

CHAPTER 13: COLLABORATION OR NEW WINDS BLOW

Erik kept these questions to himself for now, as they were nearing the elder's apartment. Elder Redding stepped out from the dark apartment into the artificial sunshine to greet the crew upon their arrival. No one spoke until Elder Elena walked in past Elder Redding's outstretched hand and was disappointed to see her home in complete disarray; chairs were out-of-place, dirty dishes were piled in the sink, various cabinets and containers stood open. "Do you infiltrate everyone's home and turn it upside down," she asked aloud to no one in particular as she slammed the flimsy screen door behind her. Elder Redding simply smiled to himself, allowed himself back in and pulled a chair out for her at the small table. She accepted the seat as they the others filed in behind her and milled around the apartment. Erik and Rush took residence on the dirtied white couch, Jenkins sat in the green leather chair facing the entrance, the pups were in their room still playing with the car Jenkins gave them, and Franklin got the hell out of there all together.

Elder Redding started their negotiations with an apology, "I'm terribly sorry for barging into your home, ma'am. We had no idea that this facility was occupied by civilians or anyone else for that matter. We'd only re-discovered it a few weeks ago when Erik was scouting around down here, looking for some long-lost technology or run-down facility we could turn into a trading post or outpost of sorts. After I was here twenty years ago, the Brotherhood decided it wouldn't be worth the manpower and resources to occupy it as we were just really getting a foothold where we're setup now." "We'll make sure it's in order before we leave, you have my word," he concluded.

She nodded. "That's nice, but what do you want from us," she asked flatly. Elder Redding replied, "well, we originally came here to find Erik. We weren't getting regular reports from him like we normally do. Of course, we rushed down after we got his distress call prior to the Enclave attack. Once we arrived, saw that the Enclave were dealt with, and got everyone patched up, we dug around and found some articles that lead us to believe there are copious amounts of data and experiments from the pre-war scientists here that we could use to make the outside world much better." He paused and continued, "frankly ma'am, you've got a utopia down here, compared to what's left of the world above: you have shelter, heating and cooling as you like it, plumbing with clean, pure water, proper sanitation, obviously great education, and pre-war knowledge and technology that would be worth more than its weight in

bottle caps. We would like to leverage that information to try to improve our world above."

Elder Elena slouched back in her chair as her fur started to rise. She didn't like the way this sounded and was deathly afraid of the worst. She shook her head fervently, "No. You will not take this facility. It is our home and we will defend it as our brethren have for the past three generations. I'll lay down my life before you will take it away from us. There are things that have taken place here that should never see the light of day. In the wrong hands, they could cause further destruction than what we have seen in our time." Elder Redding was taken aback by her accusations. "Ma'am, respectfully, we don't want to *take it from you*. We couldn't do that to you and your family, especially after what's happened recently. It would be inhumane of me to even *suggest* something like that. If you allow it, we'd just want to make copies of the research the scientists were doing, something we can use to help us provide cleaner water and food to the people in the wasteland. Above all else, we don't want to run you out of your own home." He paused again, "in fact, I was hoping to extend an olive branch of sorts. Let us help you, help us. We can provide you with extra supplies and materials for yourself and the children, even station some people here to stave off any further Enclave attacks. Anything you need. Maybe in the future, after we have grown to trust each other more, we could talk about letting the Brotherhood rent a floor or two above you to establish a presence in this area. We would be able to provide better protection and help civilize this area for future growth."

Both elders sat silently at the table for what seemed to be hours, churning thoughts over in their heads. In fact, the entire apartment was dead silent with an occasional punctuation of laughing children in the back. Jenkins had nodded off in the comfortable, well-worn chair and Erik and Rush were still sitting in silence, fixated at the worn square kitchen table with tired, red, puffy eyes rather than the important conversation that would determine their futures above it.

Erik and Rush were just nodding off when their furred elder finally responded. "Yes, Elder Redding. I believe we can come to an agreement. You and your charges will be free to search the facility as you see fit. Copy what you need, but you will leave the originals here at the station. I will review what you decide is worth taking with you. There will be a few more conditions on my part, however." Elder Redding leaned forward, giving her his undivided attention. "Yes? What can we do for you?" She sighed and said, "I want you to take Rush with you," then stopped for a moment, gathering her thoughts.

