**Time and Tide**

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**Time and Tide**

by [Lavian](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Lavian)

**Summary**

It's all gone, her world, her life, swallowed by time and replaced by a rotting husk as she slept. The story of the Sole Survivor as she makes her way through a world that has long since left her behind. Dealing with her loss, her desire for vengeance and the hope that she can find some semblance of the life that was taken from her.
Their fingers entwined, her slender hand fit perfectly in his calloused palm, an arm around her waist as they danced across the living room, the setting sun peeking through the open curtains, bathing the room in a soft orange light. His handsome face weathered by experience. The most beautiful hazel eyes, warm and inviting, with a hint of playful wickedness, kept her mesmerized.

Her grin never fading as she watched him lip sync to the song on the radio filling the room, occasionally leaning in close, warm breath teasing her with the promise of a kiss before pulling back, a playful smile playing on his lips.

..cause I'm a wanderer, yeah a wanderer....
As the song came to a close, he leaned in again. She took the opportunity to give him a playful nudge in the side with her free hand, using his surprise to finally steal the kiss he’d been denying her.

"You're mine now big guy", she smiled, hooking her arms around his neck, melting into him.

"Always", he kissed her again.

"Honey, I was thinking...".

"Hm?", she asked, searching his eyes.

"I wanna get started on the baby's room, head down to the store in the morning and get a few things"

She smiled, "Isn't it a bit early to start picking out colours?"

..into each life some rain must fall...

"Nothing like that, just clearing those boxes out, fixing up that closet, see what we have to work with"

"This is really happening isn't it", she whispered, resting her head on the crook of his neck.

"Scared?", he asked, wrapping his arms around her as they swayed slowly.

Her warm breath on his neck, "Terrified, nervous, and I couldn't be happier"

He ran his fingers through her hair, "You'll be an amazing mother, honey, and I'm back now, I'll always be here".

"I missed you", she whispered, a hand on his chest and a familiar stinging in her eyes.

"Hey…", he whispered cupping her face in his hands, "I'm not going anywhere".

"I love you", he smiled brushing his thumb across her cheeks.

"I love you", she managed, through the tightness in her chest, before their lips met.

The crack of thunder roared through the skies, jolting her awake from the living room sofa. It was dark, save for the fading, sickly green light that poured through the broken windows and the holes in the ceiling above her.

The musty smell of rot and mould.

It took her a few seconds for the reality to hit, when a flash of lightning bathed her world in blinding light, followed immediately by another crack of thunder that shook her to the core.

She scrambled for the handgun between the cushions, her heart racing as she sat on her heels, pointing the weapon at the darkness, searching for any sign of movement.

That's right…

The weight of her memories pressing down on her once more.

She lowered the weapon.
How had she fallen asleep in this?

She remembered curling up on the mouldy couch, terrified, crying. A radiation storm, an uncommon occurrence but not unheard of, Codsworth explained, as he gave her a shot to counteract its effects.

The world outside, a roar of thunder and lightning, alien, bathed in sickly green, clouds writhing uncontrollably in the sky, rain replaced by the barely noticeable tingling sensation on her skin.

All she could do was shut her eyes and pray for the salvation of unconsciousness.

She glanced at the Pipboy on her wrist, just past 4AM, her third day outside the vault.

She spent the first day and most of the second, crying between bouts of unconsciousness, camped at the foot of Shaun's crib or slumped next to the bed she and her husband once shared, what was left of it. Awake, unblinking, her mind blank, the living dead.

It was hunger that forced her back to reality. She spent the evening of the second day rummaging through the houses of her ruined neighborhood, never leaving its borders. Until the storm came, transforming this alien world into something from her childhood nightmares.

It had subsided considerably since then.

During all this time, Codsworth thankfully let her be, silently following behind her as she searched through the ruined town. Standing guard while she slept and wallowed in her despair.

She ran her fingers through her hair, and took a deep breath, trying to clear her mind before swinging her legs off the couch, forcing herself to stand. The damp leaves that littered the floor, crunching beneath her boots.

Codsworth's motion sensors provided some degree of security and peace of mind, but it didn't stop her from keeping the gun at her side, constantly.

It belonged to Nate.

Hidden beneath their bedroom floor, in a sealed, airtight room where her husband kept a private collection of firearms, clothes and military gear. Undiscovered these past 200 years, all she grabbed was the small semi automatic handgun. A little extra security while she wandered around the small town.

During those first two days, in the back of her mind, when darker thoughts nipped at the edges of her consciousness, it might have also been an 'option', a 'way out'.

But that wasn't her, deep down she knew. As much as it hurt, as much as the pain threatened to swallow and consume her, as surreal as this all seemed, it wasn't in her nature, she would not run from it.

Her baby was out there, in this hell.

She had no idea how long it had been since Shaun was taken, and she was put back into cryogenic sleep.

Was it a few days, was it a century ago, she didn't know and it didn't matter.

He was alive, her baby was alive out there, she needed to believe that.

And the man with the scar, she could see his face even now when she closed her eyes, Nate's
murderer.

He took everything from her, she needed that monster to be alive as well.

And she would find him…
Leona

The storm was dissipating. The dim, sickly green light that covered her world mere hours earlier, was dying, making way for the familiar darkness of early morning.

It would be daylight soon.

Her body ached from a night spent huddled on the weathered, mouldy sofa and her head was pounding, either from hunger or as a side effect of the unfreezing.

Rubbing her stiff shoulders and tucking the sidearm behind her, she made her way to the open doorway, hugging the doorframe and scanning the darkness outside.

The cold winds were dying with the storm, rustling the dead trees and the encroaching vegetation. Whistling through the ruins of the old suburb.

"Codsworth?", she called, taking a tentative step outside, one hand still on the doorway.

Nothing, just the wind, dancing locks of dark hair across her face.

A few more steps.

"Codsworth!", she called a little louder.

Then there it was, the light from the jets that propelled the Mr. handy unit, appearing from behind the house across the street and making a beeline towards her.

She'd never seen the robot move that fast.

"Mum!", he called, dashing across the street."Go go go, we have to go!"

"Wha…?", she managed, confused, taking a step back as the robot stopped suddenly in front of her.

"Please excuse my abruptness, but we really need to get you back inside", he insisted, grabbing her arm by the loose fabric of her Vaultsuit, and attempting to drag her back into the house.

"Codsworth, what's wrong with you?!", she resisted, pulling free and stepping out into the street.

Then she heard it, howling, voices, boisterous laughter only slightly muffled on the wind. "What is tha…are there people here?"

"It would appear we have a few uninvited guests, yes, now if you'd come with me…", Codsworth confirmed.

"Where are they, how many?", she asked, looking around, trying to discern any movement in the darkness. The voices seemed to be coming from the direction of the bridge leading out of town.

"There are four…individuals, and they are approximately 35 meters that way", he declared, pointing beyond the house opposite her own. "A little too close for comfort if you ask me"

If Codsworth were human, she imagined he'd be wringing his hands right now.

She stood there for only a moment before making up her mind, however, she managed only two steps in the direction of the sounds, before he flew in front of her, blocking her path.
"Mum, where are you going?!"

"I'm going to talk with them".

"Talk with them?", he asked incredulously. "Mum, please reconsider, I beg you, these, people are not the conversational sort".

"I need food Codsworth, and not to mention information, I have to at least try".

"But…".

"Codsworth", she smiled, placing a hand on his rusted body, a gesture meant to both reassure him and to say thank you.

"I can't stay here forever, I need to know what's going on out there, what's happened since the bombs dropped", she paused, taking a deep breath and brushing back the hair from her face. "If you're right, if I've really been gone two hundred years…then I'd imagine there's a lot I need to catch up on".

"I can assure you, there's not much to see out there Mum", Codsworth insisted.

"You don't know that", she countered. "You said yourself you haven't been that far from Sanctuary".

"But Mu…".

"It can't all be like this", she swept an arm across the ruins of the old town. "They had to have rebuilt, picked up the pieces…somewhere".

"Somewhere…", her voice tapering off into little more than a whisper. "It's not all gone, Codsworth, it can't be".

"I understand your….", Codsworth started but was interrupted by the noise behind him.

She could see well enough in the dim light, behind the house they were facing, a scrawny, bald man knocking over a stack of barrels and falling in the dirt, all the while laughing like a mental patient.

Then another male figure appearing from behind the house absently kicking him in the side before turning the corner and stopping short when he noticed them.

"Oh dear", Codsworth muttered.

She could see stained teeth in his twisted grin as he approached, dust and grime on his face, neck almost completely covered in ink, hair caked in filth and matted to his forehead. He stopped maybe ten feet away, on the sidewalk while she stood in the street, Codsworth between them.

She made no movement as he looked her over, giving Codsworth and their general surroundings a cursory glance. Her breath was slow and shallow, body tense and she could feel her heartbeat in her chest.

Was this such a good idea after all?, she thought.

He stood there seemingly relaxed, finally locking eyes with her.

To her credit, she held his gaze, her face calm and composed while resisting the rising urge to run.

Run and he'll chase you.
That much was clear from his stance and demeanor.

She was suddenly very aware of the gun tucked behind her.

*Shoot them.*

*For what reason? They've done nothing*, her rational mind told her.

He was armed, she could see the crude, pistol shaped contraption tucked inside his tattered overcoat.

She ran through a half dozen 'what if' scenarios in the few seconds that they locked eyes.

The clanging of the rusted aluminium barrels shaking her back to the present.

The bald one had managed to get himself standing again. The way he moved, he was definitely high on something.

She decided to take the initiative and hopefully set the tone of their interaction.

"Good morning", she brought her hand up in greeting.

"My…", she gave Codsworth a quick glance, deciding how she should introduce him.

"My companion and I are just passing through, and I'm afraid we've run out of supplies", she explained, giving the best smile she could manage. "I was wondering if there was any place nearby where we could restock, or, if you're willing, perhaps we could purchase any food and water you can spare", she offered, keeping her tone as friendly as possible without sounding meek.

"You from that vault up the path", he motioned vaguely to the hills behind Sanctuary. It wasn't a question so much as a statement.

"That's right", she smiled again.

"That mean it's open now?", he probed.

"I'm afraid not, it's been…resealed"

"But you can open it right?". He tapped his wrist to indicate her Pipboy.

"I can't, I'm sorry, it…it's been locked out", she lied, rubbing a thumb over the dirty screen.

"Really now?", he looked her over again, scratching at the stubble on his face. "That's a shame".

"Anyone else come with you from the vault?"

"No". She mentally slapped herself. "Listen I… there's nothing left in the vault, I left pretty much empty handed, but I have money, if you have any food or w…"

"How much?", he interrupted.

"Pardon?"

"How much caps you got?", he repeated.

"C…caps?", she asked, confused. "I don't kno…"

"256 Caps", Codsworth chimed in. "It is yours in exchange for any sustenance you may be
carrying."

"Codsworth?", she turned to the robot at her side.

"Allow me to handle these negotiations Mum". One eye on her, one eye on the men in front of them and the third seemed to be scanning their surroundings.

She gave the robot a nod.

By this time the bald one had finally stumbled his way to the man's side. "Hey now, that's a fine lookin bit..."

"Shut it you moron", the man spat at his comrade.

"Look she's got one a them vault things", the bald one persisted, earning himself a knock on the head.

"I said shut up!"

"That fuckin hurt", he snarled, rubbing his head and walking off to the side

"Alright lady, how bout this, we'll take that fancy bracelet of yours in exchange for some of our rations, I'm sure we can spare a few".

It was true she had one hell of a headache and her hunger was more than a little distracting, she felt dizzy, weak, but she had the presence of mind to understand a few things.

Codsworth's presence was the only thing preventing these men from simply trying to take what they wanted from her.

There were also supposed to be four guests according to Codsworth. So either this guy was trying to buy time until the others showed up, or the other two were already lurking in the darkness trying to get into a favourable position.

"Roan, what is this?", a gruff voice startled her. As if on cue, a man and woman appeared from the darkness, to her right.

Tattered leathers, rags and makeshift armor. Both with their guns out and just as filthy as the first two.

*Shit.* She bit her lip, her heartbeat fast and heavy, she could almost hear it.

"Mum?", Codsworth whispered, and she looked into the one eye focused on her, she was sure her face was beginning to betray her fear.

"She has a Pipboy, she's from that vault on the hill," the man with the inked neck explained, the one she'd been speaking with, apparently he was Roan.

"So take it, kill her and scrap the tin can, what are you waiting for", the woman replied.

How could they speak so callously about murdering her as if it was nothing, something barely worth a second thought, and to talk about it as if she wasn't even there.

"I dunno, that'd be an awful waste of a fine woman", the man to her right supplied, she didn't need to see his face, she could feel his eyes on her.
They were busy arguing what to do with her.

"Pssst, Mum, maybe if you hand over the Pipboy"

"No".

"But…"

It wouldn't stop her from being at their mercy if she gave it up. They would just as easily kill her, or worse, that much was plainly clear.

And Nate was in the vault, she'd die before she let this filth anywhere near him. Finally, her baby was out there. Nate's killer was out there.

If this meant her death then fine, she would die fighting, but she would not roll over for these, people, these scum.

"No", she repeated.

No…no, that wasn't it, she couldn't die here, couldn't afford to be so callous with her own life. She made a promise to him, to Nate, she had a responsibility to Shaun.

It was true, it would be the easiest thing in the world to go down fighting and say she tried. She mentally cursed her own weakness, her shaky resolve.

Depression and shock, she was still very much trapped within its web. And while she was enough of a student of psychology to recognize the signs and analyse her own feelings, she was no less a slave to them.

She took a deep breath.

Be smart.

Stay alive.

The man in front of her, Roan, still hadn't drawn his gun, he was arguing with the bald one. The bald one had a tire iron tucked in his ragged pants, nothing more, nothing hidden. The man and woman to her right were a good distance away and had their weapons drawn but not pointed at her.

"Codsworth, are your weapons still functional?", she muttered under her breath.

"Certainly".

Good.

"When I say, I need you to attack the two on our right, hold their attention but keep your distance", she directed. "I'll deal with the two in front"

"Are you s…As you say Mum".

The low light should reduce everyone's accuracy somewhat, especially with those crude looking guns. Was that wood, attached to a pipe?

Also with Codsworth's mobility he would no doubt be an incredibly difficult target to hit, and the darkness would not hinder him in the least.
It seemed they were entertaining the idea of giving her to the bald one.

If she was going to make her move, it would have to be now.

"Now Codsworth, go!", she hissed, soft enough so only he could hear.

She could feel the heat from Codsworth's jets as he dashed towards the duo on their right, drawing their fire away from her. It took Roan a few seconds to realize what was happening, whipping out his pistol and trying to get a bead on Codsworth as the robot circled the other two, unleashing torrents of flame, blinding and panicking them.

Exactly what she needed. In those few seconds his attention was focused solely on Codsworth, she pulled out the sidearm tucked behind her in one swift movement and leveled her aim on Roan.

The first shot missed and she could see his head turn towards her as if in slow motion.

*Exhale.*

The second shot hit him in the right arm, before he could get her in his sights.

His grunt of frustration through gritted teeth as the pistol fell from his hands, was drowned out by the third shot catching him in the right shoulder.

Her attention was so focused on Roan, allowing the bald one to close the distance on her. She knew he was there and could see him in the corner of her eye, but she didn't expect such speed from a man that could barely walk a straight line.

Switching her aim to the new threat while Roan doubled over cradling his arm, she managed to get a single shot off, missing him completely before he brought the tire iron down on her arm.

She managed to stifle a pained whimper.

A glancing blow but it was enough to knock the gun out of her hands and still hurt like hell. The momentum from his charge and swing causing him to stagger forward while she managed to get out of his path.

Dodging the charge however, caused her to show her back to Roan. This, she realized a split second too late, when he grabbed her from behind. With his arm across her, he had her left arm pinned while he maintained a shaky grip on her right. She started to panic, gritting her teeth and struggling against him, her heart beating like thunder in her ears.

"Fucking bitch!", he spat in her ear. His stench was sickening, infecting and overwhelming her senses.

She was facing the bald one. He had toppled over when she dodged his charge and was crawling back to his feet, rusty tire iron in his hand. She could see everything now, as if her senses were dialed to eleven. From the tattoos covering his body, to the sweat and dirt. The writhing movements of the muscles and tendons under his skin, lit with bursts of light and fire from the battle to her left. Codsworth had managed to set the woman ablaze, her screams distant and muted under the thundering heartbeat in her ears.

"Jet!", Roan barked to the bald one. "Take her, dammit!".

He had gotten to his feet, a sadistic, almost feral grin on his face, eyes wide and crazy, hunched over like a cat about to pounce on its prey as he approached her. "Gonna fuck you good, bitch".
He wasn't Human, none of them were. She realized in that moment, and it pissed her off.

"Fucking animals!", she roared, kicking forward with all the strength she could muster, her heel making contact with his face, breaking his nose and snapping his head back in a sickening crunch.

"Jet!", Roan screamed in disbelief, an unexpectedly higher pitch than she would have expected from the burly man. It only served to fuel her.

She screamed again as she struggled against him, a guttural and primal roar dripping with sorrow, fury and her indignation at this twisted world she'd found herself in.

Nothing but raw emotion fueling her.

She raised her leg and brought her heel down on his foot, feeling the bones crack, gritting her teeth against his screams and snapping her head back to catch him in the face. His grip loosened and she managed to get her right arm free.

"Get off of me!", she elbowed him in the ribs, causing him to stagger backwards, finally releasing her.

She spun to face him, again swinging her elbow blindly behind her and catching him in the jaw, breaking it. She wasn't done however, using the momentum from her blind swing, she followed up with a sweeping kick that, to her surprise, knocked his feet clean out from under him. He hit the pavement flat on his back, the wind knocked out of him, sputtering and grunting, his nose broken and face bloody, truly a pathetic sight.

She staggered a few steps back, almost tripping over the dead body of the bald one as she stepped over him, gasping for air in ragged bursts but never taking her eyes off of Roan. His left arm seemed to be the only thing still under his control, sweeping wildly across the ground.

*No, not wildly.*

She had failed to notice, with all the trash and debris littering the ground, the crude, makeshift pistol he was reaching for.

Too late, he had it.

No time to charge at him, she turned around, scrambling to the ground for the sidearm she dropped earlier as the sound of gunfire rang out behind her. In his current state he was pretty much firing wildly in her general direction, bullets cutting through the air above her and hitting the street around her, kicking up dust and rubble.

*Found it!*

She spun around on her side and squeezed the trigger, again and again, gritting her teeth and holding her breath until the magazine ran empty. Finally relaxing when he stopped moving, releasing the breath she'd been holding, the coldness of the ground seeping into her, sending a shiver through her body. She lifted her head and propped herself up on one elbow, Codsworth had led the last man about two houses away, and if the stray laser fire, flames and ear shattering screams were any indication, her 'butler' was just about finished with his task.

*Home defence...right...*

Her body ached, breathing was becoming difficult and her world was starting to spin, she attempted to sit up, but the sudden explosion of pain in her side sent waves of white hot lightning through her
brain.

She clutched her side, feeling the dampness that had formed, her palm, a dark crimson.

Shit.

Don't move, keep pressure on it.

She clenched her teeth and tried to bite back the pain, resting her forehead on her arm, her hair clinging to her damp skin while she shivered in the cold.

It's not over, not like this…not yet.

Codsworth…hurry.

"That's it, keep it steady, relax, breathe in".

The intoxicating scent she knew all too well, his warmth on her back, his breath on her cheek, rough hands cupping hers.

"And exhale…", his voice reverberating through her, sending delightful shivers down her spine. "Squeeze…".

The shot startling her, but he held her steady as she laughed, his hands slipping down to her waist and encircling her in a gentle embrace.

"There you go, great job", he smiled, resting his chin on her shoulder.

"But I missed", she giggled.

"Technique first, we can work on your aim after that, cadet".

"Oh I'm a cadet, am I?"

"Don't worry, we'll make a soldier of you yet", he grinned.

"Besides, you might have even hit the target if I didn't shift your aim to the side", he mused, feigning a tone of innocence and detachment.

"What?!", she put on the best scandalized look she could manage. "Why would you do that?".

"Well we can't have you getting a big head, can we?", he teased, taking the gun and placing it on the makeshift table at their side then locking his arms around her again.

"I have no idea what you mean, sir", she turned to face him, wrapping her arms behind his neck.

"I'm the most humble person I know, ask anyone", she smiled sweetly, pulling him into a kiss.

The grass was soft under her bare feet, the lake off to her left, calm and serene, the sun warm on her face, and she was safe in his arms.

"Seriously though, honey, I don't know when I'll get called in again, I want you to…", he began.

"Don't", she silenced him with a finger on his lips. "I don't want to talk about that, you're here now".

He caught her hand in his, placing a gentle kiss on her fingers. "I want you to be able to protect
"I've been protecting myself just fine so far, mister", she insisted, mentally slapping herself when she saw the hurt flash in his eyes.

Guilt, regret, she knew how he felt, despite how many times she tried to reassure him, he still blamed himself for their situation. Didn't he know by now, how proud she was of him. He was her hero, her soulmate, and she'd wait for him as long as it took.

"Nate, I...I'm sorry...I didn't mean...", she gave him an apologetic look, resting her palm on his cheek and rubbing a thumb across his lips.

"I Know", he smiled, kissing her forehead.

"One more year...one more year and we'll be free", he whispered.

"Yes, so stop worrying about me and focus on yourself out there, I'll be here, as long as it takes...I'll be here", she repeated, punctuating it with a quick, deep kiss.

"Besides, I pity the poor bastard that decides to mess with me", she grinned.

"Oh you mean that, Judo....uh..Jitshu...nonsense you've been learning", he teased.

"That's not what it's called, you jerk", she slapped his chest, doing her best to look appalled, but unable to contain her playful grin.

"Ha!, all that dancing and twirling around isn't gonna help you in a good old fashioned street brawl, lady", he stated in his best condescending tone, enjoying her look of faux shock as her lips moved, but she couldn't find the words.

"Street brawl!?", she managed, finally.

"Good sir, I don't know what kind of lady you think I am, but all my brawls take place at the very best high class drinking establishments!", she stuck her nose up at him, doing her best imitation of a pampered high society lady, but unable to keep a straight face.

"In fact I bet I could give even you a run for your money, slick", she poked him in the chest, her cheeky grin, achingly adorable.

"Oh ho ho, is that a challenge I hear, little lady?".

"Damn straight, think you're man enough to take me?"

"Let's see then, shall we", that wicked grin of his was her weakness.

She was over his shoulder in an instant, kicking and laughing as he made his way to the car, suddenly changing direction when they were halfway there.

"Nate?".

"Nate, that's the lake!"

"That's right sweet cheeks", he laughed.

"Nate, No!", "Don't you dare!", she screamed slapping his butt.
“Nate!, I still have my clothes on”

“God dammit Nate!”

“You kiss your mother with that mouth, sweetheart?”, he returned the favour with a slap of his own on her backside, earning him a shocked whimper.

She could see the water’s edge approaching from her vantage point behind his back, then hear the splashing as he waded in, until the shoreline was a few feet behind them.

“Nate I swear if you throw me in…”, she didn’t get a chance to finish her threat, as he flipped her over, catching her in his arms before she hit the water.

She looked up at him in surprise for a moment before she regained her senses. She wanted to scream at him, but decided the grin tugging at the corners of her mouth would do little to help her case.

“Arrrrrggghh”, she growled, as he looked down at her with that smug toothy grin.

“You’re gonna pa...mmmphh”, she started, but the words died in her throat when his lips met hers and pulled back just as quickly, leaving her head spinning.

“Give up?”, his voice little more than a whisper even as he leaned in, his breath hot on her lips.

“Wh...what?”, she managed, not really hearing him, her gaze focused solely on his lips, her heart racing in her chest.

He had her under his spell and they both knew it.

He pulled back with an amused smile when she followed his lips as far as she could, before sending him a quizzical look, but he just chuckled under his breath, gently lowering her legs into the water until she was standing in front of him, her hands on his shoulders. It wasn’t cold like she thought, the midday sun actually making it quite pleasant.

She regarded the water lapping at their hips with a frown before he cupped her face in his palms and tilted her head until he was staring into those enchanting, emerald green eyes. Leaning in close, studying her face, brushing his lips ever so lightly against hers. Pulling back just a bit to judge her reaction, pleased when she ran her tongue over luscious, slightly parted lips. Her hungry, half lidded gaze locked on his own.

He kissed her again, pulling her closer.

“Nate…”, his lips now brushing her cheek.

“Hm?”

“Nate, my bathing suit…”, warm kisses trailing under her jaw.

“Still…in…the…car…”, his fingers in her hair, gently forcing her head back, her throat exposed to his relentless assault, nipping at the soft flesh, lips moving down her neck to her shoulders.

The deliciously hungry, dull ache deep inside her, clouding her thoughts.

His scent, his kisses, the heat of his touch, as his hands roamed her body underneath the flimsy fabric of her shirt, drowning her senses in a world of pleasure. She ran her fingers through his hair, absentely scratching the back of his neck as their cheeks touched and she hungrily searched for his
lips. Denied again, he pinched her chin lightly, grinning, and asked for the second time. "Give up?".

She flashed him her own seductive grin.

"Never", she brushed his hand away, crushing her lips into his in a deep, breathless kiss, biting and playfully tugging at his lower lip when they finally part.

"That's my girl", he smiled, his eyes gentle and warm, he kisses her cheek and whispers in her ear.

"Leona...".
Blinded, for but a moment when she slowly opened her eyes. She stared up at the ceiling, the sun peeking through the cracks, dappling the room in shards of light. She could feel the warmth on her cheek as she took a deep breath, her throat dry.

She lay on the floor of her living room, just inside the doorway at her feet, she could see that much.

Her body ached, her headache though, had subsided into a mild irritation. Memories came rushing back, and she brushed a hand over her forehead, blinking the haziness from her vision. She had killed two people.

*How did she feel about that?*

It had to be done, they would have killed her otherwise, or worse. She remembered their utter indifference as they decided her fate in front of her. No empathy, no conscience, no remorse, they made their choice. And while she decided, she didn't regret what she did, she did regret the fact that she was forced to do it.
She squeezed her eyes shut, blocking out their faces and trying to calm the feeling of nausea in the pit of her stomach.

Still Alive. She thought to herself as she was once again aware of her hunger and the dull ache in her side.

That's right. She was shot.

Lifting her head and gingerly running a hand over her side. The wound was covered in a scrap of fabric that was haphazardly duct taped to her skin.

She was bare from the hips up, she realized. The top half of her blue jumpsuit was rolled down, and the blouse she wore underneath, torn and tattered in blood soaked rags as if someone had taken a shredder to it. Her bra, the only thing protecting her modesty.

She groaned, laying back again. The soft cushioning underneath her head, she realised, was probably the remains of her blouse.

"Cods…", her dry throat sending her into a fit of coughing.

"Codsworth!", she finally managed to growl, her voice hoarse.

"Mum!", the robot appeared immediately in the doorway from outside. "Haha!, you're finally awake, I knew you wouldn't lose to those filthy raiders!"

"Although, for a moment there…", he continued.

"Codsworth…"

"And then, they flew over the...", he kept going.

"Codsworth…", she ground her teeth.

"To be sure, I don't believe...", was he ignoring her?

"Damnit Codsworth!", she yelled, or tried to, her voice cracking, sending her into another coughing fit.

"Mum are you all right?". "Please try to relax, I can…"

"What, is, this?", she shut her eyes, bringing her hand up towards her chest.

"Ah, I beg your pardon, but you had lost quite a lot of blood by the time I found you, and while the stims I administered would have closed the wound eventually, I decided it best to stop any further blood loss before it took effect".

She stayed silent, eyes still shut in annoyance, bringing one arm to rest over her forehead, while she grabbed a handful of the tattered fabric at her side with the other and showed it to him.

"Oh!...oh that", he paused. "Well you see, while my fine motor functions are indeed exceptional by most standards, I must admit to some…difficulty with the buttons on that particular article of clothing".

She let the strips of cloth slip through her fingers and lazily let her arm fall to her side. She couldn't fault him for that. It had taken even Nate a few seconds to figure them out. Needlessly convoluted in the name of fashion.
"They were indeed quite the unexpected adversary, Mum".

She sighed, it made sense he would have had to work fast if she was bleeding out, she guessed. Besides he did save her life, twice now was it?, she definitely wouldn't be here without him.

"Thank you, Codsworth", she managed.

*Dammit, that was her favourite blouse…*

"No thanks necessary, I'm just glad you're finally awake".

"About the, uh, bandage, Mum", *even Codsworth recognised a disaster*, she thought to herself. "I had to improvise somewhat, however, your wound should have closed nicely by now, I see no issue, should you wish to remove it or change it out, I'm sure you would do a far better job than I".

"In any case, I suggest you have something to eat, and you do look a little dehydrated as well", his eyes scanning her as she lay there.

Her ears perked up upon hearing this.

"You found food?", she groaned as she propped herself up on her elbows to face him.

"Indeed", he pointed to the small cloth sack off to her side, the Pipboy laying on the ground next to it. "There is dried fish, cooked…meat, of some sort, Mutfruit, and Sugarbombs!". "There's water behind you, whiskey, if you're so inclined, as well as a bottle of Nuka Cola".

She pushed herself to her knees as quickly as she could, biting her lip to keep from crying out. *God, everything hurt!* She grabbed the first carton of water in reach, testing the liquid on her tongue before hungrily gulping down the rest, almost forgetting to breathe every few gulps. *Sweet nectar of the gods.*

"Easy Mum, there should be more than enough there to replenish you"

She sat back on her heels, panting and dropping the empty carton.

"Codsworth I freaking love you right now", she managed between breaths, grabbing the cloth sack and emptying its contents in front of her before helping herself, pride and table manners be damned, not to mention restraint.

"I live to serve, Mum, although it's no five star meal, I do hope it meets with your satisfaction".

"Where did you find all this?", she managed to choke out.

"From our guests earlier this morning of course", he said.

"It seems they were running quite low on supplies themselves. Mum, I do believe that mister Roan character, was *lying* about sharing their supplies in exchange for your Pipboy", he sounded absolutely shocked by this revelation.

She pinched the bridge of her nose in annoyance before shooting him a look over her shoulder. *Really?...you don't say.*

She could see the street outside behind him from where she sat.
"Codsworth?"

"Yes Mum?"

"Where are they?"

"Pardon?"

"The bodies, where are they?", she clarified.

"Aha!", one of his eyes flipping around to scan the street behind him. "I took the liberty to dispose of them earlier this morning, while you slept"

"Dispose?", she asked.

He held up the ignition canister that powered his flamethrower attachment, letting loose a tiny burst of flame.

She swallowed the fish she'd been chewing, wincing, before quietly turning back around to her meal.

She turned the pistol over in her hands, a box of 9mm ammo at her side, as she sat on the staircase leading out of her husband's secret storage room. Although, room might have been too generous a term.

It spanned the length of their bedroom, but only wide enough for two people if they stood side by side.

Shelves on both sides, lined with a multitude of guns, most of which she had some familiarity with, military gear ranging from night vision goggles to soft exosuits, worn primarily under Powerarmor, to explosives, grenades, knives, medical supplies. Everything but food and water.

Or a time machine, she mused to herself, listening to the radio on her Pipboy as it lay on a shelf, illuminating the room.

There we go, three magazines loaded for her pistol.

"Just need a shirt", she grumbled, pushing off the stairs and browsing through the shelves.

"Where did I put….those…".

"Aha, found you", a few stacks of her shirts, skirts, underwear and other random articles of clothing, hell she even had makeup, shoes and office wear down here. That was the one problem with the small flat, very little space to raise a family. Or to keep her stuff, for that matter.

Nate, thankfully, let her to keep some of her 'girly stuff' as he called it, down here.

Her father had bought her this place, a long time ago, less than a year after meeting Nate and introducing him. The only man she ever brought home that her father genuinely respected. This place was meant to be a stepping stone, a starting point to their life together.

But then the conflicts started, as the world slowly unraveled, tearing apart at the seams, and he enlisted to serve.

They spent very little time here, before they had Shaun. When she worked and studied in the big city, her apartment was her home. There they would stay, the precious time they had together, before
he had to leave again. Her heart breaking every time she said goodbye, the uncertainty of not knowing if she would ever see him again.

She thumbed through the stacks of folded clothing before finding something suitable, knocking over a small metal box when she pulled it free. Its contents spilling over the floor. She knelt to pick it up.

Pictures, of her, of them, the most recent, with Shaun. So tiny, beautiful and precious in her arms. Her heart felt like it was being crushed in her chest.

The letters they wrote whenever they were apart. Her fingers tracing his words.

She shut her eyes, a hand over her mouth to stifle her sobs, but it was useless. She cried...

*How had she forgotten this was here.*

She hated feeling this way, it wasn't helping anything, there would be time for this later. After she found her baby, after she found that monster with the scar. She clenched her fists in her lap and lifted her head skyward, taking a deep measured breath.

*Calm down.*

She wiped her tears, stacking everything, placing them neatly in the box and returning it to the shelf, pausing for a just a moment, seemingly lost in thought, before her gaze fell upon the Pipboy.

Walking over to it, she opened the Holotape slot and ejected the tape she had stored, running a thumb over the words….

'*Hi Honey'*

She returned to the box and placed the tape in it, staring at it one last time before finally closing the lid.

*I'll be safer here than with me.*

"Mum?", Codsworth called from the kitchen.

"What is it Codsworth?".

"I've tidied the living room and placed the rest of the supplies on the kitchen counter".

"Thanks, I'll be right there", she called back, as she finished lacing the pair of hiking boots and strapping the holstered pistol to her thigh.

She emerged a few minutes later, military issued mini-backpack and Pipboy in hand, a comfortable white, casual button shirt and a pair of rugged, brown hiking boots to go with her blue jeans.

She could hear Codsworth outside busying himself as she placed the Pipboy on the counter and started packing the remaining supplies into her backpack.

Two more cans of purified water left,

*I'll take those.*

The town was surrounded by water, of course, however according to Codsworth, there were residual traces of radiation in it. Radiation that her body *might* not be able to handle, having not had the
benefit of adapting to it over time and generations, like the other denizens of the wastelands out there. It was not something she was willing to test just yet.

Whiskey.

*That can stay.*

The mystery meat Codsworth eventually identified as molerat.

She had balked at the thought of eating it, even in her current situation.

Nate would have laughed at her.

"Aha, planning an excursion are we", Codsworth appearing behind her.

She flashed him a smile.

"Yes, *we, are*", she grabbed the Pipboy, fiddling with it for a moment before sliding it across the counter towards him and tapping the screen.

"Tell me that's what I think it is", she beamed.

"Ah, indeed, the old USAF Satellite Station, Olivia if I recall". "Is that to be our destination then?".

"Yup", she was still smiling.

"Might I inquire as to why?".

"There are people out there Codsworth, I've been listening to the radio on this thing. There's a broadcasting station in a place called Diamond City", she explained.

"Civilization Codsworth", she added, with a self satisfied grin. "I told you it couldn't all be gone".

"I see, but why the satellite station, that is a military facility, Mum".

"Communications", she explained, equipping the backpack. "There should be broadcasting equipment there, some kind of radio I can use. Maybe contact this, Diamond City, or at least make contact with real people", she un-holstered her pistol, double checking it.

"Or at least people who won't try to kill or rob me", she added.

"I see your point…well then, I stand ready, just say the word, Mum".

"Then let's be off", she smiled, giving the robot a playful tap on the side before strapping on the Pipboy and heading out the door.

"Mum, are those *grenades*, on your belt?…".

"Think there's anyone in there?", she asked, nodding to the Red Rocket truck stop, off to the side of the dusty road, the sun blazing overhead.

"Unlikely anyone has settled there, but there may be people inside", Codsworth informed her.

*Or supplies*, she thought, drawing her pistol, cautiously approaching the building.

"Allow me, Mum", Codsworth offered, his voice low as he followed alongside.
She nodded, letting him enter first, sticking her head behind the facility before making her way back to the door and waiting.

Old tires, parts, bottles, scrap metal, strewn all over the grounds, the weathered sign at the side of the road displaying 'Class C Coolant $113.99 per gallon'. An indication of just how bad the energy crisis had gotten back then. She sighed and shook her head.

*How had things gotten so out of hand.*

"There seems to be no one here", she heard Codsworth say from inside. Holstering her weapon and entering the building.

"See what you can find".

"As you say", Codsworth confirmed, disappearing into one of the back rooms.

The place was a mess, she ran her fingers absently over the countertop as she walked. A dug out husk of the old re-fueling station that she knew. Empty cupboards, trash, empty boxes, and a cash register she had to force open with considerable effort, revealing old money, a few thousand at a glance. Brittle and stained, no value whatsoever in this new world, if what Codsworth said was true.

*Bottle caps…..really?*

A sudden movement outside the doorway catching her eye, her gun drawn and ready in an instant, as she moved cautiously towards it. Deep breath before poking her head outside, stepping out and leveling her pistol at...

*A guard dog?*

*Are we trespassing after all?*

A German Shepard, black and brown, clawing and sniffing through the rubble around the pumping stations. Its ears perking up in her direction as it turned to face her.

*Shit.*

Its tail was wagging as it stared at her for a moment.

*That's a good sign right?*

She lowered her weapon off to the side just a little bit.

"Hello, boy, you're, friendly…right?", her voice kind and gentle as she lowered the pistol a little more.

He answered with a muffled, half bark, *'rowoff'*, and dashed towards her. The sudden movement causing her to jump back in surprise, silently mouthing, *'whoa!'*, as she backed up against the wall, an arm held up, defensively across her chest. She somehow managed to resist her gut reflex to bring the gun up at him, before realizing he wasn't really attacking. He had stopped short, right in front of her, tongue out, tail wagging, cocking his head to the side as if bemused by her reaction.

*That was a little embarrassing*, she thought, slowly holstering the gun and kneeling in front of him, no sudden movements.

"H…hi?".
Extending a hand, slowly, fingers closed, eyeing his adorable face warily. He may be cute, but, no harm in being cautious. Gentle, curious licking as he intercepted her hand, causing her to open her palm, feeling a bit more at ease.

"Hey there", she smiled, relieved.

"You seem like an okay guy", she chuckled, scratching him behind the ears, as he sniffed at her and lapped at her cheek.

"Are you out here all by yourself?"

"Ah, I have something you might like", she remembered, dropping her backpack and taking a seat against the wall.

"Here we are", after a bit of searching, she retrieved the strips of cooked molerat meat from her backpack, unwrapping it and setting it down in front of him, watching him sniff at it before digging in.

"It's not really my thing, but, maybe…", she stole a piece and took a bite.

"Mmmph", she groaned, trying to force a smile even as she winced when he looked up at her, quirking his head and whining.

"Absolutely vile", she chuckled, a hand over her mouth as she tried to swallow.

"Here", she fed him the rest of it, running her fingers through his fur as he ate. He seemed healthy and well fed as far as she could tell.

"You seem to like it though"

"Must be an acquired taste", she grinned.

"Mum, there's very little worth…ah we've adopted a canine I see", Codsworth appeared in the doorway next to her, looking down at them.

"He was wandering around out here, I thought maybe he might be guarding the place", she explained.

"Unlikely Mum, there doesn't seem to be any sign of human habitation, this place is quite deserted and has been for quite some time"

"Find anything interesting in there?", she asked.

"A box of 10mm ammunition, though I can't vouch for its condition, as I said the place seems to have been deserted for some time", he replied.

"Hmm, alright", she sighed, "we should probably get moving then".

"Indeed, I'd say we have about six more hours of daylight", he confirmed.

She threw on her backpack, giving the dog a playful scratch on the neck as she stood.

"It was nice meeting you, boy", "but it's time for me to go", she smiled, scratching him behind the ears again before walking off towards the road.

*He'll be fine, he's obviously been thriving out here, more than she would be.*
The sound of the dog's groaning followed by another bark causing her to stop and turn around, cocking her head at him. He was following her.

"Seems it wants to come with us", Codsworth deduced, bringing up the rear.

She flashed the dog another smile, kneeling to pet him, definitely adorable.

"Yeah? That's fine with me, it'll be nice to have some company, boy".

"I beg your pardon, Mum"

She looked up at the robot flashing him a cheeky grin, "relax Codworth, you know there's no one that could replace you".

"Well of course, I'm glad to see you realize that".

"Alright boy, let's stick together".
"It's this way boy!", she called.

Their new canine companion seemed adamant about heading into Concord. However, it was her plan to take the road around it, skirting the town, it would take a bit longer, but it should be safer.

*Right...?*

The dog made a beeline straight down the road leading into the town, his barking and whimpering catching her attention when she turned left at the fork in the road.

"It seems rather determined to go that way, Mum"

"I was hoping to avoid Concord, I don't want to run into anymore of those *people* before we get to the base", she explained, pensively looking out over the town from the elevated road.
It all looked hollow, weathered, rotting and broken from her vantage point. Walking through those narrow streets and between the densely packed buildings was a good way to get ambushed, she didn't need military training to see that.

Another bout of barking catching her attention. Her new friend obviously felt quite strongly about it. He sounded almost desperate that she follow him.

She chewed on her lip, looking down the road she was headed and then back towards the town before making up her mind. She un-holstered her pistol and turned towards Concord, trailing behind the dog.

*So…a lawyer, a dog and a robot, walk into a ghost town*, she sighed.

"Alright, we'll go around the buildings and use the alleyways, stay off the streets", she decided.

"As you say Mum".

Ragged curtains still fluttered in shattered windows, paint flaking off of warped walls. The wind was picking up, shades of grey slowly creeping across the sky.

Store displays blown out, bakeries and hardware stores stripped bare. Naked mannequins, once proudly showed off the latest fashion trends, now staring up at her, worn and broken, helpless, silent witnesses to the passage of time.

The sound of gunfire caught their attention not long after entering the town, causing them to dash into a nearby alley. They made their way towards the sound, between the buildings, silent and unseen, before peering around a corner towards the museum at the edge of town. Four people, in the same likeness as the ones that invaded Sanctuary. Tattoos, face paint, filthy, ragged clothing under cobbled together strips of leather armor. All of them unloading a barrage of gunfire at some hapless soul on the museum balcony, who was barely able to return fire before having to take cover again. Two men and a woman at the front, shooting from their position behind walls of sandbags that ran across the street, the fourth man, closest to her position, firing from behind a lamppost, their backs to her, still unaware of her presence.

*What should we do?*, she thought for a moment, taking in the skirmish unfolding in front of her.

"Shhh, boy", she whispered, her voice calming as she crouched next to the snarling German Shepard, trying to restrain him from dashing into the firefight.

*Should we even do anything, we don't even know what's going on.*

"Perhaps it would be best if we found another route past these savages, Mum"

"Maybe…", her anxiety rapidly growing every second she stood there.

*These people could very well have been part of the same group that attacked her.*

"Maybe we could…..", she began.

