

CHAPTER 33 : WHAT IS NORMAL OR LEARNING TO LIVE

July 23rd, 2280 marked the first day of Erik and Jenkins' limited freedom from incarceration. Coincidentally Number 86's 23rd birthday fell on this day as well. They celebrated by joining their friends in the cafeteria for breakfast.

Franklin and a smiling Number 92 met them in the kitchen. "Good morning," he nearly shouted over the sneeze guard. Franklin turned from the sizzling stove and patted him gently on the shoulder, "less yellin', more breakfastin'." He nodded in response and patiently waited for their orders. "Eggs and toast, please," Erik requested. "Same here," Jenkins added. He provided them with small mountains of fluffy eggs and golden toast. "Enjoy!"

They nodded their thanks with a smile each and sat at their corner table. Emily filled in their last empty chair at the opposite head of the table "Mornin'," Erik said to Olivia. She looked much better since they gotten home and received proper medical care. "Hey, Initiate. Good to see you out of the brig," she said distantly. Jenkins tried talking up Willis. "Mornin' my Jolly Green Giant." He grunted quietly in response before rubbing him between the shoulder blades.

"Where's Rush?" Erik asked. "He's out with Number 86," Emily responded, sipping her mug of tea. "It's not like him to miss breakfast. He loves breakfast," Erik pondered, "what the hell's going on?" "Bad night," Olivia answered. "One of the wolfies killed themselves." "We think," Emily added with an undertone of suspicion. "No way!" Erik shouted, garnering attention.

"Stop that yelling, Initiate," Knight Penn scolded him from across the cafeteria, sitting with some of her grunts. "God damnit, she's everywhere," he grumbled to himself before apologizing. "Sorry ma'am. Just got excited." He slumped down in his chair, "why would one of your clan do that, Emily?" She shrugged and sighed, "we have felt aimless since we arrived. We are not comfortable being in control all the time. We were lucky to get an hour or two without the collars daily. Sometimes when we slept in cages without them."

"We are trying to adjust to becoming productive members of your society. It's... hard." Erik nodded sadly. He never imagined that freeing them would be any kind of burden. "Many want the collars to be put back into use," she added quietly.

“But we can’t do that,” Jenkins said sternly, “it would be too cruel.” “Is our current suffering not cruelty?” Jenkins swallowed hard and stuttered, “n...no. It’s...different. We actively fight for the enslaved, to free them. No one here wants to own you or force you into hard labor. We want help you to grow strong and become our peers. You can’t do that without overcoming your psychological damage from the years of enslavement by the Enclave.”

Emily sipped her mug again and nodded with a toothy grin that resembled Rush’s. “I agree completely.” “Are you depressed,” Erik asked cautiously. “Yes,” she admitted, “but not for the same reason as many of my kin. And certainly not for reasons I want to discuss over breakfast with people I barely know.” Erik sighed and slumped a little further into his chair before sliding his tray over to Willis. “I’m done. Where’s Rush and 86 at?” “Boneyard near the Chapel,” Willis replied.

No one paid him attention as he left into the overcast morning and walked directly south to reach the chapel. He glanced down the street and saw Ida stooped over a black tarp with smudges of red peeking from under it. Father Murphy emerged from their small chapel to perform a modest service for their new members. Erik jogged to meet him. “Mornin, Father.” “Good morning my son. I haven’t seen you for quite some time. Have you been well?”

Erik nodded, “yes, sir. I heard about what happened last night.” Father Murphy sighed and nodded, “yes. It is a terrible thing when one of our flock strays so far in such a short time.” “Good morning, sons,” he said kindly to Rush and Number 86 as he and Erik came around the corner. They were busy digging a grave for their newly deceased clansmen. Rush thought it was strange to bury the dead, but didn’t question their decision. Given the number of headstones and markers here, it was the popular thing to do here.

“Good morning,” Rush replied flatly. Number 86 failed to respond, he focused on digging. “Mr. 86,” the Father asked, “how do your people pay their respects for the dead?” He tossed a few more shovelfuls of dirt to the side and looked up with puffy eyes. “I don’t know. We never got the chance. My brother and sisters just disappeared one day without warning. We naïvely assumed they escaped.” “Surely, son,” he replied kindly, “you know that all living things must come to an end?”

86 nodded, "I didn't know what to do when I found 77 this morning. He was lying on the sidewalk, broken and bloody. It didn't occur to me he could be dead," he said in short bursts, trying to steady his erratic breathing. "I thought he would be okay. Then...then I tried to speak to him, prodded him mentally. There was nothing..."

He resumed slowly digging and weeping. Rush nodded to Erik and the Father and resumed digging as well. "How do you explain death to an adult," Erik quietly queried the Father. "I'm not sure, son. I will have to pray on this; the good Lord hasn't blessed me with the knowledge to handle this yet." Erik stared at the furred men digging as the Father left. Feeling useless, Erik went to offer Ida assistance.

"Oh, Rade. Morning," she said, slightly startled by his sudden appearance. "Mornin' Ida," he responded and asked, "No foul play?" "I don't know yet and it's out of your jurisdiction, Initiate," she responded. "What?! Oh, right. Yes ma'am." "Did you know him? No more than twenty. Beautiful black coat and the greenest eyes I've seen in a long time." Erik shook his head, "no, ma'am. I was scheduled to move in with them sometime today as part of my new assignment."

"Erik," she asked, "have one of your new clansmen fetch me after your curfew tonight?" He nodded and stared, guessing she had something planned. "Get out of here, Initiate. Go talk to some people or something." Erik gladly took her orders and used the side entrance of the sniper tower to avoid the mess. He spent the remainder of the morning trying to help nearly a dozen individuals cope with their first tangible loss. He struggled constantly against their suspicions, fear, and naivety.

He didn't make any progress until he visited Colin and Number 87 at their home. He rapped sharply on the wooden door and called out, "Mr. McDaniel? Number 87? Anyone home? It's Erik, I'd like to chat." Colin answered the door. "Mornin' Brotherhood whatcha want this early? Got something needin' fixed?" Erik shook his head, "not exactly. Can I come in?" "Got a warrant?" "I, uh, what? No. I just want to talk with y'all is all. This ain't an official investigation, just bein' a good neighbor."

Before he could argue further, 87 nudged her mate out of the doorway and ushered Erik in. “Good morning Mr. Erik,” she said with a glum smile, “have a seat. What can we do for you?” “Ah, well. I came to see if you knew about Number 77’s death last night.” She nodded and replied softly, “86 woke us up. He was panicked.” “I would be too,” Erik thought. “Do you know how it happened or why?”

Number 87 gestured to their square Formica table and walked into the kitchen. She returned with three mugs of tea and took the remaining empty seat. “He was one of the strike team that was forced to kill your scribes. He was forced to attack and abduct Mr. Hawthorne and Mrs. Brown.” Erik paled slightly. Colin silently sipped his tea and watched their conversation. “After moving here and meeting everyone, settling in with the scribes, I don’t think he could handle the guilt. At least that’s what I hope happened.”

Colin shrugged slightly and asked his mate, “Anyone else know he was one of the strike team?” She shook her head, “no one outside of you or the clan.” “Are you sure?” Erik asked. She nodded in response, “Positive.” He sighed and reclined slightly in the chair, “I feared foul play. Some of our Brothers are still adjusting to our new Hawthorne family. Some folks avoided Rush for a few weeks until they got used to him.”

Erik sipped the warm tea; he recognized but couldn’t place the flavors. “What’s in the tea?” “Rosehips and Pomegranate vine.” “It’s very good,” he said sincerely. “Better than all that chicory y’all got ‘round here,” Colin replied.

“They did the same thing to Willis,” Erik added after another sip of tea. “It just takes time for folks to adjust I guess. Are any other members of your clan suffering the same way 77 did?” She thought for a long time about that question. “In some way, we all are. 86 and I were both on the team that were forced to abduct Mr. Hawthorne and Ms. Brown.” Erik gulped.

“I was very happy to see them escape with us. I was even happier to see Mr. Franklin up and alive. I didn’t think anyone could survive a point-blank shot to the head.” Erik felt like she reached into his chest and squeezed his heart. “I, uh, yeah,” he stammered, “I’m glad he’s okay too. You said y’all were you forced?”

She glanced sideways and responded, "Yes, but we volunteered to go. Not with the goal of harming anyone. We just wanted to leave the ship. Mr. Summers gave five of us the choice to go with him. I don't think he planned for what happened that afternoon." She couldn't meet Erik's gaze in fear of his retaliation.

"Tell me what happened, please." She stared at her stained mug, giving Colin time to intervene. "That's over now," he stated sternly, "they ain't doin' the Enclave's biddin' and I don't need you here harassing my wife." "Mate," she corrected him. "Mate. Wife. You know what I mean," he grumbled in response. "I ain't here to cause grief," Erik apologized, "just curious about your side of the story. Rush and Olivia don't remember much until breakin' out with your brother's help. Franklin remembers fightin' y'all, but not who or why. All they remember is getting ambushed."

She sighed with relief, "good. You all have been very kind since we came. I would hate to be the cause of discontent." Erik shook his head, "it's not like you actively chose to harm them, right?" "No," she partially lied. Erik thought he sensed she was avoiding him. "Can you explain that a bit more?" he pried. "Mr. Summers gave five of us the choice to go on a mission. We chose to go, knowing that we may have to kill someone or something that could harm him."

Erik nodded, doing his best to stay level-headed. "Makes sense. He needed protection. Did he say what from?" She shook her head, "we were rarely given details. They just used our control collars to order us around." "Why didn't he just do that?" She smiled slightly, "he didn't like to force us if he could help it. Mr. Summers was one of the few people that cared for and trusted us, aside from Colin and our father."

"He even mentioned once that he saw someone like us on one of his away missions. He was often gone for weeks at a time, only to reappear for a few hours or a day before disappearing again." Erik nodded again and grumbled, "he was spying on us." Number 87 narrowed her gaze. Colin responded for her, "Like I said. We don't do that shit no more. I'm retired and she's doin' what she wants. That's the way I want it to stay."

She looked up from her mug to her mate and gently kissed his cheek. "Not everything I want. I want to sign up to work with 86 in the Brotherhood." Colin

paled slightly and fought not to shout, “I don’t think so! You’re carryin’ twins. You ain’t got no business in th’ field. I don’t need you dyin’ and takin’ our kids with you.” “You didn’t argue when I went on scouting parties with the Enclave. Why now with the Brotherhood? You told me that I could make my own decisions now. Why are you making them for me?”

He grasped for the words, “I. It’s ain’t...augh. It’s about us an’ the kids. I want y’all safe. That’s all.” She nodded and smiled, “I want to get back into the field. Explore the forests. Sleep under the stars. Don’t you miss that?” He nodded slightly, “yeah, but...” She shook her head, “I’m glad we’ve decided I’m going back to work, then.”

Erik sat awkwardly at their table as they discussed their future. “Whatever happened to Summers?” “The colonel or spy,” Colin asked. “Uh, the spy,” Erik responded. “Something unspeakable,” 87 said sadly. “He was Emily’s brother. Their father, the colonel, forced her to murder him in cold blood. He discovered that Mr. Summers was a traitor to the Enclave. At least, that’s what she told me.”

“Oh my God,” Erik gasped, “how could he?!” “He’s pretty twisted,” Colin admitted. “He ain’t a Colonel just ‘cause he’s a nice guy. He’s murderous and conniving. Dangerous.” Number 86 reached out with her mind to help calm Erik, “please. Don’t doubt Emily’s alliances. She and 87 are the strongest members of our clan.” He nodded and replied verbally after finishing his mug, “I think I’ve got enough for now. Thank you for your time and inviting me into your home. If I have more questions, I’ll swing by later.”

Colin got up and saw him out while 87 sat and finished her mug of tea. “Scoutin’, huh?” She nodded. He shrugged, “If that’s what you really want. Then I’ll play housewife while you’re gone.”

Erik ran into Jenkins’ mom, Marie, on his way back to the sniper tower. “Good morning, Mrs. Jenkins.” Before he could get another sentence out, she backhanded him with full force. He was still reeling when she bear-hugged him. “Ow! What’s going on?!” “You coulda got yourselves killed! I had to watch you two get tossed int’ jail like a pair o’ drunks! What th’ hell’s wrong with you an’ my dumbass husband?!”

He fought from her grasp to provide her with a quick synopsis. "We couldn't wait. We agreed it was best our way. Turned out fairly well." She reared back to slap him again but stopped short. "Damnit boy," she growled, "don't you ever do nothing that stupid again. Do you know how worried we were?" "I'll try," he mumbled, rubbing his sore cheek, "I'm sorry." "Not enough. Now get the hell outta here before I beat you s'more!"

"Damnit," he muttered to himself, "Can't catch a break this morning."

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Rush sat with 86 in silence for a long time before he asked, "how do you handle the death of a clansmen?" Rush sighed deeply. "Is not easy. We are all a part of each other, mentally. When one dies, you will not find their comforting mind when you expect it, but a dark, cold, void. You must fill it with their memory. Never forget them. Make sure your clan remembers and cherishes them. Pass those memories to future generations. In that way, we will never die. We are always part of the clan."

"Our elder leads the ceremony," he continued, "to calm the dead: bring them peace. We add their names to our songs." He sighed, "our songs are quite long these days. The bodies we burn or bury are just empty shells."

Number 86 nodded, slowly letting the words sink in. "What does the Elder do, exactly?" "Reminds us of why the dead were good clansmen, even if they weren't. Recounts stories of their past triumphs. Retells their lives through her eyes. As the all-knowing head of our family." "So, you just sit around, remembering them?" Rush nodded in response, "yes. It is a personal daily ritual for most of our clan. Our whole clan comes together once a year to remember all of the fallen and share our memories of them to make sure we never forget. We make a feast for that day in remembrance."

"That's what I'll do then," 86 muttered after standing up and brushing the dirt from his hand-stitched overalls. "That's what we'll all do."

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Shortly after 10 that morning, Ida completed her investigation and released the broken body back to the clan. Number 86 took custody as their makeshift clan leader and carried him to the freshly dug hole. He and his trailing pack gently lowered Number 77's body into the hole, tightly wrapped in the black tarp.

Elder Redding was present, along with Father Murphy, Erik, Jenkins, Olivia, Willis, and Ida. Elder Elena left Ian and Harmony with Number 92 and Franklin in the Common Hall. Everyone in attendance was dressed as well as they could manage. The Brotherhood members wore their whites. Ida, Willis, and Doctor Reed donned their finest lab coats. All of the clan members wore the clothing that Jenkins made them as part of his reparations. After Elder Elena arrived in a borrowed plain dress from Jenkins' mother, they began.

Father Murphy cleared his throat and opened his tattered black bible to begin his sermon.

"Today we gather here, friends and family, clan members and brothers, to remember Number 77. At the young age of twenty-nine, he surely suffered for many years. And while he suffered, he grew strong. As he grew strong, so did our clans and brothers. I understand that he was a gentle giant in many ways: careful, calm, considerate, and caring. He was a good man in this life and will surely be in the next. May it be more peaceful than this one."

He paused to read a few carefully chosen scriptures before giving his closing remarks.

"Today, dear children, we return 77 to the cool Earth from which we are all created. May his body nourish the ground and make it bountiful for future generations. May you remember his name in your songs and his memories in your hearts. May we all be remembered in the same manner when it is our turn to be returned to the same cool Earth."

The Father then recited the Lord's Prayer and stood nearby to silently officiate the remainder of the funeral. Elder Redding was the first to follow.

"Although our new family members have only been with us for a few short weeks, we are all now Brothers in Steel. When one brother thrives, we all thrive. And when one suffers, we all suffer. Suffering in silence is not an admirable nor

wise or commendable decision; such selfish choices lead us to the same tragedies that brought us here today. It breaks my heart to see a young man with such potential give up his life in such a manner.”

“When you weep tonight, know that we all weep with you. When we suffer to better someone else’s lives, we make the world a better place.” The Elder paused to choke back his emotions. “It is my sincere hope that no one here today has plans to follow this young man blindly into oblivion. Please,” he paused, “if you find yourself weak, seek out a fellow brother and lean on them for support until you are able to hold yourself up and continue the good fight.”

Erik was always pained to see his father in such a state. Every funeral for every fallen Brother of their chapter has been the hardest on him. He took every death as a personal offence and failure as their Elder. Some thought he was weak for showing such emotion, but Erik appreciated him for it; it made him more of a person.

Elder Redding took his place to the right of the Father and stood motionless as a few manly tears escaped down his face. Rather than reach up to wipe them off, he wore them proudly in respect of the fallen.

Doctor Reed was next. His dark skin was ashen and his voice shook as he delivered his final words to one of his eldest remaining children.

“Number 77,” he said, trying to calm his shaking hands to read his notes, “was special. Not just because he was my son, but because he was the first time I was able to give someone the tools to selectively mask their scent. He was also part of the first strain to be realized as a real living creature, not as a simple biological tool for destruction.”

“After many long years, I made a choice to secretly defy my captors. To bring creatures to the Wasteland that could make a difference. I designed all of you to exceed the sum of your parts. Every pair your of genes were sequenced with the goal of making this world a better place; for you to survive and repopulate. To be strong but kind. To be gentle, but fierce when necessary.”

He paused to dry his watering eyes.

“I thought I was being strong and brave, but would like to apologize now for my ignorance and blind optimism. You have suffered for your short lives due to my shortsightedness. I realized that when we were saved from our captors and it kills me even more today, now that my own son has taken his life.”

“I wish that I had more things to say about my beautiful boy: he was strong, handsome, and kind, but was kept under lock-and-key, forced to do terrible things, and never allowed to live up to his potential. He deserved a better life, and a better father. I love him very much and failed to tell him or any of you that often enough.”

He tried to continue, but the lump in his throat made it impossible. Rather than fight it, he silently joined the Elder and Father Murphy at head of Number 77’s plot.

Number 86 cleared his throat and stood to the side of his father, Doctor Reed. He floundered and stuttered as he composed himself to begin his first official eulogy as the clan’s elder.

“Thank you all for attending this morning,” Number 86 said as steadily as he could. “Thank you father, Father Murphy, and Elder Redding for your words of wisdom.” He took a deep breath to calm his tremors and said, “We have all heard over the years that we would never amount to anything – that we were soulless tools of destruction. ’77 proved today that isn’t true. Only someone with a tortured soul could suffer as much as he did; to feel so heartbroken about atrocities he unwillingly perpetrated. ’77, our eldest remaining brother, was the rightful Elder of our pack. He never felt strong enough to carry that burden, so I assumed that position a long time ago on his behalf.”

He smiled slightly as he delivered the next section. “When ’77 was forced to ambush and ‘punish’ innocents on behalf of our previous owners, he did so with a heavy heart. He always took solace that he was saving one of us from having to do such terrible things. Everything he did was with the pack at heart and did everything in his power to protect us.”

“In fact,” Number 86 continued, “Does anyone remember Number 92’s birthday last year?” Most of his clan nodded. Colin did as well. “Mr. McDaniel’s partner was

torturing poor 92. Bless his heart, he'd never know it. '77 caught him in the act while off of his collar and pounced that foul man, beating him as fiercely as he could before the other officers apprehended him."

"Unfortunately, 77 wasn't able to kill the man, although he tried. He was severely beaten and starved as punishment. He nearly died multiple times at the hand of that foul man. Mr. Summers was eventually able to save him by selecting him as a member of his private reconnaissance team." He swallowed the lump in his throat and said, "Another fallen soul to remember, brothers and sisters."

"A wise man recently told me that we must help the dead to rest – to bring them peace. He also told me that we should never let our family die. We must remember each and every of our fallen brothers, sisters, and allies daily. We must fill the void with their memories. It is the way of our clan."

