

CHAPTER 06: NEW FRIENDS OR OLD ACQUAINTANCES

Erik looked at Rush and yelled, "get them out of here!" Rush complied immediately with a respectful nod to the elder. He took her arm around his shoulders and led the small ones away as they each had a firm grip on his tail. The group limped along as quickly as they could back toward the hall that Erik and Rush had emerged from previously. If everything went well, Rush could come back and help Erik, or so he hoped.

Just as the elevator registered its descent past floor two, Erik's Pip-Boy began squawking.

"Surveyor Erik, this is Delta station Brotherhood of Steel detachment, please respond. I repeat, please respond. We have registered an attack by hostile forces."

Erik's eyes lit up as he rushed around the corner of a nearby cargo apartment and pulled his 10mm out, readying it. "Great. Now they want to talk." He replied to the hail:

"Delta, this is Paladin Rade. Hostile strike confirmed. Repeat, strike confirmed. Please send backup, I've got civilians down here and I don't think I can keep them alive by myself. I repeat, send backup!"

As soon as he got that last sentence out, the cargo elevator groaned to a halt as it slid open its protective metal mesh doors. Inside the elevator was a small group of Enclave soldiers: a sniper and two regular troops. There were two more with them, but they were wearing suits and carrying a large black container of sorts. Erik didn't pay the suits any attention for the moment, that damn sniper was quite menacing without any backup of their own. Erik's little 10mm wasn't going to be able to cut through their armor. He'd have to go with stealth.

As the three soldiers walked out of the cargo elevator, the two suits followed and set up their black container in the middle of the open area near the robot maintenance station. As they began to set up whatever it was, the three soldiers separated and began to canvas the area. It was just Erik's luck that one was headed toward him, plasma rifle at the ready. The soldiers were yelling commands at one another, constantly calling back and forth. Until this particularly unlucky one found Erik's crowbar connecting with the base of his skull. He didn't see much, just a scrawny kid in civilian clothing and a bloody crowbar. It was the thing he'd ever see; Erik finished him off with a single round from his silenced 10mm.

Happy with his luck, Erik drug the Enclave soldier into the cargo apartment he was staged in. He unceremoniously stripped the soldier down to his skivvies and pocketed everything he could use: the plasma rifle, about seven micro-fusion cells, fifteen caps, his backup laser pistol, and his dog tags. He'd have to come back later for the armor. It was a shame, as the young, well-built man would have been a fine specimen of the human genome, had he not tried to kill Erik.

Erik holstered his 10mm, grabbed his new plasma rifle, and ensured that it was ready for a fight. After verifying its clip was at full capacity, he set it back down on the desk, shoveled the rest of his haul into his bag, tossed his bag under the nearby desk, grabbed his new rifle and peered through the cracked door. "So far so good ...," he said to himself.

He immediately wished he hadn't said that; one of the men in suits had seen him smash his compatriot and was already calling to the attention of the others. Erik wasted no time in wasting the man in the suit. He pointed the barrel out, and pulled the trigger of the loud plasma rifle three times, just to make sure he was good and dead.

Those rifles were pretty effective, but were absolute shit for stealth. He'd given away his position. Erik threw the rifle under the bed, nabbed his bag from under the desk and ran out the door, hoping to have time to set up camp in another apartment before he could be located again. He was lucky enough to escape unseen by the two remaining soldiers and the other man in the suit, or so he thought.

As Erik ducked into another nearby apartment, he peered from beside the door, hoping to take another one by surprise. Unfortunately, he'd run out of luck. The sniper had seen him running across the concrete floor and had a bead on his position in the orange cargo apartment. He could be heard yelling to the others, indicating Erik's position. "Damn it, damn it, damn it. How the hell am I going to get out of this one?" Erik started to lean out to get a glimpse of his surroundings, but quickly scrambled back inside as a .308 round barely missed scrambling his brain.

"Well, fuck. That didn't work," Erik thought to himself after nearly earning himself a new haircut. He heard the men outside of his apartment container. He was preparing for the worst, loading up his laser pistol for a close encounter. There was a bold howl from far away, Erik naturally assumed it was Rush "Rush, they've got me pinned down. Can you distract them?" He howled a second time and began to sprint toward the cluster of Enclave soldiers at far end of the settlement. He'd just escorted the

three remaining members of his clan to one of the offices in the hallway. The cargo elevator dinged as it began its ascent back to the main floor.

