sort of order. You’re gonna help me an’ the boys get these physicals knocked out.”

He nodded and helped she and Doctor Reed corral everyone into a classroom near their laboratory. After each group of four were interviewed, poked, prodded, and noted, they were sent to a separate classroom.

The work was mentally exhausting for Rush. Every individual he interacted with was literally quivering with trepidation and fear. None of them had gone so long without their collars or someone abusing them. In the last group, Rush was pleased to see Number 86, his sister Number 87, and their brother Number 92. Someone fetched him from the truck. Since there were only three left, Ida left with Doctor Reed to her office, leaving Rush, Willis, and Jenkins to manage on their own.

Willis took Number 87 to a partitioned area and began performing her physical. Numbers 86 and 89 taken by Jenkins and Rush respectively. “Good morning,” Rush said with as much cheer as he could muster to the grey-coated young man. “What is your name?” “Are you a nice man?” Rush blinked, not expecting a question.

“What do you mean?” “Are you a *nice* man?” Rush scratched his head with the eraser end of the pencil in his hand. “Try to be. Why, are you afraid of me?” Number 92 shook his head, “no, 86 and 87 will take care of me. They always have! 86 told me not to talk to mean people. So if you’re not a nice man, I can’t talk to you anymore. Sorry.” Rush was genuinely thrown off. “One moment please. Just...stay here, okay?” Number 92 nodded and sat with a strange smile on the operating table.

“Excuse me, Jenkins?” “One sec, Rush,” he replied, gently prodding Number 86’s abdomen for swollen areas or broken bones. “Oh, I’m sorry!,” he exclaimed, brushing against 86’s bruised ribs. “How’re you up and walking around like that?” 86 maintained his silence. Rush coaxed him mentally, “he is worried about your health as a human. Not as a tool. Please be nicer to him.”

86 grumbled in response and half-shrugged. “It’s okay. I’ll manage. Always have.” Jenkins scowled and replied, “Well, I want this x-rayed. C’mon let’s go.” 92’s ears perked up when he heard that Jenkins was taking his brother away. “No!” he yelled, throwing himself between Jenkins and 86. “Do not take my brother!” Jenkins took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I need to take a picture of you brother’s insides so I can make sure he’s okay. He’ll be back in here in a few minutes, okay?”

92 looked to his brother’s amber eyes momentarily then nodded and got out of the way without another word. Rush smiled, overhearing their mental conversation. “He is only worried about Number 86’s health, Number 92. Just as it is my job to make sure you are healthy. Can we go and have a chat?” The smaller wolf-man looked back to his brother for confirmation and nodded again.

“Okay, Mr. Rush,” he said leading the way back to his table. “Okay,” Rush sighed with a smile. “Your name is Number 92, yes?” The young man nodded again. “Very good. My name is Rush. I work with the Brotherhood of Steel. We all live here, working together as equals.” 92 chuckled slightly and said with an odd smile, “splicers can’t be equals, silly! Don’t you know anything? Big brother says we’re supposed to serve and do as we’re told.”

Rush lowered his ears sadly and said, “well, not any more. You and your clan are my cousins. No one gets to boss you around anymore unless you want them to.” “Really?!” Rush nodded. “Does big brother know that?” Rush nodded with a sad smile and continued his investigation into the young man’s health. “Number 92?” “Everyone calls me ‘92’.” Rush nodded again, “Okay. 92, how old are you?” He thought momentarily and counted on his clawed digits. “Nineteen. I think. I always forget.” “Close enough,” Rush said to his clipboard. “Have you ever harmed anyone? Even if you weren’t in control?”

Number 92 shook his head vigorously, “no! I would never do that! They don’t let me out very much. I wouldn’t do that even if they made me!” He paused to collect his thoughts and continued, “I cook. I make everyone food so they’re full and happy.” He looked around suspiciously and added with a whisper and a giggle, “Sometimes I get to use the knives! Big brother doesn’t like it when I use knives, he gets worried. But, I’m good at it! Please don’t tell him. He’ll be mad.”

Rush nodded slowly, “our friend Franklin does most of the cooking here. I think he would appreciate your help. Would you like to do that? Work in our kitchen?” Number 92 nodded happily without response. “Okay, noted,” Rush said, “Now for the unpleasant part. Your physical.” “What does that mean,” 92 asked. “Ah, well. Mrs. Ida needs me to poke and touch you everywhere to look for bruises and lacerations, anything broken, and to assess your overall health. It will require me to inspect *everything*, unfortunately.”