"*No boy!*", her mind was made up for her in an instant as she lost her grip on the dog, the canine bolting towards the closest shooter, taking a chunk out of his leg, his scream drowned out by the gunfire.

*Shit.*
"Codsworth go!", she hissed, dashing out from behind the building, drawing her pistol and putting two shots into him before he could swing the butt of his rifle at the dog, dead center, perfect aim, shifting her sights a few inches to the side to take aim at the woman just beyond him. They may not have heard his screams but they definitely heard her gunfire. It was too late however, she squeezed the trigger three more times while advancing, a rapid barrage that hit the woman in the chest and head. Codsworth's laser fire making short work of the third, and a timely, well placed shot from the stranger on the balcony, taking out the last one. The entire exchange took no more than fifteen seconds.

"Hey!", Up here on the balcony! , I've got civilians inside, the raiders are almost through the door. Help us, please!", he pleaded before, something inside caught his attention and he was gone, not even allowing her the chance to respond.

Everyone seemed to be unharmed, her impulsive canine friend trotting up to the museum and scratching at the door, barking at her to follow.

"Are you unharmed, Mum?".

"Mhm", she answered absently, hands shaking ever so subtly as she slowly walked towards the museum. Her eyes lingered on the bodies littering the street as she walked by. They never stood a chance, no time to react. This was different than before. She initiated this, not in anger or fear for her life, not hopped up on adrenaline, this was murder.

*But you did it to save someone*, she told herself.

*Did I?*

*They deserved this, they were monsters, just like the ones that attacked you in Sanctuary.*

*Maybe...*

"This is how it's going to be isn't it?", she muttered under her breath, looking down at the bodies in remorse. This wasn't her world, not anymore, the law held no sway here. Did such a thing even exist anymore?

She sighed, sparing another glance at the empty balcony above before settling on the museum doors. She had started something here, it might have been against her better judgement, but she would see it through. Besides, making friends was never a bad thing and something told her she'd need all the friends she could get, if she wanted to make any progress in her search.

She could hear the muted sound of gunfire inside.

*Deep breath.*

"Let's go".

"*No more British occupation!*".

She moved slowly among the lifeless redcoat and civilian mannequins, the sparse lights casting eerie shadows on the walls while a pre-recorded re-enactment played through the speakers in the ceiling. She could hear Codsworth in the next room, drawing the raiders' fire, keeping them distracted while she tried to circle around.

Room by room she crept, eyes on the shadows for any sign of movement. She could see display
cases lining the walls of third room even before she entered.

It was as she entered the doorway, that a hand shot out from the side, grabbing her gun arm, pulling her in and causing her to stumble forward.

Another hand on her throat before she saw his face, pushing her into a broken display case, smashing her arm on the wooden frame, causing her to drop the gun.

His laughter, as sickening as his stench, and his face, too close to her own.

She was off balance, bent backwards over the case, her right wrist captured while her left hand clawed at the fingers around her throat.

She could see another raider coming up behind him, self satisfied grin on his face, gun in hand.

"Hold her!", he growled.

His grin instantly devolving into panicked screams as her canine companion burst through the doorway, knocking him off his feet, snarling and mauling him.

"It's that damn dog!", her attacker snarled, looking over his shoulder.

"Get it off'a me!", the other raider screamed, dropping his gun as he tried to protect his face from razor sharp teeth.

She took full advantage of the distraction, bringing her knee up into his groin, "Fffffffuuucckk", he choked, releasing her wrist to clutch himself.

Seizing the opportunity, she pried his fingers off her throat, twisting his wrist and forcing him to bend over, kneeing him in the face.

He staggered back, reeling from the blow as she followed up with a stomp to his chest that sent him crashing into another display.

Retrieving her pistol and bringing it to bear on him as she advanced, three shots in the chest before he could recover.

It wasn't over. She whistled, a brief, sharp, high pitched tone, catching the dog's attention and causing him to jump off of the other raider, allowing her to follow up with one bullet to the chest.

"Good bo…", a sudden movement in the doorway to the other room catching her eye, before a hail of gunfire came at her. Searing pain in her shoulder causing her to cry out as she dove behind the nearest display case, pulling the dog into cover and shielding him as shards of glass and splintered wood rained down on them.

Her hold on her companion was tenuous however, allowing him to break free and dash towards the threat.

Shit.

A few blind shots from her pistol overhead causing a break in the gunfire as the raider took cover behind the wall.

The sound of growling and a panicked scream, was her queue. Pushing herself to her feet and taking aim, just as the dog, with a firm hold on the raider's arm, dragged him into view. A single shot to the head finally ending it.
She staggered back, trying to catch her breath, thanking whatever deity that still existed in this world that she hadn't hit the dog, and slumped down against the wall, making sure she had a view of all the exits.

Her finger gingerly prodding at her shoulder to check the damage, eliciting a muffled whimper through clenched teeth. It was a scratch, it stung, but was nothing compared to the first time she was shot.

Her heart was still racing, although it wasn't from the same unbridled fear and panic that she felt in Sanctuary. She wasn't weak from hunger and dehydration, her head didn't feel like it was about to explode. Her emotions, her fear, had been under control this time, for the most part.

Her eyes fell upon the bodies in front of her. It was getting easier, to pull the trigger. She could still feel the weight of their lives, though not as heavily as before.

Was she imagining it?

Was she really starting to become numb to it all, so quickly?

It scared her, the thought of it.

She pushed herself to her knees as her furry friend came bounding back, having scouted ahead she imagined.

"Hey boy, good job", she smiled as he licked her face, giving him a quick hug before checking to make sure he was unharmed.

"Good boy", she scratched him behind the ears, before standing. They really did work well together, throughout that entire scrap it really felt like they were on the same page.

The sound of gunfire in the main hall had become less frequent and she could hear shouting from the floors above.

"C'mon boy".

"Hello?...are you alright in there?", she called, standing outside the door of the room the group were holed up in. At least she thought it was, the raider kicking at it and yelling obscenities at it only moments ago, seemed to think so.

"Who are you?", came a voice from inside.

Really?...

"The one that helped you outside earlier, can you open the door?", she asked.

"Don't do it, it might be a trick, they might be…", she heard muffled mumbling behind the door.

She sighed, "Listen, the raiders are gone, it's alright to come out".

"Nice try bitch, we're not fucking stupid!", a woman's voice from inside causing her to raise an eyebrow, slightly taken aback.

More muffled mumbling. She was getting annoyed, straightening her stance and looking over the railing into the main hall below. Codsworth stood guard just inside the door to the museum, the dog sitting behind her quirking his head when she flashed him a glance, one ear flopping to the side.
She turned back to the door. "Fine, don't let me in, but the raiders are dead, you can come out when you're ready...or don't".

"Stay in there for all I care", she muttered under her breath

"I'll just be on my way, you're welcome", she turned, walking past the dog, earning a whimper from him before she heard a man's voice.

"Wait!", came another voice and she looked over her shoulder, the sound of something heavy being dragged from behind the door, a desk or some piece of furniture.

"Give us a minute".

She turned to face the door once more, the dog trotting over to her, licking her bruised knuckles, earning him a weak smile and a gentle scratch behind the ears.

The noise stopped, and the door clicked, opening slowly. She brought her gun up, just in case.

"Whoa, whoa, easy there miss, we're the good guys", a handsome man, a little dirty perhaps, and a mechanic of some sort, judging from the tool belt around his stained, grimy jumpsuit. He backed up into the room, showing her his open palms.

Next to him, the gentleman from the balcony approached, dressed in colonial attire, a laser rifle at his side, a friendly smile on his face. "Ma'am, I don't know who you are, but I'm damn glad you showed up when you did. Sorry about the confusion, but given what we've been through these past few weeks, trust and faith in our fellow man is kind of in short supply", he threw a brief glance at the woman pacing back and forth at the far end of the room, mumbling to herself.

She lowered the pistol to her side as the dog ran past her legs, towards an old woman seated on a nearby couch who whispered in his ear and seemed to be having quite the conversation with him.

"That's fine", she managed a polite smile. "Is everyone alright?"

"As well as can be expected", he replied, looking at the haggard group around him, five in total, including himself.

"What about you though" , he looked her over with furrowed brows.

Dust and dirt dotted her face and clothes. There were minor cuts on her lip and forehead, splotches of blood on her shirt, and obvious wounds on her shoulder and abdomen.

"We have a few stimpacks left if you...", he continued.

"I'm fine, thanks" , she gave him another polite smile.

"Are you sure?...I mean you look..."

"I said I'm fine" , she repeated, a little more sternly than she intended. She was aware of how she looked, and while she did have a few cuts and bruises, which were already rapidly healing thanks to her own stimpack supply, she knew the blood on her clothes was mostly not her own. Something she would rather soon forget.

"Hey it's alright", he brought a hand up in surrender. "I'm just saying, I know it couldn't have been easy making it past those raiders, so if...".

"Listen...uh...", she paused.
"Oh sorry, Preston, Preston Garvey, Commonwealth Minutemen", he offered his hand and she took it, holtering her pistol.

"Minutem…?"

"This here is Sturges", he nodded to the man in the jumpsuit, at his side.

"A pleasure miss", he nodded

"The Long's, Marcy and Jun at the back and Mama Murphy there on the couch", he motioned to the old woman.

"It's nice to meet you kid", the elderly woman nodded to her with a smile. "You're not at all what I expected Dogmeat to find out there", she paused, "Although, that might be a good thing".

"Uh, thanks, I think", she threw Preston a questioning glance. "Wait, Dogmeat?", she quirked her head at the dog, who mirrored her expression. *Oh, you poor thing.*

"Is he your dog?", she asked the old woman.

"Dogmeat?", the old woman patted him on the back. "Naw, he ain't my dog, he's his own man, a free spirit if ever I saw one".

"We found Dogmeat, or rather, he found us when we were fleeing Jamaica Plain from the Gunners", Preston explained.

"After the Quincy massacre, we thought we could maybe settle there, but they caught up to us after a few days", his fist clenched at his side, eyes unfocussed as he replayed, what she could only imagine, were extremely painful memories in his mind. "They torched our camps, most of our supplies and ran us out, killing anyone they could".

"Quincy…massacre?", she interrupted.

"You haven't heard of it?", he raised his brow in disbelief.

She shook her head.

"I thought everyone had heard the story by now".

"…In any case", he continued. "We ended up in Lexington after that, turns out the entire town was overrun by feral ghouls".

"Ghouls?", images of Halloween costumes, ghosts and goblins, flashing through her mind.

"What are ghouls?", her confusion clear on her face, it had to be a metaphor or something.

Preston just stared at her for a few moments, mouth agape.

"Wha?...haha", Sturges chuckled, unsure if she was being serious. "What do you mean, what are ghouls? You know…rotting flesh, irradiated…".

"How do you not know what ghouls are?", Preston interrupted him, a somewhat suspicious look on his face.

The two men were stared at her as if she had sprouted another head.
She opened her mouth, taking a second to gather her thoughts before she finally spoke.

"I've, actually been locked in a vault, for a….while", she explained. "I've only been out for a few days so….this is all still pretty new to me".

Apparently that was enough, as she noticed the two men visibly relax, seemingly satisfied with her explanation.

"Well I guess that explains the Pipboy", Sturges gestured to the device on her wrist.

"So you're a vault dweller?", Preston added.

"You could say that", she nodded.

"Look", she continued, sighing, wanting to change the subject, "The way out is clear, we should probably…"

"We can't leave yet", Preston interrupted, "I overheard one of those men earlier, apparently there's another group of raiders on the way".

"We leave now and we'd be sitting ducks out there in the open, even if we try to run it wouldn't be long before they caught up to us", he explained, looking over the group.

"So then, what?", she asked, leaning on the broken bookcase next to the door, "Wait here until they show up, and hope they give up before you run out of ammunition or water?"

"You won't last the evening", she folded her arms.

The raiders had pushed them back to this small room and they were down to one pistol and a rifle, from what she could see. There was no doubt they'd be dead by now if she hadn't showed up. The fact that she managed to make it up here was surprising in and of itself. The raiders she encountered were almost all high on, something, or not quite playing with a full deck. This made it relatively easy to get the drop on them. The makeshift guns they carried did nothing to help their aim and their martial skills seemed to be limited to drunken brawling. Despite all that, it was no easy feat making it up here and she had the bruises and cuts to prove it.

If they decided to sit here and wait for the raiders then she would definitely not be sticking around to see it, she thought to herself, absently tracing a thumb over her bloodied lip.

"Maybe", he agreed, "but we may have a plan".

"Oh?", she tilted her head, questioningly.

"I don't know if you noticed the crashed Vertibird on the roof", Preston explained.

She nodded "What about it?"

"Well there's more than just a Vertibird up there", the mechanic interrupted, a childlike grin on his face.

"If you head on up, and I shit you not, you'll find a complete suit of T-45 Power Armor!", he paused, obviously expecting some sort of reaction.

"Really?", was her lukewarm reply, decidedly less enthusiastic than he was hoping.

"Really!?", he repeated incredulously, obviously taken aback by her response, or lack thereof.
"C'mon man, we've got a walkin tank up there, not to mention the minigun still bolted to the vertibird". "I mean granted it looks like its seen better days, but from what I could tell, it should be fully operational".

"Then why haven't you used it?", she asked.

"Power". Preston supplied.

"The suit's missing an FC, but luckily we know just where to find one", the mechanic continued. "Trouble is, it's behind a security gate".

"Ah, the generator in the basement", she realized, receiving a nod of confirmation from both men.

The PA system, the handful of lights, not to mention the terminal behind the mechanic, had to have been drawing power from somewhere. The power grid out here was down, if the state of Sanctuary was any indication.

"Now, I'm not that good with computers" Sturges explained. "But I was gonna rig a charge for the lock, at least before those raiders managed to break through the doors and we had to barricade ourselves in here".

"I see…Sturges was it?"

"Yes ma'am".

"Can you come with me?", "I'll get you your Fusion Core".

"Seriously?", she could hear the hope in his voice.

"You really think you can get past that lock?", Preston chimed in.

"I should be able to", she nodded, heading towards the door.

"There are a few… bodies outside, and downstairs, you should probably check for anything you can use", she advised.

"After I get you the core I'll be on my way", he heard her say as she entered the hallway.

"Wait, you're leaving?", Preston made after her, motioning Sturges to stay put in the room before he himself caught up to her in the hallway. "Wh...?...please, you have to stay, we're going to need all the help we can get when the next group shows up".

She turned to face him, her sympathy apparent on her face, "I can appreciate that, really, but I have my own problems to deal with".

"Yeah? Like what!?", his tone and expression betraying his frustration and anger. She knew it wasn't directed at her, not completely anyway, but it irritated her nonetheless.

It's true, from what vague details she was given about their journey these past few weeks, it sounded like they'd been through hell.

But so what? So had she. For crying out loud, she was still in it. Her world taken away, Nate, her love, her strength, her soulmate, and Shaun, her precious baby boy, her heart, ripped from her. She was a shell of a person, walking forward on sheer willpower. It was a constant struggle to keep her emotions in check. Memories that threatened to break through, immediately quelled. Always just below the surface, threatening to overwhelm her.
"My baby was taken from me!... kidnapped", her fists clenched at her side so tightly, it hurt.

"And my husband, was…", she couldn't finish, instead closing her eyes and taking a deep breath before once again focusing her gaze on him.

"I…..I'm sorry…I…", Preston began.

"What's his name, your son?", he managed after a moment of awkward silence.

She sighed, her tension melting away as she leaned against a pillar between the railings, eyes downcast.

"His name is Shaun…he's not even a year old".

"He's out there, somewhere and I, I don't …", she felt the tears in her eyes, and tried her best not to let them fall, hoping he couldn't see her face well enough in the dimly lit hallway.

"…I don't even…", she swallowed, her breath hitching in her throat, "I don't even know where to start looking, or…", she flashed him a forced smile, running a hand through her hair, brushing it back and looking skyward, trying to blink the tears away.

"Everything is so different…none of this feels real", her voice faltering, she let out a shaky breath and closed her eyes, causing the tears to roll down her cheeks.

"Shit", she muttered, brushing her cheeks dry, suddenly feeling very embarrassed.

His heart sank as he stood there, unsure of how to comfort her. She was clearly uncomfortable, letting him see her cry, so he turned to the side, leaning on the railings that overlooked the main hall below. A Mr. Handy robot kept guard at the museum's front door.

"I get it, you know", his voice little more than a whisper.

"The Minutemen were my life", he risked a quick glance in her direction, catching her eye before returning his gaze to the hall below.

"I watched it come crashing down at Quincy…..with each soldier that fell, each friend I lost...my commander…".

"It's a weight…deep inside", he tapped his chest with his fingers. "I've been feeling it ever since we escaped, it keeps trying to pull you down. I saved who I could, lead them away from…", he paused, the same unfocused eyes she'd seen earlier. "...I lead them away, made it up as I went along, we didn't have anywhere to run to, we just ran".

He shook his head in regret. "Every decision I've made since, has led us from bad to worse…every time I fail them, it gets heavier. Makes it difficult to breathe, to move, always questioning myself…. Is my next decision finally going to get them all killed?"

"They've made it this far because of you, haven't they?", her voice soft.

"Hmph…", he scoffed, looking down at his open palms. "That's just it, I left Quincy with nineteen, most of them civilians".

"This…", he nodded towards the room to his right, "This is all that's left".

"I've failed them…the Minutemen…the people I was supposed to protect…".
"I'm sorry", she said simply, what else could she say.

"Why did you help us?", he turned his head to her finally after a few moments of awkward silence.

"What?", she looked over at him.

"You didn't have to, you could have turned back at any time".

She looked at him for a moment and shrugged, folding her arms and leaning her head back on the wooden pillar.

"I guess…because you asked, because you needed it, and maybe…maybe I felt lonely".

She chuckled under her breath at his mildly confused expression.

"I've lost everyone I know, the world I know…knew. It's all gone, and the only people I've met so far, have tried to kill me, I think maybe I just, wanted to see a friendly face".

He studied her face for a few seconds before finally chuckling himself. There was nothing mean about his laugh, in fact it was quite friendly, subdued and somewhat contagious.

She couldn't help but smirk, "Did that sound as childish to you as it did to me?".

"Haha, no, no not at all", his grin weary but genuine. "You just don't hear many people talk like that out here".

"And a friendly face", he straightened himself. "Well that's...that's something I haven't seen in a while myself, not until you came along anyway".

She returned his smile.

"Thank you, for everything, it was wrong of me to ask you…", he began.

"I'll help you", she interrupted him.

"No, I didn't mean to…".

"Yes you did", she cut him off again, still smiling, "And you're right".

Truth be told, she hadn't really made up her mind to leave, and knew herself well enough to guess that by the time she retrieved the core, her conscience may very well have changed her mind.

"I thought to myself, I couldn't afford to risk my safety, not while my baby was out there, waiting for me, maybe I still do. But I figure, if I can't get through something like this, then I probably don't stand a chance of surviving alone out there long enough to find him", she pushed off the pillar and joined him, leaned on the railing, overlooking the hall below.

"That and, well, I did start something here…and I don't think I could live with myself if I just walked away and left you all to your fate…my safety isn't worth my humanity…you know?", she explained, looking down at her hands, absentmindedly toying with the two rings on her finger.

Preston couldn't help but stare at her, somewhat slack jawed. The weight on his shoulders suddenly felt lighter, if just a little bit. The growing ache in his chest, a confusing mix of emotions. Guilt, admiration, fear… a sliver of hope.

Should he have dragged her into this?
Was he going to get her killed? he asked himself.

No, she made the decision, and it wasn't an offer he could afford to refuse...wasn't an offer he wanted to refuse.

He turned to her and offered his hand once again, "Thank you...Miss...?", he paused, confusion evident on his face.

"It's Leona", she shook his hand for the second time.

"Just Leona?" he probed.

"Just Leona", she repeated in a softer voice, a flash of sadness behind her smile, perhaps he imagined it.

"Well then, thank you Miss Leona, I don't."

"We should probably go get you that fusion core", she interrupted, looking over his shoulder at the mechanic in the room behind him, clearly pretending to mind his own business.

"Right, of course", he agreed. "Sturges", Preston called, motioning to his comrade.

"Alright, let's get this done!", Sturges clapped his hands together, hyped as ever.

Was his sunny disposition just an act?

Even if it was, it was more than welcome.

He grabbed his pistol off the desk and started towards them.

They saw the explosions of dust and debris before they realized what was happening.

"Sturges!", Preston was at his side just as the mechanic's knee hit the ground, pushing him to the floor.

"Mama Murphy get away from the wall!", he called over the sound of gunfire, crumbling stone and splintering wood. "Stay down everyone!".

She took cover behind the doorway just outside the room, her heart racing as she waited out the gunfire. She could see Preston and Sturges just inside. The mechanic had taken a bullet to the leg, his face contorted in a grimace while and Preston did his best to shield him from the torrent of debris.

And just as soon as it started, suddenly the hail of gunfire stopped, leaving the room in a thick cloud of dust. The only sound, a barely restrained, guttural growl from inside the room.

"Gah!", the mechanic managed through gritted teeth.

"Hang in there Sturges, you're gonna be alright", Preston assured him, looking him over and retrieving a stimpack from his coat.

"I'm alright, I'm alright, just took one in the leg, can still hold a gun", he assured him.

"Preston!", "You have to do something, I swear if we...,", a shrill voice coming from the back of the room.
"Quiet!", Preston hissed at Mrs. Long.

Besides Preston and Sturges, she couldn't see the others further in the room, but it sounded like everyone was unharmed.

"Hey!", a man's voice called from outside.

"Hey!", "Still alive in there?!", another round of gunfire shredding through the boarded up windows. Met with panicked screams and angry barking.

"Hahahaha, so you are still kickin!".

She ground her teeth.

They were the same as the ones in Sanctuary.

"Fucking Animals", She growled under her breath.

"You know I've been thinkin!...", the 'raider's' voice droned on, glib and cocky.

Preston moved to help Sturges up.

"Wait, stay down", he heard Leona say, catching a glimpse of her boots, as she passed him. Did he imagine it, there was something about her voice, a calmness very much at odds with their current situation.

"Get away from the window!", Preston pleaded, keeping his voice low.

"Maybe we got off on the wrong foot here…", the raider continued.

**Keep talking.**

He wasn't going to shoot, at least not yet. She was sure of it, enough to risk her own life, but only her own. She recognized the type. Prosecuted a few in her time even.

"My boys tell me…"

Psychotic and unpredictable by nature. But there was one thing you could always count on.

"...You come into MY town...."

Their ego, and the absolute need to hear themselves speak.

"Leona!", Preston's voice came again.

She held a hand up, silencing him as she leaned her back against the wall between the boarded windows. Through the cracks she could see them. Huddled behind the sandbags in the street, standing on the carcasses of ruined vehicles, and poking their heads out of the ruined hardware store just outside the museum. Twelve visible, more likely hidden, relaxed, drinking and…were those inhalers?

"...So I'll give you scavvers a choice..."

And of course, their fearless leader, winding down his little spiel, and standing in the open street in front of the others, arms spread as if he were the second coming.
Murderers, rapists, psychopaths, these were rare creatures in her world. Here however, it seemed they were a dime a dozen.

She unhooked a grenade from her belt.

**Six seconds.**

She pulled the pin and hurled it through the largest opening she could find, and into the street below. Her movement met with a short burst of gunfire which ended the instant the raiders realized what was thrown.

"Boss!"

"Fuuuuuck!!"

Sounds of panic and frantic scrambling from outside.

3…2…1…

"Get up!", she screamed, just as the explosion rocked the streets below, reverberating through the wooden floorboards.

"You heard her!", "Move!", Preston shouted, his voice almost drowned out by the panicked screams and anguished wailing outside. His voice snapping everyone into action.

Mama Murphy ran to Sturges' side, taking a shoulder as she and Preston rushed him out the door, followed by Mrs. Long, dragging her husband by the arm. "Come on Jun we have to move!".

"You Fuckers!", "You're DEAD!". "You're all DEAD!". Their leader's voice, even more crazed than before, drifting from the street below, sounding weak and strained inside the wooden walls.

She couldn't help but smirk to herself as she stepped out into the hallway and a hail of gunfire began to devour the small room.

"Codsworth!", she called down to the main hall.

"I'm here, mum!".

"Bar the doors!", she instructed.

"I already took the liberty mum!", he informed her.

**Thank you Codsworth!**, she nodded to the robot, 'good job'.

Indeed the door was barred with wooden beams and broken furniture. She wasn't sure how long it would hold, but from what she could see, it couldn't have been done any better. It would have to be enough.

She looked over the group while heading down the hallway. No one else was injured, and thanks to the stimpack, Sturges looked like he was recovering quickly. Enough to put a little pressure on the leg. Dogmeat at his side, looking up at her as she passed.

"Leona!", Preston called, causing her to turn.

"Where are you going?".
"The fusion core", she explained. "That power armor is probably still our best chance, if it still works."

"It works", Sturges insisted, pushing himself upright, standing against the wall and hiding a pained grunt behind a chuckle and a smile.

"It's gonna work", he repeated. She gave him a sympathetic look before turning her attention to Preston.

"Keep them away from the doors as long as you can", and with that she was gone.

He took a deep breath and looked to the room behind him, the boards covering the windows were completely shredded, the gunfire having since shifted to the museum's front doors below them. The balcony doors still held steady but that wasn't an option. He wouldn't last a minute out there, cover or no. From what he'd seen so far, the guns these raiders were using were a step up from the last group. It was still the best vantage point to cover the front doors. The windows however, would need to be barricaded again, a desk, a couch…something.

"Marcy, Jun, come with me, we need to block those windows".

"What?!", Marcy shouted at Preston in disbelief, "Are you crazy, we're not going back in there!". Preston scowled, he could do this, he could get them through this, but he needed their co-operation.

"I got ya boss, what's the plan", Sturges appeared between them, tucking his pistol into his belt as he limped towards him.

"Sturges…?".

"I'm good, c'mon man, you got a plan right?", a pat on Preston's shoulder as he limped past.

"I'm commin too", Mama Murphy stood up.

"No, Mama Murphy, I need you to find some place to lay low, we…", Preston held a hand up.

"Don't gimme that Preston, those raiders break through and we're all dead, besides, that kid is gonna need all the help she can get and worrin about us ain't gonna do her any good out there".

Preston sighed, they were wasting time, "Alright, alright, then I need you to check any bodies you can find, gather up any weapons and ammo they might have been carrying".

Mama Murphy nodded, and shuffled past the Long's, Dogmeat running after her before they disappeared into a dark room off to the side.

"Cods..uh…Codsworth!", Preston shouted over the railing.

"Yes sir?", "How may I help you?"

"We could really use another hand up here!", he called.

"Ah I'm sorry sir but…"

"It's alright Codsworth", Leona's voice, he could hear her, but she was nowhere in sight.

"Go on, you've done all you can down here".
"Aye mum, as you say!", "I shall join you shortly sir!".

Preston nodded.

"Good, we can do this", he muttered, more to himself than anyone in particular before turning to follow Sturges.

"Mister Garvey, sir", Preston turned around.

Jun Long pushed himself to his feet. "I'll, I'll do what I can to help"

"I appreciate it", he nodded to the haggard man before disappearing into the room.

"Jun no!", Marcy pleaded, grabbing her husband's hand. "They can handle it, we need to find some place safe".

"No, Marcy…I…I need to do this, I need to do something", never looking back at her, he let go of her hand, leaving her alone in the hallway. It took her a minute, lost in thought as she paced back and forth before finally coming to a decision, and running after her husband.

A few rounds of ammunition and two rusty pipe pistols so far, all wrapped in a cloth sack. Mama Murphy could hear the others working a few rooms over as they attempted to barricade the windows while under fire from the street below. She regarded the body of a dead raider at her feet before kneeling and taking a hold of his lifeless wrist. The aging woman going into a trance like state, unmoving for almost a minute before being nudged back to her senses by the cold nose on her arm and Dogmeat's concerned whining. She patted his back reassuringly, "That kid is gonna get herself killed if she keeps pulling her punches", her worry evident on her wrinkled brow.

The sound of footsteps on the wooden floorboards catching her attention. "Speak of the devil".

The young woman emerging from the staircase, moving at a hurried pace.

"Ah, kid…".

"Sorry", Leona forced a polite smile, as she walked past the old woman, a smile she realized, that probably couldn't be seen in the low light. "I have to hurry".

"Stay there boy", she held a hand up at Dogmeat's enthusiastic bark.

"Mrs. Reinhardt", Mama Murphy called to her back, freezing the young woman in place, before she turned around, her confusion obvious.

"Sorry, what did you…?", she must have heard wrong.

"Be careful out there kid, raiders are gonna be the least of your problems".

"What…".

"There's somethin commin, somethin big…", Mama Murphy continued.

"I…I have to go", she nodded to the old woman, before turning on her heels and disappearing into the darkness. Her expression, a mix of confusion and mild annoyance. Unsure of what to make of the old woman's words.

_Cryptic and useless._
What exactly was she supposed to do with that.

The deafening crack of thunder pierced the heavens. Cold winds biting into her skin as the rain bombarded the rooftop, creating a constant dull thrumming in her ear that complimented the chaos in the streets below. She stood there, fusion core in hand, soaked to the bone as she scanned the suit. A solitary steel golem, hunched over, forlorn...abandoned.

Time had been cruel. Its rusted armour looked like it had already taken heavy abuse. She brushed a hand over its scars.

The T-45 series.

Vastly outdated by military standards. These were a common sight back then, even more so in the days leading up to the bombs. They saw widespread commercial use, especially among the police and private companies. These groups all made their own modifications for efficiency, ease of use and comfort. Indeed in the latter days before everything ended, civilian rioting, terrorist infiltrations within the inner cities all provided her with a decent idea of the suits capabilities. Actually using one however...

She jammed the core into the suit, locking it in place with a twist. A high pitched whirring, leveled out into a low hum as new life was breathed into it.

A mechanical hiss when it opened. A black, thick inner layer of synthetic fabric beckoning her forward. It had all the trappings of a coffin. She swallowed the lump in her throat when another gust of wind bit into her.

*How did she get here?*

These 'situations' she found herself in felt like they were becoming the norm, yet still, none of it felt real. In the back of her mind, she was still waiting to wake up.

An ear shattering explosion from below startling her out of her thoughts.

*The doors!*

It had to be. If they weren't already down from that, then it wouldn't be long now. No more time to waste, she rotated her grenade belt, brushed back her wet hair and grabbed onto the suit.

"I'll get through this...".

*Come what may.*

She pulled herself into the suit's dark embrace before it closed in around her. The soft cushioned fabric hugging her snugly.

*Wake up.*

Darkness replaced by light as the suit's HUD came to life.

*Yes!*

Diagnostics flashed before her eyes. Hydraulic pressure, power...

'Suit integrity', catching her eye. Critical damage to the left leg and right arm. She expected as much.
Alright pal, I'm in your hands, hope you have one more fight left in you”, she whispered, flexing her fingers inside the soft fabric.

"Dust off those old bones…", the groaning of hydraulics, the whirring of gears and servos waking from a two hundred year slumber as the armour rose, standing tall.

"And let's see what you can do!".
You do what you have to

It was amazing!, like nothing she'd felt before. The smallest movement, the slightest twitch of her muscles, detected and amplified as she dashed forward, ripping the bolted minigun off the crashed vertibird. The shock of every thundering step almost completely negated.

It felt as if she were walking on air, initially having to fight back the feeling of vertigo in the pit of her stomach. The stale air being filtered through the helmet doing nothing to help, as she approached the edge of the roof overlooking the front of the museum.

Bursts of laser fire told her Preston and the others were still hanging in there, the museum's front doors however, were hanging on by a thread. She had to end this.

She readied the minigun, a high pitched whirring as it started to spin.

"On the roof!", "Power Ar…", she heard them cry, cut off immediately when a torrent of hot lead started raining down on them. Her breath shallow, her jaw clenched like a vice.

Panicked screams fell on deaf ears.

Is this all they understand?

She lifted her finger off the trigger, surveying the street below, raindrops cascading down her visor as she took in the carnage, hearing the cries of anguish and impotent threats of retribution. Anyone unfortunate enough to be in the streets were either dead or dying. Streaks of crimson rainwater snaking across the cracked asphalt.

Her eyes stung, her breath catching in her throat as she took it all in.

This...this was a massacre, what had she done?!

What you needed to.

"Why…?", she whispered.

Why?

She was in no danger up here, this was different than before.

How is this different?

"They never had a chance…"

A chance?

A chance to do what…?

"I'm gonna kill you, you fucks!", the rage filled voice of a raider from the street below. "You're all dead!", "You hear me?!", "When I get in there I'm gonna skin…"

That did it.

That was all she needed to hear, snapping back to her senses, her finger finding the trigger once more. She gritted her teeth as her vision once again erupted into bursts of light.
She may have been wrestling with these thoughts before now. Making her rationalizations for every life she took. But now…now it was slowly beginning to sink in. The reality of it all.

She was beginning to understand why she was doing this, why she had to. Because if she didn't do this to them, they would do it to her and anyone behind her…and they wouldn't suffer the same crisis of conscience.

She screamed, her voice drowned out by the sound of gunfire, explosions and bullets glancing off her armor.

Damn them for making her do this!

Damn her weak resolve!

The streets were wiped clean, with a few sporadic bursts of gunfire from inside the broken hardware store in front of the museum.

She wouldn't be able to do anything more from her position on the roof, she realized, as she stepped back a few paces.

Then…

A running start. Holding her breath as the roof disappeared from under her feet and the ground raced to greet her.

An earth shattering crash of steel against stone rocking the streets and cracking the pavement beneath her feet.

"Gah!", she gasped, her breath clouding her visor. The inside of the suit was heating up, sweat rolling down her face.

She rose, bringing the inside of the blown out store window into view. A woman behind a crumbling armoire and a man behind the wall, both firing at her with decidedly better weapons than the cobbled together guns she'd encountered thus ricochet of bullets on the suit's armor, deafening to her at this close range.

She brought the minigun up and leveled it at the woman first. The hail of gunfire shredding through the flimsy wood of the armoire and cutting her down in an instant. The man taking cover behind the brick walls of the store, causing her to circle around. She would most likely have to go in after him.

Almost through this, she thought to herself.

The side of the building came into view, another raider on the fire escape taking shots at her when an eruption of flame clouded her vision. She looked to her right. The man she saw earlier in the street, the leader of the group. A rifle in one hand and a Molotov in the other as he taunted her, but she couldn't understand him over the rain and the sound of gunfire on her armor.

Not that it mattered, as before she could turn to face him a bolt of red light struck him in the head, the side of his face, melted and smouldering for but a second before he hit the ground. A sudden and unspectacular end. She felt sick. She couldn't take much more of this.

This needed to end, she thought as she brought the minigun to bare once again, taking aim at the raider on the fire escape. The hail of bullets, while only catching him in the leg, managed to dislodge the structure sending it careening unto the street.
He was still alive, struggling to stand as she pulled the trigger once more, only to be met by the sound of an explosion at her side, sending waves of white hot pain into her leg.

She cried out, her eyes shut tight as she fell to one knee, propping herself up with the minigun to keep from toppling forward. It was smoking, sizzling in the rain. The ammo drum and motorized components shredded in a mass of twisted steel. It had apparently exploded, sending hot shrapnel or maybe even a bullet into her leg through the tiny gaps in her armor and the underlying frame.

She stayed like that for what felt like an eternity, fighting the pain and trying to get her frantic breathing under control, sweat dripping down her chin. Her mind raced with memories of the past two days. How many times had she been forced to pull the trigger, the callous disregard these people had for human life, the faces of those she'd killed.

Finally coming to terms with it all.

'You do what you have to out there, it's never pretty, but you do what you have to…content in the knowledge, that the price you pay, is worth it'.

Words from a not so distant memory and a voice that brought tears to her eyes and left a hollow ache in her chest.

Is this what you had to go through?

Is this how you felt?

Nate…I'm so sorry.

Her breathing steadied, she opened her eyes to the sound of glass shattering on her armor, tilting her head up just as another bottle hit her helmet. It was the raider hiding in the hardware store, a little braver now, he stood outside, fishing bottles out of a ragged cloth sack at his feet. Unlit Molotov cocktails, he was trying to drench her in the flammable liquid. He obviously thought she couldn't move as she knelt there motionless, and swaggered up to her with a shit eating grin on his face, raising another bottle to smash over her helmet.

I understand.

Shattered glass cut into his flesh when she caught his hand, bottle and all. Metal fingers crushing bone and grinding shards of glass into his palm.

She gritted her teeth, a low pained growl in her throat in tandem with the groaning of the suit as she rose to her feet, all the while keeping a hold on the raider's hand. A high pitched mewling was all that escaped his wide open mouth as he stared at her iron grip in shock, unable to speak or cry out from the pain.

The steel juggernaut stared down at him, raindrops beating down on the rusted metal when another hand shot out, grabbing his face and lifting him off his feet.

She stared at him hanging in front of her, his wide eyes, fearful and crazed between her metal fingers. She tried to squeeze.

It always ended with a bullet, distant and impersonal. But this was different, her fingers wouldn't close as she held him there, growling in frustration before finally turning and throwing him across the street, against the museum walls with a sickening crunch.
She walked up to his lifeless body, it was faced away from her, his blood being washed away as quickly as it appeared. She closed her eyes, listening to the dull thrum of the rain on her armor, the roar of thunder, Preston and Codsworth’s incoherent shouting above her and the screams of the final raider behind her.

*Finish it Preston.*

*I can't do this anymore.*

Gunfire and the sound of Preston’s musket, but the raider's screams continued amidst the distant rumbling of thunder.

*Damn it Preston…*

She opened her eyes and turned around.

Massive jaws closed around his neck, jagged teeth silencing the raider's screams. She held her breath, frozen, only able to look on in wide eyed horror as the massive reptilian beast tilted its head back, working its skeletal jaws. The sound of crunching bone, imagined rather than heard before the creature finally swallowed. Clawed fingers held the raider's corpse aloft as the creature tore into it, standing almost twice her height on two massively powerful scaled legs. Her share terror and the gruesome sight forcing her to dry heave as she struggled to breathe. A spiked tail swinging in slow measured arcs and massive, curved dual horns adorning its head giving the beast the countenance of a demon.

The sight no doubt stunning Preston and the others into momentary inaction.

How could such a thing exist.

It wasn't real.

Was she right all along? , was this all just a nightmare?

This wasn't something she was prepared for.

She took a step back, finding her legs once more when the creature raised its head skyward and let loose a deafening guttural roar. The chill that ran up her spine when she noticed the beast's eyes on her, halting her retreat.

Her mind momentarily unable to process the logic behind the lopsided grin that crept across her face.

This was all a sick joke.

Someone out there, some deity, some unseen hand was having fun at her expense. Or was this really just a nightmare? her own mind tormenting her with one devious trial after another.

*Get a grip, you're in shock.*

Subtle uncontrollable tremors in her belly growing from a low chuckle into full blown laughter.

She glared right back at the creature as it stood frozen and unmoving, only its head facing her, mangled carcass still in hand, and she laughed at the absurdity of it all.

*Snap out of it! Focus!*
Her laughter subsiding, her breath shallow and steady, eyes unblinking and her fear masked by a growing high.

*Adrenaline. Good. Use it.*

*The hardware store, you need to make it inside.*

The beast was easily twice her size and wouldn't be able to pursue her past the doorway.

*Ridiculous, those crumbling walls will only slow it down.*

*You have to take that chance, try to get to the roof.*

She was closer to the door than the beast was. She eyed the discarded minigun in the street between her and the store, now useless smouldering scrap. The beast would almost certainly make its move the second she did, or if anyone on the balcony decided to shoot. Multiple scenarios running through her mind within a matter of seconds as she and the creature stood staring at each other, unmoving.

The suit wasn't built for the kind of speed she would need, and her leg still hurt, though not as much as before, it would still slow her down. There was no scenario where this would work…

*You have to try.*

No more time to think when a bolt of laser fire hit the beast in the shoulder catching its attention for a second. On queue she bolted forward with all the strength she could muster, cursing under her breath at the lack of speed.

Her movement did not go unnoticed for very long at all. The beast levelling its sight on her once more after only two steps and bolting towards her with unnatural speed.

It was useless, she wouldn't make it, that was immediately clear.

They were on a collision course and she would be caught no matter what she did at this point.

*Fine…*

She adjusted her course, scooping up the minigun as she ran past without breaking stride, swinging the weapon by the barrel in an upward arc just as the beast descended upon her and her view was overshadowed by scales and teeth.

A mighty homerun swing that would have seen the Red Sox green with envy. The butt of the minigun catching the beast in the jaw, sending it reeling to the ground. Laserfire and bullets peppering its thick hide as it scrambled to its feet.

She raised the minigun once more and brought it down, her blow swatted aside by a scaled forearm as the beast found its footing and charged at her. Her feet momentarily leaving the ground as she was pushed back and then violently tossed aside, crashing into the rusted remains of a truck, its steel frame deforming under her weight.

She groaned, falling into a coughing fit as she regained her senses. Her head hurt from the shock of the violent crash. Unlike the suit's legs, there were no mechanisms to absorb such an impact. And why would there be, after all, what could possibly push around a suit of power armor.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to blink the cobwebs from her vision, the flashing red on her display catching her attention.
Pilot, minor head trauma detected.

Left shoulder part, Critical.

Right arm, Armor plating destroyed.

Right leg part, Critical.

Ahead of her the creature stood at its full height on powerful hind legs, throwing its head back as it let loose a bone chilling roar. All the while, its thick scaly hide being bombarded by laser fire. It would take more firepower than that. She narrowed her eyes at the beast as it stood in front of the museum, guttural roars taunting its attackers on the balcony above.

"Hold it together, pal", she whispered to her armored guardian as she pushed herself off the truck, the twisted steel groaning beneath her weight.

I have a plan.

Thundering footsteps catching the beast's attention just as she crashed into it. Her arms around its waist as she pushed it back, the beast's clawed feet digging into the asphalt, leaving a trail several feet long before she could go no further.

Shit.

She felt claws digging into the side of the armor before she was flung to the ground hard, on her back.

It stared down at her, a nasty gash on the side of its demonic face, a broken jawbone protruding through scaly flesh. Yet still it roared, clawed hands shooting down at her before she could recover. Her world exploding in unimaginable pain when jagged claws pierced her shoulder. A gut wrenching scream escaping her throat as she was slowly lifted off the ground by the clawed arm on her shoulder. Her body stiff, face contorted in agony, eyes shut tight, unable to breathe. Her mind unable to process anything but pain.

She almost didn't feel the sting in her side. The pain in her shoulder decreasing just a little, a pleasant tingling at the base of her neck allowing her to fight the pain long enough to swallow a breath and force her eyes open.

Pilot, Severe trauma detected...