While he was rushing around, Erik didn't hear the other Enclave soldier approaching from the opposite side of his cargo container. Fortunately, Rush was able to take the would-be attacker by surprise himself as he leaped down from the roof of the cargo box, winched off the man's helmet, and ripped out his throat with ease. Erik heard a gurgled scream escape the lips of the man as Rush performed his feral duty. "Thanks," Erik thought to a nearby Rush. He didn't reply but did let out a deafening war cry in response, releasing particles of blood and tissue from his maw. Erik readied his laser pistol and sprinted out of the apartment to a nearby alleyway between cargo boxes, hoping to avoid further sniper fire. Luckily, the sniper was quite distracted as he just watched his teammate get eviscerated by a large furry creature unlike anything he'd seen through his scope. The cargo elevator dinged again, but no one paid it any attention.

The sniper, perched on top of a set of double-stacked apartments, was doing his best to train Rush into his sights. Rush's speed was making this quite difficult as he was zigzagging between the apartments, but it wouldn't last for long. Rush was forced to sprint up a small lane, directly toward the sniper. There was no cover available to hide behind by this point. It was just what the sniper was waiting for, a clean shot. Rush knew it was coming, it was inevitable. The sniper drew a breath, held it, and squeezed the two-pound trigger, as soon as Rush—who was licking his chops with anticipation—entered his scope. In that instant, everything seemed to slow down, as if the bullet was ripping shreds in the fabric of space and time. Rush couldn't dodge the round. He swore he watched the bullet rip a nice new hole in the top of his right shoulder. Luckily, the bullet only grazed him, ripping away a large patch of fur and flesh. ***ding***

Erik was running in the opposite direction of the sniper when he heard the shot.

"No!" Erik screamed, fearing the worst. He tried to contact Rush mentally, but only got more pink static in response. "No no no no nononono nonooo," Erik worried to himself. He spun around on the spot and began to run back toward the sniper. As he did, he heard the cargo elevator ring as it arrived at the fifth subbasement. "Damn it, what now?!" Erik yelled as he continued to run back toward Rush.

Just as Erik rounded another corner between him and his fallen brother, he saw his saving grace: the brotherhood had sent a handful of paladins to clean up!

"Paladins," he yelled as soon he saw them, "sniper up top, and another around here

somewhere in a suit," as he continued to run in Rush's direction. One saluted him as the other two scattered, taking cover. Rather than taking cover, Erik decided it would be best to get Rush out of the middle of the battlefield. He ran up and with the help of the first soldier, drug Rush into a nearby apartment.

The soldier that saluted him and helped move Rush ripped off his helmet. Much to Erik's surprise, it was the elder! "Eh..El..Elder?! What are you doing down here," Erik stammered. The elder's sunbaked face broke into a smile, "today is your coming of age." Erik shook his head in confusion and stared a bit more. "I'll explain later," he continued, "but first we need to patch up your friend here." "Brother, actually," Erik corrected his adopted father with a hint of pride in his voice. The elder chuckled, "Huh. I'd hoped to meet him under better circumstances."

As they were talking, Erik had managed to rip off a sleeve off of his jumper and was tying around Rush's shoulder in attempts to stem the flow of blood. The instant Erik began to tighten the makeshift tourniquet, Rush howled in pain and shock. "Looks like I'm not the only one with an affinity for getting hurt around here," Erik said as he tied his crowbar into the knot and tightened the tourniquet a bit more, causing Rush to howl and bare his teeth in pain with a pitiful whine.

The elder ripped the crowbar out of the tourniquet and said, "Get out of here and clean up that mess, Erik," following the second cry from Rush. "There's a reason I made you give up med-kits for rifles," the elder said with a sigh and shake of his head as he continued to remove the shoddy tourniquet. "I'll make sure your friend here survives, now take my rifle and clean that Enclave scum out of my new base," the elder commanded as he folded up the scrap of sleeve to apply direct pressure to Rush's shoulder.

As they spoke, the other two BoS soldiers could be scarcely heard firing upon the two remaining Enclave men. Their scuffle didn't sound to be going very well, the number of slow plasma rounds were pretty shameful in comparison to the quick-fire shots of the sniper.

Erik nodded, took the elder's plasma rifle and readied it for battle. It was the elder's favorite. Erik himself had painted it matte black, replaced the steel stock with a solid oak one and inlaid a silver Brotherhood of Steel emblem into the stock using his own dog tags and broken 9mm pistol. Erik had gifted it to the elder for his 45th birthday, two years ago—quite an accomplishment in the harsh wastes.

He held it in his hands, admiring its weight for a moment before rushing out to find the asshole that put a new hole in his furry brother. He nodded to the elder, smiled at a pained Rush, and ran out of the door.