Number 92 shrugged, either unknowing or uncaring. “Please lay down on the table.” He did as instructed. “Going to take some measurements,” Rush mumbled, producing a flexible tape. Jenkins’ inspection of Number 86 was much quieter. Even when he had to perform the prostate exam, Number 86 didn’t complain or yelp. “Sorry about that,” Jenkins said after he finished, “most folks don’t care for that.” “It’s okay,” 86 mumbled, “it is part of your job. At least you’re gentle. Our previous doctor was not so...gentle.”

Jenkins was afraid to ask him to expound. Number 86 detected his curiosity and explained their previous positions as complete slaves to their previous masters. “Oh,” Jenkins sighed deeply, “I’m sorry. No one should be forced to...” Number 86 shook his head, “never mind. It is over now.” Jenkins cleared his throat and looked over his clipboard. “Okay. Lemme draw some blood and you can be on your way.”

“I want to wait with 92,” 86 replied quietly. “Uh, sure. Why?” “He’s...simple and needs to be cared for,” 86 replied. “Oh, bless his heart, the poor thing’s missing a few marbles?” Number 92 nodded, “ever since he was a child. I suspect Lieutenant Stevens caused it.” After three vials of dark blood and with Jenkins’ permission, 86 was standing on the other side of 92 from Rush.

"Hello, big brother," 92 said while Rush was awkwardly taking more measurements. "Hello little brother. Is he being gentle?" 92 smiled and nodded, "yes, he is very gentle! He even tickled me earlier." Rush blushed fiercely and buried his face in his clipboard. "Apologies," he mumbled again. After a few deep breaths to regain his composure as a makeshift medical professional, he pushed forward into their next phase of the inspection.

"You look very healthy, Number 92. You have more mass than most of your clan. Please sit up. We must inspect your oral cavity then capture some blood samples," Rush said gently. "Oral? Is that like..." "No," 86 cut him off sharply. "Not like that. He needs to check your mouth and teeth." Rush nodded awkwardly. "Okay," 92 said before opening his maw wide with an "aaaah!" Rush poked around with a wooden suppressor and inspected pearly whites that resembled his own.

"Do your teeth regenerate if damaged?" 92 shrugged. 86 nodded affirmatively. "Approximately how long does it take?" 92 shrugged again. "Depends on the damage. No more than a month, normally." "Impressive," Rush said, "that's nearly twenty five per-cent faster than mine. Assuming the nerve is intact." 86 shrugged. "Your teeth look very nice, 92." He smiled in response.

"We will draw some blood now, is that okay?" 92 again looked to his elder brother for confirmation. 86 nodded and 92 followed suit. "Good. This will sting, please try to stay still," Rush mumbled after tourniqueting his patient's left arm. Predictably, 92 began quivering when he saw the shiny needle in Rush's hand. "Brother, he whined, it's gonna hurt!" 86 gently petted his head and said sweetly, "it's okay. He's only helping. Look over here and tell me again how you make our favorite treats. As 92 described his method for making sweet rolls in excruciating detail, Rush was able to pull four full vials from the man's arm.

"And then you have to bake them at three fifty. If you do it at three twenty five, then they get all gooey in the middle. That's how Lieutenant Stevens like them..." Number 92's voice trailed off as he remembered the abusive man. Rush cleared his throat and looked to Number 86. "We are done here, if you would like to join the remainder of your clan in the classroom as we finish our arrangements."

“Arrangements?” he asked. Rush nodded and petted Number 92’s head with a smile. “You are all malnourished and need medical attention of different degrees. You all need sleep. We want to help you get healthy.” Number 86 sat roughly by his brother and stared at the floor. “I...uh...thanks.” Rush nodded happily and patted his head too. “We are here to serve.”

#

With the help from a dozen soldiers and scribes including Erik and Rush, Ida and Willis were able to see each new clan member safely tucked into the sniper tower adjacent to the laboratory building by the end of that day. They repurposed the second, third, and fourth decks from classrooms into makeshift housing.

Conveniently, the sniper tower had been an annex of the laboratory before the Great War, making the renovation relatively painless.

