

The two hour trip to Notre Endroit, Our Place, was grueling to say the least. Rusty left without eating so he was hungry, and he hadn't slept so he was tired, and his best friend had stolen the girl of his dreams, so well, yeah, he felt pretty wretched. Hastily picking a path through the dense undergrowth, he lost his way several times before he finally managed to find the trail. He was already dripping with sweat, his hair matted and slick, when he broke through into the hidden clearing. It had been only a month since he'd set foot in the area, but the sight of it still took his breath away. Rocks, trees, trails, cement walls, steel rails, ladders and walkways and tunnels. It truly was a Runner's paradise.

Falling back to reality, Rusty scanned the area from the entrance's high point and spotted Kirra and Owen far away at the other end, waiting for him, perched atop a crumbling brick wall. Finding new strength at the sight of them, Rusty broke into a jog and quickly covered the length of Notre Endroit. Arriving at the base of the wall, he placed a visibly weary hand against it and looked up, breathing deeply. Kirra, dressed in that impossibly white outfit from their first meeting, slid down a banked wall next to the bricks and walked over to Rusty, a warm smile on her dark lips.

"You ran that faster than the first time you came here. Though you still look just as tired after."

"That's because he didn't sleep."

The rough, commanding voice of Owen pierced the early morning air. Rusty's attention snapped from Kirra to Owen, the sound of his voice unfamiliar yet unmistakable since their last encounter. Barely after he finished speaking, Owen leaped from the wall and sailed over Rusty's head, landing softly in the dust and rolling out perfectly. He came to a halt in one effortless motion and stood turning, walking back casually to the jaw-dropped Rusty. His body hadn't made a sound. Only the settling of dust from his landing could possibly have been heard. Owen's large frame seemed to dwarf the red head, his body blocking much of the dawn sun. The middle aged Tracer stopped a few feet from Rusty, gazing on the young man with a criticizing eye. Finally he spoke.

"You didn't, did you? Kirra told you to rest and be ready. You aren't ready. So go home."

Rusty was dumbstruck. Go home? Had Owen really told him to leave? The moment didn't seem real. Owen however never hesitated and turned his back on Rusty, motioning for Kirra to follow suit. Kirra frowned, the first real sign of unhappiness Rusty had ever seen on her, but began to follow, glancing back just once. There was nothing she could do her bright eyes seemed to say. Owen has spoken.

“No.”

The word echoed out, strong and powerful, from Rusty's mouth. Owen and Kirra froze. Even Rusty was surprised by his own assertion. But he was either too tired, too stressed, or too fatigued mentally to back down. Swallowing hard and fixing his stance, Rusty stared at the backs of his teachers and proclaimed, “I am ready. I'm not tired. And I'm not going home until you train me.”

Kirra looked back, eyes wide in a mix of astonishment and pride. Was this really the same kid she'd met a month ago? He looked ten years older, ten years more mature. Owen too looked back, though without eyes of amazement. His pale blue eyes retained their hard, piercing demeanor. Turning to face the young man once again, Owen said bluntly, “You're a wreck. You could barely make it here, your eyes are completely bloodshot, and I can hear your stomach screaming. Go home Rusty. This isn't your day.”

But Rusty would not be moved. “No. I'm going to train, NOW. And you're going to test me.”

It was Kirra's turn to have her jaw drop. She had seen only one other potential student act so brash. And that student had been chased straight out of Notre Endroit, with a furious Owen hot on his heels. Nobody spoke that way to Owen and expected to get any kind of respect from the man.

Owen chuckled. Nothing loud, just a soft chuckle. His unyielding eyes flashed a moment of care. “Well, when you put it that way, all right.” Kirra practically had a heart attack. “Funny how things like that can remind you of people.”

Rusty wanted to ask who but his strength and courage evaporated. He was left leaning against the brick wall, breathing hard again. What had come over him? First he yelled at his mother, now Owen—where was all this fury coming from? Rusty didn't have much time to ponder as Owen and Kirra came to stand at either side of him, nodding silently to each other, before Kirra exclaimed, "Let's go!"

And off they ran, over the hills and down through the bunker tunnels, climbing up spiraling rusted staircases and zig-zagging through thickets of trees. If the jog across Notre Endroit had been difficult, this run was excruciating. Rusty's lungs breathed fire and his legs kept gaining weight till they felt like cinder blocks under his waist. Dirt and grime collected on his skin and leaves caught in his mess of hair. He trailed along behind Kirra and Owen, the two bounding easily down the trails. No words were exchanged, none had to be said. Rusty knew what the drill for today was: keep up, or go home.

After several miles of twisting trail running, the trio came to a grassy clearing. Scattered around the clearing were many handmade pieces exercise equipment, such as pull up bars and squat racks. Rocks and logs and sandbags of varying sizes and weights were piled in stations around the clearing, forming a circle with the grass in the middle. Rusty's heart sank and his stomach flipped. He understood immediately. Kirra gave her best encouraging smile and rubbed Rusty's shoulder while Owen remained stone faced, prepping the first station. All the dark woman could say was "Good luck Rusty."

