

CHAPTER 11: A MEETING OF THE MINDS OR TURNING TO THE FUTURE

Franklin and elder Redding had completed their lunch and were now sorting the loot they'd found so far. "You got a trick to these?" The elder shook his head at the holotape that was being waved in his direction. "No, not really. They're like a Highwayman, can't put 'em down." Franklin glared at his three stacks of holotapes. "Can't get the damn things to read. Pip-Boy's pissed at 'em." The elder shrugged and looked at the nearby RobCo terminal. "That should read 'em."

Franklin shrugged and walked over to the terminal and collapsed into the plush leather chair. "Right then," he mumbled, trying to force a tape into the slot on the side. "The hell? There's one in here already." He slapped his tape on top of the terminal and proceeded to mash random keys on the keyboard. The terminal's green screen slowly faded to life as its internal storage whirred.

ROBCO INDUSTRIES UNIFIED OPERATING SYSTEM

COPYRIGHT 2075-2077 ROBCO INDUSTRIES

- Personnel Terminal 7 -

Hello Dr. Hawthorne. You last used this terminal: 38357 days ago.

You have mail available.

You have urgent notices available.

> Inbox (14)

> Notices (999*)

> Access External Storage

>_

Franklin stared blankly at the screen, attempting to make a decision on which option to choose. He positioned the cursor over "Notices," then quickly decided against it. Nine hundred and ninety-nine was a bit much. He looked at the inbox entry again decided against that too, damn things were always a mile long. Franklin decided on the third option, to load the holotape. Moving down the cursor and stabbing the return key awarded him with a heavy **click** as the actuator sucked the holotape fully into the drive and began to queue up its contents.

Ten seconds later, and the terminal was ready for more input:

"External Storage

> Project Maia Recording 1
> Project Maia Experimental Notes 3
> Penny
> Back"

"Penny?," he questioned to himself. Selecting the third entry gained him another click and whir.

Penny my dear, I'm so proud of how well we've been progressing ...[CORRUPTION] ...sh and the others should be able to begin their acclimation proc...[CORRUPTION]...General Moseley and his daughter have been perfect subjects for...[CORRUPTION]...heart condition.

Our "side projects" are also well on their way, and after the first ...[CORRUPTION]...pairs seem to be best for social development.

Just think, dear, we can finally put our work to good use!

All my love,
- John

"Damn, not much outta that garbled mess..." Franklin leaned down on his left elbow and tapped his earlobe in thought. "Let's try this one," he muttered. He opened the "Recording 1" file. A man in his mid-thirties began speaking with a warm, southern accent through the terminal's thin-sounding speaker..

I am Doctor John E. Hawthorne: lead scientist of research and development, now head of the Maia project here at the Magnolia Research Station.

As per direction, we will be working in parallel with the Mariposa base in California to continue and advance the progress on the PVP. Those goons at West Tek had no idea what they were doing—typical contractors.

Rumor has it that this project we...inherited from West Tek is far more insidious than it was originally planned. I hardly believe such droll accusations and in fact am quite anxious to see how far we can push the boundaries of the human body. Imagine, with the greatest minds of our time working on this project, we'll plan out humanity's next evolutionary step!

As soon as our samples and subjects arrive later this month, we'll begin our first rounds of testing. If I remember correctly, one of my colleagues in the technology wing mentioned that we're also getting one of the new ZAX mainframes. That should help us tremendously in genetic sequencing as well as simulations...

This is recording number one for project Maia.

Doctor Hawthorne, signing off.

Franklin leaned back in the squeaky chair, "Hey, elder. You ever hear of some Mariposa place?" "Uh, yeah. Over in California. Army base, if I remember right. It's where the Master was creating that damnable army of mutants. Can you believe they've made it all the way down here?" Franklin nodded in silence, then muttered, "damn greenskins. Always tryin' to eat people or some shit..."

After pecking around on the terminal, Franklin finally coaxed it to eject the holotape that was already in it. The terminal slowly coughed up the yellow tape and was left wanting another. Franklin obliged by shoving his original tape in. The drive clicked and whirred as it tried to queue up the tracks.

ERROR!

Inserted media is severely corrupted. Recovery projected: <10%.

Would you like to perform recovery?

(Y/N) >_

Franklin was getting quickly irritated with the ancient technology. "Yes, goddammit, why would I shove it in you and not look at it?" He angrily stroked the "y" and "return" keys.