Rush and Jenkins were busy concluding the interviews they started during the physicals. All of the new arrivals agreed to offer their limited services as members of the Brotherhood. Doctor Reed even agreed to join Ida and Willis in the laboratory as a full-time scientist.

Out of the seventeen splicers that arrived in the Burg, most volunteered to train as scribes. Number 92 happily accepted a job in the kitchen, given his previous experience as a cook for the Enclave and his brother’s requirement of near-constant supervision. Number 86 opted to become a scout. Four more decided to join as standard infantry. Emily, given her pregnancy, chose to work as the Elder’s new assistant. Colin McDaniel shed his title of Lieutenant and asked to live in the town with Number 87 as a simple mechanic.

The Elder cheerily agreed to all of them, of course, but with the stipulation that McDaniel agree provide pilot training at a negotiated fee and in the event of an emergency, would act as a contracted gunman. He agreed without argument and moved in to his new home that night, two doors up from Jenkins’ parents and directly West of what would soon become the helipads and a maintenance shack for his small Vertibird fleet.

With the new arrivals sorted, Elder Redding turned to dole out punishments for his son and Jenkins. He called a town-wide meeting in front of the Commons

Building that night. He took the time to introduce each of their new neighbors and comrades. At the end, he called out Jenkins and Erik.

“Paladins Rade and Jenkins, come up here.” They did as prestigiously as possible. “In light of your recent transgressions against the Brotherhood, you will henceforth be stripped of your titles and returned to the rank of Initiate.” The pleasant overtones of the meeting died with that statement. Everyone stared in disbelief, many knights gasped. “Due to orchestrating a courageous blow to the Enclave and safely ferrying our new friends home, your sentence has been shortened from permanent disbarment from the Brotherhood of Steel to imprisonment with a work detail. After such time you are deemed to worthy, you may work your way back up to the rank of Paladins.”

Elder Redding raised his hands quell the crescendo of murmurs from the crowd and said sternly, “disobedience of a commanding officer, family or not, is strictly frowned upon. Our rigid chain of command in the Brotherhood is to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our Brothers. These two here,” he paused with dramatic effect to gesture to the young men to his left, “will serve as a reminder of that. Paladin Erik Rade and his fellow Paladin Axel Jenkins, while working with high goals in mind, disobeyed my direct orders, stole a vehicle from civilians, and orchestrated a suicidal mission to retrieve fellow members from the Enclave.”

“While they showed the tenacity and enthusiasm I want to see in all of you, they were highly reckless and disobedient in their self-appointed task. That behavior will not be tolerated in this Brotherhood of Steel.” He paused to collect his thoughts and temper. “Knight Penn, please escort these two *Initiates* to the brig. They will receive their new work detail in the morning.”

“To our new members,” he continued, “this is a highly irregular occurrence. Please try to settle in as quickly as possible. To our old members and fellow neighbors, I know you will do your utmost to help our new friends get situated and make them feel at home.” The elder narrowed his gaze at no one in particular and added, “if I hear of any undue abuse or excessive mistreatment of your fellow Brotherhood members or neighbors, you will find yourself in much hotter water than our recent ex-Paladins. Everyone dismissed.”

After allowing them to hear the end of the speech, Knight Penn ordered the two new Initiates toward their seldom-used brig. The non-descript concrete building stood at the Northwest corner of their base. A dozing guard clad in weathered leather armor nearly died with shock as Knight Penn ushered their two previously perfect Paladins toward him. “Ma’am?” She shook her head and pointed at the sun-bleached grey door. “I’ve got a pair of *Initiates* that are ordered into the brig. Their detail starts in the morn.”

The guard stood still with his mouth agape. “Open the door, Smith, or I’m throwing you in too,” Knight Penn halfheartedly threatened. He scrambled to fish out the key and open the door into their tiny, dingy brig. She led them in and locked them up without a word. “Thanks Knight,” Jenkins said with his characteristic smile. She grumbled something about him being a smartass and left them alone in the small three-cell brig. Each cell had its own toilet, sink, and a pair of naval cots, suspended from the walls by chains on one side. A single shower was available under armed escort at the far end of the short building.