Elevated Heartbeat....

Elevated Blood Pressure....

Administering Medical Countermeasures.....

The armor finally deciding she needed medical attention.

Beyond her heads up display she saw the creature's eyes. There was an intelligence behind them. It stared back at her, face to face as it held her a few feet off the ground.

Their staring contest ending abruptly with a burst of red hot light on its face, a precision shot that sent it staggering back a step, scratching at its eyes.
She landed on her feet, the armor steadying her balance, her pain reaching a peak before subsiding immensely as the claws left her flesh. Violent gasps for breath, her body once again obeying her will. She screamed, as much from the pain as from her growing rage. Fists clenched, grinding her teeth and growling as she rose. She stepped forward, bringing her leg up and stomping with all her strength at the beast's knee. The satisfying crunch followed by a screeching roar of pain sending the creature crashing to one knee, its claws reflexively lashing out and up, tearing through her chest plate and ripping through the left side of her visor, snapping her head back. Darkness as the HUD flickered and died, replaced by a dark sky and cold fresh air rushing through the gash to nip at her cheeks. It took her only a second to recover from the shock of the vicious and unexpected attack, leveling her glare at the now eye level beast and ramming her clenched steel fist into its face, all her strength behind a devastating right hook.

She wasn't done however, grabbing one of its massive horns and wrenching the beast's head so she could look it in the eye out of pure spite. Its jaw was now completely broken, unable to close, and its left eye fried from laser fire.

A clawed arm grabbed at her left shoulder once more.

"No!", she growled, only able to lift her left arm thanks to the suit's augmentation of her movements, her fingers compressing around its arm with absurd force. Another scaled arm grabbed her side, she could feel the claws working their way through the gaps in the frame, scratching at her flesh. Once again she pried the beast's arm off, holding both of them away from her at her sides.

It was a testament to the suit's power. While the beast was indeed powerful, it was the weight and speed, coupled with razor sharp claws that allowed it to dominate. A broken leg removed its mobility and power and with its arms trapped in her vice like grip, there was not much it could do. Of course she was stuck in place as well, however, she was exactly in the position she wanted to be.

She lifted her leg, bringing her foot down on its clawed toes, one last parting insult, before stabbing her heels downwards and pushing backwards to trigger the suit's ejection mechanism.

The blast of cold air and rain cut into her like a knife when the suit opened and she stumbled, falling backwards unto the street with a splash, looking up at the darkened sky, raindrops clouding her vision. The Power Armor at her feet, locked in a firm hold on the beast's arms as it struggled to break free. She didn't have much time. She forced herself to sit up, biting back the searing pain in her shoulder as she frantically fumbled with the strap on her grenade belt, finally unhooking it, pulling the three remaining pins and tossing it right at the feet of the beast.

6 Seconds.

It took her longer than she expected.

She hadn't realized exactly how much the suit had been assisting her. She cradled an arm in front of her and scrambled to her feet, a pained growl escaping her clenched teeth when she put pressure on her leg, but she swallowed the pain and hobbled away as fast as she could.

The shockwave ripped through her, knocking her off her feet, head over heels and throwing her awkwardly onto the museum steps.

It hurt…everything hurt.

It took all her strength to roll over unto her back, coughing weakly. The large museum doors, battered and broken at her feet as she lay on the steps. Her senses were muffled, but she could make out her name being called from somewhere…distant barking.
It's over…

Raindrops, cold on her face, washing away warm tears as her eyes closed.

Cold sheets between her fingers. She opened her eyes. Emptiness where there shouldn't be. A cool gentle wind dancing the curtains in the dwindling moonlight. She sat up, rubbing her eyes and brushing the hair from her face. The carpet tickling her toes as she slid off the bed. She made her way down the dark hallway to the living room. There he sat on the couch, in the darkness as the moonlight nipped at his toes. The clink of ice cubes.

"Nate?", she made her way towards him slowly, still sleepy.

"Hey honey, sorry, did I wake you?".

She shook her head, 'no', smiling gently as she sat down next to him, legs tucked under her. Running her fingers through his hair, a kiss on his neck and shoulder.

"What's wrong?", she asked softly, studying the side of his face, framed by the moonlit living room window..

He lifted the glass to his lips, before nestling it in his lap once more.

"Couldn't sleep", he smiled, "I think I'm still getting used to the new place", he brushed his palms over her thighs, his fingers cold as ice.

He could never lie to her.

"Another nightmare?", she asked, looking up at him, taking his hand and brushing her lips over his fingers.

His eyes downcast, the slight twitch in his lips as he swallowed answered her question.

"I'm dealing with it", he assured her with a weak smile. She could see the pain he hid behind those beautiful hazel eyes.

"You don't have to…not alone, I'm here honey", she whispered.

"Talk to me…", she pleaded like she always did. Her eyes stung, her heart ached seeing him in pain like this, frustrated by how useless she felt. Powerless to ease his pain, unable to get him to open up to her.

He opened his lips, she could see him wrestling with hidden thoughts and conflicting emotions, and then it was gone as he took another sip of his drink.

No matter how many times she'd asked in the past, she knew she couldn't force him.

She waited in silence for a few moments longer, her head on his shoulder before she couldn't bare the ache in her chest any longer.

She sighed, placing a kiss on his cheek, before standing and turning to leave.

His hand on her wrist startling her, she turned to look at him, her teary eyes meeting his pleading gaze.

"Don't go…".
Her breath catching In her throat, she smiled gently, bringing his fingers to her lips again before settling next to him on the couch once more, legs tucked under her. She faced him, his hand clasped in her lap as she studied him in silence. He took a final sip before placing the glass on the coffee table. She watched as he searched for the words.

"There are things I've done...", his voice faltering, the pain in his face as struggled to find the words, breaking her heart.

"Hey", she whispered, "Come here", she pulled him towards her. He leaned back, his head in her lap as she ran her fingers through his hair. He looked up at her before closing his eyes.

"Tell me…", she whispered gently.

He took a deep breath, "I don't regret any of it, it had to be done".

"You do what you have to out there, it's never pretty, but you do what you have to…..content in the knowledge that the price you pay, is worth it".

"But still I… I see their faces, not just…", he paused, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Shh…take your time", she leaned over and kissed his forehead, tracing her thumb along his jaw.

"I'm not going anywhere".
The Dynamic Duo

Sunlight poured through the grimy open window and peeked through cracks in the wall, highlighting the dance of cigar smoke and dust in the small musty room. The heavyset man sat across from her, feet propped up on the wooden desk.

"So lemme get this straight", he took a puff of the cigar. "You wanna put me in this little paper of yours, so you come walkin into my hideout, arms swingin without a care in the world".

"I didn't exactly walk in here unarmed Mr. Malone", she interrupted, straightening in her seat. "I knew you wouldn't just shoot an unarmed woman on sight, that's not your style".

She reached into her jacket and froze for a moment when she heard distinct metallic clicks on either side of her.

"Whoa, easy there guys", she held up a hand before slowly retrieving the cigarette from her jacket.

"Do you mind?", she smiled at Mr. Malone, wiggling the cigarette between her fingers.

A nod from the pudgy mobster setting the Triggermen on either side of her at ease before he slid a chrome plated lighter across the desk.

"Thanks", she lit the cigarette and took a drag. "Where was I?"

"You were telling me why I shouldn't just rub you out right here".

"Right….see I know quite a bit about you already Mr. Malone, that warehouse on Brickshire, for example, where you run guns, your little side business dealing chems. I know you have people in Goodneighbour and Diamond City, hell, I've even got a few of their names".

He flashed her a toothy grin, biting down on the cigar, the only crack in an otherwise perfect poker face.

"Sounds like you're a real busybody Ms. Wright, not exactly a healthy quality for a young lady such as yourself". "And all the more reason to take you out".

"With respect sir, that wouldn't be the smart move here", she countered.

"Ha ha ha ha ha", he chuckled as he stood, his laughter echoed by the Triggermen in the room.

"Lemme guess", he made his way to the window. "Anything happens to you, and Diamond City security gets their mitts in my business, is that it?"

"Something like that", she exhaled a stream of smoke away from the mob boss.

"Just like a broad to stick her nose where it don't belong, you think you're the first person to try an blackmail me, sweetheart?"

"Miss Wright, you're playin a dangerous game", he turned and pointed at her with the butt of his cigar.

"Sir, I think you have the wrong idea here", she assured him.

"Do I now?"
She took another drag of her cigarette. "I've had this information for almost a year."

He gave her an almost quizzical look.

"Remember that anonymous tip two months ago about the gang raid on one of your storehouses?", she asked with a quirk of her head. "Or how about the raider gang a few months before that?". "You know, the ones that kept hitting your patrols near the church?"

"Who do you think tipped your men off?", she added.

He took another puff of his cigar and regarded her for a moment in silence, no doubt trying to figure out her angle or maybe just to make her squirm.

To her credit, she betrayed none of the anxiety she felt. This was hardly new to her after all. She ground the cigarette out on the desk and relaxed in the deceptively comfortable chair, while meeting his gaze.

"And why exactly would you do that missy?". "What is it you want?"

"I did it because, as bad you are, at least you're a reasonable man. You don't go around killing people for fun. You're a businessman, I get that. And while I don't like your methods, the gun-running, the chems, I can at least understand it. I'm not going to pretend to like you Sir, but I can at least see the need for your Triggermen, even if Diamond City doesn't."

"So Diamond City needs me?"

"Ha ha ha ha ha , how do you figure that, doll?", his amusement clear on his face.

"All those raider gangs out there, have one thing in common, they're animals.", she leaned forward in her chair. "They get off on murdering and torturing innocent people, they can't be reasoned with and they thrive on the chaos they create. Its groups like your Triggermen that keep the raiders in check, because as many gangs as there are out there, they're disorganized, small groups fighting among themselves..."

"Hear that boys?", he interrupted her.

"We're Diamond City's guardian angels!", the chorus of boisterous laughter around the room doing little to faze her.

"Sounds like you got it all figured out doll", he approached her, the weathered floorboards creaking under his weight.

"In fact, sounds like you got enough to put in your little paper already, so why are you here", he leaned in, an arm on the back of her chair, staring down at her.

She swallowed almost imperceptibly, before looking up at him with a confident, if forced, smile.

"I told you, I'm not going reveal anything damaging about your business Mr. Malone. What I want, is to do a piece on you, personally. The information I have on you is second hand, I want your own words, that way you have a say in exactly what you want the people to know about you."

"And what makes you think I want 'the people' to know anything about me, or my business", he straightened and took another puff of his cigar.

"Reputation", she countered.
"I'm sure you know how valuable reputation is in your line…", a knock on the door interrupting them.

"What is it?", the mobster called.

"Boss, we found another 'guest' sniffer around outside", came the voice from behind the door.

"Christ, what am I, runnin a motel?"

"Bring em!"

"Hey, ease up hotshot", a man stumbled into the room, a patchwork trench coat and a battered fedora.

"Well I'll be, Nicky Valentine, my old pal", Malone chuckled, a wide grin splitting his face as he forcefully shook Nick's hand.

"Skinny", Nick nodded in greeting, while throwing Piper a glance. "You okay Piper?"

"You know me, I'm always okay", she grinned, hiding her relief. Her little charade was starting to become tedious.

"So you know this little lady?", Malone motioned to Piper. "Ain't that a coincidence."

"Boys I'm sure some of you know Mr. Valentine", "How long has it been Nicky?"

"Not long enough if you ask me", Nick mused.

"Ha ha ha ha, why don't you have a seat Nicky boy, and tell me what the hell you're doin here", the mob boss motioned to one of his goons, and they dragged a chair from the corner. Depositing it unceremoniously in front of the desk.

"As much as I'd love to catch up, I'm afraid this isn't a social call", Nick insisted. "I'm just here to collect our intrepid journalist here."

"Is that so?", "A real pistol this one", Malone returned to his chair.

"Don't I know it", Nick agreed.

"Heh, well, see we still have a little problem here", he lounged back in his chair.

"How do you figure that?", Nick asked, approaching the desk to stand next to Piper.

"For starters, I don't usually set up shop this close to Diamond City unless I have business to take care of, and I don't get unannounced guests when I do. Now I got two in one morning. One of you care to explain that?"

Piper gave Nick a look before she spoke, "Well I heard you were nearby, and..., I figured it was a good opportunity to track you down and get that interview I've always been meaning to get".

"A lot more convenient than wandering around downtown to find that supposed vault that I heard you were using as a hideout."

"You heard I was 'nearby'", "And who told you that, doll?"

"Mr. Malone, I'm an investigative journalist, I may not be as good of a detective as Nick here, but I'm
good at my job. I heard about that child your people kidnapped outside Diamond City two days ago, and kidnapping is a pretty big deal these days, what with the institute and all..., now it was Nick's turn to give her an uneasy look from under the brim of his hat.

"So you're sayin I should be expectin Diamond City security to come bangin on my door anytime now, is that it?"

"No, no not at all sir. I told you, Diamond City security isn't going to hear anything about you from me, unless something happens to me or Nick here. I'm just after the story, Diamond City security has their own job to do".

"...If they care to anyway", she mumbled.

"Boss, it's almost time", one of the Triggermen interrupted.

"Already?", Malone sighed, "How bout that, where does the time go?"

"Nicky", Malone sighed, "How bout that, where does the time go?"

"Nicky, looks like we're gonna have to do this another time".

"Fine by me, I know you're a busy man", Nick nodded.

"Miss Wright, afraid I'm gonna have to say no to your interview, but you can be damn sure I'll be keepin an eye on you from now on".

"That's a shame, can't blame a girl for trying, well it's been a pleasure Sir", she rose from her seat.

"Boys, show our guests the road".

"Cya around Skinny.", Nick tipped his hat with a skeletal metal hand, before leaving the room with Piper.

"Did you find him?", Piper muttered under her breath as they walked down the corridor, careful not to let the two goons a few feet behind them hear her.

"The kid's safe, just keep walkin", Nick answered, throwing her a quick sidelong glance.

Just then, the door at the end of the hallway ahead, burst open.

"Boss the brat's gone!", a panicked Triggeman shouted, freezing them in place for a second before they heard another voice from the room behind them.

"What?!!"

"Valentine!!"

"Crap", Piper hissed.

"Oh for cryin out loud", Nick sighed, doing a one eighty and punching the closest Triggeman in the nose.

Piper followed suit, kicking the man behind her in the shin.

"Sorry!", she managed, before both men hit the ground and Nick tackled her, pushing them both through the nearest door in the narrow hallway.
A few bullets hitting the wall before they shut the door.

"I want em alive!", Nick heard the mobster say as he held the door shut while Piper scrambled to slide a broken desk behind it.

"That's not gonna hold for long", he said, backing up into the room.

Though, room might have been a tad generous, they seemed to be short at least one wall. The street could be seen below, the morning sunlight filling the blown out room.

"That's a long way down", Piper said, toeing the edge of the warped floor to get a better look at the sidewalk. The crashing sound and splintering of the wooden door making her jump, she could hear the angry mob just beyond. They'd likely be through it in a matter of seconds.

"The fire escape's seen better days, looks like we're gonna have to jump", Nick approached her, looking over the side.

"Jump?", "Are you crazy?", "I can't make that!"

"It's not as far as it looks, you'll be fine, just aim for the hotrod", Nick reassured her, nodding his head to the wrecked vehicle on the sidewalk.

"Hello!, human here", she jabbed her chest with both thumbs, "I'll break my legs!".

A few gunshots shredding the door, and forcing his hand, he swept her off her feet.

"Nick, what the hell!"

"Hold on!" he advised her, holding her tight before taking a running jump off the second floor.

"Niiiiiick!", she screamed the entire way down, before they hit the hood of the car with a crash. She slipped through his arms and landed on the hood on her butt.

"Ow! God dammit Nick!", Piper winced.

"Ugh!, I'm gonna feel that tomorrow", Nick declared, wincing as he knelt next to her on the car hood.

"Are you alright?", "Can you walk?", Piper asked in concern, helping him up.

"I can still dance a jig", he assured her as they hopped off the car.

The crash from the room above told them the mobsters were almost through the door.

"Time to shake a leg!", they bolted down the sidewalk just as a group raiders poured into the street from a side alley further ahead.

"Whoa!", "Wrong way", Piper stopped suddenly, causing Nick to crash into her.

"Hey!", "There he is!", they heard one of the raiders say before the group made a beeline for the duo, hissing and hollering.

"'Now they show up!?'", she heard Nick mutter.

"Friends of yours?", Piper sounded almost hopeful until a bullet whizzed past them.
"Hardly!", Nick ducked.

"Oh boy, c'mon!", Piper grabbed his arm and they dashed across the street towards a dilapidated bar.

"Stupid lock", Piper muttered as she worked on the door.

"Come on Piper, I'm not comfortable with our asses sticking out in the street like this".

"Don't rush me", she hissed.

The hollering and whistling was rapidly growing closer, and while the door, which was in a little alcove on the sidewalk provided some cover from the approaching raiders, they were directly across from Skinny Malone's hideout.

He could clearly see into the room they'd jumped out of, on the other side of the street when the Triggermen finally broke through the door.

"Almost got it…", Piper muttered.

"Boss there he is!", Nick heard the Triggermen shout, before a hail of bullets narrowly missed his head.

"Piper!", he grabbed his hat and ducked as dust and debris rained down.

The trigger happy Triggerman receiving a fist to the back of the head when Malone entered the room, "I said 'alive' you idiot!"

"Got it!", Piper shouted, throwing the door open and scrambling into the room.

"Valentine!", he heard Skinny Malone's angry voice from the second story room.

Nick simply tipped his hat to the mobster with a smile in response, before Piper dragged him into the bar and slammed the door.

"Boss! raiders!", they heard from outside before the gunfire started in earnest.

Piper plopped down, with a sigh of relief, her back to the wall next to a window, arms around her knees. Nick stood next to her peering out the boarded windows. The tiny cracks ensured that they weren't totally in the dark.

"Looks like Skinny's got his hands full", Nick commented, whipping out a cigarette and lighting it while he peered through the cracks.

"Who were those raiders anyway, looked like they knew you", Piper asked, looking up at him.

"Didn't take much to wind them up, I even left a trail for them to follow, right up to Skinny Malone's doorstep", he explained. "But it looks like I overestimated those knuckleheads, they were supposed to get here much earlier so we could escape in the chaos", he took a drag of the cigarette, the smoke seeping through the cracks in his neck.

Just then, a stray bullet broke through the boards, shattering the glass behind it and hitting the detective in the shoulder while Piper shielded herself from shards of falling glass.

"Are you kidding me?", he prodded the hole in his trench coat.
"Ellie isn't gonna be too thrilled about this, I just had her patch it yesterday", Nick sighed.

"Will you get down!", Piper grabbed his arm and pulled him down to sit next to her.

"You took a pretty big risk using raiders like that", Piper mused, closing her eyes and knocking her head back on the wall.

"Well I wouldn't have had to if you didn't take so long getting out. You said you would distract him not sit down for tea and shoot the breeze", he took another puff.

Piper growled, snatching the cigarette from his metallic fingers and inhaling deeply, "I had it under control, I was just about to leave when you stumbled in".

"Yeah?", "And what would you have done if he agreed to your interview?"

Piper snickered, "Skinny Malone?", "There's no way he would have gone for that"

She briefly entertained the idea of rummaging behind the bar in front of her.

The gunfire outside, showed no signs of subsiding.

"At least we got the kid out, him and his old man should be safe in Diamond City, though they might not wanna go for a walk outside again for a while", Nick mused.

"Former chemist of local mob boss decides to go down the straight and narrow". "Or, 'daring rescue of child from the clutches of the evil Triggermen'", Piper mulled over potential headlines.

"Skinny's chem business is gonna take a pretty big hit if he can't find a replacement, I'll have to ask Diamond City security to keep an eye on the both of them", Nick decided, stealing the cigarette back.

"Pffft, not like they're good for anything else", Piper folded her arms, stretching her legs out on the dusty wooden floor, kicking a toppled bar-stool towards the bar.

"They have their moments, seems to me like you're just getting jaded in your old age", Nick teased.

Piper shot him a dirty look.

"What's really on your mind?", Nick probed.

"Nothing it's just…I could use a little bit of good press you know?", "Doesn't matter what I do, unmasking murderers and criminals, exposing cover-ups, I'll always be viewed as 'that nosy reporter'".

"The dirty looks, people always keeping me at arms length, it comes with the territory, I know that, I don't have a problem with it but… All Diamond City security has to do, is shoot a few super mutants or raiders and call it a day, they're heroes. But a kid goes missing and unless there are neon signs telling them exactly where to go, it's too much trouble for them to get off their asses.", Piper ended her rant with an exasperated sigh.

"So you're jealous?", Nick teased.

"I'm not jeal !….ok maybe a little jealous, but it's not about tha…"

Just then, the door burst open, startling her, partially kicked off its hinges by a raider clad in leather, a green Mohawk and, 'creative' facial decorations. Grinning at some hidden joke, rows of blackened
teeth splitting his face.

"Uh…Nick?". They slowly climbed to their feet.

"Back up", Nick whispered. "There's a door at the other end of the bar", Nick pulled her behind him while he faced the raider and they slowly backed away.

The raider pulled out a baseball bat causing him to instinctively reach into his coat, cursing under his breath when he remembered he never got his gun back from the Triggermen.

The sound of another door being kicked open behind them. And another 'colourful' raider burst through the door with a pair of brass knuckles. He howled in delight the second he laid eyes on the pair.

They were surrounded.

"That's…..that's not good, what's plan B, Nick?", Piper muttered as they stood back-to-back while the raiders closed in, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hahaha, where'ya gonna run?", the raider facing Nick asked menacingly.

"I'll take the ugly one", Nick joked.

"Nick!", Piper hissed, this was no time to crack wise.

"I'm out of ideas here, can you take 'knuckles' over there?", Nick asked, his voice low.

"With what, my fists?", "I ditched my gun, remember?"

"C'mere girly, I ain't gonna hurt ya", the raider in front of her assured her.

Piper rolled her eyes.

"We're in a bar, you'll think of somet…", Nick started, but was interrupted when the raider with the baseball bat charged at him. He pushed Piper out of the way before ducking under the swing and tackling the 'ugly one'.

Unfortunately for Piper 'out of the way' meant towards the other raider.

She managed to stop just short of crashing into the raider. "Uh…hi, 'Knuckles', was it?", she offered with an uneasy smile, looking up at him.

'Knuckles' offered her his own twisted grin before his hands shot out, grabbing her by the collar. Her response was instant and instinctual, swinging her leg into his groin causing him to double over grunting, then grabbing an empty whisky bottle off the bar and breaking it across his face which sent him careening into the wall off to the side.

She spun around to see the other raider had Nick pinned against the wall, trying to grapple with him.

Piper grabbed the nearest bar-stool and swung it down on the raider's back, sending him to his knees letting nick follow up with a solid right hook to his jaw.

The grip on her ankles almost didn't register as she fell face first on the wooden floor, the wind knocked out of her, before she was dragged and spun around roughly. 'Knuckles' was once again in her face, on top of her this time. Shards of glass still lodged in his bleeding temple.
"Bitch!", with one hand on her throat, he reared his brass knuckled fist back.

"Nick!", she managed to choke out, shielding her face, bracing for the worst.

His fist never landed however, she caught a brief glimpse of Nick's loafers making contact with his face, knocking him off of her before Nick himself was grabbed again from behind.

She scrambled to her feet, grabbing another bar-stool despite her coughing fit.

Thankfully 'Knuckles' was still stunned when she cracked the bar-stool across his face, knocking him out. She turned around just in time to see Nick ram the other raider's head through the drywall.

"Goodnight princess", Nick muttered as he let the raider fall over and straightened his trench coat.

"You alright Piper?", Nick turned to her.

Piper took a deep breath, "Still in one piece, guess I can scratch 'Bar fight' off of my to-do list", she managed a smile while rubbing her sore neck.

"Wish I could say this was my first", he chuckled as he approached her, his hand gingerly shifting her collar to check the damage. Brow furrowed, the dim glow of his eyes scanning her bruised neck.

"Nick, I'm fine", "Thanks…"

"Alright then, it's about time we blew this joint", he decided. "Keep your eyes open, I'm sure there's a back way out of this dive".

Fresh air and sunlight on her face, she closed her eyes, took a deep breath and smiled as she walked alongside the detective.

"Keep your eyes peeled, we're not out of the woods yet", he advised.

"We're close enough", Piper assured him, "Well within Diamond City's patrol route".

"And you call 'me' reckless", Nick countered.

Piper just smiled, "So how was the reunion with your old pal Skinny Malone?"

"He's not my 'pal', we just have a little history", Nick stated flatly.

"Not feeling nostalgic then?"

"No."

"I'd love to hear a bit about it though, off the record?"

"Then you can start holding your breath and I'll let you know when I change my mind"

"Pffft, smartass", Piper smiled, nudging him on the shoulder.

"Try to keep your head down for a while, alright?", "Skinny isn't the type to take this lying down, and he has people in Diamond City and Goodneighbour", Nick warned.

"I know that, don't worry, and he knows I have his number, I'll be fine", Piper assured him.

"So what's your plan when we get back?" Nick asked, after a minute of walking in silence.
"Breakfast, I'm starving, then I have a few pieces to finish off, help Nat with her homework after school and I'll probably head to Goodneighbour after that".

Nick gave her a look.

"Will you relax, I can handle Skinny Malone".

"It's not that…Magnolia is playing tonight isn't she?", Nick asked.

"Uh..I don't know…maybe…I think so, why?", Piper blushed, mentally slapping herself.

"It's Nothing, just….be careful alright?".

"Jesus, Nick!".

"What?", "I'm just sayin, a woman like that has a lot of experience under her…", he began, but Piper cut him off.

"Stop. Talking.", Piper hissed as she pinched the bridge of her nose in embarrassment as much as annoyance.

"She's not the kinda gal you can go steady with, I'll just leave it at that", Nick finished.

"I know that, I'm a big girl Nick, I know what I'm doing", "Can we please stop talking about my love life"

"More than happy to. Forget I said anything".

They walked along in awkward silence for a while longer.

"You know, there was this one time I heard she…"

"Nick!".


Hope & Resolve

I say I'll move the mountains,
and I'll move the mountains,
if he wants them out of the way.
Crazy he calls me,
sure I'm crazy,
crazy in love I say.
I say I'll go through fire,
and I'll go through fire…

The morning found her, laid on her old sofa. Eyes closed, one arm over her forehead and the other hanging over the side, absently running her fingers through Dogmeat's fur. The music drifting from her Pip-Boy on the kitchen table, lulling her, keeping her just on the edge of sleep. Images, old memories, flashed across her mind, punctuated by more recent, more violent ones. She analysed each one with an almost clinical regard. Her hands, caressing a familiar smiling face one moment and gently cradling the head of a crying infant the next, so helpless and beautiful. Those same hands, twisting wrists, those same fingers on the trigger and those fists, hitting flesh. Yet she felt strangely numb to it all, as she lay there, passively observing each fleeting image, like a silent movie playing in her mind.

Was she still in shock from the events in Concord the previous evening?

Her introduction to this new world had, after all, been a veritable baptism by fire, thrown into the deep end a few short days after stepping foot outside the vault.

She felt her canine companion stir before she heard the hollow knock on her door.

"Ma'am?", Preston's voice came from the open doorway.

She shifted her arm, opening an eye, squinting up at him from behind the sofa. The daylight hurting her eyes.

"Preston", she stated flatly, sighing deeply, from exhaustion rather than annoyance, before sitting up and swinging her legs off the sofa. Dogmeat answering the loss of contact with an annoyed half bark, sitting up and quirking his head at her.

"I'm sorry, I..I didn't mean to wake you…", Preston offered.

She wiped her face with her shirt sleeves and brushed the hair from her face, her back still to him.

"It's fine, I wasn't sleeping", she mumbled, gingerly prodding the bandage on her shoulder and buttoning her shirt, before she finally stood and turned to him.

"Come in, have a seat", she offered before stepping behind the kitchen counter.

"Uh, thanks", he replied awkwardly, tipping his hat and leaning his rifle just inside the doorway.
before settling into the sofa.

"Hey boy, keeping an eye on our friend?", he scratched Dogmeat behind the ears.

"He's been by my side since we got back" she smiled, emerging from the kitchen, two glasses in one hand and a bottle of whiskey in the other.

"Um..could you?", she asked, nudging the coffee table a little closer to the sofa with her foot.

"I got it", he leaned over and pulled the table closer before they both settled side by side on the sofa.

"Excuse the mess…", she began as she poured the whiskey.

"…but we had a, minor, nuclear mishap a little while back", she explained with a straight face.

Preston chuckled, "That's alright, I've actually seen much worse", he took the glass she offered.

"Where did you manage to find a bottle of whiskey out here?", he winced, making a face after he took a swig.

She smiled at his reaction before taking a sip herself.

"A group of raiders, as you called them, attacked us two nights ago", she explained.

"Probably part of the same group that cornered you in Concord".

"Us?", Preston inquired.

"Codsworth and I", "We managed to scrape through it, somehow".

"Spoils of war…" she muttered cynically, staring down at her drink before taking another sip.

Preston cleared his throat after a moment of awkward silence, "So, how are you holding up?"

"Hm?", she looked over at him.

"You left us as soon as we crossed the bridge into Sanctuary last night, didn't say much on the journey here either, even when I asked if…"

"I was dead on my feet", she cut him off. " Had a lot on my mind, sorry if I ignored you, I didn't mean to".

"I'm sorry", I shouldn't have made you go out there…if I had known…", Preston began.

"You couldn't have, and it was my decision, I'm not bitter about it and I don't blame you for anything", she offered him a tired smile before taking another sip.

While her words did little to ease his guilt, it was at least a comfort to know she held no ill will towards him.

He took one final swig, before setting the empty glass on the coffee table. "Damn that's strong".

She chuckled and reached for the bottle, but he held up a hand, smiling politely "I'm good, thanks".

"How's the shoulder?", he tapped his left shoulder.

She leaned back, "It's, a little sore, should be fine in a few days", she assured him.
"And the leg?", he nodded to her thigh, the fabric of her jeans torn and lightly stained dark with blood.

"Ah, it wasn't as bad as it felt, just a scratch, it feels fine", she confirmed again, running a finger across the torn fabric. The flesh underneath, tender but seemingly undamaged thanks to the quick injection of stims from the Power Armor.

"That's good to hear", he paused for a moment, "Listen, if you need anyth…"

"Thanks", she smiled politely, taking another drink before standing, collecting his empty glass and making her way to the kitchen, lowering the Pipboy radio on the way.

"So, what about you, how's everyone doing?", she asked from behind the counter, over the clink of glass and dishware.

"Better, now that we're not being chased", "Got a few makeshift beds made and cleared out the house just across the street. It's a start", he took an audible breath. "It's gonna take a lot of work, but I think we can really make a go of it here”.

She leaned over the counter on her elbows, "From what you've told me, I'd say it's about time you all caught a break".

Preston nodded thoughtfully, "It's been a long time coming, but yeah, I'd say our luck is starting to turn around".

"Oh I almost forgot, I also came to let you know that Sturges was able to get those underground pumps running, thanks to the FC we salvaged from the Power Armor".

"The water supply network?" she confirmed. "It's working? Are you sure?"

"See for yourself", Preston nodded to the kitchen faucet.

It took a little effort but she managed to twist it open, perhaps a little too far as she was met by a sudden burst of dirty brown water from the tap. The cold water on her shirt and the growl that initially came from the pipes causing her to jump back in shock, thankfully she managed to mostly suppress the girlish squeal of surprise that escaped her lips.

"Are you alright?", Preston was on his feet in concern.

"I'm fine, I got it", she waved him off before adjusting the faucet, her face warm with embarrassment.

"Just let it run for a while. Sorry I should have warned you about that", Preston reluctantly returned to his seat, his concern still evident on his face.

A piece of paper beneath the dried leaves and broken tiles under his feet caught his attention as he settled on the sofa.

"I have to say though, I was surprised to see all that equipment down there, and all those tunnels under the town", Preston explained, fishing the piece of paper out from under the debris and wiping it off with his gloved fingers. It was an old pre-war picture.

"Sanctuary was meant to be a self sustained community" she explained with her back to him as she wiped herself off with a dirty hand towel.
"Water drawn from the lake, treated and distributed locally…"

Preston gently swiped his thumb across the dirty picture, it was faded but he could make out most of the details.

"…power generators and a secondary grid that…", her voice seemed distant as he studied the picture.

It was a park, with children playing in the background, cars parked on the edges of a grassy field.

"…was actually the first step in a government initiative that never made it…".

A smiling couple in the foreground.

A handsome man, well built, rugged features. The woman in his arms, the kind of flawless beauty Preston had only ever seen in posters and magazines from the old world.

At least until a day ago.

He looked up at the woman behind the kitchen counter just as she finished drying herself off. His eyes shifting back and forth between the picture and the woman in front of him.

"Is something wrong?", she asked, confused.

"This…", Preston began as he stood and approached her.

"This is you...isn't it?", he pointed to the woman in the picture.

Her expression told him he was right.

"Wh…where did you get this?", she asked, taking the picture from him, running a finger across the faded image.

"How is that possible? That picture had to have been taken before the war", his brow furrowed in confusion.

"I mean I thought it was strange when we met in Concord, your clothes, the way you look, not knowing about Quincy, about ghouls…", "Being from a vault could probably have explained that….but this…"

"I wasn't lying about the vault", she absently discarded the towel on the counter and walked past him to lean against the broken stove, her eyes never leaving the picture in her hand.

"But..", Preston pushed.

"The day the bombs fell… we were ushered into a vault, not far from here…We barely made it inside, before the shockwave hit us…"

"You actually saw the bombs drop?" Preston interrupted, leaning against the counter.

She nodded, "It was surreal, even now, all of this…"

"Anyway", she continued. "…It was supposed to be a new life for us, the few that made it inside. At least that's what we were told. They lied…we were cryogenically frozen. I mean I can guess why they did it, food and resources being what they were and I doubt everyone would have willingly agreed to it".
"But they did lie", she scoffed. "It was all an act, the minute we stepped into that vault", "I was still in shock, everything happened so fast, but I should have seen through it", her eyes had taken on that far off look that Preston had worn all too often these past few weeks.

A look of regret, the question of "What if?" echoing in her mind. Yes he was all too familiar with that feeling.

"My husband, Nate and my baby…Shaun…", "They were frozen in the pod across from me. By the time I realized something wasn't right, it was too late".

She took one last look at the picture before pocketing it and folding her arms, her head lowered.

"You said your boy was kidnapped…", he probed, his question dying in his throat when she lifted her head, unshed tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry you don't have to…"

She forced a smile and shook her head, dismissing his concern. "I woke up…I don't know how long after", "I could barely move…there was a man, bald, a scar across his left eye, black leather jacket…", she risked a glance at Preston.

"I'm sorry…can't say I've seen anyone like that", he responded to her silent question.

"There was a woman in a hazmat suit with him", she continued. "They opened Nate's pod, tried to take Shaun, but he wouldn't let them. He could barely move, neither could I, I felt so weak…cold"

"The man with the scar, he pulled out a gun…", she shook her head willing the memory away. "They took Shaun, and put me back under. I woke up again a few days ago, everyone in the vault was long dead…I don't know how long it's been since Shaun was taken. All of this…it feels like just a few days ago I was there on the couch with Nate, everything was perfect…it all made sense…"

She took a deep breath, pushing off the stove and composing herself.

"Damn, that's…", Preston wasn't sure what to say after that.

She forced a smile, "Don't believe me?"

"No…no it's not that, I mean, if it was anyone else…", "But with everything you've told me…the picture, I don't see how I can doubt you. Still it's, not what I expected".

"Yeah", she agreed, suddenly feeling very awkward standing there.

The water from the faucet sputtered, flowing a little clearer, she noticed. She turned and ran a hand through the stream taking a tentative sip.

"There are a few leaks around town and the street is flooded in some places, but we've almost got it under control now." Preston explained, glad for the distraction.

"Great", she turned and flashed him a polite smile, wiping her hands on her jeans.

"I'm…I'm gonna run the shower for a while. I'll come find you later"

He took the hint and offered his hand, "Of course, like I said, if you need anything…"

"Thanks", she nodded and shook his hand. "I'll see you in a bit".
She walked him to the door and closed it behind him, not that it mattered with all the blown out windows around the house and the broken back door. Old habits.

She leaned back against the door for a few moments, eyes closed, before Dogmeat’s whimpering caught her attention.

He sat in front of her with what she could only describe as a concerned look. She flashed him a smile, kneeling down scratching him behind both ears and running her fingers through his fur.

"I'm alright boy", "Why don't you stay here and keep an eye out, I'll be back", he answered her with a lick on the cheek.

She turned up the radio before she left the living room and turned on the shower as she passed by on the way to her room.

Ragged sheets hung carelessly over the blown out windows of her room. A little privacy from Sanctuary’s newest residents.

There, down in the storeroom she fished out the picture in her pocket.

She ran her thumb across his face, burning the image into her mind one last time before she placed it into the small box with the holotape titled 'Hi honey'.

The hot water ran down her face, massaging her aching shoulder. She brushed her fingers over the still tender flesh, triggering a flash of teeth and claws and quickly shut her eyes, quelling the memory.

After almost a week, the steaming water felt absolutely heavenly on her skin. It also made her realize just how exhausted she was. She leaned forward against the wall, resting her forehead on her arms and letting the water work its magic on her neck and back.

If she tried hard enough, she could almost pretend she didn’t feel the sandy roughness of the dirty shower tiles under her feet, or smell the faint scent of rust in the steamy water running down her flushed cheeks.

If she closed her eyes, she could be back in her world, if just for a moment, a lazy Saturday morning.

A warm, hard body pressed against her back, a calloused palm brushing over her hips, a powerful arm around her waist. The water running down her chest, replaced by the gentle touch of his fingers between her breasts, snaking their way down her stomach… Warm kisses on her neck.

If she could stay here, a little longer.

Pretend…

She slowly opened her eyes, her illusionary world melting away in a steamy haze as she caught her breath.

Broken, dirty tiles beneath her feet, water dancing between her toes.

Why did she torture herself like this?

She sighed and straightened herself, brushing back the wet hair from her face.

It was the start of another day, in this world that wasn't hers anymore.
"I dunno boss, I'd give it a week, tops", Sturges looked up at Preston from a small trench just off the sidewalk.

"I mean it was already pretty low, but that power armor really took a lot out of it", he explained, a grimace on his face as he tightened the last valve.

He stood surveying his work. With any luck that should fix their little flooding problem.

"Where would we get another one out here", Preston thought out loud to himself, scratching his cheek.

The squelching of Sturges boots in the muddy earth catching his attention. He grabbed the mechanic's extended arm and helped him out of the trench.

"Wooo!", Sturges exclaimed, stretching his legs.

"The leg ok?".

"Oh yeah", Sturges grinned, "Just getting old is all".

Preston laughed, patting him on the shoulder, "We're all getting old".

"Heh, about the FC, that's a damn good question", Sturges thought for a moment.

"What about our new ladyfriend?", Sturges offered.

"What about her?"

"Well, she's from a vault that's supposed to be close by, right?", he explained, squinting in the morning sun.

"I'm thinking they have to have at least one FC lyin around they can spare, maybe we can trade…".

"Maybe…", Preston interrupted looking a little apprehensive.

"Somethin wrong?", Sturges asked.

"Hm?", "No…no I'll ask her", Preston assured him.

"How is she doin by the way?, Sturges asked, lowering his voice. "I mean after goin toe to toe with a Deathclaw…"

"She's a strong woman", Preston interrupted. "But, this is all new to her, I can't imagine what must be going through her head. When we talked earlier, she told me a little more about herself".

"What did she say?", Sturges pressed.

Preston shook his head, "I don't think its my place to say, but she seems to be taking all of this better than I would think".

"Fair enough", Sturges replied. "Speak of the devil", he nodded over Preston's shoulder, to the woman in question making her way towards them.

She ran her fingers through damp hair as she crossed the street, enjoying the warm morning sunlight and the gentle wind on her face. Her presence didn't go unnoticed by the Longs or the old woman, and she nodded politely as she passed them.
She made her way further up the street towards Preston and the mechanic, Dogmeat darting past her, splashing the puddles on the sidewalk before disappearing behind the crumbling buildings.

"Miss Leona", Preston greeted with a smile and she returned it.

"Morning, uh…St…Sturges right?", she asked uncertainly.

"Yes ma'am, you're lookin a lot better this morning, I gotta say."

She smiled, "I just needed some sleep, and the shower didn't hurt, thanks for that."

"Nah, I didn't have to do much, everything was set up already, just needed a little power", Sturges grinned.

"Actually…about that", Preston interrupted.

"Hmm?"

"Sturges here was just telling me that the FC we brought back won't last much longer."

"Oh.", she folded her arms.

"Any idea how long?", she asked, biting her thumb in thought.

"We got about a week I'd say, give or take", Sturges offered.

Preston cleared his throat, his brow furrowed, "We were thinking…"

"You want to check the vault."

She locked eyes with Preston for the briefest moment, seeing the apologetic look on his face.

"It won't hurt to ask, I was thinkin they might be open to trading", Sturges explained. "I'm sure we can find something they'd be…"

"There's no one to trade with", she interrupted.

"Wh…I don't understand", Sturges looked baffled.

"They're dead, the vault's empty", she swallowed and ran a hand through her hair.

"Dead?", he looked back and forth between them.

"I'll go get the Pipboy", she ignored the question, turned on her heel and made for her house.

"Boss?", Sturges looked to Preston, confused.

"I'll go talk to her, wait here", Preston patted him on the shoulder before going after her.

She swiped the Pipboy from the kitchen counter, flicking off the radio, lost in thought.

Nate was still down there, and she wasn't sure how she felt letting strangers near him. Her eyes settled on the corridor leading to the bedrooms, hers and Nate's, and Shaun's.

It was something that she noticed ever since she first set foot in the house, after emerging from the vault. She had become very protective of this space.
It's true, they didn't live here that long, but she did have memories within these walls, and the thought of careless feet intruding, trampling over these fragile memories...it made her very uncomfortable, anxious even.

She felt similarly about the vault. Part of her was in there still. An exposed nerve that she didn't dare touch. A part of her that she needed to protect from this world nonetheless.

_You're being irrational, stubborn even._

_I know that!_

She shut her eyes and took a deep breath, clearing her head.

"Miss Leona?", came Preston's voice from the doorway. "You alright?"

After a moment of silence he wasn't sure if she'd heard him, but she finally turned and approached, extending the Pipboy to him.

"Do you know how to use this?", she asked.

"Uh…y, yeah I think so", he studied her face, but she betrayed no emotion.

"There's a trail behind the house, follow it up the hill and you'll reach the vault. There's a terminal next to the entrance, use this to open it"

"You're not coming with us?", he asked, puzzled, taking the Pipboy.

