

CHAPTER 05: KNIGHTS AND KNAVES OR WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW MIGHT HURT YOU

The duo's trip back to the genetics lab was relatively quiet—a nice change from what quickly becoming new the norm. About three-fourths through their walk back, Erik inquired to Rush. "So, that magazine you found ... Have you never seen anyone like that? Well, I mean, not /like that/ but...I guess, a real, proper human?" Rush shook his head and replied aloud, "no. Only Mom. Now you." Erik wasn't surprised. Rush's probably never been out of the facility. "So," Erik continued his inquiry, "what'd you think?" Erik lightly nudged Rush in the ribs with an elbow and a grin, "how do the pink fleshy humans stack up to your pack-mates?" Rush stopped and thought about that question seriously.

"I like both," he replied to Erik's mind, "you furless humans do have pleasant shapes, but I would be afraid to mate with a human, I think." Erik raised an eyebrow in question, but Rush continued before he could ask. "I'd probably break it." Erik laughed heartily at Rush's honesty. "I don't know about that, Rush. Humans are pretty resilient creatures. We're almost as bad as radroaches—you just can't seem to keep us down." Rush failed to answer further, but simply nodded, as he frequently did when he was at a loss of words. Maybe mating with a human wouldn't be as terrifying as he thought.

After their short spat of conversation, and a long walk through the halls, they arrived at the genetics laboratory. It was in the same state they left it in: smelling strongly of Nuka-Cola scented vomit and spattered with blood smears. Erik shuddered involuntarily at the scent and sights of the lab. After swallowing his stomach back down, he led the expedition to the on-call room on the north side of the lab. Erik was on a mission: grab his bag and get the hell out of there. He quickly made his way through the double doors and into the long, empty hallway. Rush followed him through the double doors, but lingered momentarily at the threshold, sniffing the air. A familiar scent of grease, hydraulic fluid, and something else that was sickeningly sweet broadsided him. Unless he was sorely mistaken, it was the doctor's scent. Rush sprinted in front of Erik to burst through the door of the on-call room. Erik yelled at him from behind, "Hey! What's going on?!" Rush failed to reply as he was fiercely staring down the doctor, who was rambling on about something called "brussel sprouts".

Rush barked roughly, "Doctor!" The robot-doctor immediately halted his conversation on the quantum physics of vegetables and turned to face Rush. "Ah, Rush. Where did

you go? You were supposed to be watching Erik. Although, he seems to be well, although he should be in bed resting. I never could leave you two alone. There was one," Rush cut him off before he could wander to another tangent of conversation, "Doctor!!"

The robot halted himself and simply stared at the behemoth yelling at him. "What, Rush, would make you so impertinent?" By this time, Erik had joined the two in the room. "Doctor, what did you do to me? I almost died! Rush had to stab me! Where the hell'd you go?!" Erik blurted out, filling the awkward silence in the room. The doctor rocked on his treads, as if he were a child who was being scolded by a parent. "Ah, yes. Well, I went out for a bit of a walk, er, roll. A stroll of sorts, you could say. I didn't think that five minutes would be an issue."

Erik and Rush looked at each other, then back at the doctor. Erik continued, "five minutes? Doctor, it's been nearly an hour-and-a-half!" The doctor was un-phased by that statement. "Doctor," Erik queried, "Are you okay?" The doctor failed to respond at first, but after a few moments of continued rocking, he stopped and turned to face Rush. "Rush, who is this?" Rush was taken aback. He replied tersely, "Erik. Your grandson. My brother." The doctor appeared to be seriously concentrating as the suspension matter in his brain case was gently bubbling. Actually, now that Rush was looking at it, he noticed the suspension gel seemed to be off-color. It was typically a pale yellow color—it was now streaked green, as if it were contaminated.

"Doctor," Rush started as he began walking toward the doctor, "Feel okay? Look ill." The doctor began rocking back-and-forth again. "Yes, yes, of course. I'm quite well Rash. Bush. Er, Rush." As Rush closed in from the entrance, he realized that the doctor was quite damaged—one of his arms had a hydraulic fluid leak, his brain suspension case had a hairline crack, one of his servos on his treads was malfunctioning, and there were gashes in his main body accompanied with rivulets of blood and other fluids leaking from what resembled claw marks.

"Doctor! Why damaged," Rush inquired, clearly alarmed. "What, damaged?!" Erik exclaimed as he ran up to the doctor. The doctor failed to respond immediately, but his brain gel was bubbling again, as if his synapses were performing CPR on one another. "I...clan leader, spoke Don't recall that well," the doctor muttered. The doctor turned to face a now-alarmed Erik, "Hello young man, why have we not been introduced? Rush, surely you know better than to be so rude." The doctor extended a claw toward Erik, mimicking a handshake. Erik took the claw tentatively in his right hand and shook it. He reminded the doctor, "I'm Erik Rade, Doctor Hawthorne. One of your grandchildren."