The same guard the let them in came in to sit at the unoccupied desk, beginning his first watch. He scribbled on some papers before engaging them. “Uh, sirs?” “Afternoon Mr. Smith,” Erik replied with a smile, “but we’re Initiates. You outrank us now.” The short man puffed out his chest then sighed, sending his slight beer gut back out. “What’d y’all do to get demoted and brigged? Nobody told me t’ expect y’all tonight...”

“The normal,” Jenkins replied, “disobeyed orders. Saved lives. Standard stuff, really.” He nodded in response. “This is the first time you’ve been demoted though, let alone thrown in here.” Erik nodded and replied this time, “yup. We royally fucked up. Wanna hear how?” The guard pulled up a chair to their cell and nodded, “yeah, sure. My shift don’t end for another six hours.”

Erik and Jenkins recounted their entire harrowing tale to the man. After they finished, the guard let out a low whistle. “Damn. Blew their ship up, huh?” They nodded in response. “An’ th’ Elder’s got y’all locked up in here like regular drunks. Damn shame.” Erik shrugged, “it’s okay. We *did* disobey a direct order and steal a car. We didn’t feel that waiting around was in the best interest of our captured brothers.”

The guard nodded to them and drug his chair back to the desk; he was late for his daily nap. "Whatcha think we'll be doin'?" Jenkins asked Erik who was busy prying his boots off. He struggled to pry of the second before replying, "dunno. We'll find out in the mornin' though. Let's enjoy the vacation while we can." Jenkins plopped down on the cot's green cushion and sighed with relief. "Sounds like a plan. Ain't had a good holiday in a while. You think that's really why we're in here?"

Erik shrugged, "blessing in disguise? He had to punish us for that stunt, you know that. I think he wanted to pull rank and reward us at the same time." "You mean besides excommunicating us?" Erik nodded at the ceiling. "Yup." "Good," Jenkins said, "that would suck."

A sharp knock came at the door after the three men dozed off, jarring Erik and Jenkins awake. The knock came a second time. After a third time, they heard keys jangling around before the door swung inward. "Damnit Smith," Knight Penn yelled, "get the fuck up!" He snorted and shot up from the desk with a paper stuck to his face. "Uh, ma'am. How can I help you?" She glared at him, "by doing your fucking job, you slob."

"Inmates, your dinner is here. If we find anything missing or that you're wasting food, your sentences and lives will be adjusted accordingly." She yelled to someone, "in here." Number 92 came in gingerly with a pair of trays from tonight's leftovers. "Franklin sends his regards," she said to her two inmates, "but he said the new guy needed to get out of the kitchen for a bit."

"Hello again," Number 92 said with a wide smile to Jenkins. "Who are you?" He asked Erik. "I'm Erik Rade; Rush's brother." Somehow, 92 smiled even wider. "The nice man! Are you nice too?" Knight Penn rolled her eyes, "he's in jail. What do you think?" 92 shrugged. "Big brother says they helped us escape. I think they must be nice!" She shook her head and took one of his trays. After unlocking their door she handed them each one and locked the door again.

Their guard, Smith, whined, "where's mine?" Knight Penn shot him a piercing glare and replied, "shouldn't've slept through dinner. Now you can do without." He sighed and nodded, "yes ma'am." She turned and left, wanting to leave the

claustrophobic building as soon as she could. Number 92 lingered behind to dig through the large pockets in his apron.

"Here you go," he said to Smith, handing him a large sweet roll. "Made them today. Mr. John liked them a lot." He produced two more and handed one each to Erik and Jenkins. "C'mon you, let's go!" Knight Penn yelled through the door. "Bye, bye!" Number 92 exclaimed as he skipped through the door. "Strange kid," Erik muttered, picking a piece of lent from his sweet roll. "Poor guy's not all there upstairs. Sweetheart though," Jenkins replied.

"I don't care if he's deaf, dumb, and blind," Smith said, "as long as he keeps making food like this!" Jenkins dug into the scraps of protein on his tray and was pleasantly surprised. "Tastes like Franklin's braised molerat, but better." "Better? That's that impossible," Erik gasped slightly. "Oh. Wow. It *is* better. You think 92 did this?" Jenkins shrugged as he stuffed another bite into his mouth.

The two captives chowed down on their delicious dinner and soon slipped into a food-coma-induced sleep.