"No", she leaned over the couch to retrieve her pistol. "And don't ask me to."

"Just…do me a favour", she checked the magazine.

"Sure, anything", Preston replied, unsure what to do with himself.

"Don't touch the Cryopods, and don't cut the power to them", she tucked the pistol behind her.

"Of course, but…if you're not coming with us, why are you…"

"I'm going back to Concord, there are a few places I can check", she said.

"Alone?", "You can't be serious!", "Look If you wait a while, I can come with you after we check the vault", Preston reasoned.

Honestly, it made sense to her, but she wasn't going to go with them, and with how anxious she felt at the prospect of letting strangers get close to Nate, she wasn't about to sit still and wait for them either.

There was also the chance that they would have no option but to cut power to the vault, Cryopods included. If that happened, she wanted, no, she needed to find another option for them.

She shook her head, "Sorry, but I can't sit here and wait while…", she paused, avoiding his eyes, "I'll just drive myself crazy", she finished.

"But…"

"I have to get a few things together, can you give me a minute?", she cut him off and grabbed the door in a silent request for him to leave.
Preston sighed in defeat and stepped outside as she closed the door behind him.

It took a few short minutes to gather the things she needed. A few stims, an extra magazine, small flashlight. She slipped on the snug mini military backpack and ascended the storeroom stairs, stopping at the top to lace her boots.

*If you had learned your lesson you'd be taking that anti material rifle with you.*

She eyed the large gun dominating the far wall, briefly entertaining the idea.

*No, best to stay light and fast,* she decided, sliding the door shut and activating the lock.

She closed the door behind her and stepped out unto the porch, immediately intercepted by Codsworth as he floated towards her. She could see Preston and Sturges beyond him, further up the road.

"Mum!, am I to understand that we're headed back to Concord?"

"'I am", she corrected. "You're staying here Codsworth".

"But why?", "Have you already forgotten about our last visit to that dreadful place?", his voice anxious, bordering on panic.

"The raiders are dead Codsworth and so is that...thing", she explained

"That hardly means there aren't more of those thugs skulking around Mum, or those...overgrown lizards"

"Those claws...brrr", Codsworth shivered, or at least a close approximation of it. "Did you see those claws!?"

*Yeah, I saw them.*

"Codsworth, I'll be fine, calm down", she tried to quiet the robot.

"No!, I won't let you!, Sir would never forgive me if I let you go back to that...that deathtrap!", "I'm coming with you!"

"No", she replied a matter-of-factly, putting her hands on either side of his metal body and positioning him in front of her door.

"You're going to stay here, you're going to help these people and you're going to keep them out of our house, understood?", her voice gentle and calming as if she were talking to a child.

"But, but...".

"I promise, I'll be okay", "I'll be back soon, two hours at the most", she assured him.

"Please Codsworth?"

A few moments of silence where she could almost picture the gears turning in his chrome head.

"Very well Mum...", he finally relented. "But...if you're not back in two hours I shall definitely come to your rescue!"
She smiled, "You better".

And with a wave she made her way to the next hurdle on her way out of Sanctuary.

She sighed under her breath as she approached them, "I thought you'd be gone by now".

"About that", Preston stepped forward, musket in hand," We were thinking, it would probably be best if I go in first, scout around, make sure everything's safe. In the mean time, Sturges here can go with you to Concord, help with your search. What do you think?"

The mechanic nodded and offered her a friendly smile. It took some effort not to let her irritation show, but she managed to keep a straight face. She was honestly in no mood to argue, instead muttering a simple "Fine" as she walked past the men. She was also in no mood for conversation.

Where had Dogmeat run off too anyway?

"Man, would you look at this", "A thing of beauty ain't it?"

"You ever ride one of these things?", the mechanic looked up at her, running his fingertips over the rusted, broken motorcycle.

Apparently Preston had filled him in on her story, how much, she wasn't sure. But with every car they passed, every building that caught his eye, he would bombard her with questions. It was irritating at first, as caught up in her own thoughts as she was, but eventually his childlike exuberance won her over. She was glad for the distraction.

She smiled down at him, the sun at her back, unable to hide her amusement, "There's one in our backyard, just behind the driveway, you can take a look when we get back", she offered.

"Heh, I'd like that".

"Come on", she passed him, eyes always searching the surrounding buildings and side streets for any sign of movement. She didn't forget where they were or why they were here.

"Got anywhere else in mind?", he asked, coming up behind her as they navigated another back alley.

"A few places", she whispered over her shoulder, crouching as the alley opened out into the street. Sturges followed suit, settling behind her while she stuck her head out to make sure it was safe.

The street was deserted, save for a solitary figure slumped forward in front of the museum, a crumpled mass of claws and scales at its feet.

He could see the subtle tightening of her jaw as her eyes lingered on the scene. "We headed back to the museum?"

"The hardware store", she answered , without looking at him."Let's go", she withdrew her pistol and made for the hardware store. They walked at a hurried pace, eyes darting from window to window, with fluttering, ragged curtains occasionally quickening her heartbeat.

A bright, white shirt was probably a bad idea.

The steel giant stood, slumped over, broken but victorious outside the hardware store. Its armor torn and missing, exposing the exoskeleton underneath. The Deathclaw lay in a bloody, mangled heap at its feet. One of its massive defining horns missing, blown off in the blast perhaps.
She nodded a silent ‘Thank you’ as her eyes lingered on her steel guardian before they entered the hardware.

"What exactly are you lookin for?", Sturges asked over his shoulder, gun at his side, surveying the street one last time before stepping inside.

He could hear her rummaging around behind the cash register.

"This".

He leaned over the counter to see her crouched down in front of a terminal.

"A terminal?", "What's it for?"

He took a seat on the counter and watched her work.

"The 'Vales' moved here from the city not long before we arrived in Sanctuary", her brow furrowed in concentration.

"A young couple and their adorable little girl, they ran this place together", "Lived on the other side of town, but they had their own workshop right here".

She paused, biting her lip and studying the screen before continuing. "I brought Nate's watch to be repaired here a few days after we arrived", a smile tugging at her lips. "That's when I met Katherine Vale, I still remember her daughter hiding behind her skirt, handing out flyers".

"I was so lost", she smiled fondly. "Wandering the streets of a small town for the first time, taking everything in".

"The clothes in the display windows were all just a little behind the latest fashion trends and every store was a privately owned family business. Everyone seemed to know one another".

"I remember feeling a bit like an outsider, invading their world. Completely out of my element".

"It was Katherine that showed me around town, filling me in on all the latest gossip", she grinned.

"She seemed to have no problem adjusting to life outside the city".

"It just so happened…"

This was the first time he'd had the chance to just observe her without having to worry about being caught staring.

She seemed lost in her memories even while her fingers danced across the keys with practiced certainty. Her voice, just a little husky, breathy and effortlessly sexy. She was about two inches taller than he was. Toned but not lacking in feminine curves. Perfect skin and piercing green eyes. An otherworldly beauty and at the same time physically intimidating.

It made sense, he reasoned. The people of her time must have lived in utter paradise, not wanting for anything. Healthy, safe and physically perfect. They were gods that doomed their world and cursed their children to wander this hollow wasteland. A world he'd only seen glimpses of in old pictures. Indeed, it boggled the mind, what could have been.

"And…there we are", he heard her say. The click behind her catching his attention. He watched the wall sink an inch, then slide open. He could hear the sound of gears turning inside the walls and the scraping of rusted metal.
"Well I'll be. You got a real knack for these things", he winced at the musty, stale air that assaulted them.

She stood and flashed him a proud smile. "Wait here, I won't be long", she picked up his 10mm from the table and handed it to him.

"You sure?".

She nodded and fished out a small flashlight from her pack, "Keep an eye out".

She descended the long staircase, the meager light from her flashlight straining to hold back the darkness. A musty, almost sweet odour, tickling her nose. The creaking of wood, the only sound until she, at last, felt the solid concrete floor beneath her feet.

Shelves stacked with equipment. Drills, hoses, tires. She walked with slow measured steps, shining the light across the shelves and workbenches, methodically scanning the sundry equipment and stocks.

A faint light at the far corner catching her attention when her eyes adjusted to the darkness.

That's what you're looking for.

A powered down generator, massive and bolted to the floor with a fusion core installed. It took her a few minutes, scanning the various dials and buttons. her light reflecting off the bright yellow paint and blinding her.

Here we go.

She hit the release, twisting the core, smiling as it came loose in her hands. Hopefully they wouldn't have to mess with the Vault's power supply now, at least for a while. She slipped her pack off and stumbled to a table in the center of the room, resting the flashlight on the table as she made room in her bag for the Core. The flashlight rolled across the table revealing bolt cutters, a soldering iron, wrenches, a drill, these could all be useful.

Lucky she didn't bring Sturges down here with her, they'd probably be here all day stumbling in the dark. They would definitely have to come back.

A small steel lockbox on the table gleamed in the light. She slid it over and pried the lid open. She grinned, "Must be my lucky day", she whispered, retrieving another Core. It looked new, unused.

"You're coming with me", she cradled it in her palms, testing its weight before storing it securely in her pack.

It was time to go, she reached over for the flashlight, feeling something soft beneath her boots when she leaned over the table.

"What…?", she shone the light at her feet.

"God!" jumped back in shock, her hand over her mouth, stifling her scream, tools hitting the concrete floor, shattering the silence.

Black, sunken eyes stared up at her. It had the shape of a person, deformed, immense growths all over its body like a cancer had eaten them alive. Lips shrivelled, exposing the few teeth still attached to its gums. Hair in sparse patches on a mostly bald head. This poor soul looked almost mummified.
She couldn't help the look of utter disgust on her face.

Unable to take the horrifying sight any longer, she removed the light from the corpse. Her heart still thundering in her chest as she leaned over the table, steadying herself as she tried to catch her breath.

*What had caused that? The bombs? Radiation? But it's been over two hundred years, should it still look like that.*

A shiver ran down her spine.

*Had Sturges heard the noise? Her muffled scream? She would have expected him to come running down the stairs.*

She scooped up her pack and reached for the flashlight once more. It was time to go.

Her blood ran cold as leathery fingers closed around her wrist and the 'corpse' pulled itself to its feet in front of her. Its face mere inches from her own, eerily illuminated from the flashlight on the table. Her breath left her, her mouth open but the scream died in her throat. She stared wide eyed at the twisted horror, unable to think. A guttural gurgle as it observed her, unmoving with an almost unbelieving curiosity in its black, sunken eyes. The sickly sweet smell of rotting flesh threatening to overwhelm her. It was then that she heard it, the same guttural groans, the stirring of life, of bodies behind her.

No…it was coming from all around her, from the ground, cloaked in darkness.

Instinct took over when the creature inched its face closer, she fumbled in the darkness with her free hand, grabbing the first object she found, a wrench. She swung it across the corpse's face but it kept its grip on her wrist even as it staggered back. Her skin crawled when she grabbed its hand and pried its shrivelled, leathery fingers off her wrist. She followed up with a blind kick at the creature, knocking the mass of flesh to the ground once more.

She backed away frantically snatching her pack, abandoning the flashlight and scrambled blindly towards the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"Whoa there lovely", a scrawny, almost skeletal young man pointed the barrel of his rifle in her face as soon as she reached the top of the stairs. Another bearded, bald man behind him, just inside the entrance, held Sturges at gunpoint.

"Told ya I heard somebody down there".

She showed them her palms, the backpack around her shoulder, with the cores clearly visible while she tried to mask the terror that must have been clear on her face during the mad dash up the stairs.

"Ain't no reason to be scared love, why don't you come over here, slowly", he backed up into the room, grinning.

She glanced at Sturges, who gave her an apologetic look.

She was painfully aware of the horde of 'zombies' at her back as she slowly followed the young man. She wanted to run, get the hell away from the stairs as fast as she could. With every step, she expected to feel the grip of rotting flesh on her shoulder from behind.

She kept facing him as she approached and backed up against the wall, keeping the pistol tucked behind her out of view. Thankful to be away from the basement steps.
They weren't raiders, at least they didn't look like the groups she'd had the displeasure of meeting thus far, Preston's group excluded. They were filthy, unkempt and she could smell the almost skeletal man that was giving her the once-over from head to toe, rifle still pointed squarely at her.

"What do we have here, lovely?", he reached for the pack around her shoulder, uncomfortably close as she let him slip it off of her. He lingered in her personal space a little longer than necessary and she could feel his breath on her neck, along with the barrel on her belly. Her eyes lingering on the basement door behind the counter off to the side.

*How many of those things were in there?*

She needed to grab Sturges and get the hell out of there.

"You smell real nice, love", he flashed her a row of rotten teeth. She couldn't help the scowl of disgust on her face as she glared down at him. His grin faltered. He turned and threw the pack to the man behind him who clumsily dropped it on the wooden floor with a heavy thud.

She ground her teeth, swearing under her breath. 'Idiot'.

Another glance at the basement door from the corner of her eye. Still no movement.

"Check it out, how much you think we gonna get for that?"

"Damn Higgs!, I gotta to ask Pa, but I'd say a good six hundred, each", he replied scooping up the bag.

He turned back to her, "Heh, I think we hit the jackpot here". She could feel the tip of the rifle running across her hips, snaking its way under her shirt until she felt the cold iron on her stomach.

"What else you got, love?", the grin returning to his face, his eyes lingering on her chest. "That can't be all you found down there". "Do I gotta search ya a little m…".

"Hey man, knock it off!", Sturges interrupted. "You got what you want, you can have whatever's down there and we'll be on our way". The bearded man stepped forward and cracked him across the jaw with the butt of his rifle in response.

"Shut it!"

"Sturges!", she called as he staggered back. She instinctually made a move towards him, a hand on her chest holding her back.

"Heh!, so you can talk", Higgs grinned.

She backed up, slapping his hand away.

"Hey!", he growled, leveling the rifle at her.

"Sturges?", she called again. He cradled his jaw, holding a hand up to her to indicate he was all right.

"Hey Gram?", Higgs called over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off of her. "We don't need that one, right?", "Just put a bullet in…", the metallic clang of items hitting the floor echoed from the basement, snapping everyone's attention to the stairs.

"Higgs!", Gram and Higgs exchanged looks.

"Who else you got down there?" Higgs turned to face her, "How many?".
She gave him a bitter smile, "Why don't you go look", she spat.

He growled, baring his teeth at her. "Keep an eye on her", he instructed his companion before making his way to the basement door.

She locked eyes with Sturges for a brief moment, seeing his confusion.

"Hey, come on out!", "We got your people up here", he craned his neck through the doorway, pointing his gun at the oppressive darkness, unable to see more than a few steps down.

"I said we got your people!", he took a step down. "You want em back alive, then come on up here, assholes!".

Nothing but silence.

He stepped back up into the room and turned to her. "Hey, come'ere honey!". She stood her ground, making no move to obey, glaring at him.

"I said…", the rapid thud of footsteps on the wooden stairs catching his attention. One moment there was nothing there, and in a split second the mass of twisted, rotting flesh burst into the light.

"Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh…", he had no time to react, his eyes wide as saucers. The horrific creature burst through the door, barrelling into him and knocking him into the counter with enough force to warp the floorboards it was bolted to.

"What the fuck?!", Gram shouted in horrified shock.

"Aw hell!", she heard Sturges shout.

"Gram!"

"Gram!...shoot it!", Higgs screamed in utter terror as he wrestled with the creature for his gun.

Gram immediately took a shaky aim at the threat, struggling to get a clear shot.

"Gram! What are ya doin, shoot it!"

The second Gram took his gun off of her she seized the chance. She reached behind her, finding the cool grip of the 9mm, whipping it around and taking aim in one swift, practiced motion. Her single shot drowned out the panicked screams, a crimson splatter hitting the walls.

"Jesus!", Sturges jumped back as Gram crumpled to the floor with a meaty thud.

"Grab the gun!", she instructed him before again taking aim and putting a bullet in Higgs's scrawny leg. She watched him scream and topple to the floor with the creature, just as another twisted monstrosity emerged from the basement and mounted him.

Seeing them in the light of day sent a horrified shiver down her spine. But at least she wasn't alone in the dark with them.

*What are they?*

For the moment they seemed preoccupied with Higgs. She could have killed them, Higgs included. But something stopped her. Maybe she didn't want to waste the bullets on targets she could just walk away from. Or maybe she felt a bit vindictive towards Higgs and his ilk.
Regardless, it was time to go, she approached Gram's lifeless body. Sturges was crouched next to him, frantically checking the rifle. "God damned ghouls!", he hissed. "Every time…".

_Ghouls? So that's what they meant._

"Grab the cores, we need to leave, now!", she ordered as she tucked the pistol behind her.

He looked up at her, "Right behind…", his gaze shifting from her to the exit, his eyes wide in shock.

"Gram!", a gruff voice came from outside.

She turned just in time to see the dual barrels of a shotgun poke through the doorway.

She grabbed the barrel and pushed it skyward just as a burly older man stumbled into the hardware. The shot was deafening, hitting the ceiling and raining debris down on them.

"Leona!", she heard Sturges voice.

She struggled with him for a few seconds before thinking better of it, instead bringing her knee up, doubling him over and sapping some of his strength. It wasn't enough, he still held onto the shotgun with an iron grip.

_Fine._

She grabbed his wrist, violently wrenching his arm to the side, exposing his elbow before slamming the heel of her palm into it with a sickening crack. The shotgun hit the floor.

"Gah!", he screamed, his face contorted in agony. A knifehand strike to the throat cut his screams off before she stomped her booted foot into his knee, breaking the joint. He was ready to fall, she grabbed him by the collar, slamming her hips into him before turning and flipping him onto the floor with a loud crash, pinning him with a knee on his sternum.

The sound of his wheezing drowned out by a snarl from behind the counter. She turned just as a ghoul poked its head around the corner, the noise having attracted its attention. It bolted towards her with surprising speed. She reached behind her for her pistol, her fingers finding the grip just as two shots rang out and the Ghoul crashed to the floor, skidding to a halt just a foot from her.

"Hot damn, woman!", Sturges yelled, gripping the smoking rifle. "You gotta teach me them moves sometime".

"Thanks", she nodded before looking down at the man beneath her and frowning, he was still struggling to breathe. Eyes squeezed tight in pain.

_Psychotic animals._

"C'mon man I can hear more of em coming", Sturges urged.

"Yeah…", she muttered, standing, scooping up the bag and throwing it over her shoulder.

A third and fourth Ghoul emerged from the basement, dead eyes scanning the corpse behind the counter before settling on them, sending guttural snarls in their direction.

"Aw crap", Sturges unloaded a shot at them before she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him outside.

"Give me a break", she muttered under her breath, as they came face to face with a crazed looking
woman brandishing a machete.

"Where are my boys?!", she demanded, raising the weapon.

"Higgs!", she croaked.

"Whoa, lady, just hold on th…", Sturges started, suddenly jumping at the sound of two gunshots hitting her in both legs. The woman hit the sidewalk, screaming behind them, as Leona quickly dragged him away from the hardware, over to the Power Armor, retrieving one of the cores from her pack and slamming it into the suit.

"What are you doing?", he asked, looking over his shoulder at the still screaming woman.

"Get inside", she instructed, her voice sounded exhausted, almost sombre. He turned to her, she was staring at the woman as well, while holding the hatch open for him, her expression unreadable.

"But…", his words dying when she shifted her gaze to him. There was no malice in her eyes, but it was clear the issue was not up for debate.

"Alright…", he stepped into the suit, sparing another glance over his shoulder. Two ghouls stuck their heads outside, likely seeing daylight for the first time in centuries before their dead, sunken eyes fell upon the woman. Her screams only intensifying at the realization of what was about to happen. Sturges closed his eyes when they fell upon her and the hatch was shut behind him. Leona circled around to face him, carefully stepping over the mangled Deathclaw’s tail. It was dark inside the suit, but he could see her clearly enough through the large gash in the helmet.

"The core I put in is fully charged. Head back to Sanctuary and don't stop".

"What about you, I'm not gonna just leave y…"

"I'll be right behind you", she assured him.

"C'mon man I don't feel right about this, how bout we switch…"

"Sturges!", her voice pleading but firm nonetheless.

"Alright, alright, I'll wait for you outside of town then"

" SANCTUARY", she reiterated. "Don't. Stop.".

He sighed in defeat, "You're one stubborn lady, you know that?".

She gave him a half-hearted smile and stepped out of his way.

"Just, do me a favour, come back alive and in one piece"

She just nodded and watched him as he pushed off, thundering footsteps reverberating through the street.

She stood there on the sidewalk, and watched in disgust as the ghouls tore into the lifeless body of the woman. A mother and wife, her sons and husband lay dead inside.

Like the raiders, they were all no better than animals, unbound by law or morals, unchained by the civilizing effects of society. But was that so wrong? Afterall, none of these things existed anymore did they?
The freedom to act in their own interests, on their own base desires, without the consequences of law. Without concern for their fellow human beings. It reminded her of the numerous riots in her time, especially towards the end. When law breaks down, unable to be enforced, when people become desperate. Even in her time there were people like this.

*Human nature.*

Was that what it took to survive out here?

She had become a mass murderer in a matter of days. Something she had already accepted.

*Self Defence* was beside the point.

But none of it mattered anyway, not anymore.

*Right?*

There were new rules she had to play by, because this world was definitely not going to play by hers.

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Another head emerged from the doorway, a twisted abomination like the rest. Wisps of golden hair still clung to its head. Sunken black eyes looked this way and that. One cautious step, then another, out into the open. The sunlight glinted off of its leathery skin. This one was much smaller than the others.

She raised her hand to her mouth in shock.

*A Child.*

The stained and tattered yellow dress that still clung to its tiny, hideously deformed frame. She'd seen that dress many times before. On the counter of the hardware store, in the loving arms of Katherine Vale and on the proud shoulders of David Vale.

She couldn't breathe, her eyes stung, tears creeping down her cheeks as she watched the small figure raise its head to the sky, almost seeming to enjoy the sunlight on its face. Strands of sparse, dull golden hair catching the sunlight. It observed the feasting ghouls tearing into the woman for a moment before noticing her.

*But it's been over two hundred years....how?*

Her heart sank when she locked eyes with the tortured creature. She removed her hand from her mouth and tried to smile despite her tears.

"H...Hey sweetie", her voice gentle and soothing as she took a step forward and slowly crouched down on one knee.

"Remember me?", she managed to choke out.

A pained groan escaped sagging, shriveled lips and a careless tilt of its balding, disfigured head.

It was all she could do to keep from breaking down into a sobbing mess. It broke her heart, trying to reconcile the memory of the beautiful little girl she remembered, smiling, laughing, so innocent... with the walking, pitiful monstrosity that slowly shambled towards her. One leg twisted and deformed, scraping on the sidewalk.
"Come here honey, it's okay…", she swallowed the lump in her throat and opened a welcoming arm. Her pained smile never breaking. Her other hand snaking its way down to the small of her back, fingers closing around a polymer grip.

Katherine and Dave...were they here as well? Which ones?

These were people…her people. Bastardized remnants of her time, mocking her memories of a better world.

Bent, shriveled fingers, touched her palms. Her breath quickened, her heart in her throat.

"It's okay", she whispered again, her eyes unblinking even as the tears clouded her sight.

A gurgled, wheezing breath as it got closer.

"Everything's okay, baby", her palm brushing over the dead, lumps of flesh on tiny arms, over tiny shoulders.

"It's over now…", her fingers closing around its neck. A cold breath on her arm as it strained to taste her flesh.

"The nightmare's over", she gritted her teeth to stay the anguished wail that threatened to burst from her throat.

"You can go to sleep now, sweetie", her knuckles, white from the grip on her pistol as she drew it.

"You can go to sleep now…", she leaned in closer.

"Sophia".

"Look, with Shaun and us all being at home together...It's been an amazing year. But even so, I know our best days are yet to come...". She sat curled up on the sofa, swirling her finger around a glass of whiskey, Pip-boy on the coffee table. Preston leaned against the doorframe in sombre silence, head bowed. She had her back to him and hadn't yet noticed his presence. He hadn't intended to listen in, but curiosity got the better of him. After visiting the vault, seeing the man she loved, in that frozen coffin. To hear him speak now, the love behind his words. Something kept his feet in the doorway despite the guilt he felt at intruding.

"...But everything we do, no matter how hard...we do it for our family. Now say goodbye Shaun...Bye Bye? Say bye bye?. The sound of a giggling, sputtering infant. Bye honey. We love you".

She reached over and switched the Pip-boy off, wiping her cheeks with her sleeve. She looked dazed, tired.

He saw her jump when she finally noticed him. "Preston?", her voice a little hoarse.

"H..Hey, I'm sorry I...I didn't mean to listen in, I just", he fumbled for the words, feeling like a child caught misbehaving.

"How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long", he lied. "I just uh...I just thought I'd check in, see how you were doing", "I can come back if...".

"No...no, its fine", she offered him a smile, "Come in", she tapped the sofa, "have a seat". She got
up to fetch another glass as he entered the living room, he instead took a seat on the couch off to the side.

She poured him a glass before settling on the empty sofa, her legs curled up and her head propped up on her elbows.

"You look like you've got a lot on your mind", she broke the silence.

"Heh, considerably less since I met you", he took a swig, his face twisting as if he'd just sucked on a lemon. "Man this stuff if gonna kill me".

"Haha", she laughed, genuinely for a brief second that he almost wasn't sure he heard it.

"Sorry, I don't really have anything else", "Fridge is a little under stocked", she brought her hand to her face, and whispered conspiratorially, "I don't think Codsworth has been to the supermarket this week, might have to get a new model".

Preston chuckled, "Don't worry, once we've built this place up a little more, and started attracting settlers and traders, that shouldn't be a problem".

"Sounds like you've got big plans"

"Of course", Preston replied, "If you're gonna do something, you need to put your heart into it, go all out".

She smiled, swirling the whiskey in her glass, "I can get behind that, though I think you'd be better served working on security before you start putting up the 'help wanted' signs".

"That's true", he tipped his glass to her, "too much attention too fast could be a problem", "But this place, from what I can see, it shouldn't be too difficult to set up a good defensive perimeter". "We'll probably need some extra hands, so we'll have to be careful who we take in at the start".

"I'm sure you'll do fine, you all seem pretty capable, and you're off to a pretty good start", she said thoughtfully.

"That's largely because of you, you know?", he nodded. "I don't think I've properly thanked for your help back in Concord".

She shook her head, "You don't need to, I just did what any…", she stopped herself.

"What anyone would have done?", he finished her thought. "No…no they wouldn't have", he leaned forward in his seat. "You had your own problems, your son…but you helped us anyway, risked your life I don't know how many times. You've been helping us ever since and you haven't once asked for anything. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for you, I'm certain of it".

She chuckled, feeling embarrassed at his praise, "You're putting me on a pretty high pedestal, don't sell yourself short, these people made it this far because of you".

He shook his head, "I told you, out of the nineteen of us that made it out of Quincy, this is all that's left. And that's in large part to my decisions. They were under my protection and I failed them".

"Preston…".

"It all started to fall apart when General Becker died, the infighting and petty squabbles for power. It wasn't the same Minutemen I admired, growing up. Our ideals had become secondary, an
afterthought, you know?. That's what paved the way for the betrayal at Quincy. That's what led to the weakness of men like Clint. His betrayal led to the death of countless civilians, my friends, of Colonel Hollis. The responsibility to protect those survivors fell on me when the Colonel died. The last Minuteman and I couldn't even manage that.

"What about Sturges, Mama Murphy, the Longs, you didn't fail them, and I know they don't think that either. I mean, I've been out there only a few days, but from what I've seen, it's hard enough looking out for yourself, much less anyone else".

He leaned back in his seat with a sheepish smile, "I know…still, it was on me to keep them safe. My duty". He chanced a look at her. "If you hadn't shown up, we'd be dead. No question about that, and I was okay with that. Felt I deserved it. My whole life I've tried to embody the ideals of the Minutemen, even when it all started to fall apart. But I was ready to die at Concord, even if it meant condemning these people. What does that say about me?"

"It says that you lost hope. After what you've been through, anyone would have. It says you're human", she offered.

"That's what I mean", he pointed at her with his glass. "Hope, that's what you gave me. You risked your life out there for people you've never met when there was nothing in it for you. Those are the ideals that the Minutemen under General Becker embodied".

She broke his gaze, feeling thoroughly awkward. She was nobody's hero.

"I'm sorry", he chuckled nervously, leaning forward and setting his glass on the table. "I didn't mean to go on like that. I just…I just want you to know how grateful I am, for everything. I have my share of demons to deal with and I'm sure you do too. But you gave me hope, and you gave us another chance. We won't waste it".

She smiled, trying to hide her embarrassment and set her glass down next to his. "Not sure I deserve such high praise, but I'm glad you found your feet again. These people are going to need you".

Preston offered her a thoughtful nod as an awkward silence settled over them.

"Um, so how is Sturges doing? Still tinkering with that Power Armor?"

"Hah! ,no, actually, now he's up to his elbows in that bike of yours and still going on about the Ghouls at Concord". Preston leaned forward again, a seriousness in his expression. "You took a long time getting back this morning, we were about to send out a search party after Sturges came back alone". "You looked, different, when you passed us on the bridge, 'out of it'. What happened out there?"

"Ghosts", she muttered, leaning back on the sofa.

"Just, ghosts from the past".

"Take this", she held out the large box, straining under its weight. Guns, ammunition and other supplies, some devices he couldn't even identify.

"Where did you get all this?", Preston asked, taking the box and backing up, setting it down outside her door.

A hand on his shoulder. "Boss", Sturges appearing at his side with a nod before stepping into the house.
"Just a few things I had in storage, I thought you could make use of it", she called while lacing her boots.

"Ma'am", Sturges greeted.

"Hey", she smiled, looking up at him.

She looked different. A dark vest under a black, cropped leather jacket. Black jeans and combat boots. But it wasn't just her clothes. There was something in her eyes. A certainty and a purpose where there was none before.

Resolve.

She finished lacing her boots and stood.

"How's the jaw", she asked, slipping on a pair of fingerless gloves.

"Heh, that was nothing", he grinned, running a thumb along his jaw.

"Is that for me?", she nodded to the bundle in his arms wrapped in cloth.

"Huh?...oh yeah", "A few supplies, nothin much, some food, a few stims I hope you don't have to use".

"Thanks". She accepted the bundle and carefully placed it in a large backpack on the sofa.

"Listen, I just wanna say thanks, and good luck, I really hope you find your kid out there".

"Thanks", she smiled warmly, feeling somewhat awkward. Should she hug him? She didn't know them that well did she?

Instead she settled on handshake, which he returned with sincerity. "Be safe out there".

"Mum, don't forget this", Codsworth appeared from the corridor, carrying an assault rifle.

"Ah".

"I really wish you would let me come with you", he pleaded.

"We talked about this", she placed a palm on his metal frame.

"I know, I know, and I shall assist them to the best of my ability"

"Hey, cheer up pal", Sturges chimed in. "You and me are gonna have this town lookin as good as new by the time she gets back".

"Yes...yes you're right. Mum, do hurry back with young Shaun".

"I'll find him Codsworth". It was both a promise to herself and a declaration thrown out into the aether.

"You remember the route I showed you?", Preston asked as the duo walked towards the bridge.

"Yeah", she tapped her Pip-boy. "It's Fenway Park, I'd be able to find my way there in my sleep", she grinned.
They finally reached the bridge, looking out into the wasteland beyond.

"Ma'am", Preston turned to her, reaching into his coat. "There's something I'd like you to have".

"What is it?", she asked, turning to him, her voice almost lost on the wind.

A dark blue handkerchief, no, a sash, folded with care. He held it out to her and she ran a finger over the finely embroidered Minutemen logo and the striped Insignia below it. "My friend, Colonel Ezra Hollis, gave this to me before he died". She looked up at him, a mix of sympathy and confusion in her eyes.

"I can't…".

"It belonged to General Joe Becker".

She withdrew her fingers in surprise, but he caught her hand and placed it on the sash, clasping it under his own.

She shook her head. "Preston I can't take this".

He just smiled. There was sadness in his eyes, regret even. But there was also determination. "The Minutemen died at Quincy…hell, maybe even long before that. But their ideals, their spirit didn't. I can see that now. As long as there are people like you out there".

"Preston, I don't deserve this, you're giving me way too much credit".

He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "You're wrong, even if you don't see it. I do".

"I don't know why Colonel Hollis gave this to me, but I do know that I don't deserve to carry it, at least not yet".

She frowned and bit her lip, looking down at her hand between his.

"I'm not asking you to become the next General. I just think that it should be carried by someone who embodies the ideals it represents. When you get back, if you decide you want to return it, maybe by then, I'll be worthy to carry it".

He withdrew his hands, letting the fabric rest in her palm. She studied it, deep in thought for a moment before making up her mind with a sigh.

"You're already worthy, Preston", she slipped the sash into her jacket pocket, then caught his eye, "Maybe when I get back you'll have realized that".

He smiled, a bittersweet smile and extended his hand. "Take care of yourself out there, Ma'am".

"Leona", she corrected, taking his hand.

"Leona", he nodded.

"Preston". She made it half way up the bridge before she stopped, and turned to him once more.

"About my house…".

"Don't worry", he chuckled. "We won't mess with it.

She nodded, "Take care of yourselves". One last look towards the town before she turned, leaving
Sanctuary behind.

Preston stood there and watched as she passed the old Minuteman statue. A blur out of the corner of his eye causing him to jump as Dogmeat darted over the bridge. He couldn't help but laugh as he watched the dog almost topple her over. The canine lapping at her face in greeting as she laughed, before dashing ahead, barking for her to follow.

"Take care of her, boy", and with a tip of his hat he turned as well. Towards Sanctuary, the spark of hope in his heart.
Her boots splashed through the muddy water as she ran through the rain. Grey clouds rolled across the sky. Dogmeat sprinted ahead of her towards the remains of an old building. Only the stone foundation remained, with crumbling pillars holding up a concrete ceiling, the rest of the building lay in ruin behind it. She dropped her backpack heavily on the ground next to a pillar and slipped off her rifle, propping it up next to it. She ran her fingers through her hair, shaking the wetness from it.

Dogmeat mirrored the sentiment, pelting water everywhere as he shook himself dry. She threw the dog a toothy grin, shielding her face as he splashed her, blissfully oblivious. A satisfied bark in her direction, before he turned his attention to something behind them.

It was then that she noticed the pair huddled in the corner. A woman holding a small boy protectively in her arms. Their clothing faded and dirty, a bloody bandage around the boy's calf. The woman pulled the boy closer and froze when Leona turned to them.

She must have appeared rather threatening, standing tall over them, dressed and armed as she was, her eyes hidden behind dark tactical goggles.

The woman had the look of a deer in headlights while the boy seemed barely conscious, eyes half lidded as his head lolled on the woman's chest. Dogmeat sniffed in their direction as he circled them, the woman's eyes darting between her and the Dog.

Leona held up a hand to them as she approached slowly, seeing the fear in the woman's eyes. "Hello. It's alright, I'm not going to hurt you", she knelt on one knee in front of the woman. "I can help him", she held out her hand to the boy, "can I see?".

"Who are you?", the woman finally asked, her voice hoarse.

"My name is Leona".

"Tessa", the woman answered after studying her for a moment, leaning forward to let her check the boy's leg. "This is my baby, Troy".

Leona offered her friendly smile, "He's a handsome young man". Tessa's expression softened, if just a little.

She cradled his leg and carefully pulled back the bandage, while Tessa gently rocked the child in her lap.

It was a bullet wound and clearly infected. "How did this happen?", she asked, turning the leg around in her fingers.

"We got caught up in a firefight yesterday, we were travellin with a group of traders…".

Leona gently released the boy's leg, turned and walked over to her bag where Dogmeat lay, keeping watch on them.

"We stopped over in Lexington for the night", the woman continued. "The gunfire started in the middle of the night. They weren't shootin at us, not until we tried to leave the city and got caught in the middle. Then they were shootin at anything that moved". 
She came back over to the woman and knelt down on her heels, resting a carton of purified water next to her and unwrapping a cloth bundle with medical supplies.

"He's running a fever?", she asked Tessa.

"Ye…yes since this morning", the woman nodded, cupping a hand over his forehead.

"Try to get him to drink some of that, you too, after we're done here", Leona nodded to the water, before cupping his leg again, resting it in her lap and retrieving one of the unwrapped items.

"Is the bullet out?"

"Yes, m…my husband took it out this morning".

"Your husband? Where is he?", she asked.

"He went ahead to make sure it was safe, and to look for food and water. A few of the traders made it out, but we lost them in all the confusion. He thinks they might be hiding nearby".

"I see", she replied flatly.

"Tessa, honey, I need you to hold him, this will sting", she held a small l bottle in her hand.

"What is that?", Tessa asked.

"Something to fight the infection before I give him a stim", Leona explained, waiting for Tessa's approval as she held her son close, whispering in his ear and running her fingers through his hair.

"Thank you", Tessa whispered, through teary eyes, her gratitude sincere, her face reflected in Leona's dark goggles.

A pained whimper from the half conscious boy as she cleaned the wound, his mother whispering soothingly in his ear.

"There we go sweetie", Leona cooed, patting his thigh before injecting the stim, watching as the wound began to close.

Tears of joy, tremors rocking her chest as she watched her son's wound begin to close in the stranger's lap.

"Thank you, thank you so much".

"You're welcome, your little man should be alright now", she smiled. "Just let me replace the bandage so it doesn't get infected again".

"Tessa! Get away from her!", Dogmeat's bark alerting her before she heard a man's voice.

He ran in, out of the rain, a cutlass in hand, stopping short on hearing the vicious, almost feral growls from her canine companion.

Leona rose to her knee in an instant, a hand on the grip of the sidearm holstered to her thigh. Her other hand still cradling the boy's leg.

"Kent! Stop!", Tessa screamed with a shrill voice, holding up a hand to her husband. "She's helping Troy, she helped our baby".
The cutlass shook in his hand as he shifted his gaze between the strange woman and the dog that seemed only few seconds away from tearing him to pieces.

He held up a hand in surrender, crouching down and dropping the cutlass on the ground with a clang.

"Easy, boy", she called over to Dogmeat, the dog's growls subsiding, but he still eyed the man like a hawk.

Kent slowly made his way over to them keeping a cautious eye on her before kneeling down next to his wife. "Are you okay? How's Troy?"

"I'm okay, Troy's gonna be okay", she squeezed her husband's arm. "Thanks to this lady".

Leona let herself relax just a bit, settling back down as she set to work bandaging the boy's wound.

"You a Gunner, lady?", he asked.

"Honey!", his wife scolded.

"Gunner?", she looked up at him, "Why would you ask me that?".

"You look like a Gunner, it's one'er them Gunners what shot my boy".

"Kent! Stop it", Tessa hissed.

"This yours?", he asked, ignoring his wife, picking up the water carton and giving it a shake.

"It's yours", she corrected him. "Get your boy to drink some when he wakes up, he looks a bit dehydrated, you all do. I'll get you some more in a minute".

He couldn't see her eyes through the goggles as she worked on the bandage, but she could see him eyeing the backpack behind her, against the pillar and the rifle next to it.

"You have more?", it wasn't really a question.

"Your wife said that you got caught up in a fire fight in Lexington", she changed the subject.

"Yeah, a buncha raiders and Gunners fighting over god knows what", he spat. He was staring at her but she kept her face neutral.

"All done", she patted the boy's leg, letting his mother take him once more.

She picked up a few of the medical supplies and wrapped up the rest. "I'm leaving these with you", she placed the bundle in Tessa's lap. "You'll need to change the bandage again in the morning and give him another stim".

"I don't know how to thank you, if it weren't for…"

"Don't worry about it", Leona smiled, playfully pinching the sleeping boy's toes, watching him draw closer to his mother in response.

"I'll be right back", she stood and turned, making her way to her backpack.

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Dogmeat's alarmed bark followed by Tessa's scream of "No!", alerting her. She saw Kent's charge
from over her shoulder and turned just as he swung a knife in a wide arc at her midsection. The cold blade cutting into her flesh, sending a shiver across her body. She managed to avoid what would have been a much more serious wound in her attempt to dodge the swipe. She grabbed his wrist as it passed her. Using his momentum to wrench his arm to the side until his back was facing her. A kick to the back of his leg forced him to one knee as she slammed his arm against her thigh forcing him to drop the knife. She bit back the sting in her side and pushed down on his shoulder, twisting his arm just short of the breaking point, her knee digging into his lower back.

His pained cries drowned out by Tessa's frantic pleading. "Please! Stop!", she was on her feet, the boy In her arms stirring upon hearing his mother's panicked screams.

Leona looked up at her, seeing the panic in her eyes. With a pained growl she grabbed the man by the back of his collar, roughly dragging him to his feet and sending him stumbling away from her with a stomp to his back. She withdrew her sidearm and leveled it at him before he regained his balance and turned to face her.

Dogmeat dashed towards him snarling and growling. Rows of razor sharp teeth at the ready.

She whistled to her canine companion, holding up a hand when she caught his attention.

"No! Don't! Please!", Tessa ran to her husband, standing between him and the gun. "Don't shoot! Please!". Kent grabbed his wife and child, pushing her away from the line of fire. "Kent! Please miss he didn't mean it!". The boy was awake now, screaming into his mother's chest as she held him tight.

"Stay back Tessa", Kent stood his ground, cradling his shoulder. His attack had failed and he seemed to have resigned himself to her mercy.

Leona watched as he knelt in front of her, his palms up.

"Please…just…just spare my family", he pleaded

"Kent! No!", Tessa cried.

Leona's breathing was becoming shallow, a chill running across her body.

She ground her teeth, tightening her grip on the pistol, "And how long do you think they would survive out there without you?", she growled at him.

He looked at her, confused.

"Get up!", she ordered.

Kent looked at his wife then back to her before he slowly stood. Tessa was terrified, muffling her sobs and burying her tear stained cheeks against the head of her screaming child.

"The water and medical supplies, pick them up", she nodded to the carton and the wrapped bundle off to the side.

He did as he was told, cautiously walking over, careful not to make any sudden movements. He picked up the items and held them out to her. "Those are yours", she repeated. Her world was starting to twist and turn. She was losing blood.

"Move", she directed him towards his wife.

"I don't understand, I just tried to kill y...".
"Quiet!", she cut him off, and watched him move to stand in front of his wife.

Dogmeat practically foamed at the mouth, claws scraping the stone floor, ready for her signal.

It was becoming difficult to focus. She kept her gun on them as she made her way to her pack and knelt, one hand fishing through its contents. A blue sash tumbled out of her jacket as she searched, and draped across her thigh.

"You're with the Minutemen?", Kent asked in surprise as he stepped forward.

"Stay there!", she grabbed the sash and stuffed it into her pack before finally retrieving another carton of water and two tins of canned food. She tried her best to suppress the pained whimper that escaped her clenched teeth when she pushed herself to her feet and approached them.