Most of the furred recruits were fighting against tears after his short speech. "Our father," he continued, "gave us gifts. The gift to sense every living thing around us: the thoughts of our kin and the thoughts of our new Brothers. The ability to blend in with our surroundings. We must use our gifts to help us carry the burdens of our past and the weight of our uncertain future. Our clan will face many more challenges, but we must not despair. Our new Brothers may not have tails and claws, but we can rely on them in our times of weakness and will raise them up in our times of strength."

"I will miss our dearly departed brother every day: his scent, his heavy stride, warm comforting thoughts, and odd sense of humor. I will never forget that he fought with every ounce of strength for our clan. It is our duty to do the same." He stood and stared at the wrinkled black tarp at the bottom of the grave and finally wept, "Goodbye, brother." As he did, Rush started a howl that crescendoed with each added clan member. Elder Elena joined them near the end as a sign of solidarity – even though she was displeased that one of her kinsmen was weak enough to do such a selfish thing.

A passing summer rainstorm sprinkled on the mourning party as they buried their brother next to the other fallen members of the Brotherhood. Father Murphy spoke after placing a hand-carved headstone for Number 77, "your brother weeps with you children, and will watch over you."

Number 86 thanked him and the Elders again for their time and led the sullen clan back to the sniper tower. Erik followed them back to his temporary home, feeling further estranged from the pack.

Number 86 corralled everyone into the large stadium-style classroom on the first floor. After Erik followed in the last of their clan he announced, “We performed our brother a fine service today. I am proud of all of you.” “Now,” he continued, “that will never happen again, at least not for the same reasons.” Erik thought his tactics for comforting his subordinates was strange.

“If anyone here wants to sacrifice themselves, they can volunteer to be on the front lines and die while protecting their brothers – that’s something to be proud of.” He paused from the lectern to look at each member of his clan. “Anyone else wanna go out like ’77?” A few people whimpered, but no one really answered. “Good,” he replied with a sigh. “If anyone wants to talk, we’re all here. Now’s the time.”

His sister, 87 spoke up, “I do, brother.” He exchanged places with her at the lectern and took her seat from the front row. “Today’s the first day we actually saw the death of a clansman,” she said gently, “I know that’s shocking and upsetting for all of us. I don’t think anyone here, with the exception of our father, has seen a dead splicer. We always made it back home, or simply disappeared from our lives. We never got closure.”

“It hurts, but we got that today. We know how he lived and how he died. Like 86 said, it’s our job to remember him for all he was worth and more. Not only 77, but every one of the people that suffered or perished to help us. All of our brothers and sisters that simply disappeared, Mr. Summers, everyone.” She stopped to inspect the lectern for some way to summarize her feelings, “just... don’t forget. We can’t forget them. When we remember them, we have to remember that *we’re* part of something bigger now, too. We’re not just a downtrodden bunch of experiments. We’re real people. Brothers.” She looked to her brother, “that’s it. That’s all I’ve got.” He nodded and stood up to relinquish her padded chair.

“Anyone else?” he asked loudly. His clan remained silent. Erik stood up and awkwardly cleared his throat, “uh. I do, sir, if you don’t mind.” Number 86 nodded.

All of the Hawthornes watched him as he took his position behind the lectern with a hand on each side of the worn wooden top. "Uh, hi everyone. I hope most of you know me by now. I'm sorry to say that I still can't say the same. We've all been learning together for a while, but I'm not sure how much help I've been."

"Anyway, you've heard grown men cry and apologize today for their faults and I'm up here to do the same. I hope you all know that when we asked you to come here – to our home – that we did that for two reasons. One, because you're my kin. All of us Hawthornes're blood relatives one way or another, as far as I'm concerned. The second reason is that you all have the capacity to be strong. Elder Redding would not have allowed you all to join if he didn't believe in you."

"So, if any of y'all feel like Mr. 77 did, you gotta take that weakness and turn it into strength. If you can't, then find someone to help you." He softened his voice, trying to be less aggressive, "Look. I know it's hard. I was th' same boat a few months ago: I found out that everything I knew was a lie. I wasn't who I was told I was. I learned that I had a new family. I had a past that was withheld from me. I felt angry, sad, an' lost."

He paused a moment to gather his emotions and thoughts.

"I grew up here in The Burg. Born to the Brotherhood. I didn't know I was adopted or how special I was 'til I met Rush at his home down south. He helped me learn things about myself I didn't think was possible; I learned how t' do things I still can't wrap my head 'round. I wanna do th' same for y'all here. I I wanna help y'all grow an' do things you think may not be possible right now."

"Without soundin' too mushy," he summarized, "I wanna get to know each of y'all. An' if you don't want nothin' to do with me, then fine. I wanna at least be here to help you, if you need it. I don't wanna see no one else hurt themselves 'cause they think no one can help 'em."

He nodded curtly to Number 86 who opened the floor again. "Thank you, Mr. Rade." "Erik. It's just Erik," he complained, "I ain't old 'nuff to be a 'mister' an' don't call your siblings 'mister' or 'missus,' do you?" Number 86 grinned

slightly, “no. We don’t.” Erik nodded his peace and sat back down. “Anyone else?”

Elder Elena cleared her throat from the back of the room. “I would like to say a few words.” She calmly made her way down the concrete steps to the wooden lectern: everyone waited in silence. “I am Elena,” she stated plainly and cleared her throat again. “I am the Elder of the Hawthorne clan. I have purposely kept my niece and nephew from you for some time, and after today, I am glad I did.” Erik furrowed his eyebrows, unsure and uneasy about the tone of her announcements.

“You are all weak. Mentally and physically. You lack the proper discipline to be called Hawthornes.” Erik was cringing, but to his surprise, no one was getting their hackles up. He didn’t even sense any anger – they all agreed completely. She continued with an air of anger and frustration, “After you become strong for yourselves and your clan, then you will truly be a Hawthorne. Perhaps more of you should follow in your brother’s footsteps and jump from the roof in the meantime.” She abruptly left the lectern, stormed up the stairs and left the hall completely.

“If they are truly of my clan,” she thought to herself proudly, “that should light a fire under them.” Her final statement. Erik slowly watched as the surrounding faces scrunched with various emotions: disgust, aggravation, anger, sadness, and determination. “If no one else has any words for their clan,” Number 86 said after a few moments, “we all have been granted the day off by our Elder. I expect you use it wisely.”

Some of them got up and left to other parts of the building while others stayed planted in their seats, ruminating the day’s events. Erik caught up with 86 and his sister near the exit that Elder Elena used. “Sorry ‘bout that,” Erik said to them, “she ain’t one to suffer foolishness.” 86 shook his head, “she knew exactly what she was doing. She is a very wise woman.” His sister, 87, nodded slowly in agreement.

“Right, well. What now?” Erik asked. 86 hooked his thumbs around his coverall straps and shrugged, “I dunno. 87’s going back home to spend some time with Mr.

McDaniel.” “Colin,” she interrupted,” we don’t call our brothers ‘mister.’” “Right, right, sorry,” he muttered.

“Uh, 86?” Erik asked, “y’all got somewhere I can stay? I’m detailed with y’all for a good while and ain’t got quarters yet.” His comrade nodded, “yup. You’re staying with me an’ 92 on the third deck, across the hall from Mrs. Elena and her kids.” “Really?!” Erik asked with more excitement than he planned.

86 nodded and added mentally, “it’ll be nice for all of us. We’ll get to know you and you’ll get to know your kin better.” “Was that your idea,” Erik asked mentally. “Yeah, it seemed for the best. 92’s got a keen interest in you, too. You should get ready for a lot of questions.”

Erik followed his new bunkmate up the concrete stairs of the stadium classroom and up the eastern stairwell to the third deck. 86 and 92 had one of the two biggest rooms to themselves facing north, overlooking the Brahmin pens and training grounds. Elder Elena and the pups had the other on the southern side. Other than their bunks, the remaining rooms on the third deck were unoccupied and used for storage.

“Oh, nice,” Erik said as 86 opened the wooden door for them. The large, rectangular room was separated by a pair of metal storage shelves to separate the sleeping area from the office and sitting area. “It’s huge,” 86 answered,” compared to what we used to have.” “Yeah?” He nodded, “the solitary confinement cells were larger than where we were quartered. We had rooms with four bunks and all of us hot racked. When one of us was pulled for duty, another of us was immediately returned to rest. No belongings to store.”

“It was nice when we went on missions and got to sleep outside. Much more comfortable.” Erik nodded. “Not much privacy the other way, either.” 86 nodded again, “no need. We were nearly always exhausted: no time for anything else.” He walked into the bedroom area and fell back onto his new bed. “Aaah. Cool.” Erik followed him in and sat on the bed opposite of Number 86.

“I’m sorry about your brother.” 86 shook his head slowly at the ceiling, “it’s cruel to say, but he was weak. This was the best possible outcome.” “What?!,” Erik yelled. 86 nodded and sighed, “I think so, anyway. Rather than continue poisoning the clan with his depression or lash out against the Brotherhood with

anger and confusion, he took himself out. It was the most efficient solution.” “He came to me, Mr. Rade,” Number 86 added, “about his depression.” “Did you... tell him to do *that*?” “Oh, no. I’d never tell anyone to kill themselves. He made that decision on his own. I tried to help him, I really did.”

“Just Erik,” he corrected the younger man. “Sorry. Erik.” Erik sighed, “has anyone else come to you?” 86 shook his head again, “not like 77. They’re still scared and uneasy with their new freedom, but they’re adapting.” “What about you?” “I’m doing the same: adapting.” “What can we do to help?” “Who’s we?” “I, uh, me? The Brotherhood? Us?” 86 sat up, “what do you know about leading people?”

They blew through an hour chatting and were well into another when 92 let himself in. He was visibly shaken. “92, what’s wrong? Why aren’t you serving lunch with Mr. Franklin?” 68 queried with concern. “Why didn’t you tell me?!” Number 92 cried. “77 didn’t eat breakfast! His eggs got cold. Where is he?!” 86 deflated slightly and stood up to grab his younger brother by the shoulders.

“Remember 79? How he escaped one day?” 92 nodded. “77 did the same. He wanted to live free in the forests. “He...left?” 86 smiled as he lied to his mentally challenged brother. “Yeah.” “That’s...that’s not what Mr. Franklin said!” Erik sighed and shook his head. “What’d Franklin say, 92?” The young man sniffed, “he said that 77’s dead. Is that true? Why would he die? Did someone hurt him?!”

“79 is dead too, isn’t he?” 86 nodded sadly. “As far as we know. Yeah.” Number 92 named off another dozen numbered names. “Uh, yeah. Them too.” “Why?” “Why what?” “Why did they die,” Number 92 asked calmly. “We don’t know, really. Except for 77. All the others slowly disappeared one by one. I guess it was the Enclave’s fault.” “Was 77 their fault too? Mr. Franklin said he killed himself.” “...yeah. It is their fault,” his older brother responded. “They didn’t push him, but they did enough damage to make him *want* to jump.”

92 shouted and stomped his feet, “Why didn’t you tell me?” “I didn’t think you could handle it,” he admitted, “and it looks like I was right.” “I’m not a kid,” he shouted. “I know 92, I know, I know. But you’re naïve. I don’t want anyone hurting you...like before.” “It wasn’t that bad.” 86 sighed deeply and shook his head. “It was; you’re just too simple to know it.”

"I know what I like," 92 continued his vociferous argument, "I like to sex. I like to help Mr. Franklin with the knives and cooking. And I do not like lying. What else did you lie about?" 86 gave no response. After a few moments of odd silence, 92 stormed out. "I am going to help serve lunch!"

After 92 left, Erik asked, "How often does that happen?" Number 68 rolled his eyes, "more times it should have to." Erik looked past 86 through the dusty window, "How'd he get like that?" "What, challenged?" Erik nodded. His furred compatriot shook his head with disgust, "*Enclave*. They picked a bunch of splicer kids and gassed them to test some sort of neurological weapons. He was the only one to make it out of testing alive. Once he recovered, it was pretty obvious he wouldn't be the same."

"Who th' fuck could do that to a kid?!" Erik spat in disgust. "He's not the only child they experimented on. Emily was a regular human before they started working on her. They figured out how to take a person and make them a splicer without having to be born one. I guess technically she was gassed too." "What about you," Erik asked, "did they do that stuff to you too?"

He shook his head, "not much. Lots of grunt work. Got lucky with a lot of fieldwork and, uh, wet-work after I got bigger. 'Round twelve maybe?" He ended by shrugging, "not much to do about it." The average-sized human seethed while 86 thought of things to talk about. "Uh, so I've been thinking about that assignment you gave us recently," 92 said quietly with mild embarrassment.

"What? Which one?" "The name one." "Oh! That's great! What did you have in mind?" "I like Seth. I was reading one of the books the scribes gave us. It had a story about a man named Seth – father of mankind. Seemed appropriate since I ended up the elder of our clan." "I like it," Erik said cheerily, "I think it fits you well." "87 and I were talking about it. I think she's decided on 'Ada.'" "Short, sweet, and to the point," Erik commented, "sounds like her." Seth agreed, "she doesn't beat around the bush. I appreciate that a lot."

"86, er, Seth, has anyone else come to you with a decision?" Seth shook his head, "I don't think any others are comfortable giving up their numbers yet. They need more time." "Are you letting 92 decide for himself?" Seth nodded. "I'll help him out, but it's important he makes the final choice. I don't want

to force something that personal on him. He may be a bit slow on the uptake and naive and childish at times, but he *is* smart.”

Erik nodded again, pleased at their progress. “Do y’all do a lot of mental communication like Rush and his kin?” Seth nodded, “yeah. Made it easy to warn others or pass along information even when we weren’t in control of our actions.” “Why’s is so different then,” Erik asked, “when I do it with y’all? With Rush it’s easy. Comfortable. Like I belong there. I get a weird feeling when I do it with y’all. Takes a lot more effort too.”

Seth shrugged and replied mentally. “Does this feel weird? I can’t tell a difference.” Erik shuddered slightly and nodded. “Yeah,” he responded in the same manner to his toffee-colored friend, “It’s not warm and inviting. It feels cold and sterile. I can tell you’re holding a lot back.” Seth shrugged, “that’s because I am. Don’t you?” The human shrugged, “I guess not.”

Seth narrowed his gaze and started probing into Erik’s mind, trying to weasel his way in and test the young man’s defenses. Erik grunted and squinted in retaliation. They fought a silent mental battle for a few stressful minutes until Erik gave up, letting Seth have his way and harboring a fresh headache. “C’mon, man, why’d you have to make it hurt?” “You are weak,” he replied plainly, “and hungry.” “What?” Erik asked just before his stomach grumbled. He laughed.

“Y’all and your noses. Rush did that the first time I met him.” Seth raised an eyebrow. “The first time you met him? Is that about what you said earlier in the classroom?” Erik nodded. “Ah, yeah. I grew up here in The Burg. Beliving all the time that Elder Redding was my dad. I didn’t have a mom. Then a while back, he sent me on a trip to where Rush used to live. Turned out we’re kin. He came back and we’ve been getting reacquainted since.”

“Do you hate him for that?” “Who? Rush? Dad?” “The Elder,” Seth replied. “Nah. I mean, yeah. I was *mad* initially, but he did it to protect me from myself. He never puts us in harm’s way unless it’s necessary. You saw him cry today?” Seth nodded awkwardly, “...yes. That was an unexpected display.” “He wasn’t puttin’ on a show,” Erik replied sharply, “that was real.” “How could he be sincere? He

doesn't know any of us!" "'cause he's empathetic an' feels pain for everyone. It's just how he is. It's a weakness that makes him strong, I think."

"That's weird," Seth concluded. "Maybe a little, yeah," Erik agreed as his stomach growled again. "When do y'all go eat lunch?" "About now," Seth replied, "we should go. Your scribes eat a lot." "Yeah? How's that?" "They have ran out of food for the clan twice now during lunch. I have taken to reminding your clan elder and young cousins to go early. They need to eat more than we do." Erik held the door for Seth as they exited.

"How'd you figure that?" Seth shrugged, "we're used to eating once a day. Three times seems gluttonous to us." "Three's healthy," Erik said, "two, minimum. Breakfast and lunch. Some days I skip dinner and just have a drink." Seth sighed with pleasure as they walked into the bright sunlight from the exit. "I will never get tired of the outdoors."

"What do you drink," Seth asked, "water?" "What? Uh, yeah sometimes. But in the evening I like a *drink*." Seth shrugged. "Alcohol?" "Oh. We weren't allowed to have that. I don't think I would want to drink that stuff. It made our previous... caretakers...violent and angry at times. Lethargic and lewd at others." "It's all in moderation, man. Drink too much and you get drunk. Then you do stupid stuff an' folks can get hurt. I just have a glass to relax before bed is all." "That sounds reasonable," Seth concluded. "May I try some?"

"Not for lunch," Erik chuckled, "we don't normally drink during the day. I'll see if I can pull some strings. Initiate or not, I've still got some favors owed." The two men walked into the cafeteria joined the influx of Hawthornes and late Scribes, anxious to grab a bite. Erik was pleased to see happy faces on the straggler Knights and Infantrymen in the cafeteria – lunch would be good.

Before he or Seth could get through the swinging double doors, Franklin came out and announced that there was no more food until dinner. Irritated groans escaped the handful of unlucky men and women that remained in line. Erik heard familiar grumbling and turned around to see Rush at the end of the line. "Mr. Hawthorne," Erik called out, trying his best to play the part of a subordinate, "why're you late for lunch, sir?" "Classified, Initiate," he responded verbally. Mentally, however, he explained that he was busy running experiments in the lab with Ida

and Willis. They were comparing samples from the new Hawthornes against his own and their few remaining samples.

“Understood, sir,” Erik said dryly. “You got food in your barracks?” Rush shook his head, “haven’t been able to eat at home since you...redecorated. Still smells.” Erik sighed and apologized. Rush shrugged, “you saved an important life that day. Need a less conspicuous method, though.” Seth suddenly became interested as he eavesdropped on their verbal and mental communications. “Hello, 92,” Rush said mentally to his younger counterpart.

“His name is ‘Seth’,” Erik corrected him. Rush smiled widely, “Nice to meet you Mr. Seth. That is a very fitting name. Very befitting for an Elder.” Erik could feel the awkwardness radiating from Seth. He remained silent and nodded his thanks. Rush’s smile slowly fell as he narrowed his gaze slightly. “You can stop attempting to dig around,” he warned Seth mentally, “you will find me a much tougher opponent than Erik.” Seth immediately withdrew without an apology for his rude prodding.

“Hey!” Franklin yelled from the ajar kitchen doors, “I said we’re done! Go on ‘an get outta here ‘less you wanna wash dishes ‘til you only got bloody nubs left!” The rough man’s outburst broke their concentration. “You two! Furballs with the *greenhorn*? Out!” Erik nodded and shoved them toward the door.

Rush shook his head and left, clearly irritated by the mental assault. “He’s good,” Seth said with genuine awe. Erik sighed, “That ain’t a good idea to dig around like that.” Seth nodded lightly and asked, “What can we do for food?”

Erik shrugged, “Let’s go see what Linda’s cookin’ up. How many of us didn’t get to eat?” “six, not including us,” Seth replied after a short pause. “Round ‘em up and we’ll take a walk down to Linda’s. She’ll have something cookin’ and I’ve got credit there.”

“Credit?” Seth asked, leading them back to the laboratory. “Yeah, I can pay ‘em back later. I ain’t got my caps and stuff back yet since my...demotion. They know I’m good for it.” “Caps?” Erik sighed audibly and waved to the few pockets of hungry Hawthornes nearby, “c’mon. I’ll treat us to a late lunch.” Each one eyed him suspiciously before waiting for a visual confirmation from Seth.