The doctor ripped his claw from Erik's grasp and quickly accelerated in reverse, opposite of Rush and Erik, flailing his arms in the process. As he did, he began muttering; "Find tapes, speak leader, cleanse, rinse, repeat. Find leader, cleanse clan, rinse tapes, speak, repeat ..." After crashing into a nearby wall and couch, the doctor stopped and stared at the duo who were staring at him in shock. "Oh, Rush! Are you well today? You overslept. Who is your friend?" Rush shook his head and approached the doctor.

Rush shook his head, "Nobody, doctor," as he put his hands on the doctor's brain case. "Leaking," he said aloud to Erik. "Maybe infected," he said with a pang of worry in his gravelly voice. Erik spoke to the doctor, opting for a different approach. "Robot, I'm from RobCo. I was alerted that you require maintenance, may I proceed?" The doctor turned a bit toward Erik and replied, "Yes, please do. I'm sure the purple has informed you of the lack of smell?" Erik nodded, "yes, of course...the purple," and cautiously made his way between the robot and the wall to access his control panel.

Erik gently pried open the oxidized panel to reveal a rat's nest of cabling that was slickened with hydraulic fluid and brain suspension gel, just like his external damage. "Robot, what caused this damage," Erik queried. The doctor failed to reply, and thanks to the diagnostic lights in the panel, Erik was able to see why. There was severe damage to his cranial controller that linked his brain to his central processor. On top of that, some of his memory chips were rattling around in the panel, dislodged from their homes—he was suffering from a robotic form of retrograde amnesia.

"Hold still please," Erik requested as he attempted to fit the chips back into what he hoped was their proper sockets. Unfortunately, the schematic he needed had long faded into obscurity from the inside of the back panel. After a few tense moments, the doctor had decided that he was feeling infinitely better—Erik's rush job of chip pokery was a success.

The doctor relayed his current diagnostic operations: "Internal diagnostic tests? Successful. Memory obstruction? Cleared. Brain-Service link? 65 per-cent, acceptable. Emergency mode canceled. Normal operations resumed." The moment after he finished his diagnostic report, he turned to Erik. "Sorry, about my previous behavior, I've been having trouble collecting my thoughts. Have you seen them, today?"

"Them," Erik parroted back in question, "them who? Your thoughts?" "The clan members, young Erik. They were supposed to escort you back to the surface this morning." Erik stared at the doctor in confusion, "What are you talking about doctor? You told me and Rush that you were going to answer our questions today...then you decided to pump me full of drugs. You don't remember that?" "No. The clan was to bring you back through the facility and reunite you with your platoon.

Rush asked this time, "Clan, doctor? Where?" The doctor answered, "we were all in the living complex last night, celebrating your coming of age, Rush. Surely you remember something as important as that!" Rush shook his head and thought to Erik, "That happened almost seven years ago. Something is wrong, I thought you fixed him?"

Erik shook his head and replied aloud, "I think we should look for the clan and figure out what's happened. Sound fair?" Rush nodded affirmative and the doctor remained silent. "Doctor," Erik began softly, "why don't you stay here and rest for a bit?" The doctor continued his silence but did roll himself next to the short bookshelf and appeared to be making an attempt at a nap. Just to make sure he didn't leave, Erik walked back and pulled the chip that controlled the doctor's traction systems.

On their way out, Erik walked to the foot of the nearby bed and grabbed his pack. Dawning it, Erik and Rush both turned to leave the on-call room, jointly hoping that the doctor wouldn't get any worse in their absence.

Erik and Rush remained silent as they began their trek back to the commons area. After about five or six minutes, they made it back to the restroom where Erik found his new jumpers. Erik poked into the restroom, scooped their previous haul out of the sink and into his bag, spun around and exited just as quickly as he'd entered. As he was zipping up his bag, Rush thought to him, "What do you think would have caused the clan leader to attack the doctor? She wouldn't do such damage without cause—certainly not over me ..."

Erik paused and looked at Rush, "She?" he thought back with an inquisitive look. Rush nodded, replying mentally, "Yes. You couldn't tell? I'm the only male in the clan, well, excluding you." "Heh. I'm not exactly part of the clan, now am I? I just met you two days ago. Why would your clan even think about accepting me," Erik replied verbally. Rush shook his head and replied in a bold tone, "Blood stronger than time."

Neither one had spoken after their conversation. Erik was mulling over the idea of trying to speak with the clan leader, maybe she would be willing to induct in him into their clan. He was anxious to find out more about Rush's upbringing, customs, and mannerisms. Rush, however was quite worried about what they would stumble upon once they reached their destination—the attack made no sense. Sure, the clan leader was a hard-ass, but she was never violent without cause.

Erik walked side-by-side through the hall, past the various abandoned rooms, dusty and long-forgotten restrooms, and a couple of janitorial closets that were in a severe need of a janitor themselves. None of them held anything useful or informational, aside from one bathroom that had a sealed tube of toothpaste.