She set the items on the ground and backed away, "Take that with you, do you have something to carry it in?".

"I..uh….yes…", Kent stepped forward, cautiously kneeling before taking his tattered shirt off and depositing everything in it, using it as a makeshift sack.

"Why are you doing this?", Kent asked as he stood.

"Take care of your family, and think next time, before you do something stupid", she said simply.

His expression apologetic, mixed with both confusion and relief.

"Thank you…", he nodded, "I'm sorry for… you gonna be okay?". She scowled at his concern as he leaned forward, clearly debating whether to approach her, but wisely deciding against it.

"Just go", she stated flatly, her gun still on them. "The rain is over".

One last nod from Kent before he turned. "Come on Tess", his hand around her arm, nudging her away from the shelter, but she wriggled free and turned around to face Leona. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry", she cried. "Thank you, bless you", she bowed her head, her son's legs dangling from her arms as he sobbed into her neck.

"Good luck", Leona replied, her face expressionless.

"No boy", she called, stopping Dogmeat as he tried to run after them, instead giving her a frustrated whimper.

She watched as they disappeared into the wasteland, before she stumbled over to the pillar, picking up one of the stims she'd dropped in the scuffle, jamming it into her thigh as she leaned back against her backpack.

She slipped off the goggles and took a deep breath, staring up at the ceiling, her eyelids growing heavy. The sound of Dogmeat's, concerned whimpers as he trotted over, sniffing at her before lapping at her face. She closed her eyes, straining to lift a hand up and scratch his neck.

"I'll be okay, boy. Just need to rest a while…just a little while”, she let herself surrender to sleep, her hand falling to the ground. Dogmeat whimpered, nudging at her cheeks and shoulder, trying to rouse her, before finally settling next to her. His eyes looking up at her for any sign of movement, his ears keyed to her breathing and any potential threat while she slept.
"Dammit, $85 a gallon, can you believe that", Nate complained, reading the headline before tossing the paper onto the empty table next to them. She leaned back in his arms, looking up at him before planting a kiss on his cheek, "If you didn't do that, I would have", she laughed. It was late in the evening. They sat at an outdoor café, a low hedge separated them from the street behind, and a small recreational park beyond that.

He shook his head, taking a sip of coffee, "It's always the same headlines lately, pretty soon we'll all be riding bicycles and growing our food in the backyard".

"Oh stop, here how about this one", she pointed to a suit from the magazine in her lap. "This guy says the tie really speaks to him. What do you think?"

"Oh yeah…yeah it definitely speaks to me", he agreed, setting his cup down on the bench.

She grinned, rolling her eyes at the faux seriousness in his voice.

"It says, 'Hell no'", he whispered in her ear, playfully biting her earlobe. She leaned into him, craning her head back to taste his lips. "Focus, big guy", she turned the page, "You can't show up to the dinner in a leather jacket and jeans, my boss would kill me".

"What about the suit I have at your apartment, that's more than good enough, unless you threw it out when I wasn't looking".

"You know, I should have", she considered. "You can see the stitches on it and the cuffs are faded".

"Alright, alright", he squeezed her shoulder, his arm around her, pulling her close. "I think you just like dressing me up", he grinned.

"Of course I do", she smiled up at him, slipping a hand inside his jacket and running her palm across his chest. "Can you blame me?", she planted a quick peck on his lips before turning back to the magazine.

"Here, how about this, I think this shade suits you, you'll definitely look…."Honey?", she looked up at him. His gaze focused somewhere behind her, across the street.

"Nate?". No answer, his brow slightly furrowed in concentration, the muscles in his jaw tense.

"Honey?", she brushed her palm over his cheek.

"Huh? Sorry", he apologised, taking her hand and kissing her fingers.

"What's wrong?", she asked, looking over her shoulder, seeing nothing out of the ordinary.

"It's nothing", he assured her with a smile." That one doesn't look half bad", he pointed to a dark blue suit.

She'd seen that look in his eyes before, that laser focus, a sort of hyper vigilance.

"Are you sure you're alright?"

"I'm fine", he pressed his lips against her temple. "I just thought I saw…"

The explosion rocked the street behind them, the shockwave throwing them forward unto the ground, knocking down benches, tables and chairs and bathing the café in a blinding light.
Dazed, a sharp ringing in her ears. Something heavy being lifted from her legs.

Nate's voice sounding distant and muffled when she opened her eyes. He was leaned over her, brushing the hair, littered with shards of glass, from her face. She tasted blood on her lips, cuts on her arms and legs. Nate was bleeding from his forehead as he looked down at her, his lips moving, an almost panicked concern on his face as he handled her like porcelain doll, helping her to sit up.

"I'm alright", she managed, leaning back against him, barely hearing her own voice.

Panicked screams, crying and shouting, sounds of gunfire and shattering glass.

Small cuts dotted her legs, her skirt was torn and her ankle radiated pain along her leg.

"Leona!", she could hear his voice clearly now. "Honey, look at me. Are you alright?"

"I'm okay", she swallowed, looking up at him. "What happened?"

"A Car bomb. We have to leave, honey. Can you stand?" he asked, taking in their surroundings for any immediate threat.

"I think so", she winced, bracing herself against him as she tried to stand. A cry escaping her lips at the explosion of searing pain in her ankle.

"Easy, shhh", he soothed, easing her back down, running a hand over her calf, down to her ankle, carefully slipping off her heels.

"Ankle's sprained, the leg isn't broken, but it might be fractured."

"It feels like it", she groaned, trying to wiggle her toes.

"It's going to be alright. Come on, I got ya, honey", he slipped his arms under her and scooped her off her feet, taking a moment to analyse their surroundings.

"Nate?", her worry clear on her face.

"Don't worry", he smiled, pressing his lips on her forehead. "We'll be fine, honey".

The flames consuming the steel husk of a car on the sidewalk, bathing the night in a flickering orange light. She took in the chaos around them as Nate navigated the destruction.

Gunfire coming from the park, masked men beating people in the streets, firebombing buildings, breaking down store windows, people scrambling through the streets in panic. Another car exploded further down the street, followed by screams and more gunfire.

They hurriedly made their way along the sidewalk, dodging people scrambling away from the chaos and looters. Suddenly Nate stopped, she turned to see two masked men as they jumped down out of a store window and turned to face them, baseball bats in hand, the sound of glass crunching beneath their feet.

She felt his grip on her tighten as he backed up and turned to cross the street, but two more thugs approached them from the road, trying to box them in. He had no choice but to go back the way they came, keeping a brisk pace as he scanned each building they passed.

"Nate, they're following us", she whispered, looking over his shoulder, her arms around his neck.
"I know, hold on", she turned to see him kick in the door to an apartment complex, splintering the wood and shattering glass. An upscale building, the front desk empty and the lobby barely lit. He carried her over to the elevator, gently setting her down on her feet inside of it.

"I'll come get you soon, honey".

"What? What are you…", she asked, confused.

"I need you to take the elevator up a few floors, I'll come find you as soon as I can, I promise", he explained, stepping out of the elevator, but she grabbed his arm, almost falling over as she pulled him back in.

"No!, Nate, you're coming with me!", she pleaded. He held her, his lips meeting hers, his hands on her hips as he inched her towards the back of the elevator. "I won't be long", he flashed her that confident playful grin of his before stepping back suddenly, hitting the button for the fourth floor on the way out.

"Nate!", she staggered forward, reaching out to him as the door closed on his smiling face. "Nate!", she screamed, hammering on the keypad.

The door slid open on the fourth floor and she stumbled out, falling to her knees in her haste. She looked up to the sound of doors slamming shut along the corridor. The residents no doubt terrified at the chaos in the streets below. She pulled herself up, looking over the railing to the lobby below. Nate was nowhere in sight, but there was movement in the dim light. The sound of a baseball bat being dragged over the tiled floor before one of the masked men stepped into the light, then another, both brandishing bats. Another one lingered behind them holding a pistol at his side. It wasn't long before they looked up and noticed her. She couldn't make out their words but one of them pointed to the elevator.

It was then she saw Nate walking up behind the man with the gun, kicking him behind the knee and wrenching his arm back, disarming him before backhanding him in the temple. One swift and smooth combination without skipping a beat.

A wide swing from one of the other men, the baseball bat narrowly missing Nate's head as he ducked and punched him in the nose before grabbing his arm and landing another punch to his ribs, doubling him over and kneeing him in the face.

He turned just in time to avoid the swing from the third Red Sox hopeful, slamming a fist into his stomach as the bat flew by, before knocking him out with a powerful left hook to the temple.

She could see the rise and fall of his chest as he caught his breath, flexing his fists as he surveyed the men on the ground before looking up at her, flashing her a cheeky grin. Tears running down her cheeks, a hand over her mouth to muffle her sobs of relief.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw movement in the shadows behind him. He knew something was up when he saw the shock on her face and turned just as she screamed his name, "Nate!".

Another masked man tackled him from behind, pushing him into the front desk. Nate swung his elbow back, catching the man in the head, causing him to release his hold and stagger back, but he recovered quickly. The masked man threw another punch, but Nate caught it and pulled him in, backhanding him in the face before tackling him as they both disappeared into the darkness, out of sight. Time stopped when two shots rang out, causing her to jump, her eyes wide in shock. She couldn't speak, couldn't call out to him. She could barely remember the mad dash to the elevator,
biting back the pain in her ankle as she struggled to stay standing. Her knees weak with the fear of what 'might be'. Her vision clouded by tears, as his face flashed before her eyes. Her heart felt like it was being held in a death grip in her chest, on the longest elevator ride of her life.

The elevator opened to the lobby. Bodies on the floor as she frantically scanned the room, her breath catching in her throat when she saw him in the dim light, talking with two officers as they handcuffed the fourth masked man.

He was alright. He was safe. "Nate!", she cried as she stumbled into the lobby, tripping over her own feet. "Leona!", the warmth of his chest on her cheeks as he caught her. His powerful arms holding her up. She threw her arms around his neck holding him tight, biting back her sobs, her face buried in his shoulder. "You're okay…you're okay", she repeated, her knees finally giving out as they both sunk to the floor.

"It's over honey, everything's alright now. We're okay", his voice reverberating in his chest sending tremors through her own, calming her as he cradled her head against his shoulder. It felt like an eternity that they sat there on the lobby floor before they broke their embrace. He smiled, looking into her eyes as he brushed the tears from her cheeks. "I told ya hon, nothing to worry about", he grinned.

With the torrent of emotions she was feeling, she wasn't sure if she wanted to kiss him or slap him. She jabbed him in the side, making him jump, before burying her head in his chest and wrapping her arms around his waist, holding him tight. "You're a god damned jerk, you know that?", her voice muffled.

He chuckled, wrapping his arms around her once more, "I love you, hon", he whispered in her ear.

"I love you" she whispered, before their lips met.
"Ugh", Piper groaned, forcing her eyes open just a crack. It was far too bright and her head felt like someone had taken a baseball bat to it. She lifted her head just a bit, squinting against the light of the open window. Dragging a hand across the dirty sheets to her face, she brushed a lock of her dishevelled hair from her mouth.

This wasn't her place, this wasn't her bed and she was pretty sure she didn't have a stitch of clothing on under these sheets. She wracked her aching head, trying to remember the events from the previous night. The roof of the Third Rail came into view outside the window as her eyes adjusted to the light.

*Goodneighbor.*

*Oh...*

She spat another stubborn strand of hair from her lips and sighed, blowing the rest from her face. A soft rustling in the room caught her attention and she whipped her head around.

*"Whoa!", she screamed, bolting upright in the bed and yanking the sheets to her chest, as well as a pillow for good measure, barely managing to avoid tumbling off the side.*

"Well good morning darling, and here I thought you were going sleep the day away", the older woman smirked at Piper while she wiggled her hips into the slinky, red dress.

"M...M...Mag...uh...Ma'am!?", Piper stuttered, her eyes wide as she stared slack jawed at the songstress.

"Ma'am?", Magnolia teased, as she finished adjusting her chest inside the dress, slipping the straps over her shoulder. The older woman placed one knee on the bed eliciting a squeak. Piper wasn't sure if that squeak came from the mattress or her own gaping mouth.

"After what we shared last night sweetie?", Magnolia leaned over, her hands pressing down on the mattress, but this time Piper was fairly certain, the girlish squeak was hers.

The woman's face inched closer and she smiled seductively. "Cute", she planted a kiss on Piper's cheek before pulling back and standing, running a hand over her dress to smooth out the wrinkles.

"S...Sorr... Piper blinked. "Did we...um...did we do...uh I mean", bits and pieces from the previous evening flashed across her mind.

*Great job Piper.*

Of course she would remember all those times she'd visited the Rail, making a fool of herself with her clumsy attempts at flirting, the playful banter over drinks and the awkward innuendos.

But not this, oh no, the best part and all Piper could manage were 'bits and pieces'.

*There's that attention to detail from the Publick's star reporter!*

"My head hurts", Piper muttered under her breath, cupping her forehead.

"Come now. Don't tell me you don't remember, honey I'm hurt", Magnolia picked up her bag from
the nightstand.

*You don't look hurt, Lady.*

"No, no of course I remember, just a little hung over, that's all. I...uh, I had fun last night ma'am...Mags", Piper had to fight the urge to slap herself.

*Very smooth.*

The older woman checked her bag before turning to Piper, cocking her head to the side and looking her over. "So did I sweetie, we should do this again sometime", she smiled curtly, turning on her heel and was out the door before Piper could dig herself any deeper.

The door closed, and Piper sighed, bringing her palms to her face. "Way to go Piper" she groaned, falling face first onto the pillow.

"The Rexford!", Piper hissed, hopping on one leg as she struggled to pull up her boot. "The *freaking Rexford!*", the top of her boot slipped from her fingers causing her foot to slam into the nightstand, breaking one of the drawer handles. "Rrrrrrrgh!", she seethed, unable to hold back the exasperated growl that escaped her clenched teeth. She would never be caught dead in a place like this! She tugged at her coat sharply, snapping the leather taut to get rid of the creases, and to kick off the 'ickiness' she felt that permeated the cheap, filthy, 'love hotel'

Nope, never in a million years. Unless someone drugged her and dragged her sorry ass inside.

Another snippet from the previous night flashed across her mind.

The clink of glass, the woman in the red dress, seductively staring her down from across the table, running her fingers sensually over Piper's wrist. A dark corner of the Third Rail. "So sweetie, ready to get out of here? Or are you gonna make a girl beg?".

"No!". "I mean yesss!", Piper blurted out, eyes wide as she tried to blink sobriety back into her face. "Uh, I mean n-no to the begginggg, yesss to thaaa...uh...", her lips moved but words eluded her, like a fish gasping for air.

"You have a place in Goodneighbor honey?", Magnolia smirked, taking Piper's hand as she stood.

"Uhhh, ye...nnno but theress thisissplaccce acrosssthatstreet..."

"Oh God...", Piper groaned, a hand over her face as she banished the memory.

It was just as she imagined it would be when she stepped out of the room. It was the last door at the end of the long dark hallway. A candle here and there provided some scant light, the rest coming from the dingy window behind her. Enough to see the dust and cigarette smoke in the air.

*Seedy as hell.*

Piper hitched her coat collar around her neck and tugged the front of her cap almost over her eyes before stuffing her hands in her pockets. Gritting her teeth and making her way down the hallway, her eyes darting from side to side at every door she passed, at every sound she heard. At the sound of squeaking mattresses, no doubt from kids excitedly jumping on their beds to the sound of a woman obviously enjoying the best hot shower of her life. The enticing aromas of sweat, smoke, mould and cheap perfume, among others she dared not guess at.
Two old men sat in the dark, on the balcony at the end of the hall, smoking cigars and chatting in hushed tones as they overlooked the lobby below. The floorboards creaked as she got near, earning her their attention when they turned in their seats. She lowered her head as she passed them by and hurriedly made her way to the stairs.

*The place was so damned dark.*

She finally reached the lobby, looking up at the elegant, unlit chandelier overhead, almost lost in the darkness. She felt the stares from the greying woman behind the front desk, the old man holding up one of the pillars and the patrons lounging in the dark, the light from their smokes illuminating their faces.

She pushed on the front doors. They didn't budge, but the rattle they made, echoed off the walls of the otherwise hushed lobby, causing her to slink further into her coat.

"Twist the handle and pull, honey", she heard the old woman at the front desk say. But she didn't dare turn around, instead doing as she was told and squeaking a "Thanks", over her shoulder before stepping out into the streets of Goodneighbor and the light of day.

She let out a heavy sigh, squinting her eyes against the change in lighting, her headache returning as she cut across the street. Through the steam hissing out of the grates beneath her boots, towards the Third Rail, hoping not to run into her latest mistake. It was between her and the gates of Goodneighbor though, and she steeled herself as she turned the corner, a silent gasp, almost tripping over her own feet.

Nick Valentine stood outside the Third Rail, chatting with the Mayor. He noticed her almost as soon as she turned the corner, sparing her a glance as he spoke with the Ghoul.

She sighed again. There was nothing for it, they were between her and freedom.

"That's all I can really tell ya. You can ask around all you want, as long as you don't cause any trouble", she heard Hancock say as she approached.

"Thanks, but I think I got all I need for now", Nick nodded.

"Piper", he smiled. "Don't you look all bright eyed and bushy tailed".

"Nick", Piper nodded, forcing a smile behind her raised collar.

"What's with the uh…", Nick tugged at his own collar.

"I'm cold. Alright?", she rolled her eyes and Nick smirked knowingly, retrieving a cigarette from his coat pocket.

"Heheh, well if it ain't little miss reporter, I heard you had a good time last night", the mayor's raspy voice dripped with amusement. She narrowed her eyes at him from beneath the brim of her cap. That smug grin splitting his face.

"Hancock", she said simply in greeting.

The mayor's eyes lingered on her for a moment longer, revelling in her awkwardness. "That all, Valentine?". He turned to the detective.

"Yeah, appreciate the information", Nick tipped his hat to the mayor, and fished out his lighter.
"Don't mention it", Hancock turned to leave, giving Piper one last look as he turned, the smug grin returning to his face, his barely suppressed chuckle trailing behind him. Piper's glare bored holes in the back of his head before he finally disappeared into the Third Rail.

She turned back to the detective upon hearing the familiar, 'click click' as Nick lit the cigarette.

"What was that about?", she asked.

A stream of smoke escaped his lips before he spoke. "New case fell into my lap yesterday, just doing some preliminary legwork".

"Missing person?", Piper asked as they started walking, happy to put the Third Rail behind her.

"Not sure yet. A trade caravan passed through here a few days ago. They set up camp for the night in one of the old buildings down town, on their way to Diamond City. One of the kids wandered off in the middle of the night and hasn't been heard from since", Nicked flicked the ashes from his cigarette as they walked through the dank alleyway.

"That doesn't sound good, there are a lot of reasons for a kid to go missing out there", Piper mused

"True enough, but I'm not ruling anything out just yet. I was just on my way to check out the camp site".

"Mind if I tag along on this one?"

"I don't mind, but don't you have a paper to run?"

"Actually, I'm all caught up for once, and Nat should be printing out the latest issue as we speak"

"Well alright then", Nick reached over and tugged her cap up, away from her eyes. She squinted at him over her collar in annoyance, tugging it back down and shoving her hands in her pockets once more.

"Listen, do you mind if we stop by Diamond City first?", she asked.

"Sure, you can take a look at the case file before we head out. And I'm sure you'll want to take a shower after last night".

Piper's head snapped to him and she stopped in her tracks as they exited Goodneighbor's gates.

"The Rexford huh?", he took a puff of the cigarette, grinning at her wide eyed shock. He couldn't see her mouth behind her collar but he imagined it was hanging open all the same.

A growl of embarrassment was all he heard before she turned and stalked ahead of him.

"That place has quite the reputation y…", he started as he caught up and fell in step with her.

"It's a long walk to Diamond City, Nick, and we are so not talking about this", she interrupted. "And you're not gonna tell a soul, you hear me?", she growled, narrowing her eyes at him as they walked."

"Heh, you don't have to worry about me, my lips are sealed", he chuckled.

"So tell me, was the Rexford your idea, or was it hers", he probed, after a few moments of blissful silence.

"Rrrrgh", she growled, snatching the cigarette from his fingers and nudging him with her shoulder
into the path of an oncoming garbage pile. A satisfied smile on her lips as she took a puff, hearing the clang of trash cans and the crinkle of garbage bags behind her as she walked on.

"Real mature Piper!", he called after her, slogging through the garbage bags at his feet. "Maybe I should ask Natalie to come with me instead!". He looked up when he finally freed himself. A cheeky grin on her face as she waited for him, cigarette in hand. He shook his head, unable to help the smile that tugged at his lips, and taking the cigarette from her as he approached. She smiled, brushing a spec of dirt from his sleeve.

"Feeling better now?", he asked, as they walked.

"Just a little", she nudged him playfully with her shoulder as they continued onwards to Diamond City.

She hit the table hard on her back, the legs beneath it snapping under the force of the impact, sending her crashing to the ground. Heavy footsteps as the giant of a man strode towards her, a cocky, psychotic grin splitting his features. She lay there writhing on the ground in a daze, a fit of coughing wracking her body. He grabbed her by the neck and dragged her to her feet as he passed, barely breaking his stride. Her heels dragging on the floor, trying to find her footing as he pushed her back before slamming her against the wall.

"Don't worry love, I ain't gonna kill ya", his tattooed face dominating her view as she clawed at his fingers, struggling to breathe. His knee planted firmly between her legs, pinning her against the wall and lifting her a few inches off her feet.

It was something she'd begun to realize from her constant 'altercations' with the people of the wasteland. Their reflexes, were slow and they were physically weaker than she was used to. Not drastically, but enough that it was blatantly noticeable. From what she remembered of her self defense lessons with Nate, or her sparring partners for that matter, there was a clear difference. Whether it was from poor health or diet, or from the many drugs that the populace seemed so keen on. Or perhaps a result of generation after generation growing up in the irradiated wasteland, she could only guess.

Of course, there we the occasional freaks of nature, like her present company, running his tongue slowly over her cheek as she grit her teeth, his breath choking her just as much as the fingers around her throat. His hand snaking its way up her stomach while her own fingers reached for the Stiletto blade in her boot, her other hand clawing at his wrist. She winced as he squeezed at her tender chest, his tongue moving to her neck, wrenching her head to the side. Relief when her fingers closed around the steel handle, just as his found the zipper of her vest.

"…g..ing…..h..rt", she choked out.

"You say something love?", he raised his head to look at her, easing the pressure on her throat just a little.

Her scowl transitioning into a shaky grin, her emerald eyes focussed on his exposed windpipe.

Just what she was waiting for.

"Th….is…go..ng….to..hur..t". Her hand lashed out, striking him in the throat, his eyes going wide as he withdrew his knee, letting her feet touch the floor once more. Finally able to pry his hand from her throat, he was too shocked to resist when she twisted his wrist and yanked his arm downwards, bending him over. The knife danced in her fingers for the briefest moment before she jammed the
blade into his elbow. His anguished howl as she withdrew the blade cut short by a knee to the face. He was still in her personal space when she grabbed his hair, pulling him in for a headbutt to the nose that sent him staggering back before he finally fell on his ass.

Leona fell to one knee gasping for air, and regretting that last move as she blinked the cobwebs from her eyes. Her fingers rubbing her sore throat, scowling in disgust at the sticky saliva on her neck.

"You! Fucking! Bitch!", her friend rolled around on the ground cradling his arm and sounding decidedly 'nasal' as blood ran down his chin from his broken nose. She watched as he managed to climb shakily to his feet. Death in his eyes and his right arm hanging limp at his side.

She sighed, from exhaustion as much as irritation, running her thumb over the knife handle in her hand. Finally pushing herself to her feet and shaking the last of the cobwebs from her head.

"Fifty caps, sweet thing", the old woman informed her, while reaching up to one of the myriad of packs and chests stacked atop the Brahmin.

"Hold on", Leona rifled through the pack at her feet. She spared a glance at Dogmeat as he sat next to the trader's injured bodyguard. Her canine companion looked content as the man scratched him behind the ears and fed him part of his meal.

"What happened?", Leona asked.

"What was that?", the woman asked, craning her head over the Brahmin.

"What happened to your bodyguard?", she repeated, nodding to the man's bandaged leg.

"Oh that", she shook her head in disgust. "Raiders, what else"

"Lost two good bodyguards when they attacked, and damn near half my goods!", she threw her arms up, gesturing wildly."Hell, if Daisy here weren't so skittish I'd have probably lost it all!"

"Fucking raiders", she spat.

After a few moments of digging in her bag, Leona finally stood, holding a small sack. "Um, I only have thirty eight, would you be willing to trade? I have few things you might be interested in".

"Sorry honey, no caps, no sale, no exceptions". "I gotta get rid of all this, I don't need more stuff", she gave the Brahmin a hearty slap on the side. "If you don't got the caps, then I'll be headin out, sorry sweet thing".

"Please, if you could just take a look, I'm sure you'd…", the woman held a hand up, silencing her.

"Alright honey, I'll tell ya what. You look like you know how to handle yourself", she nodded to the rifle slung over Leona's shoulder.

"You want me to get your stuff back, don't you?"

"No, no no, you don't gotta go that far", she waved her hand. "See, along with my goods, they also got a family heirloom of mine. Ripped it right off m'damn neck!"

"You want me, to find your necklace", Leona raised an eyebrow and folded her arms.

"You don't gotta go searchin either. I can tell you exactly where those sons-a-bitches are hidin out".
"I don't think s…", Leona started.

"You do that for me, honey, and you can have whatever you want", she interrupted.

"You're blackmailing me", Leona stated flatly, unimpressed.

"It's business darlin. You ain't gonna find another trader or outpost for miles".

Leona chewed on her lip as she mulled over the offer. "Fine, I'll do it"

"Stay there boy", she held up a hand to Dogmeat after a few minutes of chatting and deal making with the old woman. "I'll be back soon".

The old woman shuffled over to her bodyguard, settling on the log next to him.

"I don't get it, she could have just robbed ya", the bodyguard mused. "I ain't in no condition to stop her"

"Ha!, honey when ya lived as long as I have, you get a sixth sense about people", she rubbed at her sore knees.

"Nah. That sweet thing", she nodded to Leona's retreating form. "Robbin me never crossed her mind".

"Poor thing ain't gonna survive long out there".

He spat the blood that leaked unto his lips, wiping the rest with the back of his hand."Gonna skin you alive when I'm done with you, bitch", he growled, his voice rough and gravelly.

Despite his obvious rage, he didn't immediately charge at her, no doubt leery from their recent exchange. His eyes falling to the knife in her hand as she switched to a reverse grip. She wasn't going to let him grab her again. How this large man had managed to sneak up on her in the first place, she had no idea.

Two dead raiders could be seen in the room behind him as they circled each other. A stomp of his foot as he feigned a charge, causing her to jump in anticipation. He laughed, a psychotic grin on his face revealing rows of blackened, bloodied teeth.

She had to fight the urge to run, afterall, she had what she came for. But was it a good idea to turn her back on this hulk of a man? He would probably be able catch up to her on the stairs leading out of the bunker. Perhaps even sooner, since he was no doubt more familiar with the layout of this place. And the last thing she needed was to run into him in a tight corridor. No, she needed the open space of this room. If she could at least cripple him, then she could chance a break for the exit. This was beginning to be more trouble than it was worth.

He charged at her, swinging his good arm at her head. The punch missing completely as she ducked and sidestepped, stomping the side of his knee and stabbing him in the shoulder as he passed her by. He staggered forward, falling to one knee, growling in frustrated anger. But once again, he pushed himself to his feet and turned to face her, gnashing his teeth as he glared at her with bloodshot eyes.

**Hit. Him. Harder.** A voice In the back of her mind berated her as she circled him with slow, measured steps, her chest rising and falling with each breath as she waited.

In his rage it didn't take long for him to lash out at her once more. He was clearly not thinking, as he
used the same attack as before, lunging at her with a wide swing of his meaty fist. She didn't sidestep or dodge this time. Instead she stepped forward suddenly, staying low as she caught his arm and leaned into him, using his momentum to slam her elbow into his ribs, feeling the bones bend and break as the air rushed from his gaping mouth above her. She followed up by jamming the blade into his knee and twisting before jumping back, out of his reach. He stood there for moment in wide eyed shock before falling to one knee. A high pitched wheezing as he struggled to breathe. His hand reaching out to her before she finished it with a kick to his head. Strong, but dumb and slow, a walking cliché.

She bent over, hands on her knees, finally able to catch her breath. There was no further reason to stay here, it was time she headed up and out of this bunker. She made her way to the next room, with the two dead raiders just inside.

Was this the right way?

Movement in a dark corner of the room catching her attention, and she froze for a split second before the figure crept forward, closer to the light. She sighed, releasing the breath she'd been holding. A child, haggard and dressed in rags, stood half in and half out of the darkness. She'd heard that raiders counted enslavement of their fellow wastelanders as one of their finer qualities. Hardly surprising as she stared at the emaciated child hiding behind a broken table in the dark. A boy, maybe thirteen or fourteen with long wild hair. She slowly slipped the knife back into her boot and knelt, trying to appear as non-threatening as possible.

"It's alright honey, what do you say we get out of here huh?", she smiled

No response. The child just stared.

"Can you understand me?".

Nothing.

She was exhausted. Was she going to have to drag this child out? Would he run if she tried to approach him?

"C'mon sweetie, help me out here, I'm not gonna hurt you…", she extended her hand.

The movement in the corner of her eye almost didn't register. One of the raiders she'd thought dead was on his knees just a few short feet behind her. He cradled a bullet wound to the stomach as he tried to stand, looking half dead and ready to drop at any moment. But he managed to raise the gun in his hand just as she sprang to her feet. The bullet catching her in the left arm before she could get to him. A pained cry escaped her lips as she closed on him and grabbed the gun, pushing it towards the ceiling. He was hardly in a condition to put up a fight, and even with one arm she managed to get him to drop the pistol at her feet.

She felt the tug on her boot before she felt the bite of a blade in the back of her thigh. She cried out, looking back, shocked to see the haggard child snarling up at her, his hand on the knife handle. The blade buried in her leg. Somehow she managed to bite back the pain long enough to lift her injured arm and backhand the boy, sending him to the floor, knife still in hand, the blade leaving her thigh as she hissed through clenched teeth.

Her attention returned to the half dead raider already on his knees, an elbow to the face knocking him out again. She fell to one knee, cupping her injured thigh, the pain making it difficult to breathe, a cold shiver running across her skin. She had no time to rest before the boy barreled into her,
screaming, knocking her unto her back and straddling her as he swiped the blade wildly at her face. She managed to bring her arm up and block his wild swings. Shallow cuts crisscrossing the fabric of her long gloves and the exposed skin of her upper arm. The knife wasn't a slashing weapon, something the boy realized soon enough. He reared back and plunged the knife down at her but she managed to catch his hand, holding the blade at bay, just above her throat. She was exhausted, the wound in her thigh burned with searing pain, her injured arm sweeping the ground at her side, searching. She didn't have the energy or leverage to throw him off.

"Stop. Please!", she cried, holding the knife at bay with one hand, her fingers finding the barrel of the raider's pistol. But he didn't see it, and she couldn't bring herself to lift it.

"Please", she choked, tears rolling down the corner of her eyes. "I'm not...", her breath hitching when she felt the tip of the blade on her throat, "Not going to...hurt you".

Words that were meant for her as much as they were meant for him, as she cried, her fingers tightening around the barrel of the gun.

If he understood her, he didn't show it, instead throwing his weight behind the knife. Her teary eyes going wide, her pupils dilated when she felt the first trickle of blood on her throat.

Wild eyes staring down at her, his lips curled in a scowl or a gleeful grin, she couldn't tell. The muscles of her arm were on fire, a second from giving out.

Her world stopped.

A single shot was all she heard. The boy's eyes locked on hers, the blade sliding off her neck and hitting the ground next to her head.

The child slumping over on her chest, his hair tickling her cheek. Behind him, a smoking pistol held in a shaky hand.

Her hand.

The burning in her chest told her that she was holding her breath.

Her mind catching up to reality all at once as she sucked in a deep breath, the pistol falling to the ground.

"No...no, no, no, no....", her eyes wide and unblinking. Trembling hands hovering over the body on her chest, before she rolled over, cradling his head as she lay him down. Dark crimson blotting the side of his chest. It was difficult to breathe, her breaths coming in rapid bursts as she stared down at him, falling tears mixing with the growing crimson.

It was all a blur, as surreal as those first few moments when she'd stepped foot outside the vault.

She was on the outside looking in, as she climbed the stairs of the bunker. Eyes unfocused, her palm sliding along the wall to keep her steady, leaving behind red streaks as she passed. Her thoughts coming in brief flashes.

She took one step. Her hands frantically cupping the boy's side, trying to stem the growing pool of blood as it engulfed the discarded stimpack.

Another step. Bloody palms tapping his cheeks. 'Wake up'.
Another. Bloody hands pushing down on his chest. The breath leaving her lips, filling his empty lungs.

She pushed the bunker door open. The blast of daylight not fazing her.

A few steps, her boots dragging on the loose earth before she fell to her hands and knees, heaving as she emptied the contents of her stomach.

In a daze as she pushed herself up, staggering back and falling to her knees once more. Her hands between her thighs as she sat back on her heels. Dirt clinging to the dried blood on her upturned palms, dark clouds growing on the horizon.

The sound of a familiar whimpering behind her before she felt Dogmeat lapping at her cheek. She turned to him. For a moment she wasn’t sure if he was real. Fresh tears stung her eyes, rolling down her cheeks as she slowly snaked her arms around his neck, careful not to touch him with her palms. Her face buried in his fur as she cried.
"It's that good huh?", she smiled, watching Dogmeat scarf down another strip of grilled Radstag meat, laid out on a swath of waxed wrapping paper. An affirmative snort was his only response, his snout already buried in another piece.

She sat cross legged, in the shade, against the wall of a blown out third story room. They were short two walls and half a roof. A lovely view of the clear blue sky as the midday sun bore down on the wasteland.

"You know I could never get past the smell of that", she cut another slice of Mutfruit, munching on it as she watched her companion eat. "But I guess I can't afford to be picky anymore, huh?"

"At least it's not Molerat", she muttered thoughtfully. "Maybe…a small piece", she leaned over, pinching an untouched strip.

Biting her lip in apprehension, she stared at the meat between her fingers. "When in Rome…", she opened her mouth, but Dogmeat intercepted, slobbering all over it before returning to the strips in front of him. She stared at the meat dangling between her fingertips, her mouth still hanging open as she wrinkled her nose, looking thoroughly unimpressed. "Buddy, now that's just low", she placed it back down, digging into her bag to retrieve a carton of water and a bowl. She filled the bowl and placed it next to him before cutting another slice of Mutfruit.

"Mmmm this tastes sooo good", she hammed it up. "See if I offer you any, though", she stuffed her cheeks. Her companion finally deigning to acknowledge her with a half-bark, quirking his head at the odd display.

The sound of an explosion startling her and snapping her companion to attention. It sounded like it came from a few blocks away. She swallowed, and cut herself another slice of fruit, while Dogmeat ran to a nearby window, his paws on the window sill as he scanned the buildings and street below. His ears perking up at the sound of gunfire in the distance.

"Let it go, boy", she called, nonchalantly.

A high pitched whine when he hopped off the window and turned to her.

"What?", she asked the antsy canine, his tail wagging impatiently. He bolted towards the stairs before turning around and running back to her, his claws scraping on the wooden floor, with an urgent high pitched bark.

"I'd rather not get shot again, pal", she leaned back, munching on another slice, pretending not to notice him as he stared at her, whining.

Another shrill half-bark, before the dog finally bolted down the stairs.

She sighed, closing her eyes and knocking her head back against the wall. "Dammit".

The explosion was deafening, blinding, even in the light of day. Massive plumes of flame and smoke reaching skyward and almost blotting out the sun. The steady, ominous sound of twisting metal bellowed across the city block, as the oil tanker came crashing down upon the cracked asphalt. Dust, smoke and heat, breaking upon his armor like waves crashing upon a rocky shore as he shielded the two remaining soldiers under his command. The severed arm of a feral ghoul hitting his back as he
stood and turned to face the smouldering wreckage in front of the Cambridge Police Station.

The tanker belched torrents of black smoke into the sky. Feral Ghouls, writhing on the ground, their bone chilling shrieks filling the air as the flames slowly consumed them. Smouldering body parts littered the street and the courtyard of the station. But still they came. More of them pouring in from all sides, descending upon their position. Another wave scrambling over the barricades and k-rails that enclosed the courtyard. He brought his rifle up, letting loose a torrent of laser fire upon the frenzied horde.

"Sir!", the voice behind him, drowned out by the sound of laser fire and deafening feral shrieks.

"Paladin Danse! Sir!", the woman's voice finally breaking through to him.

"What is it Haylen?", he shouted over the chaos, his voice amplified by the helmet of his power armor.

"Sir, Rhys is down!".

Danse risked a glance over his shoulder. Knight Rhys was slumped against the stairs to the station, clutching his bleeding side as he gritted his teeth, eyes shut tight against the pain. Scribe Haylen kept a hand pressed over his, to stem the bleeding while she unloaded her pistol into the ferals.

"Shrapnel from the explosion Sir! He's bleeding out! We have to get him inside!", she pleaded, panic creeping into her face.

"Dammit!", she screamed as her pistol ran dry. "Sir!"

Paladin Danse cursed under his breath as multiple ferals managed to breach the barricade, pouring in from all directions. Their position was going to be overrun within a matter of seconds. It was hopeless, there was no way they would be able to make it inside in time. But he was damn sure not giving up!

"Fall back to the station!", he growled. Haylen already had her arms slung under Rhys' shoulders as she struggled to drag him up the stairs. He could at least buy his soldiers the time they needed to get to safety. If he could hold the line until his men were inside…

In his Power Armor, he might even be able to survive long enough against the horde to break through and lead them away from his team.

The mission had to be completed. Even without him, they were capable, his team would find a way, they had to.

The first feral lunged at his feet, wrapping its arms around his leg and clawing its way up the grooves in his armor. He slammed the butt of his rifle down on its head just as another freak barreled into him with a dull meaty clang that reverberated through his armor. Growling and grinding his teeth in barely controlled anger, he backhanded the Ghoul, knocking it to the ground and peppering its torso with laser fire. There was no end to them. Another one dove at his legs and yet another barreled into him, hanging off his gun arm.

This was fine. As long as he could keep the ferals focused on him. They just needed a little more time.

Two more ferals closed on him, one clambering up his shoulder, swiping at his helmet.
"Haylen!", he heard himself shout, unable to bite back the hint of panic in his voice, as the feral shambled past him. He couldn't turn, couldn't intercept it. His view dominated by the snarling feral clinging to his shoulder.

"No!", Haylen screamed as she stepped in front of Rhys to intercept the Ghoul, a field knife in her hand as she braced herself.

The Ghoul's head jerked violently to the side, a geyser of black blood erupting from its head before it toppled lifelessly unto the steps. Haylen's eyes going wide as the ghoul fell at her feet.

"Sniper!", she frantically scanned the surrounding buildings while she dragged Rhys back and leaned him against the station walls.

Two more shots knocking off the feral on Paladin Danse's shoulder, the bullets ripping through its rotted flesh and bouncing harmlessly off his Power Armor, allowing him to grab the ghoul hanging off his gun arm by the neck and throw it to the ground. A few shots to the torso finished it off, and finally he followed up by bringing his armored foot down on the head of the feral clawing at his legs.

It didn't take him long to pinpoint the source of the shots. He caught a brief glimpse of a muzzle flash from one of the buildings off to the side of the station. Just inside a blown out wall on the second floor. He had no time to give the matter any further thought, as two more ghouls broke through the barricade and made a beeline for him.

Another shot from the mysterious shooter taking the first one down. The second one, he managed to grab by the head, the bright red light of laser fire, reflecting off his armor and cutting into the body of the ghoul as he held it aloft.

"It's a friendly!". "Haylen! Keep him alive! We're getting through this!"

She lay on her stomach, just inside the crumbling apartment wall, the shade as her cover. A perfect view of the Cambridge Police Dept. courtyard. Another ghoul in her scope as she squeezed the trigger. A single shot echoing through the small room.

These people weren't settlers or traders, and definitely not raiders. Gunners maybe? It was true she had yet to run into the infamous gunners, but from what she'd heard, they were an organized, well geared mercenary group. *The group that wiped out the Minutemen.* What if these were Gunners, should she even be protecting them?

But 'What if' wasn't reason enough to walk away. Especially now, after her canine companion had dragged her this far.

A creak of the floorboards causing her to snap her head over her shoulder.

A leathery hand on the doorframe, before a twisted face peered into the room. A ghoul, most likely attracted by the sound of gunfire.

*Shit!*

She reached one hand behind her for her sidearm just as Dogmeat bolted in from a side room, his teeth sinking into the creature's ankle, dragging it to the floor with a thud.

A sharp whistle causing her companion to jump back as she unloaded three shots into the ghoul.
"Good boy!", she gushed, resting the pistol next to her and returning her attention to the courtyard.

"Dammit", she muttered under her breath. She'd only turned away for a moment and now there were multiple ghouls tumbling over the barricades. The person in the Power Armor dropped them like flies as they poured into the courtyard, but it wouldn't be enough, with the way they were pouring in, and more approaching from the streets. She pushed herself up on one knee and flicked the switch on the side of her rifle, enabling burst fire.

"Bullets aren't easy to come by", she sighed, taking aim and resting her cheek against the cold steel.

The final feral hit the ground, smoke creeping off of its smoldering corpse. He scanned the street one last time before he allowed himself to relax, letting the laser rifle hang at his side.

"Hmph", he scoffed, at the bodies littering the courtyard, kicking the nearest one and watching as it skidded across the courtyard and crashed against the barricades.

"Freaks…"

He turned towards their mysterious sniper. The figure stood, rifle held in front of her, at the ready as she stared at him. He could barely make out her features at this distance, but it was definitely a woman. He raised an arm in greeting and thanks, watching as she did the same before he made his way towards Scribe Haylen.

"How's our man doing?". Danse stood on the steps of the police station, while Scribe Haylen bandaged the Knight's wound.

"Fit for duty Sir!", Knight Rhys grunted, trying to keep the pain from showing on his face.

"Sit down", Haylen pressed on his shoulder when he tried to stand. "You're not fit for anything, yet".

"Sir, the shrapnel's out. I've given him a stim and stopped the bleeding, but I'd recommend at least a day to recover".

"A day?!", "That's ridiculous, Sir I am ready for action…", Rhys began.

"You had internal bleeding", Haylen scolded. "It's stopped for now, but if you wanna go out there and rip that hole in your gut open again, then I'm not gonna stop you, but don't expect me to fix you up afterwards".