Never in his seventeen years had Rusty experienced such pain. One after the other, minute by terrible minute, rep after terrible rep, Owen tested Rusty. The young red head was moaning in agony as the final sandbag squat was finished, only to be ushered forward to the next station. Calluses turned to blisters turned to wounds on the pull up bars, and chips of stone nearly blinded Rusty was one accidentally landed on top of another. Once, twice, three times Rusty collapsed to the ground, sinking to his knees or even further, desperate for a break. And Owen stood above him, his jaw set tight, his eyes narrow. Every time it looked like Rusty would throw in the towel, Owen would start to say, "You're not ready. Go!"

But Rusty rose every time. Just before Owen could finish, Rusty would dig down deeper than the center of the Earth and muscle his way to his feet. Dry heaving on the dinner and breakfast he never had, Rusty continued his tortuous circuit for nearly a full hour, only once being given enough time to gulp water and keep from dying of thirst.

At last, Owen said stop. Rusty's legs wobbled, his chest rose and fell violently, but he remained standing. Kirra clapped her hands together excitedly, running over in a flood of happiness. Rusty had passed the test, he'd done it! He could continue his training!

Owen held up a massive hand and stopped Kirra cold. She looked at him, puzzled. What was he doing, that last log lift was always the end of the testing. He should have congratulated Rusty by now. Instead, Owen tapped Rusty on the shoulder and, without a word, pointed to the top of a nearby bunker wall, nearly 75 feet in height. It might as well have been Mount Everest. Rusty looked from the wall to Owen, and Owen merely said, "Go. And you're done."

Rusty didn't say anything. He couldn't. If he had uttered even one syllable, he would have passed out. Instead, he took off running, as fast as his dirt streaked legs would take him. As he ran off, Kirra cautiously walked up to Owen, saying quietly to the large man, "Why Owen? You've never done that before."

Owen never turned to look at Kirra. He focused on the thin form of Rusty as he reached the base of the sloped, cracked wall. In an even tone, he gruffly said, "You told me while we were waiting that that boy had great potential. I want to see just how great."

"But this is dangerous Owen. You know that wall isn't for beginners, it's not even solid. And with how tired he is, he could slide right off the side."

"He won't."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I saw his eyes. He won't fail when it counts." Quietly, so quiet that not even Kirra standing next to him could hear, Owen finished by saying, "Not like me."

Rise - Chapter Five - Gabriel Arnold

Written by Paul Mederos

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Rusty meanwhile was in the seventh ring of hell. The climb up the wall had started easier than he had expected, and he had dashed up more than half of it before he had been forced to lean down and grab hold with his hands. But now, with the wall nearly vertical and the cracks and bars becoming farther and farther apart, his progress had slowed to a crawl. Rested, he could have managed the climb in no time. But now, an hour and half into the most grueling day of his life, he was gritting his teeth just to hold on. Step after cautious step, he pushed his way skyward.

He was less than a dozen feet from the summit when disaster struck. The hand hold he was using turned to powder between his fingers and crumbled apart. He lost his balance and started sliding down the wall, flailing his legs and arms wildly, grasping like a madman at anything that would hold. Kirra turned away, horrified. Owen remained still, staring. Twenty feet into his freefall, Rusty caught hold of an exposed reinforcing wire. His shoulder nearly dislocated at the sudden jerking stop, but his body held as well as the wire. But that was it, he was spent. Anymore and he wouldn't be able to make it back down the wall again. He had failed. "Dad," he said to himself, fighting back a cold tear, "I'm sorry."

Then Rusty heard scuffing sounds from beneath him. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw Kirra and Owen making their way up the wall, with fast and practiced motions. Within seconds they were on either side of Rusty, holding onto him and protecting him from falling. Rusty was still fighting back tears, and Kirra tried to console him, saying "It's okay Rusty, it's okay. You did really well, Owen says you've done enough. You've passed."

Rusty managed to get his breathing under control, and used his free hand to dry his watering eyes. "But it wasn't enough, not for me. I couldn't finish."

Owen, who had remained characteristically silent the entire climb till now, spoke simply, "Then finish. We'll wait here for you."

Rusty looked from Owen to Kirra and back again. He nodded his head and began to climb.

It was as if nothing had ever happened in the last hour and a half. He scaled the wall easily, and sat on the top, legs dangling over the side, grinning from ear to ear.

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Kirra shook her head side to side and muttered through a grin of her own, "How the hell did he do that? He looked like death a second ago."

Owen stared up, fighting back his own smile. He didn't know the answer, but he knew what it meant. "I don't know, but let's find out. Meet him Downtown a week from now. It's time to start real training."