The next morning they found a new set of Initiate uniforms and a new guard waiting for them. "Up and at 'em, boys. Get up and get naked." Erik rolled from his cot and yawned, "excuse me?" "That's excuse me, *sir*!" Erik sighed deeply, "*sir*?" "Initiates don't get to ask questions. Get out of that armor. You, skinny boy", he pointed at Jenkins, "strip. You will leave the cell and walk to the end of the hall. Ten minutes to shower. Return. Get your new armor on, then the same for you, chubby."

"Maybe this will suck more than I thought it would," Erik thought to himself. "You hear 'em, Axel." They dutifully did as they were instructed.. Thirty minutes and two ice-cold showers later, they donned their uncomfortable Initiate armor and stood at the ready inside their open cell.

"Okay, *sir*, what're our orders?" "I ask the questions 'round here, maggot," the rough man exclaimed. "Which one of you's Rade?" Erik raised his hand, knowing the man knew who he was. "Right. You're on instruction duty. You're to teach the new fleabags. Ida will provide you with details. Report directly to the laboratory, do not detour or dawdle." "Aye, sir," Erik replied with a crisp salute.

“Axel Jenkins. You are to hand wash and wax every vehicle on base.” “What?!” he whined in response. “He gets to teach indoors and I’m stuck in the heat all day?” “No, maggot! You will also be performing physicals and medical checks for the traders and their animals.” Jenkins scrunched his face and replied quietly, “aye, sir.”

“Dismissed!”

The days rolled by the same way: they worked until 11:00, returned to the brig for a solitary lunch, worked until 18:00, ate scraps, then slept until 0500 the following morning.

“I dunno how he did it,” Jenkins explained over a lunchtime meal, “but the Elder talked dad into helpin’ with the wash-and-waxes.” Erik laughed, “his guilt probably made it pretty easy. Is he an’ the new guy getting’ along?” “Who the ex-lieutenant? Uh...McDaniel?” Erik nodded. “Well enough I guess. They both love their mechanics, I’m sure they’ll be fine. Dad’s not much for flying though, loves the dirt.”

“How’re the new folks?” Erik shrugged, “it’s weird. They’re all between sixteen and our age, but their education sucks. I guess they weren’t ever taught anything aside from English and basic instruction. I’ve had to start at the beginning – it’s like pulling a swamper out of the muck and makin’ ‘em a scientist.” Jenkins nodded. “Can’t you just do the mind thing and *make* them know stuff?”

Erik shook his head, “too many at once. I tried and blacked out on day one. It’s not really the same as learning something yourself, anyway. I guess they’ve never had the chance to work their minds. I’ll ask ‘em a question and most of them just sit there, waiting for me to answer it myself.” He ate a few more bites of food before continuing.

“We need to name ‘em too. I can’t keep these damn numbers straight. I accidentally called 86 ‘92’ and he got a little offended. It’s my fault though, they don’t even have the same color fur.” Jenkins shrugged, “how do you go about naming adults?” Erik mirrored his shrug. “I made it their first homework assignment. Outsourced the problem,” he said with a smile. “I told ‘em I’d expect

them to come up with something before dinner today. Should be a good first step at helping them become real people.”

A sharp knock at their door signaled the return of Knight Penn. “Afternoon, ma’am,” she said in unison. She nodded and instructed Number 92 to gather their trays. “And no more sweets for the prisoners,” she said to him. “Do that again, and you’re out of the kitchen.” The pudgy wolfman trembled as tears rolled down his face, “no, please! I’m sorry! Don’t take me away from Mr. John’s kitchen! I like it there, he’s a nice man!”

Erik glared at her, “Ma’am! Take it easy on him. That’s no way to be treatin’ ‘em.” She glared back, “Initiate! Drop and give me fifty for back talking a superior! And you, fuzzball, quit your blubbering.” He whimpered and recoiled, expecting a blow from her. After a few moments, he opened his clamped eyes and cautiously looked up to her, “You’re not gonna hit me?”

“...no? Why the hell would I do that? I jus’ don’t want you givin’ these two treats they don’t deserve.” Number 92 choked back his emotions and nodded his thanks before replying with a smile, “I helped Mr. Franklin make those. He told me to bring them!” Knight Penn sighed and shook her head, “I should’ve known.” She quickly regained her composure and yelled at Erik, “you should be on thirty by now, Initiate! Make it a hundred!”