Erik led them back into the sunlight and southbound for Linda's. "What are caps?" Seth asked again. "Currency," Erik replied, "I can't believe I forgot to tell y'all about how to barter." He gave them a quick synopsis of trading goods for caps and haggling as they walked. Erik explained, "ain't nothin' free. It takes caps to get supplies to make stuff. You gotta pay for food if you can't hunt and a room to sleep if you ain't sleepin' in th' woods. If you make stuff, you can sell it. If you can provide a service folks need, like a hotel or a place to eat or whatever, you can charge for it."

"What if we don't want to pay for it? Can we just take it?" "No. That's stealing and that's bad. That's a quick way to get killed in th' wastes. On top of that, folks are leery of y'all anyway. Don't make it worse by bein' a thief." The young man mulled over Erik's statements and asked, "how do we pay for our new home and clothing and food if nothing's free?" "By servin'. Th' Brotherhood provides the stuff you gotta have so you can do what we need you t' do."

"To do what?" Seth asked. Erik shrugged. "Whatever's asked. If you work with the scribes an' they want you t' research somethin' or test somethin', that's your job. Do your best an' make 'em proud." "What about the knights," another Hawthorne asked. "Same thing. Train hard and follow orders th' best you can. Protect your Brothers in Steel – furred or not. Everyone gets a stipend at the end of the month for buyin' stuff out in town. If you're on th' road, you get more."

With that, they arrived at the recently remodeled hotel. After Ernie and Linda moved to The Burg, she set to make something that would rival anything anyone had seen since the war. The wealthiest traders in the area were soon tripping over themselves to get a room while the less fiscally endowed made due with the old bar and motel across the highway under Ernie's care.

Erik walked up the stairs to the wide porch and knocked on the storm door. "Ms. Linda? You in?" She answered the door in short order, "Welcome to Linda's...oh! Erik. How you doin' sweetheart?" "Bit hungry, Mrs. Linda. You got room for us to grab a bite?" "I'm sure we can arrange that, dear" she replied with her never-faltering smile. They followed her into the grand sitting room past the reception desk and she bade them to have a seat while she pulled Erik to the reception desk. "I would love to serve y'all, but I can't have *them* here," she

said as carefully as possibly. "They make th' traders nervous dear, and that's bad for business."

Erik paled slightly as he struggled to contain his anger in the face of unexpected racism from such a gentle woman. "Mrs. Linda," he strained to keep calm, "these people are my kin. They're part of the Brotherhood. Is that how y'all're treatin' us now?" She sighed deeply and replied with full sincerity, "no, honey. I'm sorry. I don't like it either, but I can't have 'em here. Head over to Ernie's and I'll send food along for y'all. You can have it on the house." He replied "thanks," with a huff.

She paused to pat him on the shoulder and apologize again before leading him back to his impromptu pack. "I'm sorry y'all," she said, "but it looks like we don't have enough food here for all of y'all. Ernie should plenty, though. He's just across the highway at th' bar an' motel." Most of the Hawthorns believed her without question. Seth knew better, but after reading Erik's vibes, he decided it would be best to question the situation aloud.

Seth stood up from the overstuffed couch and offered her a hand to shake and his thanks. "Thank you for checking." "No problem, sweetheart," she replied warmly. "I'll send along my daughter to help him get something tasty together for y'all." "Thank you," he said again and mentally ordered his pack to stand up, thank her, and follow Erik out with a smile. A trader at the hotel caught Erik on the way out and laughed, "What's a'matter, boy? Got demoted to *dog* catcher?"

Erik, motivated by setting a good example for the naïve Hawthornes in his tow, answered through gritted teeth rather than snap at the man, "No, sir." "Too bad," the balding man replied, "'cause someone needs t' keep 'em in line," he responded as he walked through the screen door. "The hell was that about?" Erik grunted to Seth after they escaped the man's earshot.

The furred man sighed and replied, "We were occasionally ordered to run raids on the caravans. Steal supplies and chase them around. It was good fun. I think they recognize some of us from before." "No one's doing that now, are they?" Seth shook his head. "No, but some of us *have* been getting a little bored...," he trailed off with a sarcastic smirk.

“Speaking of raiding parties, what’s th’ Enclave doin’ with those natives? The ones dragging banners ‘round? Are they under orders or what? They’re the ones that burned down Wiggins, right?” Seth paused for a moment, unsure of how to handle the surge of unexpected loyalty for his previous captors. “I, uh. I’m not sure,” he lied. Poorly. Erik took the chance to bombard him mentally.

The intrusion set off his natural defenses, drawing the attention of his nearby pack mates. “86,” one asked, “what’s wrong?! Are they coming for us!?” He gritted his sharp teeth and shook his head. “No. Just. Go wait at the bar. We will be there shortly.” The six remaining Hawthornes looked amongst each other anxiously before obeying orders.

“What’s wrong, pup?” Erik asked mischievously as he drug Seth by the arm from the middle of the road. “Why are you doing this?” he whined in response. “Don’t feel good, does it? Someone diggin’ round in your brain without your permission?” Erik’s tone grew dark as his eyes slowly darkened from grey to amber. “What are you doing?” Seth asked again, his voice wavering. “You just lied to me pup. We don’t take *kindly* to that behavior. I’m *taking* what you owe me.”

Seth winced in pain as his vision blurred and ears rang. Erik was more interested about information than being gentle. “Owe you what? I’ll do anything, just get out! Please stop!” Erik laughed darkly and dug aimlessly through the man’s memories before fully returning to reality. The instant he realized what was happening, he pulled free of Seth’s mind.

Seth wanted to cry and beat his young friend senseless for the long minutes of mental abuse he underwent, but instead trembled and stood awkwardly away from Erik, unsure of what to do. Physical abuse he could handle, but mental was another territory all together. Erik stared, wide-eyed, at the ground between them, trying to catch his breath and sort out what occurred. “Are you...okay?” he panted to Seth. The younger man shook his head slowly with glazed look resembling Erik’s.

“I don’t know what happened,” he continued, “I’m sorry. I just wanted to know so badly. That’s never happened before. I’m sorry!” Seth shook his head again, speechless and frightened.

“That wasn’t you,” he finally responded, “who was it?” “It was...kinda,” Erik replied, finally catching his breath. “I think it’s my new trick: I can change to look like y’all. Us. I think it messes with my head though.” Seth’s eyes grew wide as he slid further into shock. “No,” he gasped. “No one can do that...safely. You can’t do that anymore! Ever!” He finished by pausing and yelling, “ever!” again. Erik shrugged nonchalantly, “it’s not like I can control it anyways.”

Seth froze and held his breath before roughly shaking Erik by the shoulders. “You must learn! You will kill us all otherwise!” Erik shoved him away and said sharply, “I ain’t killin’ no one ‘less they deserve it. Let’s go an’ eat before Ernie starts wonderin’ why there’s a pack of wolves at his door.” Seth watched him resume his course to the combination bar-and-hotel. After a hundred feet of safe distance, he followed.

Erik’s arrival to the bar was exactly what expected: not many patrons and a confused bartender named Ernie. Each of his new clan members silently took a seat at the bar and said nothing to the bartender, instead waiting for Erik and Seth to show up. The balding man was more than pleased to see his young friend walk through the door. “Erik! How’ve you been son? You know these folks? Can’t get a word out of, edgewise!” His bellowing laughter echoed through the nearly-empty bar.

“Hey Ernie, yeah. They’re with me. Sorry ‘bout that. I sent ‘em ahead.” He paused as Seth entered, “had some things loose ends to sew up.” Ernie nodded with a smile, “Linda sent word along with Mary. We’re gonna make sure all o’ y’all get a full belly,” he said with his usual smile and charm. “Thanks Ernie,” Erik said, taking a seat at the corner of the bar. He gently scolded each one mentally for playing shy and persuaded them to try to chat with Ernie, rather than sit in awkward silence.

Seth had no objection to Erik’s mental persuasion and took the empty stool next to him, but kept his guard up; afraid that Erik would try to attack him again. Each of the six Hawthornes tried to chat up Ernie on different topics while Seth silently avoided their attention, making him awkward.

Ernie eventually turned his attention to him. “Hey son, you ain’t said much. Linda’s cookin’ good? Everythin’ okay? You want a beer or somethin’ to drink?”

“Yes, yes, and no thank you,” Seth replied quietly over his toasted cheese-and-mayonnaise sandwich. Ernie looked to Erik, slightly wary and asked, “he’s quiet like Rush? Not much on talkin’, huh?” Erik smiled and nodded as he tore off another bite of roasted Brahmin. “Smart man,” Ernie said to Seth, “better than bein’ like me! I’m all talk and not much listen. Drives my wife nuts!” He laughed hardily before turning his attention back to his other patrons.

Seth was thankful to see that Ernie and their lunch had his pack’s attention. He didn’t like trying to fend off six prying minds, anxious for answers; it wasn’t necessary to alarm them with information about Erik’s aggressive behavior – not yet. They finished up their meals and slowly returned to silence, instead retreating to their minds to continue their conversations in private.

It didn’t take them long to notice that Seth was missing from their group conversation. When they started prying about his sudden sullenness, he quickly stood up, thanked Ernie for treating them, and verbally ordered his subordinates to do the same. He followed with, “do the same for Mr. Erik, then we will return home. We’ve got a lot of work remaining today.” Each offered their thanks again and left in an orderly, but confused fashion. “Got ‘em all in line, huh?” Ernie asked with amusement. Seth nodded and followed them out, leaving Erik and a few scattered patrons in the bar with Ernie.

“Guess you better get after ‘em, huh?” the bartender asked with slight sadness. “Yeah, back to the grindstone,” Erik replied. “Thanks again Ernie. I really appreciate it. I’ll pay y’all back when I get back to my...regular rotations.” Ernie laughed raucously again, “I heard ‘about what y’all did to get ‘em all here. Blew up a damn *ship*? Good job, son, kickin’ them bastards in the dick like that.” The few other patrons raised their lunchtime beers in his honor and quickly resumed their drink.

“Uh, yeah. Thanks, again.” Erik left to find that his new pack left him at the bar. “Damnit,” he sighed, “I wonder if Rush has any idea what’s happening wrong with me.”

#

Seth led his fractional pack back to their home, nestled in the first two decks of the sniper tower, while fending off their incessant mental queries. "Yes," he replied aloud, "I like the new mayonnaise stuff. No, my rolls weren't crunchy. Yes, Mr. Franklin's roast is better, but just a little bit. No, I don't think we should drink beer for lunch, even though there were others that were." He opened the metal doors and ushered them inside with an order that they return to the classroom until dinnertime. "Console your brothers and sisters. Continue studying. We're going back to work tomorrow, Number 77 or not," he added quietly.

The last one to enter asked him, "what are you doing? Aren't you coming back in with us?" Seth shook his head, "Need to take care of elder stuff. Go practice your handwriting; it still looks like a pup's scribblings. Cursive, too." His much younger subordinate slouched slightly, folded his ears, and slinked indoors, "Yes, sir." After he was mentally isolated, Seth slouched and sighed, "Damnit," to the dusty ground before setting off for the laboratory.

"I wonder where he is," Seth wondered to himself, trying to sniff Rush out. The lack of wind wasn't helping. He heard Jenkins and a much more gruff man chatting in the lab. Their conversation paused with laughter. "Maybe Mr. Jenkins and Willis know where he is." Letting himself in, Seth wandered down the black-and-white-tiled hall to Ida's Laboratory, and knocked sharply on the door.

"Excuse me," he said politely after opening the door and sticking his head through, "have either of you seen Mr. Hawthorne?" Jenkins was too red-faced and giggling to reply, so Willis grunted a negative response for them. "Are you okay?" Seth queried. Jenkins chuckled and nodded, "Willis just told me the best joke." "Go on," he pressured Willis, "ask him!"

Willis rolled his eyes and asked, "little furry man, how d'you determine the sex of a chromosome?" Seth squinted and shook his head, "A Chromosome? I don't know." Jenkins started laughing again and spat, "you pull down it's genes!" Seth looked to Willis who smirked slightly and waited a few moments before offering an explanation. "Genes are made up of chromosomes, your DNA." He nodded slowly in response and waited for Jenkins stop giggling before asking about Rush's whereabouts again.

“Well *I* thought it was funny,” Jenkins groaned. “Go an’ see if he’s in his apartment at the end o’ th’ hall. He was grumblin’ earlier ‘bout not getting lunch.” “I offered ‘em some *meat*,” Willis grunted with a perverted smile,” but he didn’t want none.” Jenkins chuckled again and waved Seth out.

“Strange pair,” he thought to himself. Thirty yards later, and he was at the end of long hall, staring at a door numbered “203.” Seth found himself suddenly plagued with a nervousness he couldn’t calm. He slowly reached up to knock on the door. Before he could strike the green door, it swung open, revealing Rush with a wide smile.

“Hello, Seth!” The younger man nodded his reply. “Are you okay? Didn’t mean to frighten you. Heard you earlier and smelled you coming.” “Can...we talk?” Seth asked. “Yes, of course. Come in.” Rush offered him a seat at his workbench near a knot of wires and circuit boards lit by a harsh fluorescent lamp on an adjustable arm. “Excuse the mess: we were experimenting with the suppression collars.” Seth gulped at the sight. “Oh, no! We are not going to use them on anyone. We are researching the cloaking devices contained in them. The miniaturization is very impressive! The craftsmanship puts most of our technology to shame.”

Seth gulped again and turned away from the mess on the bench. “Mr. Hawthorne, uh.” “Please call me Rush, Seth,” Rush interrupted. “Uh, right. Rush. I want to ask you about Erik.” Rush’s eyebrows perked slightly and flopped in a nearby chair to face the younger man. “What about my little brother?” “I think he’s sick, Mr. Rush.” “Ill?”

Seth nodded. “Why do you think that? Can you smell it? Is it food poisoning?” Seth shook his head, “we all had the same lunch at Mr. Ernie’s today. It’s not that.” Rush’s stomach grumbled, making him laugh awkwardly, “forgot to eat again.” “He said something today about a trick he learned. It’s dangerous and he shouldn’t do it ever again.” The graveness of his tone worried Rush immediately.

“Please explain. He is the only one of my clan that has the ability to shift forms. He is unique in a few ways when compared to his brothers and sisters, actually.” Seth nodded and asked, “have you heard of the tribals that roam the

swamps and wastes 'round here?" It was Rush's turn to nod. "We saw them once a few months ago on our way here, yes."

"If he keeps transforming, Erik will become unstable and a mindless killer. Just like those tribals. They...were once a part of our clan. Generations older, but still part of us. They couldn't handle changing back-and-forth: it caused them to go insane. They only want war. Blood. They made our forced raids look like children's birthday parties. They...they kill children just to watch their parents scream and suffer before killing them too."

Rush leaned back in his chair, absorbing the fresh information. "Do they possess their regenerative abilities in human form?" Seth nodded, "Yeah. They heal nearly twice as fast as a normal human. Their bloodlust makes them nearly impossible to incapacitate, though. We've only been able to kill them to make them stop." "You had to...kill them?" Rush asked gravely.

"Yeah," Seth acknowledged, "For a long time they obeyed orders as our forward strike team. After a while, they went AWOL and started razing towns and raiding supply caravans for fun. The Enclave was pissed: they were ruining our own raids and contracts with the caravans. Then they made a half-dozen attempts to raze the ship nearly ten years ago.... They declared their independence from the Enclave after a third of them were killed."

"Impressive," Rush grunted. "The Enclave is a serious threat," Seth continued, "but they're worse. You can't defeat an enemy that doesn't feel pain." Rush swept his cowlick from his view and mumbled, "makes sense. Erik never complained of much pain during or after his transformations: only a distinct change of perspective when shifted to a form like ours. After he returned to normal, he experienced weakness. Mostly due to a lack of calories is our best guess for now."

"Were any of the killed taken in for study?" Seth nodded, "I think father said something about that. He would know if anyone does. Or his brother...who's dead now." Rush pondered for a few moments in silence. "It must be a problem with some glands in the bran. Perhaps the hippocampus and Medulla Oblongata?" "Hippo-what? Oblong?" "Glands near the center of the brain," he paused to poke at his own skull, "and the top of the spinal cord," he poked again, "that control

memory and aggression, respectively. The frequent, traumatic changes could induce stress on the hippocampus. Could schizophrenia. Enlarged Medulla can cause enhanced aggression. Combined with baser wolverine instincts and poor treatment, that may begin to explain their behavior.”

Seth shook his head to clear the dense medical fog that Rush induced. “I don’t know about anything you just said, but I *do* know that he’ll be a danger to himself and others if he keeps it up. In fact, he’s already started.”

Rush furrowed his brows, “what do you mean? He has shown little aggression when he is cognizant.” “He attacked me today.” “What? How? Erik physically attacked you?” Seth shook his head and instead mentally conveyed the mixture of fear and emotions he felt when Erik assaulted his brain that morning. Rush shuddered with the wave of emotions shared from three feet away. “Erik would never harm anyone like that intentionally,” Rush whispered.

“Yeah? Well. He did. There’s at least a little bit of him in there.” Rush nodded again. “Yes, but I’ve felt the other one before as well. Two, in fact. I’d hoped he’d learned to control it, whatever it is. It sounds like he may not be able to do so alone.” Seth shuddered again, feeling the presence again.

“There it is!” Seth whispered breathlessly. Rush stood up to open the door and see Erik walking down the hall in their direction. “Do not worry,” Rush told the young man, “he will be okay. He is the strongest of my clan.” Seth shook his head, “so were ours.” “Initiate!” Rush called to Erik, “are you off duty this afternoon?” Erik nodded lazily and stopped, seeing Seth in his brother’s office. Before he could leave or make an excuse, Rush reached out to him with his mind. “He has already told me what happened today. Come and talk to me, little brother. We need to make sure you are well.”

Instead of comforting him as Rush hoped, his well-meant sentiments caused a flare in Erik’s unstable temper. “What has that liar told you?!” he shouted down the hall. “Come brother, you are going to make a fool of yourself. Please come inside.” “I’m a fool?! You should see the *speciesists* in this town! Nearly a quarter of this town is a Hawthorne! Did you know that?!” He was ranting now. “We work just as hard as anyone...” Rush quickly left his office to retrieve his brother before he earned too much unwanted attention.

“Enough brother. The speciesism is well documented: Elder Redding is working to improve the situation with the traders and vendors. Their behavior is understandable. Yours is not.” Erik replied by shouting something guttural at Rush and Seth. They forced him into a comfortable leather chair. “Breathe, brother,” Rush insisted with care. “You must calm down and re-center yourself. If you keep acting this way, you will change again. That is not wise.”

“Why not?!” Erik yelled, “’M I not good enough to be like you two? Tall and handsome? Furred with tails? Huh?! ‘M I not entitled to look like my brothers and sisters? Be treated like one?!” “Of course,” Rush cooed gently, “of course you are. You have every right to look and act and think like a Hawthorne: you are one. A very special one. Now, please try to control your anger and chat with us.” He huffed, complained, and ranted for moments before slowly quieting down.

After a few long minutes of silence, he sighed deeply. His next words were a sincere apology to Seth with a hint of fear. “I’m sorry, Seth. I don’t know what came over me. I don’t normally get aggressive like that around other folks, just y’all. Sometimes with Rush too. I shouldn’t’ve done that. I ain’t got an excuse. I just did it ‘cause you wouldn’t tell me what I wanted know. Without thinking I decided I was gonna get it whether you wanted me to or not.”

Seth nodded, his muzzle painted with a wary grimace. He wanted to trust his new friend, but was still deeply worried. Rush shrugged, “Brother, you have shown aggression at times since I have met you. Jenkins says otherwise, but since I came here, you have shown aggression toward everyone: Jenkins, me, Elder Redding, Willis, and even Ida. Once.” Erik slumped in the chair and heaved another deep sigh. “I don’t know what Doctor Hawthorne did, but I think he broke something.”

Rush and Seth nodded simultaneously. “We’ve seen this before,” Seth said as calmly as he could. “I’ve seen parts of my own clan go insane. They’re the tribals you were...askin’ about earlier.” “What’s that supposed to mean,” Erik asked as his aggravation slowly rose again. “They were forced to change too often by the Enclave. After a while, they lost their minds to the rage.”