"Understood", Danse replied, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Haylen, take him inside when you're done and see that he…".

"Sir with all due respect, I…", Rhys tried to protest.

"That's an order, Knight".

"Sir, yes Sir", he conceded begrudgingly.

"Paladin Danse", Haylen nodded towards the road. "Company, Sir".

Danse looked over his shoulder at the woman standing on the road in front of the smouldering oil tanker, a large German shepherd at her side. He stepped down the stairs and approached the stranger. The woman followed suit, taking shade underneath the rampart, on the other side of the barricade.
"Citizen", he greeted. "Appreciate the assistance, but what's your business here?"

"Just passing through", she smiled politely. "How's your friend doing?". she nodded over his shoulder.

"He'll make it", he stated flatly. "Now, who are you, exactly?".

"Like I said, I'm just passing through".

"That is not an answer citizen", he said, a little more forcefully. "If you wish to remain on this compound, you will answer my questions. Who are you and what is your business here?".

The 'citizen' thing, and his tone were starting to wear on her.

She dropped her back pack in front of her and fished around inside it for a moment. The Palladin's grip on his rifle tensing in a mix of annoyance and anticipation.

"Here", she tossed him two stimpacks affixed together with a strip of cloth. He deftly caught the bundle, and examined it before calling over his shoulder, "Haylen". The scribe nodding when he tossed it to her.

"Appr…", he turned to the stranger again, but she was already on her feet, walking past the station.

"Citizen!, hold a moment", he called.

"My apologies, your highness", she bowed, with a flourish before falling back in step. "But I wouldn't want to intrude any further on your 'compound'".

Territorial wild dogs, trampling over the ruins of her old world, sticking their flags in the dirt, and claiming ownership of something that wasn't theirs. It was the same for every wastelander she'd met thus far. And while she couldn't blame them, they were all just trying to survive out here, after all.

You owned what you could take.

That was law now, wasn't it?

However, she couldn't help but feel slighted every time she visited a familiar place, treaded familiar grounds, only to have a gun pointed at her by its 'new management' and told to 'screw off'.

Perhaps it was her growing bitterness towards this world and its people, maybe a touch of arrogance on her part.

What started off as wide eyed shock at the state of her world in those first few days, slowly changed to reverent mourning with every familiar ruin she visited.

And now?

Resentment.

She refused to acknowledge it at first. It was wrong to feel that way, wasn't it?

But it was there, like a pinprick in the back of her mind. Growing, with every atrocity she witnessed. Every cruelty born of human desperation and depravity. A result of animals fighting over the corpse of a once beautiful world, her world.

Would she become like them, eventually? Would she even notice if she did?
"Wait!", the paladin called again as he weaved past the barricade and caught up to her on the street. His heavy footsteps causing her to turn, a hand on the grip of her holstered sidearm. It was more a reflex than anything, not as if she'd be able to do anything with it if he decided to attack, encased as he was in Power Armor.

She stood there, hand on her sidearm, one eyebrow slightly raised as she waited for him to speak.

"I…apologize if I seemed…".

"Like an ass?", she supplied, helpfully. A cheeky smile tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"…Suspicious", he clenched his jaw and shot her an unimpressed look. It was probably good that his helmet hid his face. Apologies were not his forte, and this woman wasn't making it easy.

"From the moment we arrived the Commonwealth, we've been constantly under fire".

"Would you mind taking your helmet off? It's really awkward talking with you like this".

He spent all of five seconds giving it some thought before finally sighing, "Very well", and grabbing the base of his helmet.

"…I promise I won't shoot you in the head".

Her words, giving him pause for a moment as he did a double take. She was smirking, her arms folded in front of her chest. It wasn't a threat, she was teasing him, he deduced. At least it seemed that way.

He could never tell with these wastelanders. Though she didn't look like a typical settler or raider. She looked…normal, healthy, and her clothing and gear automatically set her apart from those groups.

Her weight evenly distributed on her legs, gloved arms folded, loosely across her chest. She appeared relaxed, however he could tell she was anything but. Her guard was very much still up.

_How quickly could she draw that sidearm?_ The thought flashing across his mind before he finally lifted his helmet.

A condescending smile on her face, "There you go. A good looking guy like yourself, shouldn't be so shy". Her words throwing him off guard, but he recovered quickly, hoping she didn't notice.

"Ma'am I assure you I…", he stopped himself and sighed in exasperation upon seeing her growing smile.

"Let me start again. As I was saying, we've been under fire every step of the way since entering the Commonwealth. But we have a mission to complete and I intend to see it through. The problem is, I'm down a man, as you can see", he nodded to the courtyard over his shoulder.

"And I don't have the time to wait until he recovers…"

"So you want my help?", she interrupted.

"Yes, in short".

"You helped us out of a tight spot back there and you seem capable enough. I could really use your extra gun at my side, if you're willing to continue pitching in".
"Pitching in?", she looked at him incredulously. "I have no idea who you people are, hell I don't even know your name much less what this mission of yours is".

"Fair point", he conceded. "I am paladin Danse, behind me, Scribe Haylen and Knight Rhys. We're with the Brotherhood of steel. We're on re…"

"Fancy name", she mused.

He let out a slow, measured breath, clenching his jaw before continuing. "We're on recon duty in the Commonwealth…".

"Some kind of military organization?", she asked.

"Not exactly, our order seeks to understand the nature of technology, its power and what that means to us as humans. We fight to secure that power from those who would abuse it".

"I see, so you're looters", she concluded.

"You're implying we steal technology to benefit ourselves. I can assure you, our motivations are quite the opposite!", he growled, but refused to give in to her baiting.

"And who are 'those who would abuse it'?" "I'm guessing it's anyone that isn't you?", she added, not bothering to hide her cynical tone.

"The Brotherhood of steel is the only!…".

"And what is it that you want my help with, Paladin Danse?", she cut him off.

His nostrils flared almost imperceptibly, but he bit his tongue. This woman was insufferable, but he needed her help. She was one of the few, apparently able bodied civilians, that hadn't tried to take a shot at them. Were the situation not as dire, he would have certainly given this wastelander an earful for disparaging the Brotherhood of Steel's good name.

"I've been trying to send a distress call to my superiors, but the signal's too weak to reach them. We've modified the radio tower on the roof of the station but it still isn't enough. What we're after is a Deep Range Transmitter, to boost the signal", he paused, trying to judge her disposition, but she simply nodded for him to continue.

"Our target is ArcJet Systems. We infiltrate the facility, secure the transmitter and transport it back here. So what do you say? Are you willing to lend us a hand?"

"That depends. What's the compensation for my help?", she asked.

"So you are a mercenary? Typical", he managed to mask a scowl.

"I'm not here for your convenience, Paladin", she stated flatly.

"Fine, what do you want? We have little in the way of caps, and we're low on rations as it is".

"That's fine. What about weapons? Ammunition? I'm running low, especially after that whole mess", she nodded in the direction of the smoking tanker, and the feral bodies and limbs strewn across the street. Dogmeat playfully dancing around a crippled feral, a dismembered leg in his mouth as the ghoul dragged itself on its belly, taking swipes at the dog.

Well I'm glad 'you're' having fun, she glared at her friend. Dogmeat, seemingly sensing her gaze, turned and quirked his head at her. The leg between his jaws, flopping to the side along with one of
his pointed ears.

"That, I can agree to. We've stockpiled a sizable amount of ordnance inside the station. You can take what you need, within reason", the paladin offered.

"Alright Paladin", she turned back to him. "You've got a deal".

"Excellent".

The Cambridge Police Station was a mess. The stale, musty air was now all too familiar to her. She made her way to one of the back rooms and dropped her backpack and rifle on a round wooden table. A dim fluorescent lamp dangling from the ceiling, and daylight pouring through a small louver high on the wall, provided a soft light throughout the room. It felt almost cozy.

She took a moment to look around the room. Broken file cabinets lining the walls, boxes of old, stained folders and papers littering the wooden floor. She could hear the pitter patter of Dogmeat's claws from somewhere nearby, as well as the muffled voices of the Paladin and his people, from the station lobby a few rooms away. The woman, Haylen, seemed amicable enough to her presence. The injured Knight however had looked upon her with a mixture of unconcealed disgust and disdain. As to what his issue with her might be, she didn't care, as long as the Paladin kept him in line.

She threw off her jacket and dug into her pack, trying to decide what she might need on this little excursion.

Approaching bootsteps alerted her before he spoke, "Civilian, we leave in fifteen minutes. I trust that's enough time for you to prepare?". He entered the room, finally out of his power armor, and placed his rifle and a small lockbox on the table.

"Would you stop calling me that, please?", she looked across the table at him.

"You haven't stated your name. What would you like me to call you?".

She stared at him, dumbfounded for the briefest of moments. He was right, she hadn't introduced herself, she realized, and he hadn't asked either. All this time alone in the wastes, her manners were beginning to slip.

"I'm sorry. It's Leona", she muttered, her head in her backpack once more.

He simply nodded. "Alright, Leona. The armory is just down the hall, one room over. Grab what you need when you're ready".

"Mhm", she fumbled around her pack, while he field stripped his rifle. The silence hanging thick in the air for a few minutes, when she retrieved a handful of tin cans, stacking them on the table, one after the other, before pushing the pile over to him.

"What is this?", he asked, examining one of the cans.

"Food. You said you were running low", she explained as she continued sorting through her things. "That should last you a few days if you go easy on it".

He looked over at her, "That's...generous of you. Are you sure?".

She didn't meet his gaze, instead opting to focus on her task, unsure of why she felt as awkward as she did. "Yes. I have enough, and we're on the move a lot, so it shouldn't be a problem to get more". 
The cans didn't look tampered with, from what he could tell. Still, he would have Scribe Haylen check them over later.

He honestly couldn't figure this woman out. She didn't need to share her rations. And for all her talk about payment, she didn't act like a merc, or a typical wastelander for that matter. They weren't allies and they had clearly gotten off to a rough start.

So why?

Guns propped against the walls, boxes of ammunition, explosives and other items filled the narrow walkway of the filing room, turned armory. Her rifle and sidearm, she decided, would be good enough for the mission. She just needed ammo.

And payment. She made her way over to the far corner of the small room. A riot shotgun catching her eye.

I'll take that. She hefted it, feeling its weight. Shotguns were something she hadn't had much experience with. But with the surplus of ammo here, she could definitely get some practice in, eventually. She grabbed an empty bag and sat on the floor, tucking the shotgun inside, and filling it with ammo, explosives and other miscellaneous items. Satisfied with her fee. She would have to sort through everything when she got back.

The sound of Dogmeat's claws, and the cold nose on her bare upper arm, startling her. She turned around, face to face with her companion, a stuffed teddy bear in his mouth, his tail kicking up dust behind him as it brushed across the floor.

"Hm, whatcha got there?", she tugged at the teddy bear, eliciting a stubborn growl as he tugged back.

"Give it", she urged, smiling. But the dog refused, at least initially, before he let loose a mighty sneeze right in her face, and finally surrendered the stuffed animal.

"Great, thanks, I…really needed that", she crinkled her nose and wiped her face. But he just sat there, tail wagging, tongue hanging down, looking thoroughly pleased with himself.

The bear looked to be in good condition from what she could tell, as she turned it over in her hands. A puff of dust coming off of it when she tapped it.

"So this is your fee huh?", she smiled. "Alright then, I'll hold onto it". And with a pleased half bark he turned around and darted out the room, almost tripping the Paladin as he appeared in the doorway.

"It's almost time, are you all set?"

"Yes, let me get my things", she placed the bear in the duffle bag and stood, making her way to the door just as he entered. He stepped to the side in the narrow doorway, just as she did. "Sorry", he said, steeping to the other side, again just as she did, in an awkward parody of a slow dance. His calloused palms on her bare upper arms to keep from bumping into her. It was a reflex, but he still had to make a conscious effort to keep the embarrassment from his face.

"Apologies".

"Dance…", she muttered, her eyes cast downwards to their feet, avoiding his face.

"Pardon?", he took his hands off of her.
"Nothing", she slid past him, and out the door.

She entered the station lobby dropping her backpack and resting her rifle on the front desk, and noting the stares she received. Especially the glare from the Knight, who stood talking with Paladin Danse.

"Ready", she stated, throwing off her jacket, Dogmeat trotting up next to her.

"Excellent, let's get underway", the Paladin nodded to his team before pulling himself into his Power Armor, the hatch closing with a hiss.

"K, boy", she flashed Dogmeat a smile and grabbed her rifle and backpack. "Let's go play soldier".

"This isn't a game, wastelander", Knight Rhys grabbed her by the arm as she passed.

Vicious barking from Dogmeat, at the perceived threat. But the Knight ignored it, never taking his eyes off of her.

"Let go of me", she stated flatly, narrowing her eyes at him over her shoulder.

"Knight Rhys!, stand down!", Danse ordered.

"Sir, with all due respect, you can't expect this wastelander to…".

"That is enough!", Danse cut him off.

The Knight turned back to her, still maintaining his rough grip on her arm. "If you so much as…".

"Don't make me repeat myself!", Danse growled, his heavy footsteps coming up behind her.

"Yes, Sir…", the knight muttered, releasing his hold, his eyes still on her as he stepped back. She in turn released her grip on her sidearm and turned to face the Paladin.

"Easy, boy", she called to the dog. His growls subsided but didn't stop as he glared daggers at the Knight.

"Ma'am, I'm afraid the canine will have to wait here. I don't want an untrained animal jeopardizing the mission", Danse explained.

"That must be why you're not taking the Knight here", she quipped.

"What did you say?!", Rhys growled, taking a step towards her.

"Rhys!", the Paladin's voice stopping him in his tracks.

"Ma'am could you wait outside? I'll be with you shortly".

She bit her tongue and nodded to the Paladin. "It's alright boy", she knelt in front of the dog, giving him a quick hug, ruffling the fur on his back. "I'll be back soon, I promise". Dogmeat lapping at her cheek before she stood, adjusting the rifle around her shoulder and making her way to the door.

"Knight", she stopped and looked over her shoulder, catching his eye. "If anything happens to my friend while I'm gone", she said, a matter-of-factly, the coldness in her eyes, at odds with her tone. "I'll put another hole in you".
A fine dust hung in the stale air, illuminated by the floodlight on the Paladin’s helmet as they cautiously made their way along the dark and narrow corridors of the Arc Jet Systems facility. The back of Paladin Danse’s bulky power armor in front of her, obscuring her view ahead.

She made quick scans of the path behind them every so often as they progressed further into the
facility. Not that a surprise attack would be of any consequence to the paladin, as encased as he was in armor. But she herself felt especially vulnerable and exposed.

Thanks to the noise the paladin made with every step, as his armored feet made contact with the sheet metal floors, stealth was something they’d lost the moment they entered the building.

The butt of her automatic rifle nestled snugly against her shoulder as she surveyed the path behind them once more.

“Shit”, she hissed, stumbling forward, almost tripping over the severed leg of a protectron.

“What is it?”, Paladin Danse turned, his light blinding her.

“Nothing, just more of these…parts”, she replied, holding a hand up to shield her eyes as she kicked the piece of scrap to the side. “Could you get that light out of my eyes please”.

“Watch your step”, he said simply, before turning around and pushing forward.

“These ‘synths’ you mentioned, they’re basically robots as well right?”, she asked. “So why haven’t we seen any…parts…or bodies?”

“Yes, the main fighting force that the institute utilizes, are essentially humanoid robots. They are the first and second generation models. Most are armored in plastic or metal skin, and vaguely resemble a human, but by no means can they be mistaken for one”, the paladin explained as he walked. “Their tactics, AI and armaments are a cut above these protectron security drones. With enough of them it’s unlikely they would have sustained much, if any, casualties while infiltrating this facility”.

Suddenly, he held up a hand indicating for her to stop.

“Hold”, he ordered,

“Problem?”, she could just barely see an open room beyond him.

“A Security checkpoint”, he explained as he scanned the room. His headlight illuminating file cabinets and data storage machines.

A security terminal sat on a large curved desk in the center of the darkened room, under a dim ceiling light.

“Clear”, he stated before they cautiously entered, his light still scanning every dark corner as he made his way to a sealed hatch that likely led further into the facility.

She could hear his muffled grunts and the whirring gears of his armor as he strained against the hatch.

Power was still active in some parts of the facility after all this time, or, perhaps it had been brought online recently by this “Institute” that the paladin seemed so concerned by.

Lights still blinked on the server cabinets. Heat, and a low humming beneath her fingertips as she brushed the dust from the dials and readouts.

“Damn it, I was afraid of this”, Danse growled. “We’ll have to go back the way we came, find another way in”.

“Why? What’s wrong?”, she asked, turning to face him.
“We’re locked out. I can’t force the hatch and I don’t have the ordinance to blow it”, he said.

“This terminal has power”, she leaned her gun against the desk and crouched in front of the display. “We should be able to open it from here”.

“Unlikely. For a facility like this, we’d need a scribe to bypass the heavy security and access the system”, he explained.

Danse clenched his jaw in frustration.

Should he have brought Haylen and increased the risk of losing their base of operations?

No, he made the right decision. There had to be another way to breach the facility.

“I can bypass the security here”, he heard her say, a-mater-of-factly, and he turned to see her behind the terminal. Her head barely visible over the display

“Really? You’re sure about that?”, he asked. His sceptical tone not lost on her.

“It looks that way. Give me a minute, I’ll see what I can do”.

“That’s not good enough. The time it took to get here was wasted if we can’t get this hatch open. It will take considerably more to double back and scout for another point of entry. If you can’t give me a guarantee, tell me now and save us the time. Every minute we waste is another minute we risk losing our base of operations”.

“I don’t need the lecture, thanks. Castigate me all you want if I fail, but for now, be a good soldier and keep an eye out. Okay?”, she replied without looking up, countering his brusque tone with her own thinly veiled condescension.

An audible sigh and a grunt could be heard, even under his helmet.

“So tell me more about these synths”, she spoke up, after a few awkward moments of silence, punctuated by his heavy metallic footsteps.

He turned to her, a subdued green light on her face, and her brow furrowed in concentration as she scanned the display.

“If I’m right, you’ll get a first hand look at them before the mission is over”.

“Humor me”, she stated flatly.

“What do you want to know?”.

“What else can we expect?”, she asked.

“Here? Nothing else. The Gen 2’s are more than capable of leading an operation like this. They’re likely here for the same reason we are. There’s a high probability that they are the source of those energy readings Scribe Haylen picked up while modifying our radio tower”, he explained.

“So you think they knew you were headed here and arrived before you did, to do what? Lay in wait? Take the transmitter for themselves? That’s a bit overly paranoid, don’t you think?”, she added.

“Paranoid? Negative. When dealing with the institute, there’s no such thing. We’ve yet to determine how they obtain their intel, but they’re always a step ahead. They’re always where they need to be, when they need to be there. They’re monitoring us somehow. I’ve had enough encounters with the
Institute to know this is no coincidence”.

“I see. So what else do they have besides the Gen 1’s and 2’s?”

“Hm?”, he stopped his patrol and turned to her once more.

“You said the Gen 1’s and 2’s are capable enough to do something like this, and we shouldn’t expect anything beyond that. You’re implying this “Institute” has more at its disposal than just these robots”.

She was almost tempted to look up from the terminal when the paladin didn’t immediately answer.

“Gen 3’s are...indistinguishable, from you and me. They’re used primarily for infiltration and espionage”.

“Indistinguishable?”, her fingers pausing for just a brief moment over the keyboard.

“Skin, blood, bone. We’ve yet to find a reliable method to scan for them, and that’s what makes them so dangerous. From post-mortem examination of suspected Gen 3’s, our scientists have discovered synthetic components embedded throughout their bodies, including their brain”, the paladin tapped his helmet, but her eyes were fixed to the display.

“Really...?”, her dry tone indicating her divided attention. “Disregarding the implants, they sound pretty human to me…”

“They are abominations!”, Danse cut her off. "Perversions of…”, a heavy metallic click from the hatch, ending his tirade before it could begin.

“Done”, Leona pushed herself to her feet and nodded towards the door.

“Try the handle again”, she instructed, but the paladin didn’t budge.

“There’s no way you broke through their security that fast”, Danse insisted.

His tone difficult to decipher, made all the more difficult since she couldn’t see his face.

A slight shrug of her shoulders.

“Beginners luck”, she muttered, before stooping to retrieve her rifle.

‘It should have taken even a skilled scribe at least twice that long to breach the security systems of a facility like this’, the paladin thought as he made his way to the hatch.

‘Was she lying? Were they deliberately let in?’

‘Or…’

The Paladin looked over at her before turning the hatch. She held her rifle at the ready and nodded at him to open the door.

The deafening screech of scraping iron echoed off the walls as he opened the hatch to reveal a darkened room.

Severed electrical cables hung from the ceiling, providing brief sparks of light and highlighting, if only for a moment, two humanoid shapes in the darkness.

“Initiating combat subroutines. Eliminating hostile organics”
The unmistakably robotic tones accompanied by eyes that glowed with cyan light, as the two shadowed figures turned to face the door.

“Contact!” the paladin shouted and opened fire. His bulky, armored frame, crowding the hatch and denying her a clear shot.

Bursts of blue laser fire crashing against his armor.

An errant shot slipping through the doorway, almost hitting her in the head and scorching the wall behind her.

“Shit!”, she growled as she ducked behind the desk, a few more stray shots flashing overhead and peppering the wall.

It took a few seconds, but the paladin finally breached the adjacent room, drawing their fire away from her direction, allowing her a chance to glance over the table top.

A frantic dance of red and blue light lit the darkened room beyond. The paladin’s unstable headlamp throwing the scene into even further chaos.

She pushed herself to one knee. Her cheek pressed against cold steel as she used the table to steady her rifle, and took aim through the scope.

*Pale, skeletal, mannequins.*

Vaguely humanoid robots were nothing unusual in her time.

And while the technology certainly existed to more or less reasonably mirror a human being back then, it was never done, not even to this degree. And for good reason.

Warm breath leaving her lips as she pulled the trigger. The brief illumination of laser light in the darkness, allowing her the opportunity to land a burst of three shots to the head of her target.

A rain of sparks followed the synth as it crumbled to the floor, just as the paladin dropped the other one in a smoking heap.

“Clear!”

Danse looked her over as she stood in the doorway and peered into the darkness. Her backpack in one hand and her rifle slung across her chest. She appeared unhurt.

“Meet the institute’s lap dogs”, he spat as she entered, and crouched over one of the bodies. Her fingertips exploring the broken chassis.

Sparks of light from the overhanging cables barely enough to provide a clear examination of the body.

“Is your headlight down?”, she looked up at him.

“Hm?”. “Looks that way. Must have taken a hit in the firefight”, he said.

“Were they aiming for it?”, she asked, while rummaging through her backpack.
“Possibly. As I said, even the gen 1’s are a step above a typical security drone in both intelligence and tactics. Do not underestimate them”.

“Fair enough”, she retrieved a pair of goggles from her pack and equipped them, giving the body at her knees another pensive once-over.

“My helmet is equipped with night vision capabilities, do you have a flashlight or…”, he began.

“I can see”, she interrupted, turning to him as she stood and threw on her backpack.

He watched her for brief moment while she adjusted the straps on her pack and checked her rifle.

The visor she wore was streamlined, flat and opaque, slightly larger and bulkier than a normal pair of tactical goggles.

The Brotherhood had access to a wide array of military and civilian hardware, but he did not recognize the model.

“That’s some advanced tech. Where did you get your hands on…”

“‘Communications and Control’ is on the third floor”, she interrupted him once more. “We should probably check there for your transmitter”.

“I…”, he began, but again she cut him off.

“Along with the elevators, most sections of the facility have been shut down to save power and there’s structural damage on the second floor stairwell”, she explained, moving closer and showing him her Pip-Boy display, while cycling through several schematics. “There’s a bac…”

“Hold a moment”, Danse held a hand up to stop her. “How did you come by this intel?”

“Terminal”, she jabbed a thumb over her shoulder towards the other room.

“I find that hard to believe”, he stated flatly.

“What do you mean?”, she tilted her head, questioningly.

“When did you have time to break into the system, unlock the hatch and make a copy of these diagnostics?”. A hint of suspicion in his tone.

‘*How much did he really know about this woman?’

He had to admit, her showing up to help them outside the station when she did was oddly convenient, despite their short range distress call.

The fact that anyone would show up, much less help them, was in itself uncharacteristic of a typical wastelander.

She was too well geared for a typical wastelander.

‘*Or was she a mole sent by the Institute?’

‘A Gen 3?’

‘*How could she not have heard about the Institute until now?’
“Was she gathering intel on them?’

‘Leading him into a trap?’

“Why are you making this an issue?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

He said nothing, but continued to stare her down behind an expressionless helmet.

She sighed. “Bypassing the terminal lock wasn’t particularly difficult. I spent most of my time running through building diagnostics and floor plans. “Unlocking the door was a non-issue once I had access to the system. Now are you done with the interrogation? Because like you, I’d like to get this over with and leave as soon as possible”

He detected no indication that she was lying. But then again, what did he really know when it came to these wastelanders.

He wanted to question her further, but this really wasn’t the time or the place.

He could either trust her, or he could part ways here and now, and attempt to complete the mission on his own.

She was undoubtedly a proficient marks woman. And if she was indeed not working for the institute, and was genuinely able to hack the security that quickly. It would mean that she was very highly skilled when it came to computers.

A skill he may need again before the mission was over.

She waited, looking up at him. Her eyes hidden behind her visor. But with her pursed lips and tense jaw muscles, her irritation was clear.

“Very well. Show me what you have”, he finally broke the silence between them.

“Good”, she brought the Pip-Boy up once more. “There’s a backup generator on standby on the lowest level, here. If we can get it running, we should be able to take the lifts to the third floor, to Communications and Control”.

“Power is down in these sections, and automated security is set up here, here and…”

More dark, narrow corridors. Once again the bulky armored suit of her companion made it almost impossible to see the path ahead, or to find cover, should they be attacked from behind.

There were several small offices along the corridor as they pushed forward, and she made it a point to do a cursory scan of every one they passed that wasn’t rusted shut.

“We’re coming up on an open room. Be on alert for possible ambush”, the Paladin advised.

“Got it”, she replied. Her field of view largely dominated by his armored back.

Dying ceiling lamps fizzled with the inconsistent power, and red emergency lights barely illuminated the darkened room as the Paladin lingered on the threshold, scanning for movement.

And then he saw it. The head of a synth peeking over an upturned table, and another behind a file cabinet…and another….and another. Clearly expecting the darkness to hide their presence. He had
no idea if there were more in hiding.

“Stay behind me, we have…” His words cut short as the first bolt of blue light illuminated the room. The synths no doubt realizing they’d been discovered, and opting not to wait until they ventured further into the room.

“Fall back!” the Paladin shouted as a torrent of laser fire descended on their position.

She gritted her teeth and braced herself as they slowly backed up into the corridor. All she could do was stand behind the bulky power armor as Danse returned fire. No room or opportunity for her to return fire herself.

The Paladin’s power armor was the only cover available in the narrow corridor, but it was not enough. She could feel the searing heat from bolts of stray laser fire as they flashed passed her body or peppered the ground beneath her feet.

‘Why did I agree to this!?’ She was going to get shot. It was only a matter of time before one of the bolts breached the Paladin’s frame.

The synths had no choice but to break their cover to get a better vantage as the pair retreated further into the narrow corridor.

“Keep moving! We need to draw them out!” Danse called over his shoulder, but there was no reply.

“Leona?”, he chanced a glance over his shoulder at her silence, fearing the worst, but she was nowhere in sight.

“Damnit!”

‘He knew it! He should have trusted his gut’

He swiped at the switch on his helmet, switching on his radio.

“Leona! What’s your position?!” he shouted. “Answer me damnit!”

But there was only static.

Searing bolts of light crashed and sizzled on his armor as he returned fire, finally landing a headshot on a synth that dared to stray too far from cover.

‘She led him into an ambush. Delivered him right to them’. 

‘How could he have let this happen?’, he berated himself.

‘His judge of character was never this badly off’.

“Push forward!”, Leona’s voice blared through his radio, cutting through his thoughts.

“Leona! Where are you?!”

“I’m in the room! Get back here!”, she shouted.

His immediate thought was that she was attempting to draw him back in. But that notion was quickly put to bed when one of the synths taking cover behind the doorway, crumpled to the floor in a hail of gunfire and sparks. The others turned immediately, taking aim at an unseen target.
“Damnit!”, the Paladin growled and charged forward.

She could clearly hear the heavy fire-fight raging in the hallway behind her as she navigated through the darkened side offices.

Hunched over on the balls of her feet, she moved at a hurried pace on high alert, her visor allowing her to navigate the dark with ease.

An eye on her Pip-Boy, and the schematics she lifted from the terminal, providing an alternate route around the battle.

Before long, she found herself in an office adjacent to the battle. The thin walls doing little to muffle the noise.

She kept low, hugging the wall next to the doorway and chanced a look into the other room.

She was on the second floor. There were stairs leading down into the lobby they’d been attacked from, immediately to her left. A synth stood at the top of the stairs, a mere three feet from where she hid.

She stared at the back of the robot, transfixed. Parts of its casing, its skin, had fallen away, revealing valves and wires, and the metal endoskeleton underneath.

It fired at the Paladin as he slowly backed away from the room and further into the corridor.

Another synth directly in front of her, further away, behind the railings that overlooked the floor below.

The synths below had broken their cover. Four of them huddled on either side of the doorway, taking shots at the Paladin.

She was going to have to act soon, before the Paladin retreated too far, forcing the two synths on the second floor with her to move.

A deep breath as she leaned back against the wall and readied her rifle. One more quick glance into the other room to confirm her targets.

In one quick move she brought her rifle up, and opened fire at the synth directly in front of her, behind the railings. A barrage of gunfire cutting into its head and torso, making short work of it as she stepped through the doorway.

The synth to her left, whirling around to face her before the first one even hit the floor. Only to be met by a boot to the chest that sent it toppling down the stairs.

“Push Forward!”, she flipped the switch on her chest and shouted into her radio.

“Leona! Where are you?!”, Danse demanded.

“I’m in the room!”, she brought her rifle up when one of the synths below turned to face her. A few well placed shots sending it toppling to the ground.

It was enough to get the attention of the remaining synths, and they turned in unison, opening fire as she dashed back into the adjacent office.
“Get back here!”, she shouted, with her back against the wall.

“Raaaaarggh!”, she heard Danse shout in the other room. His thundering footsteps reverberating through the metal floors.

Chancing a glance from behind her cover just in time to see him charge into the room below, ramming into two synths with the force of a freight train that sent them flying back into the upturned desks and office furniture.

One of the synths crashing into a steel desk with enough force to warp and fracture the metal, cutting a short path through the debris before it screeched to a halt, kicking up a mass of dust and paper sheets in the process.

The blinking emergency lights bolstered in its fight against the darkness by flashes of red, as the Paladin opened fire.

This was her chance, with the synths attention diverted from her…

She brought her rifle up, but as soon as she stepped through to doorway, metal fingers latched on to the barrel of the gun from her left.

Her head snapped to glowing eyes and skeletal features. The sight was surreal enough to give her a moment’s pause.

It was the synth she’d kicked down the stairs.

‘Shit!’

‘She’d been careless’

Her momentary shock allowing it to grab her by the neck, lifting her to her toes.

Its emotionless face, tinted green from her visor as it stared up at her.

She was forced to relinquish her hold on the rifle, to try and pry the fingers from her neck.

Such surprising strength from the synth’s seemingly flimsy frame.

The realization that it was probably capable of snapping her neck, fueled her immediate response. She grabbed the knife from her belt and jammed it into the side of the synth’s neck, missing her intended mark of its head.

Sparks erupted from the breach in its neck. Its head spasming violently, as it tossed her aside.

She hit the floor hard, skidding across and rolling to a stop on her stomach at the foot of the railing.

A glimpse of the Paladin on the floor below, as she pushed herself to her knees, and drew her sidearm, firing five shots blindly into the synths torso.

It staggered back against the wall, dropping her rifle in the process.

It grabbed the handle of the knife embedded in its neck. And with little effort, dislodged the blade, tossing it aside and pushing off the wall.
But she was already on her feet.

Quickly closing the distance, she stomped it in the chest, sending it slamming into the wall once more. And in one deft move, brought her pistol up, emptying the magazine point blank into its head.

A shout of frustration coming from behind her, and she turned to see the Paladin throw off a synth that had clambered onto his back, while two others peppered his armor with laser fire.

She wasted no time retrieving her rifle. And with the benefit of her vantage point and the Paladin drawing their fire, they were able to dispatch the remaining synths in short order.

The Paladin’s armored foot came down with vicious force, crushing the head of the last synth into the floor.

The sound of crunching metal making her wince.

Danse looked up at her as she descended the stairs, slipping her sidearm back into its shoulder holster. Her rifle held loosely in her other hand.

He could feel the muscles in his jaw tighten as he clenched his fist, trying to calm his anger.

“What was that?”, he asked as she reached the foot of the staircase, his calm tone sounding forced even to his ear.

“Hm?”, she walked over to him, glancing down at the mangled remnants of the synth at his feet.

Her aloof and seemingly oblivious response further testing his patience.

“What the hell did you think you were doing, pulling a stunt like that?”, his tone growing more forceful. “You could have gotten both of us killed back there!”, his insinuation taking her slightly aback. “If you can’t work with me and follow orders then you’re useless to me”.

“Running off like that in the middle of an engagem…”, he continued

“I’m not one of your little soldiers ‘Paladin’, so stow the attitude”, she cut him off, lifting her visor over her forehead to glare at him in the darkness.

“That’s becoming painfully clear”, he fired back. “But you are under a contract with the Brotherhood of Steel, and I expect you to follow my orders. To be where I tell you to be and to act…”

“I’m not under a contract”, she interrupted. “I’m doing you a favour…”. “From the moment we met, this arrangement has been skewed entirely in your favour. I’d lose nothing if I walked aw…”

“If you continue to act this recklessly then you’re a liability”, he corrected her, cutting her off. “We had no idea of their numbers. Rushing in was impulsive and reckless. If you had fallen back when I ordered, we could have managed their numbers by drawing them out and dealing with them, with far less risk to…”.

She held up a finger to cut him off. Her eyes shut as she took a deep breath. “These corridors are narrow, you might have noticed. I can barely see past you, much less return fire when we’re under attack”. “There’s no cover, and most of these offices are either sealed shut, or dead ends”, she swept a hand in the direction of the darkened corridor they had come from. “If you think I’m going to hide
behind a walking target with a giant ‘Shoot Me’ sign on its head, and hope I don’t get hit by stray fire, then you have another thing coming”.

“My safety takes priority over your orders or your plans”, she continued. “I won’t abandon you, but if I have better idea, or see an opportunity to increase my chances of NOT getting shot, then I’ll damn well take it”. “Because I hate to break it to you ‘soldier boy’, but we’re not all encased in metal”, she tapped her fist on his chest plate and immediately regretted it.

“Sonofabitch!”, she hissed, withdrawing her hand and stepping back with impressive speed.

His armor was searing hot.

“The ablative shielding on this suit has been almost completely worn down due to sustained combat these past few weeks, and I haven’t had the resources or the opportunity to patch it”, he explained. “I’ve been trying to minimize its exposure to heat and energy based weaponry”. “It’s why I didn’t charge into a room with an unknown number of Institute hostiles, when they had the advantage of cover and positioning”.

He sighed audibly when he saw her expression soften somewhat. “I thought I could shield you until we fell back to a favourable position, but I can understand your concerns and your reasoning”.

He could at least offer an olive branch. He needed her co-operation. “You’re not a soldier, I can appreciate that fact, but you are my partner on this mission. Can we agree on that?”

She sighed as well, still clutching her hand. “Fair enough”.

“Then we need to work together. Keep your radio on. Stay in contact”. “I may not be your commanding officer, but this is my operation and there needs be a clear chain of command. “If you have any input, then I’ll hear it. If we get separated, I need to know your status and your position”.

“Is that acceptable?”, he asked.

The red emergency lights glinted off his helmet and armor in the darkness.

She hated not being able to see his face when they were talking, but it was clear he was making a sincere, if reluctant attempt at a compromise.

“I can work with that”, she agreed.

She was a civilian. He couldn’t expect her to follow orders without question, or adhere to military protocols and codes of conduct. It wasn’t ideal, he thought to himself, but he needed to make this work.

Because she did have a point. She had gone out of her way to assist them for comparatively little reward. Back at the station and now.

She was an asset, and one he’d rather not lose, if it could be helped.

She brought her pip-boy up, “We have to take the emergency stairwell on the second floor, down to the lowest…”

“Get down!”, Danse shouted, cutting her off and knocking her to the ground as he intercepted a bolt of blue laser fire. The flashing red and blue lights in the darkness disorienting her.

“Clear!”.
It’s was over in the brief few seconds it took to slip her visor back on. The smouldering corpse of a synth that they’d missed, lay in a heap just inside the doorway of one of the side offices.

He turned to face her as she got to her feet. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine…thanks”, she replied, trying not to look at him.

“We can’t afford to be careless. Stay sharp, and never drop your guard, especially in unknown territory. There are very few places in the Commonwealth that can afford you that luxury”, the Paladin advised.

“Yeah”, she checked her rifle. “I’m learning that more and more every day”.

“Take the lead”, she stepped aside and nudged her head towards the stairs. “Let’s get this over with”.

“Auto turrets up ahead. Engaging”, his voice coming through clearly on her radio.

“Wait. Save your ammo, give me a moment”.

They’d passed a small security room on the way, and she decided to hang back and use the terminals to try and disable any security measures or locked doors in their way, while the Paladin scouted ahead.

“Alright, go ahead”, she directed.

“You’re sure?”. She’d gotten used to his sceptical tone.

“Fairly sure. Why don’t you stick your head out and find out?”, she quipped.

“This is not the time for…”

“They’re down Paladin. Get moving”, she cut him off. “I’ve unlocked the security doors in the next section. They should lead directly to the engine core testing area”.

“Copy that. Proceeding to the core. Rendezvous with me there, and watch your six”, he advised.

She glanced at the security monitors displaying the empty hallways just outside the room, before retrieving her rifle and heading out.

“On my way”.

A massive rocket engine suspended in the center of the testing chamber, illuminated by blinding floodlights as they entered.

“Look at this place. The scribes would have a field day in here”, she heard Danse say as she stepped out onto the walkway that skirted the edges of the circular room.

Beneath her feet, she could barely make out the ground far below, through the holes in the steel mesh grating.
“That should be the control room up there”, he pointed, and she had to shield her eyes against the floodlights to see the observation window of the control room far above them.

“Looks like we could have taken this to the third floor”, she thought aloud, toeing the edge of a large gap, where a section of the walkway had fallen through.

“Stick to the original plan”, Danse turned and began down the winding walkway. “I can see the freight elevator from here. Let’s get that auxiliary generator online”.

“I’m not sure what’s powering those floodlights, but this section should be dead”, she mused, looking up at the lights above them as they reached the bottom.

“They’re probably on another grid”, the paladin guessed as he made his way over to the lift.

“With all the structural damage, it’s hard to say, but the freight elevator is definitely down”, he confirmed.

“Scout the maintenance area off of the main chamber”, he directed.

An observation window in front of them and a passage off to the side.

“I'll stay here and watch our back. Stay sharp in there”.

She made her way through the maintenance tunnels at a brisk pace, alert to any movement or sound.

The hiss of steam pouring through ruptured pipes, partially obscuring the way ahead. And the darkness illuminated by red, blinking emergency lights.

“What’s your status?”, the Paladin’s voice came through on the radio, just as she entered the maintenance control room.

“It’s clear. I can see the generator”.

She could see the dimly lit generator room in the back, to her right, and the Paladin through the stained observation window on her left.

The control terminal was embedded in the wall next to the generator. A single dim, hanging light, illuminating the keyboard.

“The system is locked. Give me a minute”, she set her rifle down and got to work.

Danse stared up at the butt end of the jet engine. A marvel of old world technology.

Once this mission was complete, this facility would need to be marked for a proper salvage operation.

“I’m through. Activating the generator”, Leona’s voice interrupting his musing.

“Copy that”.

The overhead lights flickered as the hum of power flowed through the generator room, breathing life into the equipment and control panels around her.

“There we go”, she smiled. “How does it look out there?”

“That did it, the freight elevator is active. Great work!”. He actually sounded pleased. A touch of emotion other than annoyance slipping through his usually gruff demeanor.

“Meet me at…”, his transmission ending abruptly.

“Paladin?”, she asked.

“We’re under attack!”, he shouted over the sound of laser fire, as she left the generator room and hurried to the observation window.

The Paladin was shooting at, and taking fire from somewhere above him, she couldn’t see from her position.

“Multiple contacts!”, he shouted, just as two synths dropped down behind him from the walkway above.

“Danse! Behind you!”, she slammed on the glass and the Paladin whirled around, opening fire and taking one of them down as two more dropped from above.

There was no cover. The synths were just barely more durable than a human. But out in the open with no cover, they couldn’t withstand nearly as much punishment as a suit of Power Armor.

Even so, the Paladin was taking fire from all angles. Even his armor wouldn’t withstand that kind of punishment for long.

Her palm brushing over a switch on the console. She could make out the words Test Burn and Ignition, in the darkness, and understood immediately what they were for.

‘No…’, she couldn’t…wouldn’t.

Two more descended the walkway. One of them closing on him with a shock baton.

About as dumb as a typical drugged up raider, she thought, but their numbers were growing.

“I need you back here. Now!”, he shouted.

Her eyes lingering on the red switch for all of two seconds before she made up her mind.

“Shit!”, she growled, pushing off the console and breaking into a sprint down the maintenance tunnel.

She practically skidded to a halt, dropping to her knees and peeking around the corner into the test chamber.

Four synths in front of her firing at the Paladin who was out of sight, blocked by the wall she was hiding behind.

‘Aim for centre mass’. 
Unlike her 9mm sidearm, her rifle had proven infinitely more effective at body shots earlier against these synths.

Two quick breaths before she leaned out, firing short bursts into the group that shredded the first two, ripping through their outer casing with ease.

The third turning to face her, but a well placed shot to the head taking it out before she was forced to duck behind cover when the fourth returned fire.

She braced herself as a barrage of laser fire rained down in her direction, using the opportunity to reload.

A break in fire giving her the opportunity to sneak a peek around the corner just in time to see the synth brought down by several bolts of red laser fire to the head and torso.

She bolted from her cover, the Paladin finally coming into view.

A synth on his back, clawing at his helmet, another one pinned beneath his armored foot, while three more fired at him from the walkway above.

She took aim at the one on his back but was forced to jump back as another synth dropped down from the walkway above her, taking a swipe at her with a shock baton.

She staggered back, dropping her rifle to catch the synth’s arm as it brought the baton down at her with an overhead swing.

Its other hand grasping for her face, but she caught it at the wrist, holding her ground as she grappled with the robot.