He dropped to the ground and began pushing against it. “One. Two. Three...” “Guard, sit here and count out a hundred. If he screws up, he starts over. Got it?” The woman nodded and did as she was told, not wanting to piss off the Knight further. “Let’s go, fuzzball,” she said to Number 92.

Jenkins sat on his bunk and stretched as Erik restarted his punishment twice after Knight Penn left. He restarted once for sneezing and again time because the woman counting lost her place. After 150, Jenkins spoke up cautiously. “Ma’am? I think that’s a hundred.” “Did I ask you to speak, Initiate?” she replied sourly. “No ma’am. He’s just fat and his arms might break off.”

She shrugged and said, “whatever, my shift’s over in an hour anyway.” Erik stood up and shook out his arms. “You could’ve spoken up earlier.” Jenkins nodded with a mischievous smile, “yeah, but you *do* need the exercise.” “You suck.” “Yup,” Jenkins replied with a lewd smile.

A week into their new routine, Erik and Jenkins received an unexpected set of visitors at the brig during dinner. Elder Elena, Ian, and Harmony accompanied Knight Penn and Number 92 to the brig. Knight wasn't pleased with their continued preferential treatment, but allowed it at the request of their common Elder Redding.

Number 92 handed the guard on duty their dinner then did the same for Erik and Jenkins. He paused and instead of sneaking them sweet rolls said, "We have a better treat," and opened the door to wave in Erik's three furred family members. "Cousin Erik," Ian exclaimed, running up to and shoving his small muzzle through the iron bars, "were have you been?" Erik smiled widely and bent down to pat him.

"We were a bit bad and are in adult time-out." Ian frowned and asked, "what'd you do, cousin? Was it really bad?" Erik nodded again, "yeah. We didn't listen to our Elder like we were supposed to. Now we have to live here for a while." "Erik," Elder Elena said gently, "it is good to see you well. We heard you brought Rush and the others here safely?" The two captive nodded and Jenkins added, "I helped too."

She ignored his comment and continued, "you must be surprised to see us here." "Yes, ma'am. I didn't think y'all would leave the station. What changed your mind?" "Your Elder Redding and his friends defended against the Enclave for a second time." She paused to remember a name before adding, "the large green one. Willis? Is your mate, medic?" Jenkins nodded, "yeah. Why?" "He has been very kind to us sine we arrived," she replied, "he has been very worried about you two." Jenkins blushed and said, "that's just like him."

After an hour of chatting, Knight Penn was ready to leave and demanded everyone out. "Visitin' hours are over," she said sternly. Elder Elena nodded respectfully and gathered her children. "Bid them goodnight, children. It is nearly your bedtimes." They did as they were told, each hugging Erik through the gaps in the bars.

In a few swift moments, Jenkins and Erik found themselves alone with the snoozing guard again. "I'm sick of this," Erik muttered. "About twenty three more weeks," Jenkins replied, "at least we'll be out before Christmas. Right?"

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Another two days continued in the same manner: cold showers, cold meals, and hard beds made the days seem even longer. That Thursday, Elder Redding stopped in to check on them. "Guard Smith? Can you give us a few minutes?" The guard sharply saluted before leaving them alone.

"Good evening boys." "Good evening Elder," they replied in near-unison. "I came to give you both some good news: tonight will be your last night in the brig. Jenkins, you'll be moving into the common dorms in the scribe hall tomorrow morning." "Really, sir?" Jenkins asked enthusiastically. He nodded with a slight grin. "Yes, provided you still do as you're told and obey *all* of your superiors." "Where am I going, sir?" Erik asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"I've arranged a spot for you with your new clansmen in the tower. I'm afraid they're not adapting quick enough to their new home. You need to spur them along." "Aye, sir," Erik replied flatly. "Still glum? You could stay here," Elder Redding replied with a hint of his old cheer. "No sir, sorry. Thank you." Redding changed his tone from Elder to father and asked, "son, what's wrong?"

Erik shook his head, "nothing, sir! You just released us from brig detail. I don't have anything to complain about. Just slow progress." He eyed his son suspiciously, "is that all?" "Aye, sir," he replied. "Good," he concluded, "you two will still be restricted to the base for the coming weeks and will have a 2100 curfew. Don't break it or you'll be back in here, understood?"

They both nodded affirmatively. "Very good. Goodnight boys." "Goodnight, sir."