Erik shuddered. “In...insane? Literally?” Seth nodded, “the Enclave tried to reign them in, but instead started a war with them, lost half of their new ‘clan’, and

left out on their own. Doing whatever they want: mostly burn and pillage.” “Can we prevent it?” Rush asked, trying to build a scientific solution. Seth shrugged, “you could ask father. He and uncle had the most experience with them before they...left.”

Erik shot up from the chair, “Where is he now?!” Seth shrugged and looked to Rush, “maybe with the scribes? He’s been working with them lately on the same thing you are, I think.” The older wolf-man nodded and sat behind his terminal, quickly clacking out a message to the good doctor. “His presence is urgently requested. If he does not get this message directly, a scribe will pass it along for us.” “Efficient,” Seth mumbled with awe. “You can talk to him through that thing?” “My terminal? We can send electronic messages. It is barely real-time and does not send anything more complex than text.....we are working on that,” he finished with a proud smile and a gentle pat on his *Programmer’s Handbook*.

It took twenty minutes to calm to his normal state Erik. After he was quietly sitting on a couch next to Seth in Rush’s apartment, sipping a mug of tea, did Doctor Reed arrive. He was slightly out of breath. “Mr. Hawthorne? What’s wrong?” Rush pointed to Erik through the door. “My brother seems to be displaying early signs of mental instability due to form shifting.” Doctor Reed furrowed his brows and looked to his young son in the room. “Is he one of the *Væcors*?”

Seth nodded slowly. “Like Mr. Haw...Rush said, he’s in the early stages. Aggression and lack of control. Can you do anything? I don’t want to have to kill him,” he finished sadly. “Latin?” Rush asked the doctor. “Yes. We needed a name for them and it seemed appropriate. Means ‘frantic or crazed.’” “Kill me?!” Erik blurted of their mutual respect for dead languages. “No way in hell you or anyone else is doin’ that!” His face flushed with anger.

Rush sighed and stood between Erik and the doctor as a preventative measure. “No, little brother, no one wants that. Me, especially. Please calm down. Let us listen to the doctor.” Rush gestured to him and paused, “Apologies! Would you like anything to drink, doctor?” “No thanks. I’m more interested in my patient.” “Oh, no. I ain’t gonna be some experiment!” The doctor scowled and interjected with irritation, “If you don’t let me study you, watch you change, and monitor your behavior, I can’t hope to help you survive this.” He took a darker tone

that deeply contrasted his normally bubbly personality and added, "I will *ensure* you do not cause the harm my other children have."

The doctor took a steeling breath and instructed Rush to fetch Ida. "She needs to know what's happening. Keep the other two out of it for now." "Jenkins and Willis?" The doctor nodded. "Aye, sir, but they all know about his new skill," Rush replied, taking Seth with him. "Okay, son. When'd all this start? How many times have you changed? Have you hurt anyone? Have you tasted human blood?"

"I uh, a few months ago, I guess. Doctor Hawthorne shot me up with a serum or something. He said it would make me more like the clan. Made it so I could hear 'em in my head. Started a while after that." The doctor nodded and scribbled something down on a book he pulled out of his pocket. "How many times?" "Two? Three, maybe? I don't remember all of them." "Hurt anyone?" Erik heaved a sigh, "yeah. But I didn't mean to! I was scared, trying to fight whatever it is." "Who was it?" "Rush," Erik muttered, "he was protecting me from myself, I guess."

Doctor Reed nodded again, "he was the best one to be on the end of your hormone-induced rampage. Have you ingested the fluids of another human while in that form?" Erik shook his head, "no. My own, I guess, but that was a new thing we tried after the last time I changed." "Self-inflicted injury?"

Erik shook his head, "no. How do they normally change?" "How do *you* change?" the doctor countered. "The normal way I guess? I get scared, or pissed or, like last time, sensed someone needed me and changed." "*How* did you change, son?" Erik shrugged awkwardly, "Uh, well...it feels like my bones and muscles get too big for my body. Everything gets muddy and dark after that, but when I come out of it, I'm surrounded by my own shredded flesh and clothing, looking just like Rush. Tail and everything."

"Can you do it now?" Erik stammered, "Uh. No? I don't have a reason, and you make it sound like a bad idea. I don't think I want to anymore." Doctor Reed sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "You're gonna have to. Take off your clothes and lie down on the linoleum over there." "What? No. I ain't doin' that." "Erik!" Ida yelled from the doorway. "Do as your doctor tells you, or so help me I'll beat you senseless."

Erik dropped his head in mild embarrassment and agreed to strip down to his boxes. “Good. Mrs. Ida?” Doctor Reed asked, “do you have a recent file for Erik?” “Yeah, we update ‘em every time they come and go from the field.” “Good,” he said and asked, “do you have any medical depressants?” Ida thought for a moment, “got some Valium. That strong enough?” “Yeah, we’ll preload with some alcohol, if Mr. Hawthorne has some.”

Rush nodded dutifully and pulled a frosty bottle of absinthe from his freezer. Erik scowled at him from the cold floor, “th’ hell you doin’ with that?” Rush shrugged, “it was a pretty color. One of the traders recommended it.” “Pour him four fingers, Mr. Hawthorne.” Rush did as he was told and tipped the neon green liquid into a glass. “Drink up?” Erik scowled and chugged it as quickly as possible. “Ugh. Oh, god. That’s bad. How’s this gonna help?” “It’ll further depress your immune system when I forcefully induce a change in your body’s chemistry to make you transform.”

“So I’ve gotta get drunk every time I need to go ‘wolf?” Doctor Reed shook his head, “hopefully not, son, no. This *is* all theory, of course.”

Erik started to balk but quickly silenced himself when Ida arrived with a rather large syringe of slightly yellow liquid. “Got th’ good stuff, m’boy. Twenty cc’s, with your name on it.” Doctor Reed scoffed, “*Twenty?! Are you trying to kill him already?*” Ida laughed, “He’s just like one the walking wolves, doc. Resistant to every medication I throw his way. We’ll start with a slow ten, then another hit, if he needs it.”

He deferred to her judgement and produced a quick tourniquet for Erik. “Left or right?” Erik shrugged, “left?” He watched quietly as the larger man tapped on the crook of his elbow plunge the needle deep into his brachial artery. The wormwood-laden drink was working well: he didn’t even feel the pinch. “Lie back and focus on breathing. You’ll feel like sleeping shortly.”

As he drifted into a drug-induced coma on Rush’s cool linoleum floor, Ida queried the doctor about the next steps. “Let’s go back to your lab and whip up a cocktail for Mr. Rade here. Mr. Hawthorne? You have medical training, right?” Rush nodded. “Good. Make sure he doesn’t go bradycardic. Administer CPR if necessary and have Seth fetch us if he really starts going sideways.”

Rush nodded and took a seat next to his little brother. Seth mirrored him on the other side. “Do you have any jet handy?” Doctor Reed asked Ida when they exited Rush’s apartment? “I don’t know ‘bout the Enclave, but we don’t tolerate hard drugs in this town, Reed.” He nodded and asked anyway, “how about pre-war medicine? I need to make some Psycho to set the boy off in there.” Ida’s milky eyes nearly flew out of her skull. “No way I’m letting you drug him up like *that!*”

“You just let me chase his alcohol with benzos,” he said honestly and coolly, “something no medical doctor should do for a normal human. This abnormal procedure calls for abnormal administration. I’ll need to make a double dose of Overdrive. We’ll do it the same as the valium: half dose. Another if necessary.” “Overdrive?” Ida asked.

Doctor Reed explained the chemical makeup: a concoction of Psycho, a dash of distilled Nuka-Cola, and a handful of other “fun” chemicals to round out the complex, oaky flavor. “*Christ,*” Ida sighed, “are folks that desperate now? Back when the raiders were here, they just spent most of their time high and murdering folks on good ‘ol Jet. Your ‘Overdrive’ sounds like something they had before the war...What was it called?” She thought silently while they quickly mixed and distilled chemicals.

“Oh! Meth!” she exclaimed. “That’s what that stuff was. Terribly addictive. Rotted holes in folks’ brains and teeth. Devilishly cheap to make, too, if you don’t mind the aftertaste of liquid fuel.” Doctor Reed sighed, “it’s a shame folks seek those poisons out.” “And here we are,” Ida swirled her flask at him, “makin’ an improved version.” “A *safer* version,” he corrected her.

“He’ll still feel like hell afterward, but it should be no worse than the hangover he’ll have from that absinthe.”

As the doctors were slaving away in Ida’s laboratory, the three Hawthornes remained on the linoleum floor, waiting. “Wonder what they are concocting,” Rush asked Seth. The other shrugged in response, “we weren’t ever told what we were getting in our shots. I always assumed it was boosters or something. Got a red one, one time. Burned like hell.” “Side effects?” Rush curiously. “Uh, my whole

body went numb for a while. I couldn't feel anything at all. I wasn't even sure I was breathing at one point."

"Frightening," Rush replied. Seth nodded, "yeah. We didn't get that one again after the first time. They came back with something similar after that though: it still burned but I wasn't numb. I felt *strong*. Like I could rip a man in half. The hangover from that one sucked though. I was sick for two days."

"Sounds like an amphetamine. Very strong stimulant." Erik interjected into their conversation at this point, slurring slightly.

"Heh, stimulant. I'll bet you's horny as hell!" Rush smirked, making Seth blush slightly. "Uh, yeah, I guess so," he admitted quietly. "It is okay," Rush said, "that is a normal reaction." "I don't wanna really talk about that stuff anymore," Seth said sadly, "too many bad memories." "D'aww," Erik cooed sarcastically from his prone position, "tell me!" Again, without permission, he dove toward Seth's mind with his own.

Seth easily defended himself against the inebriated man. Erik complained loudly, "why won't you lemme in, 'not Rush'?" Rush tweaked an eyebrow. Seth shook his head, "my mind is my only private place. I barely know you. I don't even let my own sister in regularly."

Erik slapped his forehead and replied, "well, there's your problem! You makin' it too hard! You ought t' be like me an' Rush! We're all over each other's heads, all th' time. Jus' ask him." Erik finished by thumbing to Rush. He nodded slightly, "what he says is true. We share nearly everything mentally, when we can. Very calming. Comforting. Our clan has used this as a support technique for generations now. Strength in numbers."

He continued the defense of their open mental policy, "it is designed to keep one connected his peers. If one gets too weak, the others can support them. The same way we have been here for each of Erik's transformations – to help him overcome his fears and weakness." Rush paused and lowered his voice, "maybe...it could have saved your elder brother."

Seth sighed and rolled his eyes, "thanks for the mushy sentiments, but that's not how the real world works, Mr. Hawthorne. Your 'lil brother here's drunk and

fixin' to get *really* drugged up so he can get fixed 'cause *he's weak*. Weak like my big brother, an' weak like the rest of us." Rush scoffed sourly and rebutted, "you do not know what it means to be a *real* Hawthorne."

Seth scoffed in response, "You're *damn* right I don't. We don't live in some make-believe fantasy land. All of us know we're science experiments. That's it. We ain't special. We're tools, designed to maim and kill. Nothing more and nothing less. Mr. Erik's troubles are just another variable in the experiment that's our lives."

"Stop callin' me 'mister', Goddamnit!" Erik lazily yelled between them. Rush chuckled and pet his hair. "Killing machines or not, we are advanced creatures capable of much more than you give yourself credit for." Erik agreed, "shut t' fuck up 'bout bein' weak. Knowin' your weaknesses is a strength. Stupid." He paused his browbeating to request another drink, "Rush? You got any more 'o this absinthe?" Rush swirled the nearby bottle, "A bit. The remainder may have plant material as well. That *is* part of it, right? Is that why it smells strongly?"

"Dunno," Erik slurred, "don't taste like anything I've had before. Reminds me o' the stuff we used to smoke as teenagers."

Seth sighed and asked, "can we get this over with? I've got a clan to keep from killing themselves." Doctor Reed's warm smile turned sour. "Son, I know you're hurtin', but don't take it out on me or anyone else." Ida looked around, trying to avoid the awkwardness of a father scolding his adult child. "Rush, you two're gonna have to hold 'im," Ida instructed.

"Yes ma'am," he said despondently, resuming his place to Erik's left. "She's right," said Doctor Reed, "he's likely to go into convulsions before he comes 'round to his second form." Erik unfolded his arms from behind his head and pulled into a half-lying position. "Convulsions?" "Don't worry about it," the elder man replied, "you won't feel much." He looked to either furry man nearby and ordered, "hold 'em down tight. Nobody's gonna like this next part."

In a flash, they pinned Erik down to the black-and-white linoleum. The young man was quickly sobering up as panic set in. "Wait, wait! I don't think I wanna..." he didn't get to finish. Before he could become a problem, Doctor Reed cinched the

loose tourniquet and jammed the needle deep into the crook of his elbow. The injected the strange brown liquid into the thick vein.

“Ow! Ow! That burns, doc!” Erik complained. “Yeah, sorry about that. You’ll start feeling warm all over. Just try to relax as you fade into the darkness.” Erik fought to stay alert, but his heightened heart rate surged the chemical concoction through his blood. At first, his toes started twitching, followed by his calves all the way up his body. Soon, he appeared to be suffering from a private earthquake. His eyes rolled back and he began moaning.

“Now for the bad part, boys,” the doctor said, stepping across Erik’s chest. “I’ve gotta kill ‘em a bit.” Rush looked up to the gentle man with great concern, “You what?!” “We’ve gotta make him fight for his life. It’s the only sure way to make him transform.” Rush was shocked to see Ida going along with this terrible plan without a word. “Do. Not. Kill. Him,” Rush threatened through gnashed teeth.

“Don’t worry, son. I *am* a doctor,” Reed replied. Breaking his normal protocol, Seth reached to calm Rush with his own thoughts. “We’ve done this before. He’ll be okay, I promise.”

Doctor Reed felt for Erik’s pulse and made a mental note before slowly choking him out. His large black hands encircled Erik’s throat, cutting off his supply of air and blood to his brain. “C’mon,” he whispered aloud. Erik’s tremors slowed as his oxygen supply dwindled. “Fight it, son, fight it.” In twenty seconds, the young Initiate was very still. Ten more and he turned a slightly paler shade than normal. Just before completely losing consciousness, something sparked in Erik’s brain – the fight for self-preservation.

In his case, this now included an option to transform into his Hawthorne form. The moment Erik’s bloodshot eyes flashed open, Doctor Reed released his grip and allowed him to breathe. The combination of drugs and weed-infused absinthe caused Erik’s transformation to happen in slow motion. Instead of ripping himself apart, his body slowly stretched with grotesque sounds to accommodate his new bones and musculature.

Doctor Reed sighed and stood to his son's left. "Very good, young man. Very good. Just breathe," he said gently to Erik. "Don't let him go," he reminded Rush and Seth. "When he finishes changing, he'll be conscious again, but not as the Erik you know. He'll probably be scared, which makes him *very* dangerous." They both nodded to each other. Ida watched in disbelief as her adopted son transformed into something familiar yet foreign.

Ten minutes separated his human and Hawthorne forms. In the fading seconds, as Doctor Reed predicted, Erik's subconscious mind surfaced. It was clearly agitated. "Let. Me. Go!" he yelled sharply. "Sorry," Doctor Reed replied, "we can't do that just yet. Your brothers and I want to chat with you for a minute."

Furry Erik struggled but quickly found that the combination of strong Hawthornes and drugs made it futile. He threatened and howled for a few long moments before settling down. "Are you done, son?" He growled again. "Good enough," Doctor Reed replied warmly. "Now then. Who are you? Are you Erik? Or someone else?" He struggled again before growling his answer. "I don't know! Why have you captured me?"

"That's for our protection an' your own. Once you calm down, we'll let you go." "Let me go!" Erik yelled, "Do it now!" The black man shook his head and asked Rush, "how often does he transform?" "He has only changed three times that we know of." Doctor Reed sighed, "Ah, that's the problem. He's still new to this."

He took a deep breath and yelled at the top of his lungs at Erik, "Pup! How dare you act thus toward your Alpha?! I would cut out your heart and feed it to the young, but it'd make them weak with fear! Get your shit together before I skin you alive and leave you in the hot sun for the crows to eat your eyes and molerats to crunch your bones!"

Everyone within earshot was sure that was going to set Erik off. Surprisingly, he calmed down immediately. He pinned his pointy ears to his skull and curled his tail between his legs. "Much better, pup," the doctor continued sternly. "What is your name?" "Erik," Erik replied barely above a whisper. "Good. Who is to your left?" He glanced over and replied, "my brother. Rush." "And your right?" Erik had no answer. "I...don't know. He is familiar though." Seth lowered

his ears sadly. "He is your pack brother. Seth. How could you forget your own brother, pup?"

Erik tried to shrug. "Never mind that now. What has you so angry that you would endanger the pack?" The freshly furred man looked around the sparsely decorated room for a hint to the answer. "Well?" the doctor asked. "I tire of being weak and being trapped in this furless world. I hate it here: the senseless rules, the lies, the backstabbing humans. I want to live free in the wilds like my kin of days past." "Too bad," Doctor Reed replied roughly.

"It's no better out there than here. Worse, in fact. There's no game to hunt that's safe to eat. There's nowhere to live that's not irradiated and infested with all kinds of nasty surprises. You have no natural mates to continue the pack in the wild. How do you plan to survive?" "I don't know, but I'll figure it out!" Erik growled angrily. His throaty growl continued as he renewed his struggle against his larger brothers.

Doctor Reed lowered his voice to a hint of a whisper and replied, "you. Are. Weak, pup. Your brothers should kill you to strengthen the pack. You are a dangerous nuisance." Erik snapped at the doctor: a decision he quickly regretted. Reed punched him square in the Adam's apple, making Erik cough and sputter. "Try that again, and I'll open your pretty neck nice and wide for your blood to escape."

Rush winced and turned away, wishing he wasn't forced to participate in the abuse of his little brother. Seth was oddly calm for the drama and posturing between Erik and the Doctor. Ida took the chance to leave, "I don't' need to be a part of this barbarity. Find me in my lab when he's back to normal." Erik coughed to Rush, "don't look away from the true nature of the men, brother. They enjoy abusing each other, we should enjoy it too."

Doctor Reed's patience was growing thin: time was running short. Soon Erik would revert to his human form and lose his conscious connection to the angry Hawthorne inside. He clamped Erik's muzzle shut with his thick, smooth black hands and spoke directly into his ear. "You're jealous of your brothers, both furred and squishy. You're scared and afraid, little pup. Ain't nobody got time for that. You're weak. If you can't grow a pair of testicles and man up, you're

no use to the clan alive as a Hawthorne *or* a human. I don't care how much your brother coddles you," he added disapprovingly to Rush.

Erik struggled again, unsuccessfully throwing the three large men from him. Reed placed a hand over Erik's cold nose, removing his oxygen supply. Absolute panic washed over the young man, causing him to flail even more. "Stop struggling. Stop! Stop it, or I'll suffocate your stupid ass to death right now! It's less work for me to dig a fresh grave than to deal with your bullshit!" Erik's eyes went wide as he calmed down a second time.

Doctor Reed removed his hand, as he implied he would. "That's a good pup. Keep your anger in check and you'll be useful. Don't, and I'll have your brothers hunt you down like a tasty deer. Understand?" Erik nodded slightly. "Say, 'yes sir,' like a good pup does for his master. "Yes...sir," Erik replied through his clenched teeth. "That's better."