Erik bounced through the door and headfirst into trouble. The sniper up top was holding his brethren under heavy fire with assistance from the man in the suit who was to their three o'clock, pelting them additional rounds. The second man had recovered one of the plasma rifles from a fallen Enclave soldier. He was doing a surprisingly good job keeping the two BoS soldiers at bay. Erik shouted in their direction as a distraction—it worked. Mostly. The sniper paid him no mind, but the suited man did. He turned his attention from the pair of brotherhood men toward a screaming Erik.

Erik spun on his heel and ran opposite of his comrades that were hunkered behind a concrete divider. The suited man followed Erik, determined to end him with his own plasma rifle. Erik who was now sprinting and firing over his right shoulder, was doing his best to avoid being shot. Fortunately, the slow recharge cycle of the assailant's plasma rifle gave him plenty of time to dodge.

As the suited man chased Erik around a corner, he continued to send volley after volley of plasma toroids. The last round in the micro fusion cell nearly hit Erik directly: he'd stopped and turned to taunt the man again, only to realize that the grunt of a man wasn't going to bite a second time. The man flung the spent rifle away from himself and pulled out the 10mm he was previously using.

Erik tossed himself around the corner of another forgotten apartment and tried to catch his breath. Panting, he readied the elder's rifle and aimed for where he thought the man was going to be. He waited. And continued to do so. The man thought he was going to out-smart Erik by going around the other side of the building; he nearly did. Erik heard his approach from behind and quickly fired off a few shots in succession to slow down his attack.

The man refused to be deterred. He rounded the corner behind Erik and began to unload the entire clip in Erik's direction. Erik had just enough time to look the man in the eyes. They were wide with fear, large pupils soaked up almost all of his green irises. Not only were his eyes dilated, but blood-shot as well, as if he'd taken psycho or something. In Erik's split-second of observation, the man had squeezed off five of his twelve rounds, missing Erik entirely.

His luck ran out at round six. That one pegged Erik in his lower left leg. He wasn't sure when; but he didn't bother to notice until the man had been hit squarely with a toroid of plasma, super heating him and rendering him a sickly green goo. Having dealt with the man, Erik's adrenaline had dropped and he was now feeling pretty awful. He'd taken a bullet through his left calf, leaving a gaping bloody gap where there was once tissue. The bullet had penetrated his dermis and a portion of his muscle, preventing him from walking any further, forcing him to collapse to the hard, cold concrete floor.

He groaned in pain. Getting shot sucked, but at least his diversion bought the Brotherhood some time. After Erik had dispatched the man in the suit, the two BoS soldiers were able to split up and divide the sniper's attention, quickly bringing about his demise with some well-placed rifle shots.

Silence quickly filled the area. Erik cried out from a far corner of the room, "Anyone home," while fighting to rip off his other sleeve. "Surely I can use a tourniquet on this," he thought to himself. His cry elicited a response from one of the brothers, "Aye, explorer. Do you require assistance? What's your twenty?"

Erik roughly chuckled with a cough and cried out again, "Copy that. I seem to be bleeding again." Erik grabbed his plasma rifle and fired it up from his current direction as a flare. He looked down and grimaced at the blood that seemed to be surging out of his leg.

Shortly after firing at the roof, a pair of brotherhood soldiers jogged to his aid, one of them was holding his arm and had a fresh bullet hole of his own. They jointly took Erik's weight around their shoulders and slowly made their way back toward the elder.

"Hey guys, why's everything muddy? I don't remember mud in here ..." Erik slurred to the soldiers. "Sorry?" the one of the left replied. "Rade, what are you goin' on about?" Erik shook his head as his vision began to fade into a murky brown darkness. Erik's head drooped as his eyes rolled back into his head. "Uh...shit," the right-hand soldier said as they both picked up their pace. They didn't have too far to get him to back to help.

The Enclave's men had been dispatched, Rush was severely injured by the sniper, Erik likewise by the man in the suit, and one of the Brotherhood took a stray bullet as well. Given the circumstances, they seemed to be doing pretty well for the moment.

The Brotherhood soldiers had forgotten about the giant black container that the Enclave's men had set up.

The soldiers carried Erik past a handful of apartments until they came to the one that the elder was in. They both called, "Elder! We have more wounded." The elder came out, his mirror-like armor was now smudged with blood and bits of coffee brown fur. He was wiping his hands off on a bloody shirt when he came out, "what now, brothers?" He looked at Erik's pale, limp form and sighed under his breath, "Damn it, should've known."