"I can't ask you to leave Erik here, he seems to have an important role in your clan and I won't have he and Rush split up. They have been apart for far too long as it is. I'm afraid there may have been permanent damage between them." Elder Redding nodded. "I'm sure they'd appreciate that, as do I," he said, "but what will you do without him? Surely he's just as important to you as Erik is to the brotherhood? Especially considering..." She ignored the rest of whatever the man in front of her was going on about—as much as she disliked Rush, she still loved him dearly and didn't really want to think about his leaving the clan.

After some further silence between the two, Elder Redding decided to wrap things up. "As a final condition, since you're entrusting Rush with us and seem to be severely short-handed now, I'd like to schedule supply trips down here. We'd bring you supplies every so often as you deem fit. Ideally, I'd like to have Jenkins bring them. I'm sure he'd like to bring the kids something now and again too—they seem to taken a liking to him. Of course, he'd probably want to do checkups on all of you as well." The elder chuckled to himself with a smile, "he's overly protective of his patients. Especially children."

Elder Elena pushed her chair back to make room for herself, "fine, fine. Yes, that will be fine. You will aid us when necessary and Jenkins will visit and keep us healthy. I too have one last request. Rush and Erik must visit at minimum once a year—Rush hasn't missed a birthday for the children yet. That and I'm sure I will miss our never-ending arguments eventually." Elder Redding smiled and said, "I wouldn't have it any other way, ma'am. I'll do my best to ensure the safety of you and your family as best I can. As far as I'm concerned, Rush, being Erik's blood, is as good as my son. I hope you feel the same about Erik." She nodded and replied, "yes. He was taken, ah...given away long ago. I am glad to see him in such good health. I have often wondered over the years where and how he was."

With that, they concluded their negotiations, stood up, and shook hands, as civilized men and modern-day werewolves are wont to do. They both looked around, curious about stillness in the apartment, and saw that their compatriots were all asleep. Jenkins was gently snoring in the chair, Erik and Rush had slumped over on each other's shoulders and the children had climbed up next to them, Harmony had a slightly soiled teddy bear with one eye and Dorian was clutching the blue car Jenkins had gifted them. They were all fast asleep.

For the first time in what seemed to be a lifetime, Elder Elena proudly presided over the remnants of her once-great pack and smiled as Rush and Erik both began

gently snoring in unison. Although her pack was nearly decimated, they were quite resilient and would recover one way or another. They would all one day be what the world above needed, or so she was told long ago and deeply believed.

Elder Redding was thinking something along the same lines as he gently patted Elena on the shoulder. "Tough crew you've raised, ma'am." She nodded in response, silently thanking him. "You seem to have done respectably with Erik as well. He appears to be just as caring and intelligent as his brother. I wonder if he is half as hard-headed?" Redding chuckled in response, "Like you wouldn't believe. Would you care for a walk? I'd like to learn more about you and your clan, if you don't mind, ma'am. I never got so much as a hint from the doctor that your people existed. All of his notes and letters left me thinking it was just him and some experiments..." She nodded again as they exited through the screen door, pleased that he's at least half as civilized as they were. She thought to herself, "it certainly couldn't hurt. It'd be nice to get a first-hand account of the world above, I haven't been up top for over twenty or so years now."

Franklin, being the partially racist and monstrosity-fearing man he was, was the only person in the facility who was unhappy with the current situation aside from the radroaches—they'd hoped to take the facility for themselves. He was still in disbelief that Elder Redding would put the Brotherhood in so much danger by bringing that behemoth Rush back home with them. On top of that, what the fuck did he think he was doing, palming around with /their/ old lady?! It was obvious to Franklin, that the best course of action would be to put a bullet in each of their furry damn heads, preferably teeth first, and burn this pre-war hellhole to the ground, preferably with a large explosion of some sort. Or at least that's what he, the six-pack of flat beer he'd found, and his trusty flask thought. With all of the alcohol in his system, he felt pretty good—in an awful sort of way. He wasn't impressed with the impending changes this corroboration between the clan and the Brotherhood would bring. "What's next," he thought, "we're gonna start hugging super mutants and kissing ghouls and petting deathclaws and...what. Fucking robots?" He laughed aloud to himself at the last part, no way that could work out well—too many sharp bits. Or could it?