As the doctor released his grip on Erik's muzzle and pulled away, the young man stupidly snapped at him a second time. "Oh, hell no you didn't!" he yelled as he encircled Erik's thick neck with his hands, clamping down and choking him. "Do you want to *die*? We can do that *right now*." He emphasized the last two words by tightening his grip. Rush whimpered loudly with tears welling up in his eyes. Erik struggled, again fighting to breathe. "You'd best check yourself before you wreck yourself, pup." He held his grip until Erik was gasping and the flesh under his thin muzzle fur was paling and turning blue. His grey eyes grew red and bloodshot as the delicate blood vessels in them throbbed and threatened to pop.

After eight long seconds of terror, he pissed himself. "Feel that, pup? That cold embrace? Pack your shit up, or it'll be permanent!" He quickly released his grip, allowing Erik to breathe again. He hacked and coughed and dry heaved in Rush's direction.

Doctor Reed stood up and towered over the three of them with his chubby form. "You two," he said to Seth and Rush, "clean him up. Check for permanent damage, you know where to find me if there is any." He glared at Erik one last time and threatened him by pinning his head to the ground with a boot. "We need to have

this conversation again?" Erik coughed and sputtered but eventually choked out, "no sir."

"Very good, pup. Let your brothers care for you. They have my full permission to end you, if they deem necessary." With that, Doctor Reed looked to Rush and Seth again with a slight smile and left to find Ida in her laboratory. Erik wept openly with waning terror and a wash of relief. Rush gently approached his younger brother's mind with his own.

"You are safe now, little one. Have you learned your lesson?" he asked gently, trying to hide his own disgust. Erik nodded and asked, "can I get up, please, sir?" Rush conferred silently with Seth before they both agreed: the severe anger that previously clouded Erik's mind dissipated. He was returning to his normal mental temperament in his new physical form. "I...I'm sorry, big brother," Erik choked. Seth sternly warned Rush not to coddle him.

"You should be," Rush replied flatly. "You endanger yourself and everyone else when you fail to secure your emotions. Your physical form requires great mental strength and discipline to master. Doubly so, as we can influence others' thoughts. What would happen if you were to incite a panic in your clan?"

Erik sat up and stared at his soiled crotch. "I...dunno. Nothing good, probably. Sir." "You'd damn well better believe it," Seth replied sourly. "You start going berserk and takin' everyone with you, it'll be a blood bath." Erik shuddered again and dry heaved, letting the weight of his unstable actions weigh on him. Seth continued, "you're lucky father didn't dispatch of you here on the spot. He's had to do it before."

Rush looked to Seth with a mixture of shock and sadness. "Yeah. Watched him do it a number of times. For their own good and ours too. Failures that couldn't control themselves. The *really* bad ones he elected to shoot in the head: ended their misery quickly." Rush gulped.

"And that's the hardest part," the youngest man said, "was letting go. When you bring something into the world, you have to be prepared to take it out as well. I don't envy him: it's a hell of a burden. The only regrets *I* have are that I was unable to prevent myself from murdering innocents. Father had to kill his own children to save them from themselves. I don't know how he did it."

Seth and Rush stood up to hoist Erik from his small puddle on the floor. "Let's get you to the bath, pup," Rush said with a grimace. "You can clean up this latest mess after you clean yourself up. We will continue our chat afterward." The sudden vertical movement sent Erik's vision wobbly as the remainder of conflicting drugs surged in his gut. "Don't do it," Rush threatened as Erik's muzzle paled with a green tint hue. "Don't throw up in here again!"

Erik doubled over and redecorated Rush's kitchen floor by spattering neon green vomit across it. "Damn it," Rush sighed deeply, "was that necessary?" Erik wiped his maw and stumbled into the bathroom without assistance or an answer to his elder brother's aggravation. Seth grumbled to himself, disappointed by his superior's lack of tolerance and behavior. "See?" he asked Rush across the apartment, "I told you. Weak." Rush nodded sadly and shrugged, "he has a lot of work to do. We have had our entire lives to learn and adjust. He has had just a few weeks. His rate of tolerance seems appropriate given the short amount of time he has had to adjust." "Short?" "Yes, just a few weeks."

"Weeks?!" Seth yelled with surprise. Rush nodded and counted on his fingers. "About six." "Holy shit," Seth exhaled, "I thought this was a lifelong problem?" Rush shook his head, "no. He grew up aboveground after the Elder of the Brotherhood adopted him from our clan. He did not know of his origins until, well, about six weeks ago. His mental powers and transformations are part of his adjustment."

"Damn, I feel bad for being so hard on him now," Seth admitted, "especially after what father just did to him." "Not to worry," Rush replied with a grin, "Erik is resilient and will learn one way or another. Knowing my little brother, it will be the hardest way possible."

#

Seth and Rush exited his apartment into his office to lessen the stench of alcohol and bile covering his floor. Rush gave his new friend a primer in his clan and their habits, culture, and lifestyles. Seth was surprised to find that they held such tribal beliefs and yet studied such highly scientific subjects as genetic engineering. "How do you explain those two things?" Rush shrugged. "Came naturally. We know we were designed by Grandfather, but he insisted we were

ultimately designed by a higher power. After the first few generations, he left our clan to figure things out for themselves, but provided insight when necessary. We learned to fend for ourselves and design what we couldn't come by in nature."

"At one time," Rush continued sadly, "we had designated clan members to go aboveground and scout. Recover resources. Document changes. Hunt. After our fathers disappeared, we stopped going up. We switched to baiting mole rats underground for meat and relied on hydroponics for everything else." Seth shook his head. "So much technology and knowledge! Your clan *must* be the smartest Splicers I ever met." Rush shrugged, "we were given a chance and forced to survive. We are all built with the capacity and brain power to survive and succeed." "That gives me hope for the others," Seth mumbled.

Rush smiled, "of course! They will have access to knowledge and support with the Brotherhood. They will be protected and learn to protect themselves and their new clan." Seth shook his head, "no, the *others*." Rush furrowed his brows and asked, "there are more beyond those than moved here?" Seth nodded. "Yeah. We're just a detachment that was given to the Mobile base. There's a hundred or two of us. Or was. We're probably down to a hundred through deaths and whatever else the Enclave is doing to us." Rush shuddered. "There are more. That is good news!"

Erik, sopping wet from his bath and disheveled by drugs and alcohol, warily leaned on the doorframe separating Rush's apartment from his office. "We have good news? That's a nice change." "Good to see you are still alive," he replied before answering, "there are more of our clan!" Seth nodded. "At the main Enclave base. The technology park. Enclave's got a giant lab where they grow more. Or, at least they did for a while. I dunno if they have since the one after 92's generation."

"Where are they sourcing the samples," Erik asked cautiously. Seth shrugged. "Dunno. Father probably knows. He used to lead the team that designed all of us. Well, he did most of the designing anyway. The Colonel at the Mobile base got suspicious of him after a while and moved him there with us to keep an eye on him. Part of it was so he could run transformation experiments on his own children..."

Rush shuddered, “who could do that to their own children?” “You’re doing it to your own brother,” Seth responded, “you tell me.” “That is different,” Rush mumbled, “he was born this way.” “It’s no different,” Seth argued. “You’re still makin’ him suffer just to make him *better*, aren’t you?”

“It ain’t just his choice,” Erik replied from his post, “it’s mine too. At least to a point. You got any clue how hard it is bein’ different from your clan *and* your family? I ain’t a regular human *or* a Hawthorne. I’m in the middle and neither at the same time.”

A knock came at the door. Doctor Reed announced himself. “Everyone still alive in there?” “Yes, sir,” Seth replied to the door before leaving the comfortable leather chair to answer it. “Hello son,” the doctor said warmly. “And hello again, Mr. Hawthorne. How is your brother, Erik?” “Better,” Erik answered for himself, “sorry about earlier.” The doctor shook his head. “Your primal side must learn to mind. You just needed to be reminded. In fact, I’m sorry for having to treat you like that, but unfortunately it’s necessary.”

He chuckled sadly, “Seth, you should have seen ‘77 the first time he tried to transform. The poor thing. His tail dropped off, teeth fell out, and he could only drop the fur from his stomach. It was quite a sight to behold.” Rush spoke up, “sir? Would it be possible for...me to do that?” The doctor shrugged, “I’ve got no idea, son. If you an’ Erik are of the same generation, it may be *possible*, but I ain’t sure.”

“Anyway, I came to draw some blood samples, now that you’re done changing and’ve settled down,” Doctor Reed said to Erik. “Standard panels: cholesterol and such.” Erik nodded and sat next to Rush on his couch. “It’s all yours,” he replied calmly. “Good boy,” he said cheerily.

Doctor Reed drew five vials of dark red blood and turned to leave. “Father?” Seth asked. “Hhm?” “How long’s this normally take?” “What the blood panels?” “No, the first set of transformations.” Doctor Reed thought for a second, “well, it’s normally between three and ten times before one of you gets the hang of it and can do it on demand. Why?”

"But, that's for the Splicers that've been...the same their entire lives?" Doctor Reed shook his head, confused. "What are you asking?" "Well," Seth paused, "What if me or Mr. Hawthorne wanted to do it, too?"

"Ah, bad news son, you can't. You're more handsome the way you are, anyway."

"What about Mr. Hawthorne?" "Rush?" the doctor looked to him. He nodded sheepishly. "I dunno. If *he* can, I reckon you probably could learn to as well. I dunno why you'd bother though. Y'all are *much* better in this form anyway."

"*Social* reasons," Rush muttered. Doctor Reed sighed, "yeah, well. That'll get better with time. Don't worry."

"Now, if that's all the questions you've got, I'm gonna go run these." All three men shook their heads in response. "Good. Now, Erik? Stay in that form as long as you can, okay? Last report said you only transformed for about half a day. Try to go for twenty-four hours this time." He nodded slightly, "yes, sir."

Rush patted Erik on the shoulder and nodded back toward his apartment, "you've got some cleaning to do, pup." Erik sighed and nodded, apologizing again under his breath. "Put on a pair of overalls while you're at it," Seth added. "May as well get used to 'em. We don't get to walk 'round naked, y'know." "Not outside anyway," Rush added with a sigh.

Rush and Seth continued their conversation as Erik cleaned his newest mess. "Why do they wear all of that clothing during the warm months anyway," Rush asked. "They can't control themselves," Seth replied, "as far as I can tell. You ever seen how a man ogles a bare-breasted woman? It's embarrassing." He pondered and replied, "yes, well. Don't we do the same? A well-shaped woman is a sight to treasure." Seth chuckled awkwardly, "heh, yeah. I guess, but at least we can keep ourselves from running over and humping them like *dogs*."

"Wait, are you calling humans dogs?" Seth nodded, "we've lived with some despicable folks. Lowest common denominator kind of folks. Can't keep their dick outta their hands, if you know what I mean." Rush scrunched his eyebrows and nodded slowly, "guess so. Not all humans are like that, though." "Yeah, yeah. I figured that out as soon as we moved here. They do a better job at hiding it, but they can't hide their smells. Everyone stinks of their desires and needs."

Rush nodded again, “you get used to it. It is quite helpful when you must talk to them verbally.” Seth nodded, “yeah. No kidding. It’d be too easy if they all could to the mental thing too.”

The two furred men continued their chat about the normal humans for some time until Erik reappeared, now clad in worn blue denim overalls. “All done, sir.” “Thank you, pup.” Erik grumbled at his new title. “Can you just call me Initiate again? Pup is degrading.” Seth spoke up, cutting off Rush’s impending coddling. “No. Among your peers, you will be a *pup*. That is your mental state when transformed. When you earn it, you will know.”

Erik sighed and unintentionally rolled his eyes, “Yes, sir.” “Do that again,” Seth growled, “and I’ll snatch each one out individually. You’ll be blind for two weeks until they heal. You wanna learn to echolocate or just keep those pretty grey orbs?” “I’ll...uh, keep them,” he paused at the thought. “Good. Go and make your elders some tea, then come back here. We need to chat some more.”

Erik did as he was instructed. Seth propped his feet up on Rush’s desk. “I like this. I ain’t had anyone to boss ‘round before.” Rush scowled in response. “Power begets responsibility,” he warned. “I ain’t gonna do nothing bad, just keep him in his lower rank. At least when he’s one of *us*.” “He is *always* one of us,” Rush argued. “His physical appearance has no bearing on that. We are all blood.” Seth slumped in the chair and nodded shallowly. “Yeah. It’s hard to remember sometimes. None of us stayed long after we started transforming. The ones that did, got shipped off for other duties protecting the main base.”

Erik soon returned with three mugs and handed them out to his superiors and resumed his seat by Rush. “Where is the main base?” Erik asked. “That’s ‘where is the main base, sir?’”, Seth corrected him. Erik grumbled and repeated himself including the “sir” at the end of his query. Seth scratched his head, “I don’t really know the name. Atlas or something like that. It’s a two-hour flight northeast from our base at the ship.” “Was your base,” Erik said proudly, “before we blew it up.”

Seth held his tongue while he caught his breath; Erik’s proud statement caught him unguarded and unsure of how to handle the mixed emotions that suddenly sprang forth. The Brotherhood, specifically the ones surrounding him in this

room, blew up the only home he knew. He was certainly happy to see it destroyed, but still sad that it was blown sky high. “Ah, yeah. *Was.*”

Seth’s catch garnered Rush’s attention. “Are you well?” Seth nodded, “uh, yeah. Just...thinking. Sorry. Anyway, it’s two hours northeast. Was a pre-war technology park, housing some of the best stuff from then. Labs, engineering and manufacturing centers, all kinds of cool stuff.” Rush nodded with excitement as his imagination ran wild. “Wonder if we will see it some day?” He asked Erik. His little brother nodded, “probably. I’m sure we’ll want what they’ve got one day. It’s kinda what we do, remember? Hoard technology?”

Rush nodded, “but we use it for good!” “*We* do, but if the big Brotherhood in the West finds out about the Enclave’s base down here, and if we manage to capture it, they’re gonna want it for themselves. That ain’t gonna end well.” It was Seth’s turn to be confused. “What? Are y’all *part* of them?” Erik shook his head, “long story short: no. We’re kinda outcasts. We’re too nice to folks like *us*, and they don’t like that. Told us we could keep our gear and whatever, but don’t bother them or ask ‘em for help.”

“Then why keep the name and ranks and stuff,” Seth asked. Erik shrugged, “stability? We started from there, but strayed a little. We’re still Brotherhood, as far as we’re concerned.”

After a few hours of chatting, dinner time rolled around. Erik’s stomach was the first to complain, quickly followed by Rush’s. “Hopefully they have enough this afternoon,” Seth complained. “That’s my fault, I guess,” Erik replied as they exited Rush’s office and down the hall of the laboratory building. “I kinda brought a bunch of extra folks home. We weren’t ready for the increase in population. We’ll get it sorted though, don’t worry.”

Seth nodded to Willis and Jenkins as they filed out of Ida’s laboratory and followed them down the hall to the exit. “Maybe Mr. Hawthorne can work his magic and help with crops or something?” “For what,” Willis asked. “Food shortage.”

“We could always eat the extra dogs,” the super mutant suggested. Jenkins shrugged, but looked to Rush to gage his response. Rush nodded, “would be acceptable, if the clan would be okay with that.” Seth found the idea abhorrent.

“No way. That’s like eating one of own clansmen!” Willis chuckled at his successful trolling, “you all look tasty. Can we just cook up some of y’all?” Seth shuddered but was quickly comforted by Rush’s own laughter. “No, Willis. We are not appetizing.” “Should be just like humans,” he replied, “tender and just like chicken. Maybe a little gamey? You *are* dogs after all.” Willis paused in his stride and asked, “is that Erik?”

He nodded, “Hey.” “Why ‘th hell’re you gone and fuzzy again?” “Practice,” he lied. Willis playfully growled, “don’t go trying to steal my hubby, you damn dirty dog.” Jenkins’ eyes widened as he blushed, “shut up! That’s not funny.” Willis roared with laughter and clapped his mate on the back. “Once you go green, you never go back,” he kissed Jenkins on the top of his head.

“You two are in a good mood,” Erik mumbled. “Speak up, dog,” Willis said. “I said,” he replied overly-loudly, “you two. Are. In. A good. Mood.” Willis reached up to ruffle his head fur, “yup! We’re done rebuilding the samples from the last breach. No more petri dishes!” Jenkins sighed with relief, “yeah. Now we can get back to *real work*.” The small crew made their way across the road and into the commons building.

“What’s that mean?” Seth asked. Before either Scribe could answer, they were distracted by the fresh scene in the building. They pair of brotherhood members that normally stood watch at the entrance were actively keeping the Hawthornes out of the cafeteria. “The hell’s goin’ on?!” Erik asked. “None of your concern, *dog*,” one replied. Erik growled angrily but quickly realized no one would recognize him.

Willis’s smile faded as he helped break up the impending fray. “What. Is. Going. On?” “Splicers broke in to the pantry after lunch and stole a bunch of food. We’ve been ordered to keep ‘em out while we track down who’s responsible,” the second armored man replied to Willis. “That’s impossible,” Seth argued. “None of my clan are that selfish! We’ve all eaten today: they had no reason to! Even if they *were* hungry, they would rather suffer than steal!”

The growing crowd on either side of the doors to the cafeteria drew the attention of the higher-ranking members, Elder Redding included. He and Major

Artemis stopped their conversation as they descended the stairs and sprinted directly to the middle of the mess.

“What in the *Hell* is going on here?!” Elder Redding yelled at the top of his lungs. His uncharacteristic outburst stopped everyone dead in their tracks. The men and women holding the doors closed from the inside relented and let the doors slowly open. Each of the Hawthornes that were complaining about the indignity and wrongful accusations silenced themselves. Everyone turned to the Elder to await his next words.

“EVERYONE OUT FRONT! RIGHT! NOW!”

He led the hoard of angry men and women into the street. The orange afternoon sun made the sky look like liquid fire. Erik couldn’t remember the last time his father raised his voice, it scared him deeply. The crowd waited patiently in separate groups surrounding Elder Redding: the Hawthornes to the North and West, the Brotherhood to the East, and Erik’s group between the two. Elder Redding cleared his throat to silence the mumbling and chatter in the crowd.

Elder Redding took a steeling breath before shouting: “Everyone down! Pushups! Now!” Erik and the other Brotherhood members immediately collapsed to the ground and assumed the ready position. “You too, Hawthornes. You’re in just as much trouble for this.” They looked around in confusion and one by one, imitated their metal-clad counterparts. “Major, count the off for me.”

“Aye, sir,” Major Artemis yelled. “One! Two! Three!” As he counted their pushups, the Elder continued talking. “You will all push until *I* am tired.” A younger member made the mistake of groaning. Elder Redding turned with laser-focus accuracy and pointed him out: “Initiate! Get up and come here.” The young man did as he was told. The scribe shivered as he waded through the throng of people doing coordinated pushups. “Tell me,” Elder Redding yelled, “why you think we are all here. Right now.”

The young man, no older than seventeen, stuttered his response, further aggravating the Elder. “Spit it out, boy!” “It’s because of the dogs, sir!” Elder Redding’s face flushed with anger. “What did you say?” The man stuttered again in fear, “it’s...th...th...the dogs’ fault, sir. If the Paladins didn’t drag them up here, we’d have no more problems!” “Get back on the ground, boy!”

The scribe did as he was told and continued his pushups. "Let me tell you all why he was wrong and why he's lucky I'm letting him stay in the brig tonight and the rest of the week, rather than kicking him into the Wastes." He paused to take a breath. "*None* of you are any better than another. Hawthorne or human, we are *all* Brothers. I'll be damned before I let my children fight over such petty accusations and act in a manner befitting common vandals."

"Platoon leaders," he called out, "Stand up! Now!" Captains from the various sections stood up: four in total. "All of you will be joining the Initiate in the brig this week for allowing your subordinates to act in such an *undignified* manner! Get back down!" Each saluted and resumed pushing the ground.

"Fifty! Fifty one! Fifty two!"