Please wait. Spooling holotape for recovery.

Franklin sat and stared at the blinking prompt as it advanced by five-per-cent every once in a while. He turned to the elder, who was still leafing through and

scrutinizing the documents from the stained Manila folder. "Anything good?" The elder paused and looked up from the hand-scrawled notes. "Uh, yeah. Interesting to say the least. There's a bunch of notes here on the development of the FEV and how it affects development of various creatures, humans included." Franklin nodded as he started hollowly at the RobCo terminal as it slowly ticked away its progress. He nodded off just as the terminal passed thirty-five per-cent.

The crew of six had just made their second of three to get back to the apartment block. No one had spoken aloud the entire trip. Erik and Rush had been going back-and-forth across their minds, trying to make sense of the recent events. Why had their grandfather and creator lost his mind? Why did he try to kill the cubs? Was he to blame for their elder's wounds? Would they be able to salvage anything useful from his corpse? Why did their elder only speak German?

Erik paused at the entrance to the office where they fought for their lives, not a few hours ago. It was charred black except for a few sporadic places and the epicenter of the blast. That's where Dr. Hawthorne's empty carcass was—a twisted cylindrical heap of scrap metal and electronics. His brain case had been shattered, its contents were splattered across the asbestos tile ceiling.

Erik sighed and entered the office. He tread carefully on the scorched concrete toward the doctor's body. The rest of his companions silently waited outside ground zero. Erik knelt next to the robot's carcass and began rooting around in its remaining innards. After a few moments of digging through charred wires and boards, he found what he was looking for: the robot's black box. That'd have its most recent RAM contents prior to detonation. Hopefully he could recover something useful from it, or at the very least have a recording of the last moments of his grandfather and creator.

Erik shook bits of debris off of the small cubic circuitry and shoved it into his trench coat pocket. The crew stared at him as he exited the burnt doorway. "What? Let's go home. We've got work to do, right Rush?" Rush nodded and added, "must pay respects." Erik glanced at his elder, the pups, then Jenkins and smiled. "Well, off we go then." They resumed their winding sojourn back to the complex yet again. Erik constantly turned the black box over in his pocket, feeling its intricate collection of chips, wires, and pins. "I'm going to figure out what happened to you," he thought to himself.

Jenkins noticed the stern look of concentration on Erik's face, and instead of bombarding him with questions like he'd planned, he turned them toward the others.

Jenkins jogged up from the back to walk in tandem with Rush, behind the elder and ahead of Erik and the children.

"Hey big guy," Jenkins whispered. Rush nodded in his direction, "yes?" "Uh, is everything okay with y'all? It's been rough going today. Should we be in such a hurry?" Rush shrugged slightly and grumbled, "elder's choice. We obey." Jenkins sighed, "yeah, I get that. But..." Jenkins grabbed Rush's arm and held him back behind the rest of the group. "Mrs. Elena's severely wounded. I tried to check her out when I let her out of that tank earlier." He lowered his voice even more, "I'm worried about her. We seriously need to check her out. The wounds are probably more than superficial. Maybe she didn't understand me when I tried to explain that to her..." Rush scoffed at the latter statement, he did his best to whisper as Erik turned back to glance at them a good forty feet behind them. "Elder knows. Speaks English, prefers German."

Erik stopped following the group and turned back in Jenkins and Rush's direction. Jenkins nonchalantly waved him off. Rush continued his explanation; "elder will worry about health after we mind the dead." Jenkins shook his head, "I don't know if that'll be good enough." Rush nodded and grumbled, "Thank you. Jenkins... Needleman." Jenkins smiled and patted Rush on the back, "no problem, big guy. Remind me when we get back to work on a name for you." Rush nodded with a small smile.

The two picked up their pace to rejoin the rest of the group. Erik turned around and walked backwards to speak with Jenkins. "What was that all about?" Jenkins shrugged and said, "guy stuff, you wouldn't understand." Erik snorted at Jenkins and turned to follow the group. As he did, he asked Rush mentally what was going on. He responded sparsely, "Jenkins is worried about the clan's elder. She's severely injured, but refused to show it. I think she's worried about things more important than her health at the moment." Erik acknowledged Rush's explanation with a quick nod as he turned back around.