Franklin struggled momentarily, but eventually managed to get his mind back on its wobbly, alcohol-fueled track after getting derailed by the imagery and complications of human-and-robot sex.

Okay, sure. The fuzzballs were just almost completely obliterated—and would've been if the Enclave knew how the hell to shoot something properly—but he /knew/ damn good and well they were hiding something. No one in the wastes was this intelligent and well-mannered without hiding some terrible secret; just like those people that turned out to be cannibals. They'd had everyone duped, too. Maybe those furry abominations were going to use Erik and the rest of them as livestock? He trailed off at the thought of being used as a human stud—maybe it wouldn't be so bad so long as they got some females. He had no intention of becoming a fagot for these monsters or anyone else...

As he slouched in a deck chair on the deck of a second floor apartment, his conscience, nestled in the tiny, sensible portion of his brain attempted to reign him back in by materializing his dead brother next to him in an empty deck chair.

"You're just paranoid and insecure, Frank. Is it due to the attacks by the deathclaws that lead to my death? It's making it hard for you to adjust—to let anyone close to you. Just think, this week you discovered a new sub-species of humans and found a almost-new bozar! When have you had such an accomplished week? Not to mention that one of your only friends in this world is a genetic experiment of the same strain that spawned that nice werewolf, not an orphan like we all thought, and /he's/ taking the news much better than you are!"

The warm, intelligent voice that sounded like his dead brother was getting quieter and quieter with each swig of skunky beer that Franklin chased down with moonshine from his battered flask. "You just miss me. Do you still think it should've been you instead of me that died that day? You've gotta get over..." Franklin cut his imaginary brother off as he quickly polished off the beer in his hand, let it drop to the deck with a ***clank*** and chased it with another shot of searing moonshine. He popped open another flat beer. "Why're you jealous of Erik? Is it because he found what you lost? Or is it that you're afraid that he'll replace you with Rush?" his brother cried in question. Gulp, swig. "You know you like Rush and can't stand it. Is it because he reminds you of me—a big, protective brother. He's giant teddy bear for fuck's sake, Frank. I'd bet you two could be great friends." Gulp, gulp, gulp, swig, swig. Another beer down and now his flask was dry. "Damn it, shut up" Franklin slurred as he threw the fifth bottle in the general direction of the other four emptied ones near him, shattering it. He'd sincerely hoped that damn brother of his would finally drown. That would make him happier than anything in the world. "I love you, little brother. Keep trying to better yours....," it faded as it finally sank into the depths of his alcohol-soaked brain.

As he watched from the second floor deck, the elders' walk made him intensely jealous. Or maybe he was being overprotective of the only man who was nice enough in the wasteland to give him a reason to live now that his brother was gone. Or it was jealousy? It was definitely probably maybe jealously. He watched the two stroll leisurely through the debris-littered complex as if it were just a beautiful Spring day. They legitimately seemed to be getting along, they were visibly more relaxed with one another, Elder Redding threw an arm over her shoulders...they were getting touchy-feely. She just slipped a hand of slender fingers into the codpiece of his armor while his elder was going in for a handful of boobs! Or that was his imagination. He blinked the false, awkward images out of his eyes and again saw two diplomatic and well-postured beings exchanging their cultures in a non-flirtatious way. No goosing going on there. At that point, Franklin decided to return to the apartment he was borrowing and pass out on the dusty bed after he'd kicked the remnants of a long-dead something out of it. He'd catch up with the rest of them in the morning, or afternoon, or whatever it would be in about ten hours from now. Maybe he could talk some sense into them then. Or at least use some of the fuzzy ones for target practice.