Elder Redding continued his interrogation. "Franklin! Up front!" Franklin stood up and wiped the gravel from his hands, "aye, sir." He waded his way through and stood near the Elder, "Sir?" The Elder leaned close and asked, "what the *fuck* is going on here?" "A few greenhorns rumored that the walking wolves broke in and stole a bunch of food 'cause of lunch today—we ran short again." "Is that all?" Franklin nodded and continued, "mostly. They're riled up, but I can't figure out why. Maybe '92 knows."

Elder Redding and asked him to resume his place. "Aye, sir." "92! Up here!" Number 92 and Franklin exchanged places. The young man whimpered and clenched his apron as he approached the Elder. "Did you see anyone steal food today?" Number 92 stuttered on the verge of tears, "No! N..no, sir! We would...starve before stealing if we could help it!" Elder Redding continued questioning the simple man, "Not just your clan. Did you see *anyone* taking food? Anyone that shouldn't be in the kitchen?" 92 shook his head again, "no, sir."

"Ninety seven! Ninety eight!" "Thank you son, please stay here with me for a moment." 92 nodded and stood awkwardly to his left. "Everyone up!" An exhale of relief crossed the crowd. "Rank and file! Immediately!" Each member of the Brotherhood scrambled into a long line, sorted by rank, leaving the Hawthornes in a loose clump. "Captains, forward." The same four stepped forward. "You will be responsible for sorting out which of the greenhorns decided it would be *funny* to accuse their family of theft. Send them directly to me after they serve

whatever punishment you deem appropriate for causing distrust within their own ranks. Extra laps during PT tomorrow as well.”

“Aye, sir!” they saluted. “Knights, forward!” a dozen more members stepped forward. “Aye, sir?!” “Extra laps tomorrow morning during PT for letting this get out of hand.” “Aye, sir!” “Scribes, forward!” The civilian section of the group stepped forward as the last stepped back into line. Another ten men and women, clad in their typical red robes stood sock still, awaiting their punishment. “Double PT for you as well. Second: you will pause the research on our latest acquisitions and return to research and improve crop yields and animal husbandry. I don’t care if you have to make a Brahmin fuck a mole rat, figure out our food problem!” More than one had to stifle a chuckle at the mental image.

“Hawthornes, listen up!” Each one continued to stare at him, dreading what was coming. “From here out, all of you will now be partnered with a human in the field you have volunteered for. You will leave the tower and be relocated to live with them. This will begin bright tomorrow morning, starting with PT. It your responsibility, as much as theirs, to improve relations with your new brothers. Having you segregated is clearly not working. Understood?!” Each of the fifteen Hawthornes nodded. “I can’t hear you!”

“Yes, sir!” They replied in unison. “Very good.” He turned back to the Captains and Knights. “It is *your* duty to see that your underlings behave and don’t *ever* pull a stunt like this again. So help me, I’ll hang each and every one of you by your toes until I’m satisfied that the rank and file is in order again.” Every member shuddered.

“Additionally,” Elder Redding continued, “Our scouting parties will resume rotations. Expect your new objectives day-after-tomorrow.” Elder Redding repeated himself to make sure his commandments were concrete. “Are there any questions, Brothers?” No one spoke up. “Very well. Everyone follow Franklin and ’92 into the cafeteria to eat except the Initiates. You stay out here with me.”

Most of the crowd, Hawthornes included, filtered into the common building and cafeteria therein. Erik, Seth, and a handful of other humans awaited their verbal beat down. Elder Redding scowled at his son and Seth, “I said *Initiates*,

Paladin. You and your partner go get some dinner. Save me a plate as well.” A twinkle shimmered in his eyes as he instantly reappointed his son to his hard-earned position.

“Aye...aye sir,” Erik saluted. The verbal abuse he heard echo through the doors of the common building was full of four-letter words and slurs he didn’t know his father knew, let alone used. Erik waited in the hall to listen. “...and if I ever hear of such stupidity from any of you again, your ass will be out in the Wastes faster than your mother can turn a trick! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, CHILDREN?!”

“Aye, sir,” they mumbled. Elder Redding sighed and looked to Major Artemis who was busy struggling to hold his laughter. “Start over, Major. The children haven’t had enough. Two hundred, minimum. I’ll save you a bite.” “Aye, sir,” the Major replied.

“On the ground, maggots! One! Two! Better touch the ground with your nose, or we’re starting over until I’m satisfied!”

“Ah, no dinner tonight either,” he added insult to their injury before walking back into the commons building. The guards saluted the Elder as he entered. He refused to salute them back. “Let’s get a bite, Paladin,” Elder Redding said with a sigh and slight smile. “Aye, sir,” Erik replied happily to his father. “Why’re you sportin’ your fur coat,” the Elder asked as they filed in the long line. “Practice,” he said, “how’d you know it was me?” “I can tell the Hawthornes apart from each other. Your damn cowlick helps too, son.”

“You look much better than you did last time I saw you like this,” the Elder continued. Erik nodded his thanks. “Doctor Reed, Seth, and Rush helped. You think anyone noticed I’m me?” Redding shook his head, “dunno. Don’t care right now. We’ll deal with the fallout later.” They remained silent until receiving their servings of meatloaf and mashed potatoes with peas. “I...hope you like it, sir,” Number 92 said to Elder Redding, “We worked really hard on it! I got to help Mr. Franklin hunt this morning to get enough meat.”

Elder Redding smiled proudly and thanked the young man warmly, “You have made Franklin and the rest of us very proud with your handiwork, 92. Please keep it up.” 92 beamed with pride, “yes, sir!” His happiness was instantly infectious. “What a good kid,” he thought aloud to himself.

The cafeteria was filled with awkward silence and the thick smells of meat for dinner. Erik, Jenkins, Willis, and their Elder, ate at their regular table in the corner. Seth was thrilled to join them. "So, Number 68, tell me about yourself," the Elder said. "I prefer 'Seth' now, sir." "Wise choice, son. That name fits you well." "Thank you, sir" he replied with embarrassment, "Uh, I don't have much to say, I guess. We grew up under the heel of the Enclave. Now we're here. New futures and opportunities." "Does the rest of your clan hold such high hopes?" Willis asked. Seth nodded, "I think so. Most of 'em are just scared. Today didn't help, but we'll make it. We always do."

"Succinct and well-said. You're very bright for your young age. Only 22, right?" Seth nodded sheepishly. "Yes, sir." "Well, don't worry," the Elder said cheerily, "stay level-headed and you'll be old like me an' th' Major here, one day." Their conversation faded as their hunger got the better of their attention.

Elder Redding took a bite of the thick meatloaf and sighed. "This is the best I've had since I was a kid." Everyone nodded in agreement. "Try with ketchup," Willis recommended, "that's how we used to do it." The suggestion went over well.

After finishing his plate and waving down Major Artemis to join them, he asked, "well, my children? Are you ready to get back in the field?" Erik nodded happily. "Yes, sir. Can't stand being cooped up." Seth agreed, "Sleeping outdoors would be nice." Jenkins asked carefully and gestured to Rush and himself, "what about *us*, sir?" "Ah, yes. Erik? Your brother has made his decision for his Knighthood. He'll stay here as a Knight Scribe. Unless circumstances dictate, he will not be joining you on your scouting missions. He'll be directly under Jenkins, here."

Erik nearly choked on his meatloaf. "Sir? What? You're splitting us up? He belongs in the field with me!" Elder Redding narrowed his gaze slightly and replied, "wasn't my choice. Rush – a Journeyman Knight – made the choice for himself. In his own words, it was more beneficial for the clan for him to stay in-house to continue his research with Jenkins and the others." The young man slumped in his chair.

“Not to worry,” Elder Redding added, “you’ll be working with two of our finest recruits from now on: Seth and Ada.” Seth half-smiled at Erik, hoping to cheer him up. “Also, you’re not the only active scouting crew. I’ve hand-picked two more groups of three to reduce the area each has to cover. We’re still missing two of our long-range scouting crews, but we’ll scrape by until we figure out what their status is.”

“So, you get to work with your new friends *and* spend more time in-house with your old ones,” he concluded happily. Rush reached out to placate his brother mentally, “it is because we want to keep you safe. Because we love you, brother. Apologies.” Erik nodded with disappointment to his mashed potatoes and mumbled, “yeah, yeah. I know. You too.” He added mentally, “I just wanted to spend more time with you and our old clan. Learn more, y’know?”

“One last thing,” Elder Redding said, “that thing you’re doing right now? I’d rather you didn’t do that around others that can’t. It’s rude and makes you look like you’re talking to yourself.” Erik gulped, as did Rush. “Emily has been teaching me,” he said with his well-worn smile.

“Where is she, by the way,” Seth asked. “She’s been working as my aide. I couldn’t’ve asked for a better one. She puts her brother to shame, honestly,” Elder Redding replied. “So...you know what...happened?” Seth asked. Elder Redding nodded, “another atrocity orchestrated by the Enclave, son. Nothing more or less. Damn shame, bless her heart.”

“What about Olivia,” Erik asked Rush. “Same as me. We are becoming Knight Scribes. You will be very impressed with her latest changes to your plasma rifle.” “Ah, okay,” Erik sighed again.

After the rest finished their dinner, Rush volunteered to pick up their plates and return to the kitchen. Elder Redding stood up with a smile and said, “Thank you, Knight. I’m off to finish the plans for rearranging everyone. G’night.” “Goodnight, Elder,” they replied disjointedly. Erik sighed again and asked Seth, “So? What’ve you got planned for tonight?” Seth shook his head, “nothing. Counseling my clan, if anyone wants. I’m sure a lot of them will be even more nervous after that stunt earlier.”

Erik nodded, “probably. It’ll be good in the end, though.” “What about you,” Seth asked in turn. “Ah, I dunno. I wasn’t expecting to get my rank back so soon, honestly. I can do just about anything I want. Probably sleep in my own bed tonight...” he trailed off, suddenly remembering he could pull rank and *reassign* Olivia to be elsewhere tonight. Seth chuckled lewdly, “so you *do* have plans? Will I see you in the morning?”

Erik nodded and grumbled something derogatory to his new partner and saw himself out. Seth shook his head and reclined in the chair, running the busy day’s events through his mind. “At least it’s never dull ‘round here.” Willis and Jenkins took their leave as well. “Just wait for Christmas,” Willis said grumbly. Jenkins shot him a look and added, “it’s the *best* time of the year. Stop bein’ a grumpy old man.” “That’s what I *am*,” Willis argued, “I’m nearly ten times your age!” Jenkins elbowed him in jest and called him a cradle robber as they left Seth alone at the table.

He shook his head in disbelief. “I’ve never met anyone as nice and weird as them.” Rush exited the kitchen, his forearms still damp with dishwater. “Seth? Why are you still here?” The younger man shook his head, “no reason. Digesting?” Rush nodded, “wise. It was a very heavy dinner. It was to be a celebration of your clan’s arrival. Your brother has been slaving all week to make it happen. It is sad that your elder brother died this morning.”

Seth cleared his throat, trying to change the subject. “Yeah, well they did a good job.” “He would be happy to hear that himself,” Rush replied. “Who? 92?” Rush nodded, “Every time he speaks with me, the conversation ultimately turns to his fear of disappointing you.” Seth sighed and slumped further into his chair. “Yeah, that’s another thing I don’t really wanna talk about.” Rush nodded again, “understood. You know here my home is, if you would like to stop by.”

“In fact, we are going there now.” “We who?” “Me.” Seth squinted, “what?” Rush shook his head, “was taught as a pup it is rude to think or refer to yourself in the first person. Never *I*, always *we*. Clan before yourself.” “That’s fine, but it makes you sound weird.” Rush shrugged and left with a quick wave. “My god, they’re all weird here. Still, beats getting beaten all the time,” Seth mumbled to himself with a smirk.

He stood up and peeked into the kitchen to track down 92. "Oh, hello Mr. Franklin," he said. The Ex-Paladin nodded in his direction and asked, "you like dinner?" Seth nodded, "yeah. It was great. Thanks." "Thank your brother," Franklin replied roughly. "You don' know what you got 'til it's gone, know what I mean?" Seth nodded again, quickly getting tired of everyone's free advice. "Is he still here, by the way?"

Franklin nodded back toward the freezer. "He's preppin' in th' back. In fact, tell 'em I said 'go home.' The damn kid's been workin' his ass off all day since we went huntin' this mornin'. Needs a bath an' rest. Got it?" Seth nodded again and asked cautiously, "is he...doing okay? Here? With you?" Franklin nodded and grinned – something he rarely did. Seth thought it was scary. "He's th' best sous-chef I ever had. Kid knows 'is stuff."

"No anger issues? No...accidents?" Franklin shook his head, making his copious scars glint in the fluorescent light. "Nope. Not a one. He needs a lady, though." Seth gulped. "What?" "Th' boy needs a damn woman. Ain't never seen no one so pent up. You ought t' see 'em go after them potatoes today!" Seth blinked, unsure of how to proceed. "Uh, yeah. Okay. Thanks? I'll just...go get him."

Franklin nodded and resumed cleaning for the night. "92?" Seth called out, pushing the cold metal door into the walk-in freezer. "Hello, brother!" 92 replied cheerily. He blinked twice then panicked as he hid his large chef's knife in a nearby box of carrots. "I'm...I'm..." Seth sighed, "it's okay 92. I know you've been helping Mr. Franklin. You've been doing a very good job. Your dinner was great." "You're not mad?" Seth was taken aback, "about what? The knife?" 92 nodded sheepishly. "Well, you need it to do your job, right?" 92 nodded again. "Then, no. I just want you to be safe, little brother. That's all. As long as you don't have any 'accidents,' then it's okay."

"If you keep doing such a good job, you'll probably have Mr. Franklin's job one day." 92 panicked again, "what? I don't wanna do that! Where's he gonna work?" Seth shook his head, "Never mind, 92. I'm sure he'll be doing it for a long, long time." 92 sighed with relief. "Why're you back in the freezer, anyway?" "It is cool." Seth nodded, "hm. Makes sense." "Mr. Franklin said it was too hot since the air freezer was broken." "Air conditioner?" Seth asked.

92 nodded again, “that thing. He said ‘cause I got fur, it’d be worse for me. He was right.” “That was nice of him,” Seth thought aloud. “Oh, he sent me in here to bring you back home. You’re off for the night.” “No! No, no, no. I can’t, brother! I’ve got potatoes and carrots and corn to get ready.” Seth nodded, “it’s because you did a good job that you get to go home early.” “I...what?”

Seth sighed and leaned through the door, “Mr. Franklin? Can you ‘officially’ send him home?” Franklin grimaced and slung the soapy water from his hairy arms. “Yeah, yeah. 92? Why’re you still here? Your brother told you to go home. Take the night off.” 92 shook his head and yelled, “I can’t leave you alone, Mr. Franklin! It’s not fair!”

Franklin chuckled to himself and shook his head, “well, you’re a grown man. It’s your choice.” He finished that sentence starting directly at Seth. “Ah, well. Okay then. Try to be home before midnight?” Seth said to 92. “’Night, boy” Franklin replied, pushing Seth out of the kitchen into the cafeteria. Franklin whispered to him before the door closed, “You keep coddlin’ th’ boy an’ he ain’t never gonna learn. You two’re just like Erik and that damn Rush. If y’ weren’t kin, I’d swear you’d suck each other off, y’ coddle each other so goddamn much. Now, go!” Seth found himself again lacking words for a response.

“Now, what’d I tell ya ‘bout cuttin’ th’ carrots?” “Die...diagonally,” 92 replied. “’s right. Remember why?” Seth couldn’t hear the rest of their conversation as the door swung closed, muffling the occupants. He stood alone in the cafeteria for a few moments: he wasn’t sure what to do with the copious amount of free time he had since moving to The Burg. Before he and his family became free wolves, Seth distanced himself emotionally from his captors and relied on the limited interactions with his clan to get by. Now that he was literally alone most of the time, he was beginning to develop issues with his newfound solitude.

He glanced at the cracked clock on the wall: fifteen past eight. “Maybe I’ll take Mr. Rush up on his offer,” Seth mumbled to the doors as he pushed through them into the hall. He caught a nearby guard’s attention, “furball!” “Huh?” Seth asked and pointed to himself, “Who, me?” The armored man nodded. “The hell you still doin’ here? Get out!” “I’m going home, why do you care?” “Ain’t none o’ y’all supposed to be in here. Get out, mutt!” Seth growled under his breath, but held his tongue as the man fingered his rifle.

“Uh, yeah. I’m leavin’. I’m leavin’,” he muttered and continued striding through the main doors. “Mutt!” Seth stooped mid-stride, stood still and asked “What?” with thick aggravation. “Your kind ain’t supposed to be usin’ the front doors. Go out the back.” Seth spun around and glared at him. “No. Why? That’s stupid. I live right *over there*.” He gestured down the street. “You getting’ smart, mutt? Do I need t’ remind you ‘o who you belong to?!”

That was enough to break his calm demeanor. Seth bowed up, took the gun pointed at him and dug it into his chest. “Do it. Right now, pussy. I promise you’ll have a full-blown riot on your hands. Both sides’ll be bloody and it’ll be your fault. You want that? Do you?!” The man tried to rip the gun free from Seth’s grip, but was unable to.

Before things could escalate into a bloodbath, Elder Redding was heading down to run 92 and Franklin out of the kitchen. “Knight!” he yelled from the top landing of the stairs. “The hell do you think you’re doing?! Put that gun down!” The younger knight stammered and began making excuses. “Sir! This mutt was threatening us! He said he’d kill us!” Elder Redding concentrated long enough to make a connection with Seth mentally to get a real explanation. Ten seconds later, Elder Redding started yelling orders again. “Knight! Your obscene behavior and gross negligence of your post leaves me no choice but to remove you from our detachment.”

The knight trembled in his armor. “Si..sir. Sir? What?” “Strip down. Right now. Give me your gun, too.” The man continued to stammer. “Are you deaf, son?! Armor. Off. Now. If you’re not in your birthday suit in the next two minutes, I’ll shoot you myself. Understand?” The man nodded sadly and began disassembling his metal armor. As he did, the Elder continued, “y’know. It’s because people like you that we started this branch of the Brotherhood. It’s a damn shame you’ve strayed from the path. What happened to decency?”

The man shook his floppy black hair and mumbled, “it ain’t nothin’ like that, sir.” “Please, tell me, young man, what you seem to think it *is* like.” The man stopped after wriggling out of his chest armor to reply. “They ain’t people like *us*. They’s made by us. Ain’t got no soul. Ain’t worth feedin’ and trainin’ an’ keepin’ ‘round.” Elder Redding scoffed, “this young man, *grunt*, has done more for our chapter in the short weeks following his arrival than in the twelve

years I have *personally* attempted to train and turn you into something half useful. You spend most of your day drunk and the rest at the baths. Don't think your substance abuse and smoking has gone unnoticed, either. I have never approved of any of you smoking cigarettes, let alone what *you* smoke."

Elder Redding turned shades paler as his voice rose. "So, please tell me how that helps us at all?! These kind people that joined our cause do nothing but try their hardest *their every waking moment*. How would you like to compare that to the *six* reports I got on your unbecoming behavior over the last two days?!" The infantryman gulped then continued to disrobe without another word. Once he finished, he handed his previous boss his gun and neatly collected his filthy armor to set it at the Elder's feet.

The man stood awkwardly in his stained underpants and tattered wife-beater, awaiting further instruction. "Go directly to the armory, tell them you are being dishonorably discharged. Your tales, *if any*, will be stricken from the Brotherhood's records. You will receive what remains of your squandered stipend for the month and a set of basic leather garments, then I never want to see your face around here again. Understood?!" The man nodded sullenly and opened his mouth to beg forgiveness. "No," Elder Redding cut him off sternly. "You have been given chance after chance. This is the final straw. Seth did nothing to deserve your abuse or racism and our Brotherhood abhors it. Perhaps you would be happier in the Enclave? Or maybe as a Raider, raping and pillaging?"