“Get the hell OFF ME!”, she growled, bringing her leg up and stomping at its knee. Surprise flashing through her eyes as her foot met solid resistance and she realized her mistake.

No kneecaps and its joints were constructed differently than a human’s.

It was too late, she was off balance, allowing the synth to push her back hard against the pipes lining the maintenance tunnel.

“Gaah!”, she screamed as a piece of jagged metal cut into her back. The sudden, searing pain causing her strength to falter briefly, and the shock baton got dangerously close to the side of her face.

The sharp crackling of electricity next to her ear.

The synth leaned in, in an attempt to push its advantage. Its face inches from her own.

“You Must Be Terrified”, its voice and face both lacking any hint of emotion.

She scowled, gritting her teeth against the pain and bringing her other leg up for the second time.

A powerful stomp to its knee, this time at a different angle, and she could feel the metal shift beneath her boot and the immediate drop in the synth’s power as it lost its leverage.

The robot looked down at its injured limb and then up at her to see a pained, but vindictive grin on her face.

She pushed off the wall and stomped the synth in the chest, knocking it off its feet and back through
the doorway, into test chamber.

Retrieving her rifle as she closed the gap and unloading three shots into it as it struggled to stand, severing its head at the neck.

The Paladin still had a synth on his back. Its fingers gripping the underside of his helmet, threatening to rip it off. All the while taking fire from the three on the walkway above.

His arm appeared to be damaged, unable to reach the synth on his back.

Instead he opted to ram his back into the observation window of the maintenance room, sandwiching the synth in the process, but it was not enough.

She could see the gap between his helmet and his armor growing. It wouldn’t be long before it came off.

“Danse! Turn around!”, she shouted both into her radio and directly at him.

His response was instantaneous, whirling around so his back was facing her, while she dropped to one knee and took aim. She had to be incredibly careful not to risk stray fire or a ricochet catching the Paladin in his exposed neck.

A surgical burst of fire from her rifle, shredding the synth’s arm at the elbow, forcing it to adjust its position on his back, just enough for the Paladin to grab its other arm.

Danse spun around again, yanking the synth by the arm and slamming it into the observation window. The glass cracked as the synth slid to the ground, head first.

He could handle it from there. Her aim immediately shifting to the three on the walkway above him. Their attention still focused on the Paladin as he finished off the synth.

‘Perfect’ She flipped the selective fire switch on her rifle.

Full auto

“Goodnight sweetheart, well it’s time...hmm...hmmm”, she hummed.

The walkway exploded in a dance of sparks and debris as Danse joined her in focusing their fire on the hapless group above them.

The synths never stood a chance. Severed limbs and scrap raining to the ground as the smoke cleared and she reloaded.

“Clear! Keep your eyes open, there may be more”, the Paladin shouted, holding a hand up.

She was on her feet, her weapon pointed skyward as she cautiously made her way over to the Paladin.

“Get the lift, I’ll cover you”, she called over her shoulder.

“On it”.

“Get in!”, he instructed, lifting the steel gate and slamming it shut as they both retreated to the relative safety of the lift.

He hit the switch, beginning their slow ascent to the third floor.
“Well that was fun”, she pulled her visor down and let it hang around her neck, while she ran her fingers through her hair.

“Not exactly how I’d choose to spend my Saturday evenings”, she added, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

The Paladin twisted his helmet off, and she could feel the warm air escape the confines of the suit.

“That was some damn fine soldiering back there. Outstanding work ma’am”, she heard him say.

Glancing up at him she had to do a double take.

“Huh, didn’t think your face could to that”, she mused, staring up at him with an exaggerated squint.

“Do what?” he asked with a single raised eyebrow.

“Smile”, she grinned teasingly at him.

His chuckle sounded more like a grunt as he wiped the heavy layer of sweat from his face.

“When the situation calls for it”, he replied.

“I mean it though. You really did handle yourself well back there”, he said sincerely, holding her gaze for a moment before she turned away, awkwardly checking her rifle.

“I’m fairly certain I wouldn’t have made it this far without your assistance”, he added.

“Well we’re not done yet”, she replied, looking up through the grating in the lift. The elevator shaft above them, shrouded in darkness. “Let’s hope we find what you’re looking for in the Control Room”.

“You’re injured?”, he asked, noticing the blood on her shoulder staining her tank top.

“It’s fine, I’ll deal with it when we get out of here”, she replied.

“What about your arm”, she added, nodding to his left arm. “Your movements looked a little stiff back there”.

“Ah, you caught that? The left actuator is damaged” he explained, lifting his arm and flexing the suit’s fingers. “It’s heavy and movement range has been reduced, but I can still manage”. “It will require major repairs when we get back to the station however”.

“Heads up”, she motioned to the Observation window of the well lit Control Room, as it came into view.

The lift jolted to a halt at the topmost walkway, and they had a direct line of sight into the Control room window.

“There’s movement. I count three more”, Danse said, securing his helmet and readying his laser rifle.

She could clearly see the three remaining synths as they stared back at them from behind the thick glass. Unmoving, with emotionless faces and glowing eyes.

“That’s not creepy at all”, she muttered

“They know we’re coming”, the paladin grabbed the gate and turned to her. “We do this hard and
fast. Follow behind me. Pick your targets and stay in cover”.

“I’m ready, let’s move before they decide to come greet us”, she pulled her visor up and nodded to him. “I don’t want to fight those things on this rusty walkway”.

His armored foot pinned the synth to the floor, crushing its torso as he finished it off with several shots to the head.

“That’s the last of them”, he sighed. The temperature inside the suit was becoming more than a mild annoyance.

“Are you alright?”, he looked over his shoulder to see her standing over the body of the third synth. A dismembered arm in one hand and a pistol in the other.

“I think so”, she winced, holding up the severed arm with a shock baton still in its grip, and scrutinizing the dangling weapon.

“These things…really hurt”, her breath hitching briefly, before she tossed the limb aside.

“I don’t see the transmitter. Fan out and search the room”, he ordered, before exiting the suit.

The place was a mess. Files and equipment trashed and strewn every which way.

“Is this it?”, Danse heard her say, and turned around to see her hand poking up from behind one of the control stations. A compact device in her grasp.

“Let me see”, he said, making his way over.

She was crouched next to the body of a destroyed Gen 1. Meticulously examining its chassis.

Suppressing his urge to question her, and taking the device as she absently held it up towards him.

“Outstanding. This is what we came for”. He turned the device around in his fingers.

“Put it in my pack. It’s by the door”, she pointed, without looking up.

He stepped over the dismembered Gen 2 she’d killed earlier, and grabbed her backpack, resisting the urge to examine its contents while her back was turned.

A cursory glance at the body at his feet showed its arm ripped off at the elbow, its leg twisted at an odd angle, and multiple shots to the side of the head.

He watched as she held the mechanical arm of the Gen 1 next to her own, extending and contracting her fingers in tandem with it. Probing its naked chassis with clinical curiosity.

“What are you doing?”, he asked finally, approaching her.

“Huh?”, she turned and looked up at him.

“Oh…You’ve probably seen a lot of these things, haven’t you?”, she stated. It wasn’t really a question.

“More than I’d care to”, he said flatly.
“Well they’re pretty new to me”, she stood, brushing her palms on her pants.

“Well I’m afraid you’ll have to satisfy your curiosity another time”, he handed over her rifle and backpack. “The mission isn’t over. We need to secure the exit and return to HQ as soon as possible”.

“I’ve been meaning to ask”, she began as she watched him enter the suit. “Wouldn’t your little organization be interested in their weapons, and their bodies for that matter?”.

“No. Our scientists have already analysed enough of the Gen 1’s and 2’s, as well as most of their energy based armaments”. “You’ll find most of their weapons are inoperable. Key internal components are fried when no synth energy signatures are detected within range”, he explained as he tested the suit’s damaged arm and then turned to her. “Their value lies in scrap and salvage. The Brotherhood will do a proper sweep of this facility at some point, but right now we have a mission to complete”.

“I see. Well then, after you”, she nodded to the door.

The soft orange light of the setting sun greeted them as they exited the facility via a rear bunker exit.

The fresh air was a welcome change from the musty and poorly ventilated facility.

He was waiting up ahead as she exited the bunker.

Twigs and dried autumn leaves crunching beneath her boots and the cool winds dancing the hair across her face.

“Is the package secure?” he asked as she approached.

“Snug as a bug in a rug”, she quipped with a smile, and holding up her pack as she stopped to face him.

“Why don’t you take that helmet off? You must be burning up in there”, she asked.

“Not when we’re out in the open like this, and not while we still have a mission to complete”, he said.

“I’ve said it before. Don’t ever assume you’re safe out here. All it takes is one…”.

“Dogmeat!”, she gasped, cutting off his lecture.

He whirled around just in time to catch a blur as the canine dashed past him and barreled into her, knocking her over, into the golden and orange leaves that covered the ground.

“Hahaha. You little bloodhound!”, she laughed as the dog excitedly licked her face. His tail wagging wildly.

“How did you find me?”, she grinned, briskly ruffling his fur and scratching his ears as she tried to sit up.

*She looked…innocent.*

He found himself smiling as he watched them, and had to remind himself that they were still on a mission and far from safe out here.
“Let’s get moving. We should be able to make it to HQ before dark. Stay sharp, and keep the chatter to a minimum until we get back”, he turned and started down the path.

“Right”, she finally managed to get to her feet. Dried leaves clinging to her hair as she grabbed her backpack and rifle

“Come on boy”.

The ghoul corpses around the station courtyard had been cleared out by the time they made it back. Knight Rhys and Scribe Haylen coming out to meet them as they cleared the barricades.

“It’s good to have you back sir” Haylen smiled, as they both saluted the Paladin.

“Glad to be back. I’m pleased to report the mission was a success. Thanks in large part to our friend here”, the Paladin nodded to her as she came up beside him.

“Here”, she retrieved the device from her pack and handed it to Haylen.

“Happy to help”, she flashed the Scribe a quick smile and brushed past the group to head for the station doors.

“Any, trouble, Sir?”, she heard the Knight ask as she closed the door behind her.

She was exhausted.

Now that the adrenaline was wearing off and the tension slowly left her body, she was becoming more aware of her bruises and injuries.

Dogmeat trailed closely behind her as she made her way to one of the small filing rooms, and dumped her gear on the table.

A heavy sigh as she removed her gloves and sunk into one of the chairs, burying her face in her palms.

_Synths…Ghouls…Raiders…_

There was so much she still didn’t know. So much going on.

She didn’t belong here.

This wasn’t her world. But it _was_ wearing its skin.

Superficial similarities bridging the gap between the old world and the new.

“Ma’am”, A soft knock on the open door, interrupting her thoughts, and she looked up to see Haylen in the doorway.

A timid but polite smile on the Scribe’s face.

_Isn’t she a soldier?_
“Hi, I’m sorry to bother you. But I just want to let you know there’s running water on the second floor if you want to freshen up”

“Thank you”, Leona nodded and flashed her a polite smile.

There was a brief pause as the Scribe looked like she wanted to say something else, and Leona tilted her head, somewhat bemused.

“I…I know we didn’t get to talk before, but I…Uh…”, the Scribe began. “…I just wanted to say thank you, for your help with the ghouls, and…and for accompanying Paladin Danse on this mission”. “He spoke very highly of you”.

Really?, she thought.

“I don’t want to think what would have happened if you didn’t show up when you did, and…”

“I appreciate it”, Leona cut her off with a weak and embarrassed smile, and the Haylen nodded in return.

“That’s all I wanted to say”, she smiled politely and excused herself.

He stood on the edge of the roof, looking down into the courtyard below. Behind him, Scribe Haylen worked on the radio tower. Four worklights surrounding and illuminating the structure in the dwindling evening light.

“Sir?”, Knight Rhys came up at his side.

“Rhys. What is it?”.

“Sir, about that wastelander”, he started, and Danse looked over at him with a furrowed brow.

“Can I ask how long she’s going to be with us?”.

Danse regarded him for a moment before replying. “I imagine she’ll be moving on soon. I’m not going to expel her from the compound, if that’s what you’re asking. Not at this hour”. “She’s been a highly valuable asset in the half-a-day that she’s been with us”.

_It would have taken the skills of all three of them to clear the ArcJet Systems facility. Leaving their base entirely undefended_, he mused, but didn’t attempt to justify his reasons to the Knight.

Her contributions were clear, and that was enough.

“Sir, with respect, I don’t think we can’t trust her. I think it’s likely that she’s been sent to infiltrate our operation. Think about it. Her showing up when she did. Didn’t that seem a little convenient?”.

Danse looked out across the courtyard and the darkening buildings beyond, as he listened.

“She has to be working for someone”, Rhys continued. "That large duffle bag she left in one of the filing rooms has some fancy hardware, military grade. I also found some sort of insignia…”

“You went through her effects? When?”, Danse turned to him, cutting him off.

“Sir, after you left for ArcJet, I…”.
“Did you tamper with anything, or leave any indication that’d you been through her things?” Danse cut him off again.

“N…No sir but I…”

“Knight Rhys, I’m ordering you to keep your distance from our guest for the duration of her stay”.

“Sir? I…”

“I don’t expect it will be more than a day or two. We should have the radio tower operational before then”, Danse continued.

“Sir, I don’t…”

“Is that clear, Knight?”, the Paladin repeated.

“Yes sir”, the Knight bit his tongue, making no attempt to hide his displeasure.

“Carry on”.

Dogmeat lay in the doorway as she wiped the dirt and sweat from her skin with a wet cloth.

Bare from the waist up. Gingerly dabbing at the wound on her back.

It was beginning to throb.

She wouldn’t waste a stimpak on it, but the last thing she needed was an infection.

A single, dim, hanging bulb, lit the dirty bathroom. A mouldy bathtub next to the sink and a dusty, faded mirror covering the medicine cabinet.

A small wooden table in the middle of the room held her bag, a dirty ashtray, a pack of cigarettes, shell casings and several tools and mechanical components she couldn’t identify.

She passed a damp cloth across the mirror and grabbed a bottle of painkillers from her bag. Downing three tablets with a single gulp from her canteen.

The sound of voices and static drifting from the roof, through the open window as she leaned on the sink.

A faded reflection in the dirty mirror when she looked up.

She sighed, grabbing a small bottle of antiseptic medication from her bag.

She could barely see her reflection in the mirror behind her as she looked over her shoulder, and struggled to apply the medicine to the wound.

Dogmeat’s whining catching her attention, and she turned as the Paladin appeared in the doorway.

“Shit!”, she hissed, turning her back to him.

“Sorry!, I…didn’t know you were in here”, he apologized, diverting his eyes.
“It’s fine”, she muttered, grabbing her tank top from the sink and gingerly slipping it on.

He made his way to the table grabbing several of the tools, and couldn’t help but notice the dark spot on her back, as she slipped her top over it.

He watched her as she awkwardly snaked a hand behind her, underneath the cloth of her tank top, to blindly dab at the wound.

“Do you need help with that?”, he asked.

“Huh?”, she looked over at him as he reached behind the doorway and retrieved a chair from the hallway.

“Here, sit down”, he placed the chair next to the table.

“I can ma…”

“I insist”, he cut her off, tapping on the back of the chair.

A moment’s pause before she wordlessly made her way over, handed him the bottle and took a seat with her back facing him.

The dim bulb overhead illuminating the dark splotch that stained her tank top, below her left shoulder blade.

“Hm…”, she heard him mutter.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I should probably get Haylen to assist you with this”

“Wh...why?”.

“You’ll, uh…”, he cleared his throat. “You’ll need to lift your shirt, to properly clean and dress the wound. I think it would be best if I go and…”

“I don’t mind”, she cut him off, hitching her tank top up around her neck.

Haylen was working on the radio tower on the roof. There was no point in dragging her down here and turning this into an event, she thought.

The pale, smooth skin of her bare back, marred by the dark red dot beneath her shoulder blade.

She had her back to him, but still kept an arm across her chest to hold everything in place.

Her eyes closed, not wanting to look over her shoulder.

“Get on with it. Don’t make this more awkward than it has to be”, she said.

She heard him exhale deeply before he replied. “Very well”.

She said nothing as he worked to sew the wound shut.

The growing silence making him uneasy.
A sudden intake of breath and a slight shudder breaking the silence.

“Sorry”, he said, but she remained silent, the fingers of her right arm softly tapping on the wooden table.

A glint from the light catching his eye, and he noticed for the first time the two rings around her finger.

“Those are wedding bands aren’t they?”, he asked.

Her nervous tapping stopped and she closed her fingers, running her thumb across the twin rings.

“Yes”, she said softly.

“I wasn’t aware the custom was still practiced out here”, he continued.

“Really?” her voice soft. Her tone distant and disinterested.

“At least not the way it was back before the war”, he corrected himself.

“Now it’s just a formality”, he added. “From what I’ve heard, they consisted of grand ceremonies, an exchange of rings. Food, drink and dancing…”.

“That sounds nice”, she cut him off, mildly amused by the superficial description.

At the same time, fighting a torrent of memories.

*Smiling faces.*

*His eyes.*

*His hands.*

*His lips.*

*Her wedding day…*

She squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her jaw. Forcing the memories back behind the wall she’d built.

Her eyes stung but the tears did not fall. A small victory.

Danse couldn’t see her face, but he could see her tightly clenched fist on the table.

“Does it hurt?”, he asked.

Yes…

“No. I’m fine. Keep going”, she managed to keep her voice steady.

Danse was no fool. He knew what the two rings on her finger meant, and the fact that she was alone out here in the wastes.

Still, while no one could accuse him of being sensitive, he could tell she was upset.

But he knew next to nothing about her. Even now.
How far could he push her for information?

Should he? Did it matter anymore, now that her part in the mission was complete?

But she had potential, skills that would be highly valuable to the Brotherhood.

She didn’t belong out here.

She reached over the table, grabbing the pack of cigarettes, fishing one out with a single hand, then dug into her bag, searching blindly.

“Here”, he said, grabbing the lighter next to him and offering her a light.

“Thanks”, she said, before a fit of coughing shook her body and he was forced to pause his work.

“You alright?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s just…been a while”.

“I’m almost done”, he informed her.

“I was watching you, during the mission”, he said after a few minutes of silence.

“Oh?”, she said flatly.

“You have military training don’t you?”

She snickered, almost devolving into another coughing fit.

“No”, she chuckled. “I have marksmanship training with a handful of firearms”. “My husband i...was the soldier”.

“I see. Who was he affiliated with?”.

“The US Army’. She couldn’t say that, could she?

“I can’t say”, she offered after a moment’s pause.

“I understand”. He didn’t, but it wasn’t important right now.

“So he taught you how to handle a weapon?”, he probed.

“Mostly…My job tended to intersect with his…After a while I got pretty familiar with the people he worked with. I picked up some of what I know from them as well”.

“What did you do?”, he asked, cutting the thread when he finished sewing her up.

“I was a law...an arbitrator of sorts”, she corrected herself.

“Do you have bandages?”, he asked.

“Bag...left side pocket”.
She took military cases whenever it was allowed. Or any job that required legal civilian oversight, when she could.

As long as it allowed her to see him.

While command wasn’t overly fond of her. It did make her popular with the troops.

Maybe it was their respect and camaraderie with Nate.

Or perhaps it was somewhat of a novelty having her around.

But they would often let her watch their training sessions and drills, teach her during their off hours. Even eventually allowing her to participate on several occasions, as her connections and relationships grew.

It was all in good fun. Somewhat condescending at times, but they were always polite. Always gentle with her.

Nate wasn’t happy initially. That she would go out of her way to see him, in often potentially dangerous regions.

Eventually she stopped taking these cases. Two years before he left the army.

Marksmanship training. Civilian martial arts, and Military hand to hand combat training.

Even as the world began to fall apart, it was rare that she needed to call upon these skills. Especially with an increasing military and civilian police force presence, within the inner cities.

Five years since she’d practiced these skills, or spared them a second thought.

She had the knowledge. But very little practical, real-world experience using these skills

However, ever since leaving the vault, they’d been slowly returning.

Out of necessity.

Survival.

The monster with the scar across his left eye.

Vengeance…

“Where did you learn y…”

“Are you done?”, she cut him off before taking a drag from her cigarette.

This was starting to feel like an interview and an interrogation.

“Yeah…you’re good to go”.

“Thanks”, she pulled her shirt down.
“I’d like some privacy please. I’ll be down in a minute”, she kept her back to him.

“Of course. I’m going to see how work on the radio tower is progressing”.

Later that evening found her sat on the steps of the station entrance. Absently running a hand through Dogmeat’s fur as he lay beside her, digging into a bowl of canned dogfood.

The night sky appeared so much clearer since she’d left the vault.

The door creaked behind her.

“Here”, she heard Danse’s voice and turned so see him holding a bowl out to her.

“Thank you”, she offered as he settled down next to her and started eating.

“It’s from the stock of rations you donated. Surprisingly good. Did you scavenge these from a supermarket?”, he asked.

“Most of the stores and businesses in the vicinity have been picked clean”, he added.

“A few towns over. I liberated them from those who would abuse them”, she quipped, remembering his words when they first met.

“It was for their own good really”, she added.

He answered her with a grunt or a chuckle, she couldn’t tell. But he didn’t seem offended this time.

“Joke all you’d like, but the Brotherhood’s motives are noble.

“I know you believe that, and I’m in no position to judge. I just find myself becoming more cynical the longer I’m out here”, she reasoned.

“I know what you mean”, he said. “Out here it’s every man for himself. Assume the worst of anyone you meet. It’s the only way to survive in this wasteland”.

“That’s a sad existence”, she whispered, looking down into her bowl.

“It doesn’t have to be yours” he looked over at her, catching her eye. “You went far out of your way to help us out. To ensure the success of our mission”.

“In hindsight that was probably a bad idea on my part, since I still have no idea what your mission is”, she grinned, biting her spoon.

“Though I’d gladly accept being seen as selfless instead of stupid, any day of the week”, she added with a smile.

“It was a selfless act”, he insisted. “Anyone else would have joined the ghouls to bring us down and raid the station once it was clear”.

“That’s not true. There are still good people out here”, she said.

“I don’t doubt that”, he assured her. ”But the odds that someone like you would answer our call was slim at best”. “I was initially against putting out a distress call and broadcasting our position”.
“See?” she pointed her spoon at him. “Having a little faith in your fellow man paid off”.

He smiled. “Faith and trust will get you killed out here. We got lucky”. “Lucky you were inclined to help us out, and lucky you had the skills to ensure the mission’s success”. “Looking back, I can confidently say I wouldn’t have been able to acquire the transmitter without your assistance”.

She had nothing to say, no quips or witty retorts to make light of his words, and instead let her gaze settle on the cracked asphalt of the courtyard.

She knew what was coming. What he wanted.

“Listen to me, Leona”, his tone grave, as he set his bowl aside and shifted his position to face her.

“You don’t belong out here. Someone with your mindset…with your skills”, he stared at the side of her face. “I don’t know what your story is, but it’s clear that you haven’t been out here that long. This wasteland will change you, eat away at you until you’re a shadow of who you are right now. It’s only a matter of time”. "I’m offering you a chance to be part of something bigger. Something meaningful. A cause that can use your skills. Brothers and sisters in arms that you can rely on. A chance to make your mark on this world”.

She didn’t respond.

“I don’t expect you to blindly accept the Brotherhood’s values or our mission”, he continued. "But given time… Once you see for yourself what we’re all about, I’m confident you’ll realize that you made the right choice”.

She would be lying if she said some small part of her wasn’t tempted.

Someone to rely on. A safe harbour from which she could make sense of this new world, at her own pace.

If things were different, she might have actually considered it.

“Wandering from place to place, trading your skills for a meager reward, from wastelanders who would just as soon shoot you in the back if it benefited them. That’s no way to live”, he continued. “I’m offering you a purpose. Or at the very least, a way out of this life…this fate”.

“I have a purpose”, she said softly, and turned to him, a pained smile on her face.

“There’s something I need to do…And a promise I need to keep”, her gaze settling on the courtyard once more.

“Maybe……Maybe when I’m done. If the offer is still open…”, she took a deep breath and ran a hand through her hair.

There was a chill in the air.

“I’m leaving tomorrow”, she said as she pushed herself to her feet and picked up Dogmeat’s empty bowl.

She didn’t wait for the Paladin’s response.

“Goodnight Danse”, she turned around and headed through the door with Dogmeat trailing behind her.

“Goodnight…”, he replied. His back to the closed door.
'17...18...19....'

The warm morning light peeked through the boarded windows lining the hallway, casting a streak of light across her bare midsection, as she pulled herself up against the top of the filing room door frame.

She heard his footsteps first, and peeked between her arms to see Danse standing in the hallway in front of her.

"Morning", he greeted.

"Mmm..morning", she grunted, letting herself hang from the door frame before dropping to her feet.

She turned and retreated into the filing room, breathing heavily as she searched her bag.

The bandage on her back peeking out from under her sports bra.

"Where’s your canine?”, he asked, looking around the small room. A poor attempt at small talk.

"Ah, out on the town I’d imagine. I let him out early this morning. He’ll find his way back eventually”.

“I see. Well…anyway, I’m pleased to report that we made contact with command this morning”, he flashed her one of his uncharacteristically pleased smiles when she turned around with a hand towel.

“That’s good to hear. What did they say?”, she asked as she wiped herself down.

Locks of her dark hair, damp with sweat. A light sheen on her neck and shoulders. The toned muscles of her arms and stomach. Her chest heaving with each breath. Deep, green eyes looking at him expectantly.

He caught himself staring, and broke eye contact. Folding his arms as he leaned against the doorway.

“We’re on standby, awaiting orders . Transmissions are encoded, so it will take some time to decode once we receive a response”, he explained.

She nodded with a smile, still breathing heavily. “I’m happy for you. Seems like everything worked out pretty well”, she said sincerely.

“You played a significant role in this. That alone will carry considerable weight with command”.

“Have you reconsidered my offer?”, he added.

She chewed her lip and shook her head.

“No. I’m sorry. I can’t…yet”.

He frowned, running a finger across the stubble on his jaw. “I understand”.

“When are you leaving?”, he asked.

“Before mid-day. Unless you want me out of your hair before then”, she grinned.

“Not at all. Take your time, but see me before you leave”.
“Alright”, she nodded as he turned and disappeared back into the hallway.

It was almost midday by the time she’d finished packing her things. All that was left was to perform routine maintenance and cleaning of her sidearm and rifle.

She hadn’t grown attached to this place. But it was relatively safe. She’d gotten at least one restful night out of this deal.

Security. That was something she didn’t have out there. Even with Dogmeat’s watchful eye, she found it difficult to let her guard down at night.

She slipped off her gloves and rings, setting them on the side table before she retrieved the gun oil from her bag.

She sat cross legged on the floor, a cloth laid out in front of her as she began dismantling her weapons.

She slid a fresh magazine into her sidearm and tucked it behind her. Her rifle was finally reassembled as well.

She set it aside and wiped the oil and dirt from her hands.

The sound of bootsteps in the doorway off to her side, she assumed belonged to Danse.

“I’m surprised you’re still here”.

‘Rhys’.

She looked over her shoulder to see him leaning in the doorway. A silent sigh as she returned her attention to cleaning up her tools, and the workspace in front of her.

“Surprised you didn’t just raid our armory and take off”, he continued.

She couldn’t help but track the sound of his footsteps as he entered the room.

“Yeah well, life’s full of surprises. You’ll realize that someday, when you grow up”, she replied dryly.

An audible grunt as he scoffed.

“You know, I’ve been asking myself why you’re still hanging around. What you could possibly want…”

It seemed Danse hadn’t told them she was leaving.

“I want what we all want, pal”, she pushed herself to her feet and dusted her pants off.

“World peace”, she quipped as she placed the tools on the filing cabinet in front of her and turned to face him.
"Hmph. Cute. That mouth is going to get you in trouble wastelander", he replied, fiddling with something in his fingers as he slowly approached.

“Do you think so?”, she said a-matter-of-factly, as she finished wiping her boots.

She threw the dirty cloth on the file cabinet, and turned to him in earnest, folding her arms.

“What do you want from me Mr. Rhys?”

“It’s Knight Rhys. And I think it’s time you left”, he glared at her.

“I’ll leave when I’m…” her voice died in her throat when she recognized Nate’s ring in his hands.

She didn’t understand it, but the very thought of someone like him, touching….defiling such an intimate keepsake…

“Give that back!”, she held her hand out and stepped forward. She was shaking. She didn’t know why, but she couldn’t stop.

“Huh?”, Rhys looked down at the ring between his fingers. Regarding it as if it were something insignificant.

Trash.

And with a callous flick of his wrist, tossed it back towards the table. Missing it entirely, as it hit the wall and disappeared into a shadowed corner of the room.

Her mind went blank and her breath froze in her throat. She couldn’t process what he had just done.

Slightly parted lips and a vacant, wide eyed stare.

’Nate…It was a part of Nate…All she had left. She couldn’t see it… Where was it…? Where was he…?’

She couldn’t think. Her legs moved on their own towards the dark corner. It was all she could focus on.

A hand roughly grabbing her by the arm as she passed the Knight.

“Did you hear me?”, he growled. His voice barely registering.

Her gaze fixed on the dark corner of the room.

Something was preventing her from moving. The world was slowly coming into focus.

His hand on her arm finally registering.

“I don’t know what your game is…”, he continued.

“Let go of me”, she whispered. Barely a hint of emotion in her voice.

He did this. Nate… Where is he…?

The image of a scarred face flashing across her mind.

Her fist clenched at her side.
That monster.

Her vacant eyes widening ever so slightly, as she lost the battle to keep the memories at bay.

The Vault.

“You may have Paladin Danse fooled..”, he jerked her arm when she tried to move.

“Let go”. That familiar tingling sensation rising on the back of her neck as she clenched her teeth and her body tensed.

“But I know what you wastelan…”.

Everything happened so fast…

He had no time to react when she grabbed his hand and violently snapped his wrist.

An agonized scream ripped from his throat when she rammed the heel of her palm into his elbow, breaking it.

A backhand to the side of the head silencing him, immediately followed up with a stomp to the side of the knee that brought him to his knees.

How dare you!

He was delirious with shock as she towered over him and grabbed him by the collar, slamming him face first into the wall.

She was in a blind rage.

His callous disregard. Tainting and trampling on the memory of her husband. Tossing it aside as if it were nothing.

She wouldn’t lose him again. Wouldn’t let this world touch him. Her memories of him.

They weren’t worthy. This world wasn’t worthy!

She slammed him into the wall for the third time, lifting her leg and pinning his face to the wall, with her shin on the back of his neck.

She could hear the heavy footfalls in the hallway, and drew her sidearm, leveling it at Scribe Haylen as she burst into the room.

“Rhys!”, Haylen screamed. Horror etched on her face as she reached for her pistol.

“Drop it!”, Leona spat with venomous rage.

The Scribe’s training failing her when she heard the woman’s tone, and saw the hatred and disgust in her eyes.

The woman’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. Even as she pointed a gun at the Scribe.

Haylen’s gaze falling to the bloodied face of Rhys. His arm hung limply at his side, abnormally bent at the elbow. “Oh god”, the words escaped her lips as she panicked. 'What could she do…what could she do…Rhys!'
“Haylen!”, Leona heard Danse’s voice before he burst into the room. Her anger dissipating ever so slightly upon seeing his face.

“Oh no…”, Danse muttered upon taking in the scene.

She kept her gun pointed at the Scribe.

“Leona”. He held out an open palm towards her as he stepped between the two women.

She kept her eyes trained on the Scribe.

“Leona!”, Danse repeated, when she didn’t immediately look at him. “Calm down”.

A mixture of indignation, anger and helplessness on her face.

There was no way this was unprovoked.

But even so…

She had Rhys on his knees, pinned against the wall. A bloodied face and a clearly broken arm and leg.

The Knight sputtered. “S..sh..oot her”, blood trickling down his face into his cracked lips.

Danse was torn. He shouldn’t have been, but he was.

She wasn’t Brotherhood, but…

“Haylen, holster that sidearm”, he ordered.

“Sir?!”, the shock and disbelief the Scribe’s voice was almost palpable.

“Sir, but Rhys!”.

“Now!”, he repeated, verifying her compliance before turning back to Leona.

“Leona, look at me”, her breath came in short rapid bursts, her pupils dilated. “I know you don’t want this. I need you to let him go”, he kept his voice as calm as he could.

“Ssssh…oot…h…er”, the Knight sputtered once more.

“Rhys be quiet. No one is shooting anyone!”, Danse cut him off.

Without further coaxing she removed her leg from his neck, letting him fall to the floor.

Her gun still pointed at the Scribe as she stepped away from the Knight.

Danse nodded to her and turned to Haylen. “Get him out of here Haylen”.

“Sir…?”, Haylen wanted nothing more than to run to Rhys’ side, but the gun pointed at her gave her pause.

“It’s alright”, Danse assured the Scribe.

He watched as Haylen cautiously hurried over to Rhys’ side, struggling to support him as they hobbled out of the room.
He turned to Leona. She had her gun down at her side. The tension drained from her shoulders.

She approached him and he braced himself. He was unarmned, but she wasn’t looking at him.

She released her sidearm, letting it hit the floor with a heavy thud as she passed him by and fell to her knees in the corner of the room.

“Leona?”, he was confused, watching her frantically drag her hands across the dirty floor, desperately searching for…something.

Somewhere from down the hall he heard Rhys’ scream as he approached her. A glint of metal beside her caught his eye.

Half buried in the dust when he picked it up and knelt next to her.

It was almost as if she were in her own world, not even so much as acknowledging his presence when he knelt next to her.

Her teeth clenched. Her moist eyes darting wildly around as she searched.

Despair and frustration clear on her face.

He held his palm out in front of her and she stopped her frantic searching immediately.

And unsteady hand carefully taking the ring from him.

He watched as she examined it in her palm, closed her fingers around it and held it to her chest. Her head bowed solemnly.

Hunched over as she was, her hair obscured her face, but he could tell she was crying silently.

“Leona…”, he placed a hand on her back.

She was shaking.

She clutched the ring to her chest. Struggling with all her might to push her emotions back.

To reign in her rage, her despair, her sorrow. To clear her mind of the bad…and the good.

She felt weak…drained.

She had lost control for a split second. Went too far. Misdirected her rage.

For a moment…a brief moment during the stand off. She had entertained the idea of killing them.

She had the opportunity.

If he hadn’t trusted her, what would she have done…?

He sat with her as she struggled to regain control.
“Leona?” he probed, as the tremors stopped and she straightened her back.

He could see her face again. She brushed the wetness from her cheeks, but didn’t look him in the eye.

“Leona, what happened?”

“Nothing…” she muttered, slipping the ring on her finger.

“No. You don’t get to say that!”, he said sternly. “That’s not good enough. I have a seriously injured soldier on my hands. I need to know what happened”, he pleaded. “Did Knight Rhys attack you or provoke you in any way?”

“Yes”, she replied, looking down at her open palm, running her thumb across the ring on her finger.

“But I overreacted”, she continued. “I don’t….know wh…I…”

“This shouldn’t have happened…”, she finished.

Danse sighed deeply and sunk against the wall next to her.

“What are you going to do?”, she asked, her gaze still fixed on her hands.

Rhys’ pained groans drifted down the hallway, punctuating the silence between them, and she squeezed her eyes shut until it stopped.

“What would you do if I said I would confine you and have Command render judgement?” he asked.

She lifted her head and locked eyes with him. She looked exhausted…distracted. He could see it in her eyes, despite her blank face.

There was no more anger or malice in her bearing, but he knew what she meant. She didn’t have to say anything.

“I thought as much”, he sighed.

“Knight Rhys was under clear orders to keep his distance from you”.

She looked at him, confused.

“I have no doubt he provoked a response from you. But you can agree your actions were well over the line”, he held her eye. “You’ve been an asset to me and my team. But my team comes first”.

“I understand that”, she replied.

“Good”, he took a deep breath and stood.

“Get your gear together. I want you off this compound as soon as possible”, he ordered. His back to her, waiting for her response.

“Understood”, she whispered. And with that, he walked out of the room. His footsteps fading down the hallway.
The light hurt her eyes. The sun was almost directly overhead as she descended the steps of the Cambridge Police Station.

She could see Dogmeat milling about, past the courtyard and beyond the barricades.

She slid a pair of dark shades on and adjusted the bags on her shoulder.

This had been a waste of time, and she had herself to blame. She had burnt any possible bridges she could have made here.

*Didn’t she?*

*Did it matter?*

They were in a better position because of her intervention….well, most of them.

Meanwhile her situation remained unchanged, and in fact she had lost more time. She needed to stop these pointless diversions.

“I’m coming, sweetheart”, she whispered, looking up at the burning sun before pushing forward.

“Leona”, Danse’s voice stopped her when she reached the barricades.

Her fingers stealthily unlatching the holster of her sidearm as she turned around.

He wasn’t armed, she noticed, as he crossed the courtyard and stopped in front of her.

His stoic expression betrayed no emotion as they stood in silence, facing each other for what felt like an eternity.

She tried to read him but couldn’t. He wasn’t looking at her. His eyes focused on the ground, seemingly contemplating his words.

Finally he turned to her and held out a folded piece of paper.

She looked at the note in his hand, and then at him, tilting her head questioningly.

“I meant everything I said yesterday”, he responded. “This incident hasn’t changed that”, he saw the tension leave her shoulders ever so slightly as he said it.

“This is a Brotherhood frequency”, he explained. "If you change your mind…Or if you need to reach me”.

She wordlessly took the slip of paper from his fingers.

There was nothing to say. She held his eye for a brief moment, and with a solemn nod, she turned on her heel and walked away.

“Stay alive out there…”, he whispered as he watched her go.

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**NOTES :**
15/11/2018 Edited the dialogue of all chapters to hopefully improve readability.

Apologies to those I didn't respond to. This has been on hold for a while. But I'm back, and if you're still around, I hope you enjoy the story^^

Updated Leona's Picture in Chapter 2.

Working on Chapter 12 and I'll be making small edits to previous Chapters while I do that. Nothing major, just improving readability.

She should meet Piper by Chapter 13^^. I've had multiple scenarios of their meeting in mind since I originally started. So I'll have to decide which way I'll go. Though I imagine Ch 12 will influence that a lot.
She rummaged through her bag in the dark, finally retrieving her canteen and taking a few measured sips while she took in her surroundings.

Holed up in a large room, on the third floor of an unfinished high-rise office building. Construction had stopped on the fourth floor. Steel beams extending even higher above it.

It was a shell of a building. Unfinished and bare crumbling walls, gaps in the floor. But at least she had a ceiling over her head.

Outside, cranes, excavators and bulldozers lay rusted and dormant around the site. Frozen in time. The moonlight casting shadows across open trenches and unfinished foundations.

It wasn’t ideal. Not that it ever was. But it should do for the night.

She wiped the trickle of water on her chin and replaced her canteen.

The far wall of the room was unfinished, and the moonlight peeked through, nipping at her boots as she continued to search through her things.

*“Team 2, all clear”*

*“Team 3, all clear”*

*Team 4. Buildings C through F are clear*

*… … …Team 1, North side is clear*

*This is Marlon. Run a sweep of the construction site and let’s get the hell outta here*

She stood in the shadows, next to the unfinished wall. Careful to stay out of the moonlight as she peered outside. The roofs of the surrounding residential houses were visible for several blocks.

A discarded needle lay at her feet, which she absently booted off the side, watching it hit the water that had gathered in one of the open foundations below, with a splash.

She had found many of these needles and discarded chem dispensers among the trash that littered the floor above.

This building likely saw regular visits by junkies, scavengers and travelers. But for now it was completely empty, which was something she found rather odd.
**“Got movement outside the building. Checking it out”**

**“It’s just a mutt, leave it”**

Fenway Park wasn’t too far off now, she thought.

One more day.

“Hey! you!”. A man’s voice causing her to whip her head around and reach for the sidearm tucked behind her.

“Ah, ah, ah”. He stood in the doorway with a rifle pointed at her back. And scopes over his eyes, which she guessed were night vision goggles.

‘Shit’, she hissed under her breath.

“Why don’t you slide that little pistol over here, sweetheart”, he ordered with a grin.

She’d been careless…again.

‘Never let your guard down out here’, a certain paladin’s advice echoing in her mind.

She did as she was told, showing her hands as she placed the gun on the ground and purposely kicked it over, so that it skidded to a halt in the middle of the moonlight’s path.

“Please, don’t shoot”, she kept her voice as non-threatening as possible. Letting it rise a few octaves, flavored with a touch of innocence and helplessness.

She watched as he stepped into the meagre light to kick the gun aside. His rifle trained on her the whole time.


She noted all of these things, before he stepped back into the shadows.

“I’m just a traveller. Am I trespassing? Please, I didn’t know”. It was a task to alter her posture and her expression, so that she appeared as small and timid as possible.

She hated feeling weak, powerless…But what she hated even more, was pretending to be.

It turned her stomach.

Still, it was a tool like any other. A skill she could hopefully exploit in her current situation.

“Take it easy sweetheart. Get over here, up against that wall”, he ordered.

“Okay”, she whimpered, grinding her teeth as she made her way to the wall opposite the door, and stood in the moonlight facing him.

Be co-operative, make him lower his guard. Wait for an opening.
If he was going to shoot her he would have done it already.

He pulled his goggles over his forehead and looked her over for a moment before asking. “You alone, sweetheart?”

She nodded, “Yes”.

“Wh…”

“Cole how’s the third floor look?”*, came the voice on the radio.

He didn’t immediately respond, and instead appeared to be deliberating something. Looking her over as she stood there with her palms up.

“What was he doing?

There were more of them. But he was alone on this floor it seemed.

“This is Gunner territory, lady”, he explained with a smirk. His rifle in one hand, still trained on her. The infamous Gunners? She thought.

“Now see, we’re under orders to put down any riff-raff we find in here. But if ya ask me, it’d be a real shame to waste such a pretty lady”.

She could guess where this was headed.

Her heart was racing. But it wasn’t exactly fear.

What was it?

Anxiety…Anticipation…Adrenaline?.

“Don’t worry sweetheart”, he continued. “It’s your lucky day. I’m a reasonable man. I’m sure we can work something out”, he grinned.

She bit her lip and swallowed.

This act was starting to annoy her. ’Come closer, and point your gun away for a god damn second! ‘, she thought.

“Please, I have caps. I can…”, she offered.

“That’s good”, he cut her off. “That’s a good start. But that ain’t gonna cover a bullet in the head, is it?”.

“Wh…what do you want?”, she asked, and saw his grin widen in the dark.

“Don’t play dumb with me, sweetheart. The shirt. Take it off”, he pointed with his rifle.

“Wh…what…?” she started to object.
“You heard me”, he growled.

‘Shit’, she grabbed her tanktop, hesitating for a moment until he nodded and wiggled the barrel of the rifle at her.