The group had made their last turn through the maze just as Rush and Erik concluded their meeting of the minds. A quick five minute jaunt down the hall rewarded them with the entrance into the apartment complex.

Franklin grumbled at himself for nodding off and at the terminal for its pathetic advancements— it was now at sixty-five per-cent. He got up in a huff and walked outside for a walk," he grumbled to the elder as he slammed the door behind him. After making his way into the main thoroughfare, he noticed a few shadowy figures in the distance. "Hoy, brothers?"

Erik and Jenkins both raised an arm to wave back his greeting as they picked up their pace; the clan followed. Elder Redding stood up and strolled outside after hearing Franklin's announcement. "Looks like they found 'em, eh?" "Yeah, 'sgood I suppose. More mouths to feed, though," Franklin scoffed. "There always are, and we're better for it. You know that," the elder replied flatly.

A few short moments later and the entire crew had finally come together; both elders, Franklin, Jenkins, Erik, Rush, Harmony, and Dorian. They all stood around and stared at one other in silence until Erik cleared his throat. "Uh, elder Redding, this is the clan's elder." Elder Redding beamed as he held out a hand toward the clan's elder. She glanced down at his hand, then back at his offered hand. Since she was clearly not going to shake hands, he patted himself on the chest and said, "I'm Marshall Redding. Elder of our clan, the Brotherhood of Steel, and incidentally Erik's father. It's nice to make your acquaintance. Mrs..."

The furred elder again looked at him, this time with a faint hint of irritation. She glanced over to Rush, mentally commanding him to translate. He did as requested. "Sie ist Marshall Redding, menschlich Altester—Erik's Vater angenommen. Er sagt, er is glucklick, uns zu treffen." She nodded after Rush had finished mentally maiming his German. She extended her hand as Elder Redding had, "Elena, Altere von Magnolia Clan."

Elder Redding's fading smile renewed as he grasped her not-so-slender hand in a handshake that would hopefully be the beginning of their clans coming together. The clan's elder, however wasn't in the mood to suffer these strangers in her home any longer than necessary.

"Konnen Ich Sie helfen, Redding?" Elder Redding tilted his head and smiled awkwardly, "I'm sorry, but I only speak English and not very well. Rush can you translate?" He nodded again, quickly regretting the decision to speak. "Want to know if you need help." "Ah, yes. Well I suppose so. You see, we came here for two reasons. 1.) to bring Erik home, and 2.) to use the technology in this base to better the outside world, but now that we've discovered that you all live here, we'd like to offer you protection in exchange for the use of the base—we'd never bother you if you like, of course."

Elder Elena slumped a bit and responded in her thick, rough German accent, "We must mind our dead first. After that, we will discuss." Rush looked over at the elder, surprised at her English. He couldn't remember her speaking it outside of their tiny

classroom. She noticed this and responded mentally, "My English has improved, unlike your German, Rush. Don't worry, I will sort this out." Rush nodded.

Elena paused before properly beginning negotiations with Elder Redding. If she were completely honest with herself, she didn't know what to do. Had her clan not been nearly completely destroyed, she would have run them out post-haste...if not worse. She wouldn't have to make the hard choice that could ultimately lead to the end of her clan. She'd worked too many years to keep things running smoothly. Throughout her twenty-something year stint as Alpha, she'd managed to keep all twenty or so members in check, fed, educated, reproducing, and safe. She turned to face Rush directly.

He avoided her gaze, as he didn't want to give her a reason to berate him any further, being scolded over his terrible German was bad enough. She cleared her throat with a short growl, forcing him to meet her gaze. It was unlike one that he'd seen before; it was full of sadness and confusion. He blinked back at her and tilted his head. "Yes, elder," he asked mentally, "Können Ich helfen?" She nodded once and gave him a small smile. "Ja. Sie Können. Sie und Erik will helfen Mich mit den Toten."

He nodded somberly then turned his gaze back toward the dirtied concrete floor. He had a pretty good idea of what she'd had planned and he didn't like it. He'd suffered through so much recently, he wasn't sure if he'd be able to deal with another death so soon. His elder of most his adolescence and adulthood gently placed a hand on his cheek and kissed his forehead. "Ich liebe dich, Beta Rush. Ich will gehen mit den Toten. Sicherstellen das der Clan wächst stark." She glanced over at Erik then repeated the same actions to him, leaving him confused and worried. Erik thought over to Rush, "what the hell's going on?"