The moment Elder Redding's voice began to rise, Seth's consciousness slipped from his body. He felt like he was floating on the ceiling as his new Elder beautifully deconstructed the worthless man in front of them. His psychological defenses muffled their voices: he couldn't hear the Elder yelling his orders to the man. A man, no older than twenty five, just had his entire life destroyed and was probably sentenced to death in the unforgiving Wastes by one of the nicest people he knew.

"Seth?" Elder Redding asked after he watched the man skulk to the far end of the hall and through the doors to the armory. "Seth, son? Are you with me?" The young man shook his head to clear the cobwebs. "I, uh. Sorry, sir. What?" "Are you okay? I'm sorry you had to watch that, but it was a long time coming." Seth furrowed his brow, "Okay, sir. That's okay. You did what you had to, right?"

Elder Redding gently patted Seth on the back and said, “why don’t you come up and have a mug of tea with me? I’d like to get to know you better, son.”

Seth was still cemented to the ground. “Well?” Elder Redding asked with concern. “That sounds...nice,” Seth said, confused and now feeling at least partially responsible for the other man’s assured death. “Very good. Let’s go get those two hard-working folks out of the kitchen first.” Seth nodded dutifully and followed him back into the cafeteria.

“Franklin’ll work his fingers to the bone if I’d let him,” Elder Redding said over his shoulder with a warm smile and a chuckle. “I feel your younger brother is the same.” Seth nodded again, “yeah. I...he’s been known to do that. Literally,” Seth mumbled the last part. “Boys,” Elder Redding called through the swinging doors, “time to pack it in.”

The kitchen was oddly quiet. The dishes were done and racked. The large containers of chopped ingredients were in the refrigerators. “Where are they?” The Elder peeked into the walk-in freezer. “What’re you two doing in here?” “Havin’ a chat, sir” Franklin said roughly. Seth felt dread growing in his core. “What about?”

“Jus’ th’ normal stuff. Ladies an’ th’ like,” Franklin winked to 92. He chuckled in response. The Elder smiled and shook his head, “well, y’all head on home soon. I want the lights out in twenty. Oh! I haven’t forgotten about the air conditioner, either. I think the Scribes are sending Rush in to fix it in the morning. He’d mentioned something about wanting to learn. At this rate, he’ll be a one-man repair squad!”

Seth snorted and shook his head, “predictable,” he thought to himself. Elder Redding smiled again and left them in the walk-in to continue bonding. “About tea time, Seth.” He said, leading them out of the cafeteria and up the flights of stairs. The younger man was constantly amazed at how well the Elder moved and how young he looked for his age. The only real indicators of his age were the slight pauses when he was sitting or standing. The stairs seemed to be little trouble for him as well.

At long last, they’d made it to the third deck. “Home, sweet home,” Elder Redding mumbled to himself. “Have you been up here, son?” Seth shook his head,

“no, sir. Never had a need.” “Ah, well. This is where most of high-ranking Paladins and staff live. In fact, the first apartment on the left is Erik’s. Major Artemis – have you met him yet? – lives across the hall. Jenkins is next. Further down Knight Penn has a suite. A couple of vacant suites, then we have your sister Emily’s room, then mine.”

“Is she the only one of us up here?” Seth asked. “Ah, well? Unfortunately, yes. She’s the only Hawthorne aside from Rush that holds a rank right now. Until you all learn and advance in your chosen roles, it wouldn’t be fair for me to give up these rooms.” Seth nodded, “that’s fair. Do you think I could live up here one day?”

Elder Redding unlocked his door and opened it for Seth before replying, “son? If your family is any indication, you’ll be destined for great things. Probably better than just becoming some Knight in an unofficial detachment of a paramilitary organization.” Seth stammered, “I. Uh...uh...um.” The Elder shook his head, “I only speak the truth son. Learn everything you can from Erik and you’ll be fine. Just don’t pick up his latest attitude.”

Seth paled slightly. “It’s okay, son. I know just about everything that happens around here,” Elder Redding said reassuringly. “Well, most things.”

The elder man pulled down a fresh pair of mugs and set his kettle of fresh water to warm on the hotplate. “Have a seat, son,” he gestured to the comfortable couch. “It’s been a long, tough day, hasn’t it? For all of us?” Seth nodded without a word. “One of your brethren commits suicide, we nearly have a brawl,” Redding counted off on his fingers, “then I had to commit a delayed murder. I highly doubt that young man has learned anything from us. It wouldn’t surprise me to hear of his death in the coming days or weeks.”

“How...do you do it?” Seth asked cautiously. “What’s that? Order folks around?” Seth shook his head, “you just sent a man to die in the wastes, and now ten minutes later, we’re having a nice conversation. With *tea*. How do you do it?” Elder Redding sighed and sat down on the couch adjacent to Seth’s. “Well, son, because I *have* to. If I don’t, the whole thing comes crashing down and I can’t *stand* to see good folks suffering.”

Seth leaned back into the couch. "I don't think I can do it. I'm not strong enough to lead a pack. I can hardly keep myself together most days." Elder Redding leaned forward, "Says you! Emily told me half of what y'all had to put up with. In her own words, 'if you weren't there to keep your folks together, *none* of y'all would've made it.'" "She said that?" Elder Redding nodded. "She sure did." "You're just goin' through a tough scrape right now. Trust me, I know one when I see it; I've had enough of them myself over the years."

Seth sighed. "I think 77 has it easy, now. Lucky bastard." Redding nodded, "of course. It's easy to give up. I'm sorry that he didn't seek you out." Seth sighed deeper. "He did. A few times. I couldn't handle it. We had a big fight a couple of nights ago. I said...some things that I'll never get to apologize for." Elder Redding stood up to fetch the whistling kettle and poured their mugs to steep.

He handed one to Seth and asked, "So what was it about? The fight?" Seth blew across the mug. "He, uh, wanted to turn us in and run tuck-tail back to the Enclave. I said he was stupid and weak for even thinking that." Elder Redding nodded and listened silently. "He said he was lost and scared. I argued that we're better off than we've *ever* been, even ignoring the...social issues. I wasn't there when he needed me. I kept blowing him off. Then..." Elder Redding sipped his tea and said gently, "he gave up." Seth nodded slowly, trying to keep his emotions bottled up. "Did you tell him to do it?" Seth looked up with surprise. "Did I what? Tell him to *kill* himself? No! Never! He was weak, but that's just...cruel. I loved my big brother."

Elder Redding nodded again, "It was something I was curious about. Mrs. Elena seems to have a different stance than you and Rush hold. She seems very harsh." Seth nodded in agreement, "I think she's had a hard life like all of us. I don't know why, but she seems to harbor some hatred toward us. It's hard to pin down. Like a misguided sort of hate."

Seth continued, "I tried to ask Mr. Rush about it before, but whatever happened, I don't think he's ready to talk about it either. Do you know what happened to them?" Elder Redding shook his head, "not my place to say, really. When they're ready, they'll open up. Just like you an' yours. We've all got baggage." "I guess, so," Seth conceded.

They sat in each other's silent company for a while. After finishing his mug of tea, Seth washed his mug and thanked the Elder. "Thanks, sir. I appreciate you takin' time out just for me." "I do it for all of my children, furred or not. I'm glad you decided to come up and chat." Seth nodded with a small grin and saw himself out down the long hallway and down the stairs. He tried his best to ignore the litany of scents and sounds as he passed his superiors' apartments.

Back at the first deck, he found himself alone again. This time, shrouded in darkness: Franklin and 92 turned off the lights on their way out from the cafeteria, leaving the main floor pitch black with the exception of ancient exit lights at the far ends of the hall. Seth held his composure until he walked up three more flights of stairs of the sniper tower and down the hall to his own apartment.

He sniffled quietly and unlocked his door, thinking sourly, "92 must be out with Mr. Franklin." Seth walked through the bedroom and sat at the two-person table against the window of their small kitchenette and wept openly. "God damnit, 77," he mumbled. Each tear that detached from the short fur on his muzzle made a tiny dark drop on the dry wooden table. He stared at each one that escaped and plinked into the table. "You fuckin' idiot," he cried, "why'd you go and do something so stupid and selfish?!"

Before he could bask in more of his loneliness, he recognized a pair of footsteps ambling his way. "Damnit," Seth cursed to himself, "why've you gotta bring him here *now*?" quickly standing up to wash his face before anyone could catch him displaying emotion. 92 quietly opened the door to their apartment and called out, "brother? You here?"

"Y...yeah," Seth choked out from the kitchen. "Just straightenin' up." "I brought Mr. Franklin!" "I heard," Seth replied with his back firmly to them. "Hey, what kinda way's that t' greet someone? You raised in a barn?" Franklin asked gruffly. "S...sorry," Seth stammered as he spun around. "Was choking a bit. Water down the...wrong pipe." Seth coughed roughly a few times to complete the lie. Franklin nodded, accepting it without care or question.

"So, what'd you wanna show me?" the elder man asked 92. "This," 92 gestured to their small apartment. "Uh, yup. It's y' quarters." 92 smiled gleefully, "it's

ours! *Ours!*” Franklin nodded slowly, “ah, yep.” “Yup,” 92 concluded. “Alright then,” Franklin said, slightly confused, “I’m a head home, ‘less you wanted t’ chat or somethin’.” 92 and Seth both shook their heads. Franklin scratched his head and said, “well, it’s nice digs, boys. Keep ‘em that way,” as he let himself out.

92 took a chair next to Seth in the kitchen as said with pride, “this is *ours*. All ours, brother.” Seth nodded, unsure what he was going on about. “Why’d you drag him all the way up here just to show him our meager quarters?” “Because, brother, it is ours! We’ve never had a place of our own, before.” Seth nodded, “you’re right. Why’re you so proud about it now? We’ve been moved in for nearly two weeks.” 92 shrugged, “felt...proud. Wanted to share it with Mr. Franklin. I like him.”

“Is he nice to you all the time,” Seth queried. “Yeah! Well, most of the time. He never hits me or anything like *they* used to. He only yells sometimes, but never at me. Almost never.” “So he *is* nice, then? What’d y’all talk about earlier?” 92 clammed up, embarrassed. “C’mon, you can tell me, 92. We talk about everything.” “No we don’t. Not the stuff you don’t wanna talk ‘bout.”

“Well, tell me now. I’m listenin’.” “We were...talking about girls.” “Yeah,” Seth asked, “like what?” “How’re they’re pretty and stuff,” he replied with embarrassment. Seth smiled and continued digging: “do you think there’s a pretty girl in town you wanna talk to?” 92 nodded. “That’s great! Who is she?”

“I don’t wanna tell.” “Why not?” “‘cause you won’t be happy.” Seth furrowed his brow and asked again, “Who, 92? Why wouldn’t I be happy? I’ll be really happy, I promise.” 92 shook his head, “no. You won’t.” Seth sighed, “Why not?” 92 squirmed in the seat for some moments, “because...it’s not a girl.”

“That’s...that’s okay, 92. I’m not stupid, you know. I know you’ve had your fair share of flings with both kinds back at the old place...whether you had a choice or not.” 92 nodded and plowed through to make the awkwardness worse, “it’s...Mr. Rush.” “Oh,” Seth sighed, “I don’t think that’s gonna work, 92.”

“What?!” the younger man cried, “Why not? Doesn’t he like me?” “I’m sure he does 92, but not like *that*.” “But I like *him* like that.” Seth sighed deeply and patted his brother between his shoulder blades, “Well, I’m sorry. He’s not

attracted to males. Can't you tell? You can smell that sort of thing." 92 scratched his muzzle and thought deeply about that question.

"I guess I didn't think of that. The funny way that Mr. Jenkins smells?" Seth nodded, "yup. It's not on purpose, it's just how he's born. Mr. Willis too, but it's harder to tell. Super mutants kinda smell weird all together. Never figured out why. Maybe Mr. Rush knows." Seth decided to derail this conversation with another question. "Have you put any more thought into a real name?"

"I have a real name!" 92 argued. "No, 92, a *real* name, not a number we were given as slaves." "I forgot to think about that," 92 admitted. "Well, have you been reading, like I asked you to," Seth questioned. "Yes. Some." "Anything stick out that you like?" 92 switched from scratching his muzzle to his scalp. "Uh...yes. A book Mr. Franklin gave me." "He can read?" Seth asked, genuinely surprised.

"Okay? What about something from in there?" 92 shrugged, "The book was about an officer that had to kill a bunch of robot people that were killing the nice people. He was strong and smart. Then he meets a lady that turns out to be a robot person! I think they run away together, I haven't finished it yet. I hope they do."

"So, what's his name?" "Deckard," 92 replied. "That's a bit odd. Is that his pack name?" 92 nodded. "Well, what about his first name?" "Rick. Rick Deckard." "That's a nice name, 92, what do you think about that. Rick?" The young man shrugged. "I think I like it. It is easy to spell and remember."

Seth smiled and tossed an arm around his younger brother's shoulders, pulling him in to a half-hug. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Rick." The gray-furred man smiled widely and giggled, sending his tail into a frenzy. "I'm Rick! No more numbers. I have a name! Rick! Rick, Rick, Rick!" Seth joined him in laughter and after a few moments of enjoyment asked, "what d'you say to a drink, little brother Rick?" "A drink of what?" Rick asked.

"Let's see what's kicking around in the fridge," Seth mumbled. Rick recited the contents from memory: "three Nuka-Colas, half of a mole rat sandwich, five carrots and a book." Seth nodded and confirmed each, questioning the last. "Why's there a book in there?" "I didn't want to lose it." Seth picked up the

well-worn copy of “*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*” He thumbed it open to the first page. There were twenty or so signatures on it, ending with “Chase and John Franklin.”

“It must’ve been in his family for a *long* time. Did he give this to you to keep?” Rick nodded, “he did! Mr. Franklin said it was important to keep it safe and that if I have pups one day, they should get it. It should be safe in the refrigerator, right?” Seth felt the cool paper and nodded, surprised by the strength of such an inane object. He held the book to his nose and inhaled deeply, appreciating the decades of scents adorning its stained and creased pages.

“Is this is the book you were talkin’ about earlier?” Rick nodded again, slowly growing impatient. “Put it back. You said we were gonna drink something?” Seth did as he requested with a chuckle, “Well, I don’t see the kind of drink I’m looking for in here. Let’s go see if Mr. Rush has anything.” Seth thought to himself, “he *did* invite me over. I guess he won’t mind if I drag...Rick...along. The added company would be nice, too.”

The two men quickly made their way down the familiar hall and stairs to the street. “Mr. Rush won’t mind us coming over so late?” Rick asked. “Nah, I don’t think so,” Seth replied, “he did invite me over earlier. I didn’t make it, I had to meet with the Elder.” “Oh, wow,” Rick gasped, “I never see him except for meals. He *is* nice, right?” Seth nodded, “yes. He is very kind, but strong. You know, he was crying at 77’s funeral this morning?”

“Why?” “Because he cares. For all of us, Rick. Don’t ever forget that, okay? He barely knows us and was *crushed* when 77 died. He is a *very* kind man. That makes him weak, but it makes him strong too.”

Rick shook his head, confused. “How...can he be both?” “It’s hard to explain, but one makes him the other. Don’t worry about it, just remember that if anything bad ever happens, he’ll help, okay?” Rick nodded and added, “He likes his eggs over-easy with toast and butter.” “I’ll, uh, remember that,” Seth mumbled. Their short conversation got them up the street and into the first set of doors.

Seth shivered: the laboratory building’s scents always reminded him of the experiment chambers from their past lives. “Cold, big brother?” Seth nodded his

lie and continued leading them down the dimly-lit hallway. “Why’s is so dark in here?” Rick asked. Seth shrugged, “to cut back on power? Y’all turned off the cafeteria lights, right?” Rick nodded, “that’s smart!” Seth nodded again, stopping at the oddly-colored door to Rush’s office. The recently-replaced door didn’t match any other door in the building and was barely big enough to fit properly in the frame.

He knocked gently, knowing Rush was inside by his scent. “One moment, please,” Rush called out as he finished scribbling something down on a pad of paper near his terminal. He stood up, stretched, and answered the door. “Good evening, brothers. What brings you by? Is everything okay?” Seth nodded and replied, “Yeah, we’re fine. You’d invited me over earlier and I wanted to make good on your offer.” His younger brother blurted out, “I’ve got a name!” Rush smiled widely and asked, “have you? What have you decided on? Come in and tell me all about it.”

The two younger men let themselves in and Rick took over the conversation. He explained in great detail the plot of *“Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?”* and how he admired Mr. Deckard. “That is a good name,” Rush concluded, “You and Mr. Deckard share many similarities.” Rick’s tail got excited, “really? How?” “You and Mr. Deckard pose the question of what makes something human. He strives through his struggles and comes out okay in the end. Just like us. Just like you.”

Rick got lost in the deep discussion half way through. “Okay...,” he mumbled. Rush turned to Seth and asked candidly, “How are you after today? Are you okay?” “I, uh, yeah. I think so,” he lied. Rush’s smile slowly faded as he saw through the façade. He thought very pointedly to Seth, “it is not polite to come to my home just to lie to me. That is a poor precedent to set for your younger brother, as well.” Seth coughed and nodded, “Well, what I *meant* was that I’m working on being okay.” Rush nodded, “that is good. Would you like to discuss anything?” Seth glanced at Rick who was bent over Rush’s desk, investigating his terminal before answering, “I, uh, no? Just wanted to say ‘Hi’, I guess. Let you know that Rick decided on his name.”

Rush thought his reply back to Seth, “more lying? Keep that up and you will make me angry.” Seth sighed outwardly and replied mentally, “it’s a defense. Sorry.

I'm *trying*." Rush nodded, "well, let us have a toast to Rick. The latest Hawthorne to lose his captive name." Rick's tail swished around as his excitement grew again. "You have bread to toast?"

Rush chuckled and ushered them into his apartment. "Have a seat," he gestured at the couches, "one moment, please." Rick and Seth sat next to one another on the couch facing the kitchen. Rush opened a cabinet under his sink and produced a clear glass bottle with a dark brown liquid. He fetched three glasses and filled his guests' with two fingers of whiskey and the same amount of cold water, not knowing their tolerance. He poured three fingers straight for himself.

Rush sat on the opposite couch and handed out the glasses, warning them, "careful. It is strong if you have not had alcohol before. Sip, do not chug it." Seth and Rick nodded and accepted their glass. Rush held his aloft and said, "here's to Rick and Seth, my newest brothers. We wish you health and a long life each, filled with stories and lots of pups." Seth blushed in response and nodded his thanks, sipping on the drink. Rick instead sniffed his and scrunched his face.

"Why does the dirty water smell funny?" Rush sipped his whiskey, "it has alcohol in it. It is an *adult* drink." "Why do we have less?" Rick asked, comparing the two glasses. "It is strong and you two have never had alcohol. Best to take it easy," Rush reiterated. After a bit of gently coaxing by his elders, Rick joined them in their drinks.

Soon, Seth and Rick were quite tipsy after Rush refilled each glass twice. "Brother," Rick slurred and flopped on Seth, "why can't I feel my mouth? Am I broken?" Seth chuckled loudly, "No! No, no, no, no. No. It's the ah... whatsitcallded...Booze!" "Brother!" Rick exclaimed again, "Where is Mr. Rush?"

"Right here," Rush replied from the opposite couch. "Have not left." "Good!" Rick continued yelling, "I wanna tell you something!" He waved around his empty glass in Rush's general direction. Seth giggled, knowing where this was going, but he was too drunk to care and was more interested to see how it would turn out.

"What have you to tell me, pup?" Rush asked. "I...I...I want..." Rick hiccupped, "to show you what...what they tau...taught me to do!" Rush furrowed his brow, "what do

you mean?” Seth took over, sobering up quickly as he realized what his younger sibling was about to try. “Uh...uh. Uh, that’s not a good idea, 92, er, Rick.” Rick shook his head, slobbering a bit. “I wanna do it!”