Shaking his head he waved them in and had them lay Erik down on the large queen-sized bed next to Rush. "Thank you, brothers," the elder said as he made his way to the one that had shrapnel in his arm. "Franklin, you look like you took a hit as well." He turned to look at the other soldier, "Jenkins, you okay?" The soldier nodded and removed his helmet. "I'm good, but I think Erik's pretty tossed. He passed out on us on the way." The elder nodded and patted Jenkins on his shoulder and looked at the first soldier, "well done men. Thank you."

The apartment they were currently occupying was a "deluxe edition." It had five entire rooms in the forty- by sixteen-foot cargo container-based building: a kitchenette / dining area, a living room / office, two bedrooms and a bathroom, complete with tub / shower combo. Franklin took a seat in a dusty leather chair that was opposite the entrance with his rifle across his lap, to the west of the kitchenette in the tiny living room. The RobCo terminal on the desk beside him was dimly glowing, a testament to its quality. Franklin pulled off his helmet and gloves. After he tossed them on the desk and began to tug at his gauntlets when Erik came to. Franklin stopped mid-tug as he watched as Erik struggled to sit up, his head still heavy from before.

"Whas goin' on," he slurred, looking around at Franklin though the door way, Jenkins who was in the room, then down at Rush who was still out cold. Jenkins replied with a relieved chuckle, "Well, mate, you took a cap to the leg then decided on a bit of a sleep, you lazy bastard." Erik slowly regained his mind, a panicked look came across his face. "What happened to Rush? Where's the others? Where's the doctor?! Where is everyone? What's going on?!"

The elder came in from the kitchenette and gently patted Erik on the shoulders, "son, calm down. You and your friend here both took some slugs, but you'll be no worse for wear. Maybe some scarring. Now, we didn't see any civilians nor a doctor. Are you sure you saw them and not imagined them?" Erik shook his head, making

himself dizzy. "No elder, just ask Rush. They're here somewhere. Didn't you speak to the doctor?" The elder shook his head and looked back at Jenkins and asked, "you get any comms lately?" Jenkins shook his head with a frown in response, "Nope. Just Erik's latest broadcast. We haven't heard from him since before he went down here, comms went black. No beacons, no emergency broadcasts, nothing."

Erik pondered on that, surely the good doctor would have no reason to lie to him. "Jenkins, are you sure? You weren't off dicking around while you were supposed to be manning the comms," Erik queried. Jenkins shook his head again. "No, we were worried about your lack of communication. The Enclave attack prompted us to speed up your extraction." Erik knitted his brow in confusion then asked, "Elder, can we speak privately?" The elder gave a single nod and looked over at Jenkins and Franklin who had just walked in. "Give us a few minutes, men."

The two left through the front door and wandered toward the center of town to investigate the mysterious black box as the elder and Erik spoke. "Elder, you did speak with the doctor today, right?" The elder shook his head, "No, I've not spoken to him since I brought you home, son." Erik nodded and furrowed his brow again. "So...the only reason you all came down here was because of the Enclave? The doctor made it sound like he'd had my extraction planned out ..." The elder nodded again and replied with a chuckle, "Yes. That and we were worried about you. How are we supposed to function without a half-ass scout?" Erik snorted and smiled at his adopted father. "Well, thanks. I'm glad y'all came when you did," Erik paused and continued, "what do you mean when you said you were hoping to meet Rush under better circumstances? And what the hell is my /coming of age/?"

The elder shook his head as he sat on the edge of the bed, nearest Erik. "Well, I guess when I said I hadn't heard from the doctor, I misspoke. He's been spending his free time hacking into our network and leaving me sporadic messages; requesting updates on you, mentioning your brother, typical sort of stuff to write home about. They were far and few between, but there nonetheless. The last one I got, ten or fifteen years back, mentioned something about a special day. He didn't go into detail though, I just assumed that I'd been celebrating your birthday on the wrong day for nearly twenty years now." The elder finished with a faint chuckle and short sigh. Erik, who sat in silence, asked with pained tone, "you've always known I had a brother? Why didn't you tell me? I thought I've been alone ever since you told me how my parents died..."

The elder cut Erik off with another sigh, "I knew this was coming You know as well as I do that if I told you about your kin," the elder paused and patted an

unconscious Rush on his right thigh," you'd have nothing occupy your time except searching for them. No training, no learning, no schooling, no nothing. I felt, as your father, that it was in your best interests. That and I love you, and the brotherhood does too you idiot, you've never been alone. How do you suppose I was to keep my only son alive otherwise?" The elder finished his last statement with another gentle smile and a pat on Erik's pallid cheek. "Now, let's see how badly you've banged yourself up."