Another fifteen minutes of walking through the maze of halls led them to the large steel door that previously halted them from beginning this trip earlier today. Erik sighed and glanced at his Pip-Boy. It was 17:46. They haven't slowed down since around 10:00 that morning. "At least," he thought, "I had a nice bed to start from today," as he rubbed his bruised chest.

Erik looked up from his Pip-Boy and Rush. "Ready for some more answers, or just more questions?" Rush nodded and bumped the door release with bottom of his right ham-sized fist.

Nothing happened. No lights, no swoosh of a metal door flying overhead, not even a groan of a failing motor.

He slammed his fist against the release this time with a curled lip and short growl of frustration. Still nothing happened. Rush looked to Erik for advice. "Huh. I dunno. Lemme see," Erik said with a groan as he squatted down to inspect the panel below the release switch. After prying it off with his crowbar, Erik said with a sigh, "well, here's your problem." The panel's contents had been ripped to shreds. He groaned to himself and began to trace wires to and from the door in attempt to figure out some way to short it open. After a good five minutes of watching Erik fiddle with wires, Rush grew impatient. "Gimme," he said to Erik. "Give you what," Erik asked. "Metal bar." Erik slid over his trusty crowbar and immediately went back to his work with the wires.

Rush was fed up with waiting. He yanked Erik by the back of his collar, away from the panel, thrust the crowbar inside the panel, and proceeded to thrash it around. Before Erik had the time to complain, Rush had already shorted half-a-dozen wires with the crowbar, causing the door to slowly groan open. "Let's go," Rush said with

a smirk as he handed the crowbar back to Erik. "How'd you know you wouldn't get electrocuted to death doing that with my crowbar," Erik queried. Rush shrugged and replied mentally, "familiar with high voltages."

Their conversation halted with the door halfway open. Erik looked disgustedly at the door and threw his pack through the gap, quickly followed by himself. Rush followed suit, bashing his left shoulder on the way through the gap. Growling and rubbing the pain out of his shoulder, Rush stood up beside Erik who was currently agape.

What they saw was a disaster. It looked like a tornado touched down amongst the container apartments. Pre-war clothing was tattered and scattered alongside the debris of porches and furniture. To make matters worse, there was evidence of recent laser-based weapons fire. Some of the cargo containers had large scorch marks. "What the hell happened here," Erik asked Rush. Rush slowly shook his head, "No clue," he said gruffly.

Rush tilted his head up and called the pack with a long, lonely, wavering howl. There was no immediate response. Rush called again. A moment later, there were but two distinct howls. Rush immediately began to sprint in the direction of the first, "Elder," he yelled with worry to Erik.

Erik followed to the best of his ability. The pair ran around to the far end of the apartments, near the cargo elevator. This portion of the facility was even more damaged than the first. Portions of the apartment cargo containers were severely dented and scorched. A portion of the ceiling and wall had collapsed in, revealing earth beyond. It was under the rubble that they located the elder.

She was severely beaten, bruised, bloody, and a bit broken, but quite alive. Initially she looked to be alone, but upon further inspection and removal of debris, Rush and Erik discovered that she was sheltering the two youngest members of the clan. Rush lowered his head to the elder in respect. She glanced at Erik and put a hand on Rush's left shoulder as a silent thanks for their assistance. "Elder, if I may," Erik asked, "what happened?" She glanced at Erik again and spoke to Rush mentally.

"Angegriffen Metall mann kam suchen Arzt. Gefunden wir statt. Allein wir drei verbleiben." Rush looked at his elder with eyes full of tears as they splashed down his muzzle. His peaceful brethren had perished for no reason. He looked back at Erik after putting a hand on the elder's, and translated: "Men in metal came looking for

the doctor and attacked the clan. The elder and the youngest are the only ones that survived the attack."

Erik was sick to his stomach again. Why would someone attack this facility? Surely it wasn't the brotherhood, they knew he was down here. Who else had metal suits and this much firepower? Not raiders nor the Jackals, they couldn't pull this off. They're too dull for that. The answer dawned on him, the Enclave. Erik shot Rush a panicked look and said aloud, "Elder. I don't think you're safe here. If it's who I think it is, we need to get out or go somewhere else." She growled and winced in pain at that idea, "Nein! Nicht verlassen mein Zuhause!" Erik got the gist. She wasn't going to give up her home just because of some random ass hats. She continued her stone-cold glare at Erik and spoke to him, "ie leben mit sue vor langer Zeit. Name, junger?" "Erik Rade," he said as proudly as he muster. "Erik, sohn von Rade, bruder von Rush, willkommen zu Ihrer zerbrochenen Familie."

Erik swelled with pride at the elder's recognition of him. Unfortunately, his moment of mixed pride and sadness was short-lived. The cargo elevator had just reached their floor with a loud ***ding***.