Rush leaned back onto the couch and asked Seth mentally, “what is he talking about? What is a bad idea? Is he okay? Does he need help to the restroom?” Seth shook his head and tried his best to keep his concentration to reply. “No, remember when we came here an’ you were doin’ medical work? He mentioned oral? He meant sucking...” Rush cut him off, not wanting to hear the rest. “Pup,” Rush tried to ask Rick calmly, “Why do you want to do *that*? To *me*?”

“’cause,” Rick slurred, “you’re nice. I wanted to thank you for being nice!” “But that is not how you thank someone for being kind,” Rush replied sadly. “Sure it is!” Rick argued, “that’s how it worked on the boat! People would do nice things and I would do that for them. Sometimes I could do that *first*, and *then* get nice things. Well, except for Mr. Steven, he just wanted me to do it and not tell anyone. All the time.” Seth choked on the last dregs of his drink, trying his best not to remember the terrible man.

“Rick,” Seth said sternly, “Mr. Rush isn’t gay. He doesn’t want you do to that. It’s not nice.” “But, but, it feels nice! I promise! I even know how to not get my teeth in the way!” This was by far the strangest situation Rush found himself in this week. “I, uh, believe you, Rick,” he stammered, “but your brother is right. Thank you for the offer, but it would not be right. You shouldn’t do that just because people are nice to you. You only do that for another person you are mated with. A person you *trust*.”

Rick was confused, he’d never been told “no” when he offered that particular service to anyone in the Enclave. “But...I trust you. I trust the Elder too! Seth said to.” Rush’s eyebrows popped up as he glanced to Seth. “Yeah! Yeah, but not like *that*, 92, er...Rick. He’s old. He doesn’t like other men like *that* an’ he wouldn’t like it if you even tried.”

Rush shuddered at the thought and quickly wished Jenkins was around. He’d have a *much* better idea of how to carefully explain things without stifling the young man all together. He paused to take a breath and listen in the hall, hoping that

by now Jenkins and Willis were on their way back from enjoying each other's company at Jenkins' apartment.

A few moments passed by and he sighed deeply with disappointment. "Rick? Why do you want to do that?" "I told you, you're nice! I want to do something nice for you too." "Okay, thank you, but you can't do *that*. What else could you do?" Rick thought for some time on the question. "I...could...make you a cake! Seth loves cake!" Seth nodded, corroborating the story. "I do." "That would be *very* nice way to thank someone," Rush replied, relieved he successfully derailed the horny young man's train of thought.

"What kind of cake?" Rush asked. "We can't have chocolate, right?" Rick asked his brother. Seth nodded, "that's right, 92, er, Rick. *Damnit*. Dogs can't have chocolate. It's bad for 'em." Rush scratched his chin and said seriously, "don't know. Will research later." He jotted a note down on a stray technical diagram on the coffee table and resumed questioning the young chef. Ten minutes of cake discussions, Rush was relieved to hear his favorite super mutant's heavy footfalls intermixed with Jenkins'. "Apologies, excuse me," he said quickly to the two men in his apartment before leaving them alone to seek Jenkins' help.

He burst from his green ill-fitting office door and caught Jenkins just as he passed, dragging him in the office by the collar of his robes. "Woah! The hell's goin' on, Rush!?" Rush focused his mental energy on blocking everything out around them and cupped his muzzle to Jenkins' ear. "The young Hawthorne is homosexual, has confused offering sexual acts with normal reprisal behavior, and is attracted to me. Help. Please explain to him how to have a healthy sexual behavior."

Jenkins' eyes grew wide, not in lust, but surprise and shock. "He what? Which one?" Willis leaned in the office to see where his mate ran off to. "The hell're you doin with my man, dog?" Willis asked playfully. "Serious discussion, not the time for that." Willis furrowed his bald brow, silently expecting an explanation. "Franklin's partner in the kitchen." "Oh, the...slow one?" Rush nodded.

"What 'bout 'em?" Willis asked, putting away his fun for the serious conversation. "The wolfie that works with Franklin's like us. He don't know how

to deal with it, though, and wants to blow everyone, apparently.” Rush grimaced at the oversimplification and nodded slowly. “Something like that.” “What’s the problem?” Willis said with a smirk. “The boy wants to blow someone, let ‘em. Good for morale.”

Jenkins’ sour expression halted the rest of Willis’ chiding. “That’s terrible,” Jenkins sighed sadly, “you think his brother knows?” Rush nodded strongly, “he is *very* well aware.” “Get ‘em out here and we’ll go chat at Will’s place. More seats.” Rush nodded and poked back into his apartment. Seth was petting his brother’s head: the younger man seemed deeply sad. “Why’s he being mean, brother?”

Seth heaved a sigh, “he’s *not*. He just ain’t like that.” Rush cleared his throat, garnering their attention. “We have some friends that would like to chat, if that is okay?” “More friends?” Rick asked. Rush nodded and gave Seth a quick mental rundown of Jenkins’ previous experiences and what he gleaned of Willis. Seth nodded, thankful for the help. “Let’s go move our party down the hall,” Jenkins said with a smile.

Rick jumped up, wobbled around and shouted, “let’s go! I love whiskey! Can we have more?” Rush shook his head, “no, pup, we have had more than enough.” Rick whined. “C’mon,” Jenkins persuaded, “let’s go.” “Okay, where are we going?” “To Mr. Willis’ home. Just down the hall,” the medic replied. “Are we all going? I don’t wanna leave my brother!” Jenkins looked to Seth and shrugged, “If he wants to come, he’s more than welcome.”

Seth nodded dutifully and led his brother down the hall with Jenkins and Willis. Rush trailed them, curious to see how this was going to shake out. All five arrived at Willis’ apartment, down the hall and six large rooms away. He opened the door and stood by as everyone filed in. The Hawthornes were amazed at the size of the room. “It is nearly twice the size of my apartment,” Rush gasped.

“Big man’s gotta have room t’ move ‘round,” Willis concluded. Rush nodded. It was nearly what he expected: neat and orderly. Sparsely but carefully decorated. A small kitchenette like Rush’s, sans stove, stood near the entrance of the apartment, leading into a makeshift dining area. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined the walls, each filled to the brim with tomes and files. As the room swept

around a smaller room adjacent to the kitchen, tall laboratory tables with stools held aloft documents and complicated glass equipment for chemistry experiments. The first table against one of the windows perforating the back wall was packed with glassware and tubes extending four feet from the surface toward the ceiling. An experiment gently bubbled and gurgled as if greeting them.

Around the second wall of the smaller room was his office. A desk, perfectly clean, supported a single RobCo terminal against the windowed wall. A white ceramic coffee mug with the letters "I ♥ Muties," were carefully hand painted on it with thick black paint. A fleet of filing cabinets faced it from the opposite wall, making an alleyway to the curtain-separated sitting area. The retro curtains half obscured a full-sized couch, coffee table, loveseat, recliner, and yet another room behind the bathroom.

"Home sweet home," he mumbled, letting the crowd in. "Have a seat in th' back and get comfy," Willis gestured past toward the curtains hanging from the ceiling. After Jenkins walked in to the familiar apartment, Willis shed his own lab coat and hung it from a peg near the bookshelves. "Gotta piss like a racin' racehorse," he grumbled, letting himself in to the smaller room off of the kitchen.

Rush was pleased to see he had Willis figured out, even if he did use weird phrases all the time. He did find it strange that there was a distinct lack of scents like he smelled at Jenkins'. He clearly smelled gentle reminders of Jenkins and even Ida, but not the sweat and musk of two humans' previous mating like he expected. Seth and Rick didn't think much of the lack of scents: they were much more entertained by the prominent chemistry set.

A toilet flushed and sink ran for a few moments before Willis exited and asked "What're y'all lookin' at?" Rick pointed at the brightly-colored fluids in the glassware. "What's this?" "Chemistry experiment. Don't touch. Explosive," he lied. Jenkins looked up to him and shook his head, "no. It's not. We're tryin' to find a new way to use soylent green." "It's made of people," Willis said. "No, it's not," Jenkins argued, trying to halt Willis' strange sense of humor for the upcoming serious discussion.

"Why did you not tell me about this?" Rush complained, "Can you impregnate it with DNA fragments and force it to generate a desired output?" He hunched over Seth and Rick to join in their visual investigation. "What, like make new plants?" Jenkins asked. Rush nodded, thinking of the delicious coffee that Ida gave him when he first arrived to her laboratory. "Useful plants, crossbreeding, resurrecting ones lost since the Great War..." Rush thought aloud, "like coffee. We should definitely figure out how to grow more of that."

"Maybe," Willis scratched his chin, "but that ain't why we're all in my house." Seth nodded and drug his brother from the visually exciting experiment to the couches. "Am I in trouble, brother? Why is everyone mad?" Rick asked, pinning his ears and drooping his tail between his legs. "No, no. Nothing like that. We just want some...experts to chat with you 's all." Seth sat next to Rick on the loveseat and were quickly joined by Willis and Jenkins on the full-sized couch. Rush opted to sit in the overstuffed recliner.

"Right then," Jenkins sighed, "92?" "Rick," he replied. "What?" "My name is Rick now." "Oh," Jenkins exclaimed, "congratulations!" "Well, Rick, we need to chat about some personal stuff, okay?" He nodded affirmatively in response. "Are you sure you want Rush and your brother here?" Rick shrugged, "they're nice. It's okay." Jenkins sighed and patted Willis' thigh to steel himself. "Okay, if you're sure..."

He took another deep breath, "so, you're interested in...males?" Rick nodded. "Why did Seth want you to come talk with us?" Rick shrugged, "he said I can't do nice things to Mr. Rush." "To him?" Jenkins questioned with a raised brow. Rick nodded again, "brother wants me to make a cake instead of make him feel nice." "Feel nice, how? Like a hug? Mr. Rush likes hugs. Those make everyone feel nice." Rick shook his head, "a mouth hug." Jenkins squinted at Rush, seeking an answer. Rush confirmed the worst for Jenkins, "He wanted to perform oral sex on me for being kind to him. He does not have an acceptable understanding of such an intimate act."

Jenkins fought to keep from imagining the scene and sharing it with Rush himself. "Ah, well. Rick. That's nice an' all, but you can't just do that to folks because they're nice to you. That's something you save for someone special. Your...mate." "Like you and Mr. Willis?" Jenkins nodded. Rick announced,

“then I want Mr. Rush to be my mate! Can I be your mate, Mr. Rush? Please? Then I could make you feel nice all the time.”

Rush blushed under his fur and stammered, “Th...Thank you, Rick, but males do not attract me *like that*. Would be more than happy to be your friend, but not your *mate*.” Rick folded his ears and slumped in the couch, “but why not? What did I do wrong? Don’t you like me?” “Of course,” Rush placated him, “You are very kind and help Mr. Franklin take care of everyone, just like your brother takes care of you. We are brothers, not mates. Siblings do not do those sorts of things with one another. Understand?”

Rick scratched his head in confusion. “But Seth is my brother!” “Me too,” Rush lied, “by blood, no less.” “Really?!” Rush nodded. “I would *never* do that to Seth,” Rick concluded, “that’s not nice.” Rush nodded again. “But not just that, you only do things like that for your mate, and only if you want to. Understand? Only for someone you love, when *you* want to.”

“Love?” they all nodded and Seth took over. “Yeah. Like sister Ada loves Mr. Colin and Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Willis love each other.” “Mr. Tom at the garage is nice, maybe he would be my mate?” Jenkins choked, “nope, no. No. I don’t think that’ll work. Mr. Tom’s my dad and loves my mom.” “She won’t share?” Jenkins blushed and shook his head, “Ah, no. Most folks don’t...share...their mates.” “They did back home!”

“Home?” Seth asked. “On the boat! The boat...” Rick trailed off as he remembered they helped bring it down. “We killed them, didn’t we?” Seth sighed, Rush joined him. “Yeah, we did. But they were *bad*. We had to. That way they couldn’t hurt us or anyone else any more. Remember what 77 did last year during your...birthday celebration?” Rick nodded and remembered fondly, “Mr. Stevens came to the kitchen and asked me to come in the back. He said he had a surprise.” Rick’s ears fell again. “I didn’t like his surprise. He was mean. He made it hurt. It’s not supposed to hurt...”

Rush furrowed his brow and stared at the floor. Jenkins asked carefully, “what did he do?” Seth cleared his throat and interrupted. “He...forced himself on Rick. 77 caught him in the middle of it. Tried to kill ‘em. He nearly got himself

killed himself tryin' to save my little brother." Rick sniffled, "it's not supposed to hurt..."

Jenkins swallowed hard and asked, "remember how it hurt?" Rick nodded sadly. "When you force people to...feel nice...and they don't like it, you're doing the same thing. You don't want to make Mr. Rush feel like you did, right?" Rick's eyes grew wide and quickly filled with tears. "No! I'm sorry, Mr. Rush! I...I...I just wanted to..." he wept onto his brother's shoulder, making Jenkins feel terrible.

"There, there, now," Seth cooed to his little brother, "he knows you meant well. Just remember, making people feel nice *like that* is only for your mate. Okay?" he nodded, smearing tears into his brother's fur. Rush nodded and swallowed at the knot in his throat, "perhaps you and Seth should go back home for now. Get some sleep?" "Yeah, c'mon, Rick, let's go." The young man sniffled and wiped the tears from his eyes, "okay, big brother."

"Tell Mr. Willis and Mr. Jenkins 'Thank you,' Rick. Mr. Rush too." He nodded and mumbled, "Thanks," to the floor and led them through the apartment. "Thanks, guys," Seth added sincerely, "I think he understands better now." Jenkins nodded back, "no problem. Just...make sure he knows he can come talk to us, okay?" Seth nodded again. The three remaining men watched the other two leave and make their way back home.

Rush slumped into the recliner and sighed, "that was...worse than expected. Terribly awkward." "Why'd you lie to him?" Jenkins asked. "You told me what happened before, with your friend's brother?" Rush nodded and mumbled, "they were adults and mentally mature. He is still a juvenile, mentally. Also, he does not attract my...attention. More of a brother to me than a mate." Jenkins scoffed, "What if I wasn't with Willis and tried the same. What'd you do then?"

"The same," Rush replied, staring him square in the face. "You are a brother to me. Cannot think of you as a mate. It would be the same as thinking of Erik that way. Prefer females, anyway." "Yeah, 'cause that worked out well last time," Jenkins replied sourly. "Hey! That was uncalled for," Rush yelled. Willis rolled his eyes and covered Jenkins' mouth with a huge hand. "Ignore him. He better've not meant that." Jenkins slumped in defeat and pried at Willis' hand. "Nope. Not

'til you calm down an' apologize. Rush didn't need that, young'un." Jenkins grumbled and bit Willis.

The super mutant chuckled and said lewdly, "Chew all you want. You know I like it rough." Rush shivered at the thought and the sudden blast of hormones wafting from the two men. "Time to get back to work," Rush said awkwardly. Jenkins renewed his fight, forcing Willis to let him go with a strike to his throat. "Rush! Wait! Don't go. I'm sorry, I didn't mean that." Rush nodded, already knowing that it was a slip of the tongue. "Do not worry, brother," he mumbled, "you can owe me later." Rush took his leave of Willis' apartment to return to his own.

He followed Seth and Rick's scents back to his apartment and found them in his office. Seth was still trying to console Rick. The young man was still crying, although he seemed to be slowing down. "What is wrong?" Rush asked with concern. "He wanted to apologize again," Seth replied. Rick shook his head fiercely. "You already have, pup," Rush said gently, "that is enough. Dry your tears and go home. You have to work with Mr. Franklin in the morning, right?"

Rick nodded again. "Did you know that every meal you serve with Mr. Franklin makes someone feel good?" "Really?" Rick whimpered. Rush nodded. "Every single one. They make us strong, too. You two help keep everyone safe, just by making us three delicious meals a day." He started perking up immediately. "See, Rick?" Seth gestured, "I told you...just not in so many words."

The grey-furred wolf-man sniffled again and walked up to Rush. He gently hugged him and renewed weeping. "Okay, okay," Rush said awkwardly, "enough of that. It was my mistake to feed you two so much alcohol. Now, please go home and go to bed. You will both feel better in the morning." "C'mon, little bro," Seth tugged on his arm, "bedtime." After more tugging and guiding by Seth, they left Rush alone in his apartment.

He reflected on that afternoon's events and completed his night with a hot shower and a few fingers of whiskey. Rush sipped the dark liquid and stared from his only functioning window that faced the fields. The bright harvest moon looked like a small sun in the dark sky. As he sipped the remainder of his

alcohol, a familiar knock came at his inner door. "Oh, damnit," he sighed to himself. "Who is there?" "It's me, big bro, wanted to come an' say 'hey'."

"Come in," Rush answered Erik. He filled his glass with water and gulped it down. "Evenin', Rush." "Hello, brother. Are you well?" "Long day," Erik sighed, crashing onto a couch. Rush sniffed the air and scrunched his nose. "You could have showered afterward." Erik blushed in response. "I, uh, sorry. I forgot you could tell."

Rush shrugged, "you should be proud. Your mate was happy to see you. She must have healed very quickly." "Not exactly," Erik mumbled in embarrassment. "It is okay, Erik. No need to be embarrassed around me. Proud and happy for you. Jealous as well." Erik furrowed his brow in a Rush-like manner and asked, "Jealous? Why?" Rush filled his glass with water again and sucked it down.

He rinsed it out and set it to dry before collapsing next his brother on the couch. "Olivia loves you very much, brother. Willis and Jenkins love each other. Tom and Marie. Mr. Colin and Ada. Even Ida and your father have some strange relationship. Others of the Brotherhood have flings and sordid affairs with one another. Except for the Hawthornes. We are all kin to some extent. Makes things... awkward when that topic comes up."

Erik leaned on his big brother and scratched his head, "so somethin' happened today?" Rush nodded, "yes. Franklin's sous chef confessed his attraction to me." Erik coughed in surprise. "What? Seth's little brother?" Rush nodded. "He's...like Jenkins?" Rush nodded again and explained the situation as delicately as possible.

"Well...that's not normal," Erik muttered. "What'd you do? You turned 'em down, right? You're not gay...right?" "Turned him down, and lied. Told him we were blood related to dissuade him." Erik nodded, "that's for the best, I think." Rush nodded sadly, "Would have been nice though, to have someone to call my mate." Erik continued scratching his head. "I know what y' mean. I was by myself for a long time, too. Finally got enough courage to stop in at the bath house. Paid for *extra* service, then found the woman I love. You could try that."

"What, the bath house? You saw how they looked at me the first time we visited," Rush replied sourly. "They were afraid." Erik nodded, "yeah, well they did the

same to Willis too. You were just new. There's so many Hawthornes 'round now, I'll bet they'd have no problem with you stopin' in. If you've got the *fortitude* to do it." Rush growled playfully and licked Erik's forehead. "More fortitude than *you*, pup." Erik grimaced and wiped the slobber from his forehead with a slight grin.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Oh! I found your copy of '*The Cat's Paw*'. Remember? From the base?" Rush nodded slightly. "Well, considering the conversation we just had, I think you need it more than *I* do." Rush blushed and nodded slightly, "thank you." Erik left it on the coffee table and saw himself out. "Just don't get anything on it. That thing's worth a hundred caps or more. Apparently it's a rare copy, or something," Erik said as he left for the laboratory's exit.

Rush looked at the red magazine. It stood out harshly against the black-and-white diagrams scattered on his weather-beaten coffee table. He locked his doors and reclined on the couch with the magazine in hand. He smelled the book, savoring the myriad of scents: aging paper, rubber ink, sweat, musk, and countless others. Rush distinctly recognized eight different men's scents including his and his brothers on the book. Completely reclining on the couch, he let his imagination run wild with the scents, rather than flip to the centerfold and busy himself.

He soon drifted to sleep with the book across his face, weary and beaten from the emotionally taxing day.