She closed her eyes, cursing under her breath as she lifted her top up and over her head.

Her dishevelled hair shadowing her face in the moonlight, as she slipped the fabric down her arms and stood before him in her sports bra.

He raised his hand, motioning for her to throw it over to him, and she did. Watching as he held it to his face and breathed in her scent with a self-satisfied grin.

“Pants. Take’em off and turn around”, he ordered, licking his lips and tossing her shirt aside.

But she didn’t respond. Her head downcast and her arms stiff at her side.

“Do it!”, he shouted, startling her. Loud enough to risk the others hearing him.

This was going too far. She needed him to get closer. But how?

She reluctantly reached for her belt. Pretending to fumble with it, but making no progress.

“Don’t fuck with me, bitch!”, he shouted, clearly trying to keep his voice down this time. “I’m runnin outta time, and that means so are you!”.

“P…please”, she stammered. “M…my hands are shak…shaking. I can’t…”, she pretended to cry. Fake tears running down her cheeks as she avoided looking directly at him, but kept him in sight.

She heard him curse under his breath, watching as he set his gun down next to the door and approach her.

“Hey, hey! Take it easy”, he grabbed her upper arms firmly and pressed her back against the wall.

"Christ, finally!", she thought.

“Relax. Just do what I tell ya and everything’ll be alright. You be a good girl and you’re gonna walk outta here alive and in one piece. Understand?”, he assured her, running his thumb over her lips. And she had to fight the urge to bite it.

His hands dropped to her chest, and she winced, trying not to cry out as he squeezed roughly.

“Move your hands”, he instructed, and she lifted her hands to her chest as he worked to undo her belt.

He didn’t notice her shaking had stopped when he unbuttoned her pants.

Didn’t notice her sobs had ceased.

He wasn’t looking at her face.

His guard was down.

“Just stay calm”, he grinned as he found her zipper.

“I am calm”, she replied.
The timbre of her voice had changed completely. And it caught him totally off guard.

Meek, timid, high pitched tones, replaced by her usual, slightly husky, even-toned voice.

His eyes snapped to her face in confusion, and she caught his gaze for a split second before ramming her forehead into his nose, and striking him in the throat. He staggered back in wide eyed shock, struggling to breathe.

She pushed off the wall, taking a measured step towards him as he clutched his throat, and she kicked him hard, between the legs, doubling him over.

She reared her fist back, intending to finish it with a right hook, but he tackled her at the waist, pushing her back and slamming her against the wall.

“Guhhh!”, she coughed, dazed for a second as the wind was knocked out of her.

He was still hunched over at her midsection. His arms snaking under her legs in an attempt to lift her off her feet.

But she wasn’t having it.

She brought her elbow down on his back. Once, twice, eliciting a muffled grunt of pain before he managed to lift one of her legs and toss her aside.

She hit the ground on her back, striking her head on the concrete floor.

Wincing and gritting her teeth against the pain, as he hobbled towards her.

He was still bent over, able to only grunt and wheeze, but he had death in his eyes as he reached out for her on the ground.

It was his last mistake.

She intercepted his wrist, wrapping her legs around his arm and neck, dragging him to the ground with her and trapping him in an armbar.

He coughed and sputtered, clawing at her legs as she tugged at his trapped arm. A thrust of her hips as she pulled, finally snapping his arm with a sickening crack!

“Gaaaahhhhh!!!!”, a pained and guttural scream ripped from his throat.

“Damnit!”, she growled. There was no way the others didn’t hear that.

As if on cue, his radio activated. “*Cole what’s goin on up there!? Cole!*”.

Cole’s screams almost drowning out the radio.

“SHUT! UP!”, she kicked him in the face, silencing his screams and knocking him out.

She let his lifeless arm hit the floor.

‘Shit! Shit! Shit!’, her mind racing as she stomped on the radio, destroying it. A quick examination of his scoped goggles, before retrieving her sidearm and making her way over to her bag.

She had a matter of seconds, she guessed, before ‘who knew how many’ of his companions swarmed the third floor.
These were gunners, she reminded herself. An organized and well geared mercenary group.

She slipped on her visor, switching it on and bathing her world in green.

One grenade, three Smoke grenades. She hooked them on her belt. Swearing under her breath as she hurriedly re按钮ed her sagging pants.

She could hear the commotion on the floor below as she loaded a flare gun and tucked it behind her.

Hiding in this room would be a bad idea. She had to take the initiative, and she was out of time.

She grabbed her sidearm and rifle, made her way to the open doorway and peered around the wall. The floor was empty, save for a number of pillars interspersed throughout.

The emergency stairwell exit was at the far end of the floor, and she could hear the heavy footfalls getting closer, echoing through the doorway.

She turned around, absently putting two shots into Cole’s unconscious body before tucking her sidearm behind her heading out the door. Rifle at the ready.

She hid behind one of the pillars, watching as the first man emerged from the stairwell and knelt. He kept low, scanning his surroundings, his gun sweeping across the darkness.

A woman coming up behind him, peeking out from the doorway, sweeping her rifle around for any threat. A third man stopping just inside the doorway next to her.

Like Cole, they were all utilizing night vision gear, as she predicted.

She couldn’t afford to let them split up. She had to act quickly.

She hit a switch on her visor. The green tint replaced by a muddy grey.

Thermal Imaging.

She drew her flare gun, stepped out from behind her cover and fired it into the group, hitting the first man in his armored torso before they had a chance to react.

The sudden burst of light, absolutely blinding them.

They cried out in shock, dazed and completely disoriented, firing wildly into the darkness.

She dashed behind another pillar, crouching as she drew her rifle and unloaded into the group, cutting them down.

Her rifle trained on the doorway as she approached the stairwell, switching to night vision and giving the three bodies a cursory glance as she passed.

Despite the low volume on their radios, she could just barely make out the chatter.

*…lost… ntact with team 2*

*gun…ire….ilding…*

*All…eams…nverge on the…nstruction site*

The emergency stairwell was the only viable way up. If they were coming it would be that way, she
mused as she entered the stairwell and peered over the railings at the winding stairs below.

A solitary gunner on the stairs below looked up just as she peered over, and he unleashed a barrage of gunfire, forcing her to back away from the railings.

She hugged her rifle, her back pressed against the cold wall, bracing herself against the shower of sparks, as gunfire tore into the steel railings where she stood a second before. An errant bullet ricocheting off the railing and embedding itself into the wall, inches from her head.

The reverb in the enclosed stairwell was almost deafening and she gritted her teeth against the noise.

A sudden break in gunfire, replaced by familiar growls and a panicked scream.

She peeked over the railing just in time to see Dogmeat drag the gunner off his feet and try to pull him down the steep staircase.

A single scoped shot to his neck ending his screams.

“Dogmeat!, stay there boy”, she called in a hushed voice as she hurried down the winding staircase towards him, taking them two and three at a time.

“Good boy!”, she gushed. A quick pat on his side as she passed him.

“Lets go”, she called, unhooking a smoke grenade from her belt and leaning over the railing, letting it drop all the way down the middle, to the ground floor.

Dogmeat had gotten to her before the others. That meant they weren’t all in the building at the start. She stuck her head through the second floor doorway as she passed. Confirming it was indeed empty.

She needed to make it to the ground floor before the rest of them got to the stairs.

Once more she switched to thermal vision as she descended the stairwell, and was engulfed by the rising smoke.

‘How the hell did she find herself in this situation!?’, the voice in her head screamed as she hit the ground floor of the stairwell and peeked beyond the doorway, masked by the thick smoke.

Her foot blocking Dogmeat as he tried to pass, and she gently nudged him back behind her.

The gunners were in the building. Their dull grey forms, cautiously closing in on her position as the smoke poured out of the doorway.

Static, and the garble of incoherent voices on their radios, echoed across the empty floor.

She leaned back, knocking her head on the wall and swearing under her breath.

She needed to avoid a straight out firefight. If this devolved into a prolonged shootout, she would lose.

She could almost hear her thundering heartbeat as she unhooked the last two smoke grenades from her belt, pulled the pins, and tossed them through the door.

The barrage of gunfire was almost instantaneous, barely affording her the opportunity to duck back behind the doorway.
She crouched over the dog, shielding him as sparks, concrete and dust rained down on them. Gritting her teeth as the thunderous crescendo of gunfire smothered her world.

It stopped as suddenly as it began. Thunderous explosions replaced by deathly silence.

“Shhh”, she whispered in Dogmeat’s ear. Her hand on his muzzle as he whined, desperate to be unleashed on their attackers.

Dust and shards of concrete clung to her hair as she lifted her head and shuffled over to the doorway, risking a look beyond the shredded wall.

“Can’t see a fuckin thing in this shit. Did we get em?”, she heard one of them say.

She could see their heat signatures clearly through the thick smoke that was rapidly spreading throughout the room.

There were four of them. They weren’t all wearing headgear. But even if they did have night vision apparatus, they still wouldn’t be able to see though the smoke.

 Unless they had thermal optics…

 Did they?

She took a deep breath and stuck her arm across the open doorway for an agonizingly long two seconds before pulling it back.

It was a stupid move, but she needed to be sure.

There was no response from them as they continued to cautiously advance in her direction.

“Perfect”, she muttered as she unhooked the single grenade from her belt and rolled it towards them before ducking back behind the doorway.

“Hey what is that?”. 

“GRENA…!!!!”.

The explosion rocked the ground floor. Reverberating through her body as she covered her ears.

Two bodies on the ground, unmoving. Two more gunners shakily attempting to stand while she slipped through the door and skirted around the group.

Dogmeat circled around on the opposite side, going for the throat of one of the stunned gunners. Panicked screams replaced by guttural gurgles.

She circled the other gunner as he tried to stand. A mere six feet away from him, but he couldn’t see her through the smoke.

She stopped her pacing and stood for a moment, regarding the struggling man. He was clearly dazed and hurt. A silhouette of bright grey in a monochrome world.

She held her rifle at her side and drew her sidearm.

 How easy it had become…To pull the trigger on a fellow human being…

A single shot rang out, and the gunner hit the ground for the final time. Unmoving.
There was no more resistance in the trigger. No more weight to it, she thought, as she turned the pistol around in her hand.

A single bark from Dogmeat on the other side of the room catching her attention and she looked up as three more gunners poured in through the entrance.

She ducked behind one of the pillars, quickly switching to night vision then back to thermal to confirm that the smoke was indeed still doing its job.

She could see Dogmeat’s form as he stalked through the smoke and darkness. His head low and his movements measured and deliberate.

She whistled softly when he wandered too close to the entrance, drawing him away.

He was a smart dog to have survived out here this long on his own. His survival instincts likely better than hers, but still, she wouldn’t risk it.

“Maylin! Keller!”, one of the gunners called.

“What the fuck is with this smoke?”

“Shut up and spread out”, another one ordered as they filtered into the room.

They were all armored to some extent. Chest and shoulder guards, helmets.

*Two bullets remaining,* she checked her rifle, cursing under her breath. ‘*Shit*’

*No protracted gunfights,* she reminded herself.

She set her rifle down against the pillar, and broke away from her cover, circling around behind them, from one pillar to the next.

She picked her target. One of the gunners lagging behind the other two. His rifle pointed into the sea of smoke in front of him.

Her heart thundering in her chest as she approached him from the side.

He didn’t see her until she was right on top of him.

“Wh...!”

Her hand shot out of the smoke, grabbing his wrist, and at the same time the cold barrel of her pistol slipped under his arm, between the gap in his armor, and she fired.

“Gahhhhhhh!”, he screamed, dropping his rifle as she shot him again in the leg, forcing him to his knees. Her hand on his shoulder steadying him and using him as a shield while she unloaded three shots into the nearest gunner.

Her aim shifting to the third and final gunner. His rifle pointed in her direction but he was hesitant to fire blindly.

Dogmeat barrelled into him from behind, knocking him to the ground and tearing into him.

“P...please, don’t... don’t”, the gunner kneeling in front of her looked up, begging. His face, grey and featureless under the thermal imaging.
She pressed the barrel of the pistol against his neck, seemingly frozen in thought.

“P…please…”, he sputtered again.

She withdrew her pistol and let him fall forward unto the floor in a moaning heap, as she stood over him.

*It wasn’t that easy after all*, she thought, cynically.

There was still weight behind every life that she took. She had just learned to bury it, it seemed.

*When this was all over, would she be able to handle the cost of…*

The gunner flipped over onto his back. The sudden movement snapping her out of her thoughts.

Her breath froze in her chest when she saw the pistol in his hand, pointed up at her.

Two shots shattered the silence.

“Guhhh….Go...d..damnit!”, She collapsed, straddling the corpse beneath her. Blood running down her bare arm from the gunshot to her shoulder.

*Ssss..Sonova…..BIIIIITCH!*”, she screamed into his lifeless face. Her voice echoing throughout the empty building. A single hole in his forehead as he stared up at her with dead eyes.

She felt Dogmeat’s cold nose on her arm. Concerned whimpers as he licked her dusty cheek.

“I’m fine boy”, she winced, snaking an arm around him and taking a deep breath.

*When was she going to learn her damned lesson?* She berated herself.

The sound of groaning coming from near the stairwell, catching her attention.

One of the grenade victims she had thought dead, had woken up.

She ground her teeth and growled through the pain as she stood.

She had a few questions…and a few things she needed to get off her chest.

“His name’s Olsen, Vincent Olsen”, Nick slid the file over the desk towards her and took a drag of his cigarette while she flipped through it under the overhead light.

“Turns out kidnapping and human trafficking are just a few of his winning qualities”, Nick explained.

“Wait, so he’s not actually with the gunners?”, Piper asked, looking up from the file as Ellie Perkins, Nick’s secretary, set a glass of Nuka Cola next to her.

“Here you go. Nick tends to forget his manners when we have guests”, Ellie smiled, throwing Nick a
teasing sidelong glance, and receiving a smile from the detective as he took another drag of the cigarette.

“Thanks Ellie”, Piper grinned.

“Not with the gunners. No”, Nick replied. “He’s more of a *permanent client*. They provide security and safehouses for his operations”.

“Do we know where his safehouse is?”, Piper asked, scanning the file.

“That’s the problem. His hideout keeps moving. He has the gunners scout out new territory every so often before setting up shop again”, Nick explained.

“I’m guessing you have a plan?”, Piper looked up at him.

“I might”, Nick leaned forward, tapping his metallic finger on the old wooden table in thought, before continuing. “I have a lead on a former gunner by the name of MacCready. Hangs out at the Third Rail. I’m hoping he can point us in the right direction”.

“The Third Rail?”, Piper winced. “Alright. I’ll head down to Goodneighbor with you tomorrow. We'll see what 'Mr. MacCready' knows”, she sighed, taking a gulp of her drink.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about”, Nick explained. “I got a new case yesterday, from a couple who’s daughter went missing. There’s a few branches I wanna shake before the trail goes cold. Would you mind meeting with this MacCready character alone? I’ll meet up with you after, and we can decide where to go from there”.

“Fine”, Piper buried her face in her palms, dreading the thought of running into a certain songstress, alone.

“I keep telling him he needs a full time partner. With the backlog of cases we have piling up…”, Ellie remarked, leafing through one of the file cabinets.

“I do just fine on my own, thanks”, Nick assured her. “Besides, do you know anyone qualified, who’d actually work with a synth?”.

“Well if Piper could…”, Ellie began.

“Ohhh no”, Piper cut her off. “I’m more of a *collaborator*. If I took a job here with all the pro bono cases Nick takes on, Nat and I would be out on the street in a month”.

“Hey, I make enough to keep the lights on”, Nick assured her.

“Thank goodness only one of us has to eat”, Ellie smiled, giving Nick’s shoulder a gentle squeeze as she set a file in front of him. “Here’s the Darla case”.

“Alright”, Piper stretched, taking one final drink as she stood. “I’ll meet you back here tomorrow when I get back from Goodneighbor”.

“Goodnight”, she called over her shoulder as she headed for the door.

“Goodnight Piper”, Ellie called.

“Try to stay out of the Rexford this time, alright?”, Nick added, before the door slammed shut in response.
NOTES:

This one was a bit short compared to the previous 15k word chapter. But it's been almost a week and I wanted to get something out before too long.

So this is the first part, and a bit of a prelude.

Wanted to showcase a bit of her intelligence and tactical ability. So it wasn't just mindless action.
Lucky Break

I’ll meet you in the middle
You can show me what you got
If you’re feeling lucky tonight
Diamond City, yeah that’s my thing
I flash my style
I show my rings
I do the boys a favor
With all my manual labor
It’s good to be a good good neighbour
Mmm mmm mmm………..

The aroma of cigarette smoke and booze hung in the air, drifting up the staircase as she descended into the Third Rail. The repurposed subway station.

The sensual, velvet tones of the Third Rail’s main attraction, Magnolia, echoed up to greet her.

The songstress’ signature red dress coming into view as Piper reached the bottom of the stairs. Her stage illuminated by the flattering lights of a dormant subway train frozen on the tracks, behind the bar.

A visible haze of smoke hung in the air as she snaked her way between the tables and chairs of the dimly lit bar. Receiving a few cursory glances from the patrons as she passed. Their faces illuminated by the light of their smokes and flickering candles.

“Charlie”, she called as she reached the bar. The Mister Handy robot busy serving a customer.

“Excuse me, sorry”, she apologized, squeezing between the patrons seated at the bar, receiving a few disapproving looks in the process.

“Charlie!”, she hissed, keeping her voice low and tapping her fingers on the counter to signal the robot.

“Piper”, the robot noticed her. One of his eyes focused on her as he poured a patron a drink.

“Haven’t seen you here in a while. What are you havin’?”.

“Uh, nothing today, just need some information”, she replied, suppressing a wince as she remembered the hangover after her last visit. “Do you know where I can find a guy by the name of Robert MacCready?”.

“Hm, Mr. MacCready eh? He’s in the back, head through there”, he pointed over her shoulder.
“Thanks Charlie”, she offered a polite smile, dislodging herself from between the seated patrons, careful not to elbow anyone in the face. Or worse yet, knock over their drinks.

*I’ve got arms, to hold you tight*

*I’ve got charms, to keep you with me at night*

*I’ve got all, that you could ever want*

*I just need a man, whose man enough*

Magnolia’s velvet voice trailed behind her as she walked down the red lit corridor. A row of closed doors on either side, before finally opening up into a lounge area.

Just like the bar area, it was dimly lit. Cosy even, with just the right touch of sleaze.

Sofas and short tables lining the walls. Candlelight dancing shadows on couples enjoying each other’s company, and partaking in the many vices one would expect in an establishment such as this.

Music drifted in from the bar outside, providing a pleasant background noise.

“How’s it goin honey”, a drunk couple staggered past her, brushing her shoulder. The man throwing her a lazy grin as he passed. His girl giggling as she propped him up.

“Hi”, Piper smiled nervously, lowering her head and watching over her shoulder as they shuffled down the corridor and disappeared around the corner.

She sighed, turning back to the shadowed faces, and finally crossed the threshold, leaving the dim red light of the corridor behind.

The worn, carpeted floor, cushioning her footsteps as she walked, discreetly scanning the faces of the patrons.

There weren’t that many people, but that didn’t make it any easier since she didn’t have a face to go with the name.

A solitary man sat at one of the corner booths. Hunched over a half-finished drink. A soldier’s cap obscuring the top half of his face, and a handful of bullets strewn across the table.

The smart money was on him, Piper decided. If not, then maybe he could at least point her the right way.

“Uh, hi, I’m sorry to bother you but…”, she stood next to the couch, directly across the table from him.

“Sorry lady, not looking for company tonight”, he cut her off, without looking up from his drink.

‘Tonight?’, she thought. ‘It was mid-afternoon. When was the last time this guy went outside?’

“Well, that makes two of us”, she replied quickly. “I’m actually looking for a merc, a Mr. MacCready. Would you happen know where I can find him?”
He pushed his cap up, and finally lifted his head to look her over. “You found him. What’s the job”, he asked.

“It’s, uh, not a job per se. I just need some information”, she paused. “Can I…?” she motioned to the couch opposite him.

He sighed and nodded, and she took a seat.

“Well?”, he asked. His eyes on her as he took a drink.

“I’m trying to find a man named Vincent Olsen”, she paused, noticing the slight furrowing of his brow. “He’s supposed to be some kind of-”.

“He’s a slave trader”, MacCready cut her off. “Kids mainly”, he added.

“Right…”, Piper nodded, biting her lip. “I heard you had ties with the Gunners, and was wondering if maybe-”.

“Lady, any ties I might have had with the Gunners, were cut when I left”, he interrupted. “What do you want with that ass…sscumbag anyway? “.

She leaned back, apparently deliberating how much she should tell the mercenary.

Finally coming to a decision after a moment, she leaned forward, absently toying with one of the loose bullets on the table. “I’m trying to find a boy, a ‘Joseph Chase’. Kidnapped from a trader caravan about a week ago. W…I have reason to believe he was abducted by gunners working for this Olsen person”.

“What if he was?”, MacCready replied and took a swig of his drink. “What are you going to do about it? Kick down his front door?”.

“Wh…I. I’m not exactly sure yet…but I at least need to know where he is first”, she admitted.

“Give it up lady. If that bastard still has any gunners left on his payroll, you can be damned sure they’re on high alert. You’re not sneaking in, and a direct assault would be too much of a risk, unl-”

“Wait. What do you mean ‘still left on his payroll’?”, she cut him off. “Why would they be on high alert?”.

He frowned at her. “Hm, thought you would have known, if you’re looking into him that closely”.

“Known what?”, she looked at him, somewhat bemused.

He finished his drink and set his glass down. “Word is that someone hit a Gunner patrol just outside the city last night. Those Gunners were working for your Mr. Olsen. Twelve guys, no survivors…”.

“Raiders?”, Piper offered.

“More than likely, but from what I hear, they didn’t find any raider or supermutant bodies among the dead. You don’t just take on twelve Gunners and expect to come out of it without casualties”, he explained.

“So, what? You’re saying whoever attacked them, cleaned up after it was all over?”, she asked.

“I don’t know”, MacCready grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the table. “There’s a lot of rumours floating around right now. But if some group wiped out a Gunner patrol, then covered their tracks,
I’d say Olsen’s got a good reason to be worried”.

“Now might not be the best time to go sticking your nose in his business”, MacCready added.

Piper shook her head, “All the more res-”.

“Great…”, MacCready muttered under his breath, and she followed his gaze to the two large men approaching their table.

“Mac Cready. So this is where you’ve been hiding”, one of the men said as they stopped at the table. “Can’t say I’m surprised to find you in a dump like this”.

“Hmph, Winlock. I was wondering how long it would take your bloodhounds to track me down”, MacCready lit a cigarette and lounged back in his seat. “I’ve been here almost three months. Don’t tell me you’re getting sloppy in your old age”.

“Beat it honey”, the other man ordered, towering over her.

“Thanks, honey”, she replied. Her lips curled somewhere between a smirk and a defiant scowl, as she looked up at him from her seat. “But I was here first. I think I’ll stay right where I am”.

They were Gunners, that much was clear. But even they wouldn’t dare risk an ‘incident’ in Hancock’s town. Much less his favourite bar. At least that’s what she was counting on.

Maybe.

He grabbed her arm and yanked her out of her seat. “Hey! Let go of me!”, she shouted, pounding her fist into his brick wall of a chest, before he seized her other hand and pushed her up against the wall.

“Barnes! Take it easy”, Winlock held up a hand to his associate.

Barnes looked over to Winlock and then turned back to her. She glared up at him with a scowl, her teeth bared as she struggled to free her wrists from his iron grip.

“Hmph”, Barnes smirked, looking her up and down before he released her with one final push against the wall.

“Asshole!”, Piper hissed, glaring at him as he moved to stand next to Winlock.

A few patrons in the lounge, nervously headed to the exit.

MacCready appeared entirely unfazed throughout the altercation. Still lounging back in his seat, he took a drag of his cigarette. “Should we take this outside?”.

“It ain’t like that”, Winlock explained. “We’re just here to deliver a message…”.

“Yeah well, in case you forgot, I left the Gunners for good. We have nothing to talk about”, MacCready cut him off.

“Yet you’re still taking jobs in the Commonwealth. That ain’t gonna work for us” Winlock continued.

“Not my problem. I don’t take orders from you anymore. So why don’t you take your girlfriend and walk outta here while you still can”, MacCready flicked his ashes at Barnes.
“Winlock, tell me we don’t gotta listen to this shit”, Barnes growled.

“Lemme tell you something MacCready”, Winlock leaned over the table, picking up one of the bullets and tossing it in Mac Cready’s empty glass. “The only reason we haven’t filled your body full of bullets, is we don’t want a war with Goodneighbor. See, we respect other people’s boundaries. We know how to play the game, something you never learned”.

“Glad to have disappointed you”, MacCready replied.

“Hmph, play the tough guy all you want”, Winlock scowled. “This is your first and last warning. If we find out you’re still operating inside Gunner territory, all bets are off. You can’t hide in Goodneighbor forever”.

“You finished?”’, MacCready spat.

“Yeah, we’re finished. Let’s get the hell out of this dump”, he nodded to Barnes.

Piper glared at them in silence until they left, before slipping back into the seat across from MacCready.

“You alright?”, MacCready asked, leaning over the table to put out his cigarette.

“Yeah”, she replied. “I can see why you left those assholes”.

“Look, miss…uh”. He paused, trying to remember her name.

“Piper, sorry”, she apologised. “Piper Wright”, she offered her hand and he shook it.

“Piper. I don’t know where you can find Olsen or where he’s holed up. But I do know someone that can set up a meeting…”.

“I don’t want to meet the guy. I just need to know where he is”, Piper cut him off.

“Unless you’ve got a team willing to storm his hideout, you’re not getting that kid out by force”, MacCready explained. “The only way you’re even gonna find out where he is, is by setting up a meeting. And the only other way you’re getting that kid out is by buying him back”.

Piper folded her arms and leaned back in her seat, mulling over her options.

“How much?”, she asked, finally.

“Four hundred caps”, he stated flatly.

“Ffff….are you insane!?”, she blurted out. “I’m not paying you four hun-”.

“Listen!”, MacCready cut her off. “My going rate is two hundred and fifty caps, but I’m willing to settle for one hundred just this once”, he held up a single index finger. “There’s a special place in hell for anyone that messes with kids, but I’m not gonna put my as…neck on the line, for free”, he tapped his finger on the table to emphasize his point.

Piper bit her lip and frowned at him as she listened, anxiously tapping her foot under the table.

“It’ll probably cost you anywhere from two hundred, to two fifty to buy the kid back, at most. That’s if he hasn’t been sold yet”, he added. “Now, I can set up the meeting and you can go alone or have someone else go with you. Your choice”, he finished.
“This isn’t some kind of, scam, you’re trying to pull is…”, Piper started, but he cut her off again.

“Lady, I’m just laying out your options. I can go with you, but it’ll cost you one hundred caps. If you know anyone else that’s capable, and can watch your back, then I’d suggest you take them with you. The sooner the better. If Olsen thinks someone’s gunning for him, there’s a good chance he’s gonna be packing up shop soon, if he hasn’t already”.

“Fiine”, Piper groaned. “Give me like, two hours to get the caps”.

“You sure you wanna do this?”, he asked. “Once I set this meeting, there’s no backing out. You’ll be on your way to see this Olsen guy immediately”.

“Yeah…”, she sighed.

“Then meet me back here in two hours”.

“Nick!”, Piper called as she opened the door to the Valentine Detective Agency, clearly flustered. “Nicky, are you here?”.

“Piper?”, Ellie appeared from the back room, a stack of folders under one arm. “What’s wrong honey”, she asked, concerned.

“Ellie, is Nick back yet?”. 

“W, Well no, I don’t expect him back for a few more hours. Why? What happened at the meeting?”, Ellie asked.

“Damn it”, Piper took her hat off and sat back on Nick’s desk, running her fingers through her hair. “What do I do?”, she muttered with a sigh.

“Piper?”, Ellie set the files down and placed her hands on Piper’s shoulders. “What’s going on?”. 

Piper raised her head, frustration clear on her face. “I got an in with Olsen, but I have to go right now”. 

“Olsen? Did you find out where he is?”, Ellie asked.

“Ye…No…not exactly. I found someone who can take me to him. I won’t actually know where I’m going until I get there. And I’m going to try to buy the kid back. But I don’t know if I can trust this MacCready guy and…”.

“Piper, you’re rambling”, Ellie squeezed her shoulders gently. “Breathe”.

Piper took a deep breath. “Tell Nick, that I’m going to meet with Olsen, to try and buy the kid back. I’m taking MacCready with me. He has a contact that can get us in”. 

“Piper, you can’t be serious. At least wait until Nick gets back and-”

“I can’t wait. This is happening now. I thought Nick would be here by now and we could… nevermind”, Piper hopped off the desk, nudging Ellie back and slipping her hat back on. “Just let Nick know when he gets back, okay?”. 

“Piper wait. Piper!”, Ellie called.
“I can handle it”, she called, throwing Ellie a quick, but forced smile, before she shut the door.

‘Nick had better not have taken on this job for free’, she thought, as she retrieved a box from beneath her bed. An emergency stash of caps.

Savings for a rainy day, and, should something ever happen to her, it was something she could leave behind for her sister.

This job was going to take a sizeable chunk out of it.

With all the risks she took during the course of her own investigations, as well as helping Nick on the side. Her luck could run out at any time, she was fully aware of that. But it was worth it.

Wasn’t it?

*Her and Nick made a difference out there...Didn’t they?*

*What they were doing, mattered...Didn’t it?*

This would be one of the rare times she would be going into a situation mostly blind, with very little information to inform her actions.

‘This was stupid’, a voice in the back of her mind kept screaming at her.

She was genuinely worried.

She let out a slow, measured breath to try to calm her nerves.

Nick tracked the child to Olsen, but if she had more time she could dig a little deeper. Find his weaknesses, his enemies, and use them against him.

*Could this MacCready guy even be trusted?*

It pissed her off to no end, that she would have to pay off some low-life, scumbag, slave trader to get the boy back. Diamond City security wouldn’t lift a finger, or go out of their way to help rescue him since he was part of a roaming trade caravan.

Even if it had been a Diamond City citizen that went missing, she was fairly certain they’d barely lift a finger to help find them.

Her mind racing from one thought to the next.

She finished transferring the caps to her rucksack and replaced the box beneath the bed, when she heard the front door open.

“Piper?”, Nat called.

“I’m upstairs. Be down in a sec. How was school?”, Piper asked as she finished packing her bag.

“Okay I guess. Pete got detention again. He threw a paper ball at Erin and hit Mr. Zwicky right in the face!”, Nat giggled.

“Well I’m glad you’re at least getting some entertainment from that place. Just try to keep your
grades up alright?”, Piper said as she descended the stairs from her room. “I’ll help you with your homework when I get back”, she added, seeing Nat on the couch munching on a sandwich.

“You’re leaving again?”, Nat looked up at her sister on the stairs and noticed the backpack over her shoulder.

“Yeah, sorry kiddo. Got a bit of an emergency to deal with”, Piper stopped in front of the couch and beckoned her sister over.

Nat looked up at her, mildly confused, but set her sandwich down and made her way over to her sister.“What?”.

Piper smiled and wrapped her arms around her, pulling her into a warm embrace. “I’ll be back before dark. You be good okay?”.

“Piper. What’s wrong?”, Nat asked, worried. Looking up when Piper held her just a little tighter, and a little longer than usual. Her voice muffled in her sister’s coat.

“Nothing’s wrong”, Piper smiled reassuringly down at her. “Can’t I hug my kid sister?”.

But Natalie still looked at her with concern in her eyes. “Are you sure?”.

“Yessssss”, Piper grinned and ruffled her sister’s hair, finally breaking their embrace. “Stop worrying so much. I’ll see you when I get back”.

The lounge was mostly empty when she got back to the Third Rail. MacCready stood by the door as she entered. “You’re alone. I thought you’d bring someone with you”, he said.

“That was the plan, but it looks like I’m going have to rely on you after all”, she replied. “One hundred caps, right?”.

“That was the deal”, he confirmed. “Also found out the kid you’re after hasn’t been sold yet, so this should be a pretty simple exchange”.

“How do you know that?”, Piper frowned.

“See that low life behind me?”, he said.

She looked over his shoulder at the booth where they’d met earlier. A ghoul sat at the table, guarded by two men standing next to him. He swirled the glass in his hand as he stared at her and MacCready.

“Is that your guy?”, she asked.

“He’s a sort of broker for the Gunners and other shady businesses. Brings them clients and negotiates deals”, MacCready explained. “They provided him a list of the kids Olsen’s holding”.

“A list? There are more?”, Piper frowned.

“Of course there’s more. Olsen’s a slave trader”.

She knew that, of course. But she had pushed the thought to the back of her mind until now. It was agonizingly frustrating. The idea that she could only save one. That she had to choose…
“Hey”, MacCready snapped her out of her thoughts. “Pick the battles that you can win. Focus on getting the boy out, and well figure something out after that. Alright?”

“Alright”, Piper took a deep breath. “Yeah”. She looked over his shoulder once more. “How well do you know that guy?”.

“His name’s Draylen. Sleazy bastard, but he owes me a debt. A few, now that I think about it. He won’t screw us over”, MacCready replied. “Come on, let’s get this show on the road”, he turned and led the way.

“So this is the little lady you told me about?”, The ghoul’s raspy voice carried a hint of amusement.

“This is Piper”, MacCready offered.

“Nice to meet you”, Piper said simply, forgoing a handshake for a nod.

She moved to take a seat, but he held up a hand. “Don’t bother getting comfortable, you’ll be on your way soon enough”.

“Gotta say, you don’t look like the type who’d be into this sorta business, sweetheart”, he set his drink down, absently tapping his finger on the glass. His dark, bloodshot eyes, scanning her from head to toe.

“Yeah well, I’m always up for trying new things”, she replied. Hiding her scowl with a cheeky grin.

“That so?...hehehehe”, he chuckled.

“Well before we go any further, there’s the small matter of my commission…”, the ghoul began.

“Cut the crap Draylen”, MacCready cut him off. “You get your commission, from the Gunners. Just get us a meeting and you can consider the debt you owe me, paid in full”.

“Heh...heheheheheh”, Draylen laughed. “You’d settle my debt to save her a few caps? This little girlie must have you wrapped around her finger good. Either that or she’s got something on ya, maybe…”.

“Just get on with it”, MacCready cut him off, folding his arms in annoyance. “That’s the deal, take it or leave it”.

“Hmph, I’ll take it”, he downed his drink and turned in his seat to face them. “Here’s what’s gonna happen. These two gentlemen here are Jake and Rolan. After we make sure you have the caps, they’re gonna accompany you outta town. From there you’re gonna put these on”, he reached over to the seat behind him and tossed two strips of dark cloth on the table. “Take those off at any time before they tell you to, and you’re dead. Got it?”. “Oh, and of course you’ll be leaving your weapons here with me”.

“Ow!”, Piper growled as she stumbled forward and a rough grip on her arm yanked her back to her feet.

She was blindfolded, and her hands tied in front of her at the wrists. One of the goons, Jake, held her tightly by the arm as they walked.

She imagined Mac Cready was in a similar position behind her.
“Piper you okay?”, She heard Mac Cready call.

“The girl’s fine”, Rolan answered before she could. “Shut up and keep walkin”.

They’d been walking in silence for quite some time since they left Goodneighbor. But how far and in what direction, she couldn’t be sure. The sky was overcast. She could no longer feel the sunlight.

The sound of muted gunfire in the distance was nothing out of the ordinary. Background noise in the wasteland.

All she had were her thoughts to pass the time.

“You know you guys would make horrible tour guides”, she broke the silence after a few more minutes. “How about pointing out a few points of interest?”

“Shut up lady”, Jake growled, his grip tightening around her arms.

“Something like, ‘See that abandoned building ma’am?’, she lowered the pitch of her voice to imitate him. ‘That’s where me and the guys lost our virginity to a pack of feral ghouls last night’.

“I said, shut the fuck up!”, he spun her around and screamed in her face as he shook her violently. His fingers digging into both her arms, eliciting a whimper of pain from her lips.

“G…God!”, she winced. “Asshole!”, she hissed through clenched teeth as she was lifted to her toes by the vice grip on her arms.

“Piper!”, MacCready shouted and tried to shake Rolan off his arm, but the cold steel of a gun barrel against his neck stopped him.

“Don’t even think about it!”, Rolan threatened.

“I got no problem putting a bullet between your eyes and taking those caps, bitch”, Jake spat. His breath warm on her face. “But that’s bad for business. So shut the fuck up before I make an exception”.

“We’ve been walking for like an hour!”, she hissed back at him. “How much longer is this going to take?”.

“Piper knock it off!”, MacCready called.

“We’re already here”, the Gunner next to Mac Cready said. “Just keep walkin. Jake, let the girl go. Vincent’s guys can handle these two once we drop’em off”.

“Is that smoke?”, Jake said. “His grip on her arms, relaxing somewhat.

“What? What’s going on?”, Piper asked.

“Shit, the door’s down, something ain’t right”, Rolan growled.

Three shots rang out. It sounded dangerously close.

“Fuck! Somethin’s goin down inside!”.

“Geeze! Will somebody please tell me what’s happening!”, Piper struggled against Jake’s hold on her. The close proximity of the gunfire startling her.
MacCready slipped the blindfold over one eye in the confusion. They were in front of an old two story house.

The gunner next to him had his gun pointed away from him for the moment, and MacCready seized the chance.

He grabbed the gunner’s arm and yanked him forward, kneeing him in the gut. The gun fell as they grappled.

“Rolan!”, Jake shouted over his shoulder In surprise when he saw his companion grappling with MacCready.

“MacCready?!”, Piper shouted upon hearing the sound of fighting, grunts and the sporadic sound of gunfire from somewhere nearby.

Something was happening. Mac Cready had made a move and she needed to act.

She blindly rammed her knee into his crotch, hearing him grunt.

“Bitch!”, he growled, backhanding her in the face.

“She hit the sidewalk, dazed. “Ow…”, she groaned, rolling unto her back, and pushing the blindfold off.

The grey sky blinding her for a moment as she regained her senses. The taste of blood on her lip.

From between Jake’s legs, she saw MacCready struggling with Rolan as she blinked the cobwebs from her vision. Saw Jake draw his pistol and point it at MacCready. But MacCready saw it as well and pushed Rolan in the way as Jake pulled the trigger.

“Fuck!”, Jake screamed, as the bullet tore into his companion. Rolan slumped over, becoming dead weight, and MacCready was forced to let him fall.

He had nothing to hide behind as Jake levelled the gun at him once more.

“No!”, Piper screamed, kicking the gunner in the back of the knee just as he pulled the trigger, throwing his aim off.

The shot missed completely, and MacCready charged at Jake before he could recover.

Piper rolled out of the way just in time, as the two men landed hard on the pavement next to her, fighting for control of the gun.

She scrambled to her feet and swung her foot at the gunner’s head, allowing MacCready to turn the gun on him and end it with a single shot to the chest.

“You alright?”, MacCready asked as she slumped against the wall surrounding the hideout.

She winced, licking her lip and tasting blood. “I’m not dead. All things considered, I’d say I’m doing alright”.

“Here”, MacCready tossed the pistol to her, and pushed off of Jake’s corpse to retrieve Rolan’s discarded weapon.

“Looks like there really is someone after your guy”, he said and he knelt next to her, fished a small blade from his boot and tried to cut the bindings from his wrist.
“Give me that”, Piper grabbed the blade from him as he awkwardly struggled to cut through his own bindings.

“This is perfect”, she said as she finished cutting him loose. “We can use this”.

“Use it?”, “Lady we need to get the hell out of here”, he corrected her as he cut her free, and another round of gunfire rang out from inside the building. “You don’t want to get between the gunners and whatever group that has the balls to take a shot at them”.

“We’re not going to get another chance like this”, Piper rubbed her wrists and stood, adjusting the bag on her shoulder and gripping the pistol tightly. “We can sneak in while they’re all shooting at each other and get every one of the kids on that list out”. Piper pushed open the rusted gate and stepped onto the property.

The walkway leading up to the steps was overgrown with grass and vines. The doors were blown off their hinges, and the bodies of two men lay on either side of the steps. Blood pooling beneath them.

“Lady you’re going to get yourself shot”, MacCready grabbed her by the arm before she reached the door, keeping an eye on the windows above them for any potential threat. “This is probably some sort of turf war. If you’re going in there thinking the enemy of my enemy is-”.

“I’m not an idiot!”, she cut him off. “But I’m not going to leave those kids in there for whoever’s left standing when the dust clears!”, she hissed, prying his fingers from her arm. “Now are you coming? I can’t do this alone!”

“Not for one hundred caps Lady”, he hissed back at her. Both of them trying to keep their voices down.

“Two hundred”, Piper growled, squeezing the strap of her backpack in annoyance.

Just then an explosion rocked the second floor of the building, blowing out one of the windows above them and raining down shards of glass. MacCready yanked her in close and shielded her against the debris.

“Two fifty!” he countered, his arm around her as they huddled together, bent over against the falling glass.

“That’s blackmail!” she hissed in his ear.

“That’s my regular fee and you know it!”. Piper sputtered and growled. “Fine! Deal!” “Jerk”, she added under her breath when they broke their huddle and she made for the front door.

“Stay behind me”, he pulled ahead of her, stepping over one of the bodies. Both men were shot in the head. Their weapons still holstered. He paused on the steps and looked out across the street at the buildings opposite the hideout. They were most likely sniped from one of those buildings, he thought to himself.

“What is it?”, Piper whispered.

“Nothing. Stay behind me”, he raised his pistol and proceeded through the door.

Piper gagged as she stepped over the pooling blood on the stairs. An engraved and faded sign at the
side of the doorway, catching her eye, and confirming that this house was actually an orphanage.

She scoffed. *This scum had a twisted sense of humor*, she thought.

A thin haze of smoke hung in the air. The boarded up windows providing scant light, but she could make out the long dark hallway ahead of them.

The gunfire had stopped and a silence had settled in the old building.

“Stay put, I’ll scout ahead”, he ordered.

“And do what? We should stick together”, she whispered.

“Listen lady, I need to be silent and fast. That works best if I’m on my own. I don’t need you to worry about as well”, he explained.

“This is insane! We’re in a house with a bunch of trained killers and you want to go all ‘Lone Ranger’ on me!? I know how to use this thing!”, she hissed, waving her pistol at him.

“Lady…”.

“Piper!”, she growled.

“Piper. I don’t know how good you are with that thing, but now ain’t the time to find out. So find some place to hide and I’ll come get you when it’s safe”, he finished and turned, leaving her behind.

“MacCready!”, she hissed after him before he disappeared down the hallway. “Rrrrggh! Pompous Jerk!”, she muttered.

A few seconds of pacing before she finally dropped her bag in a small alcove along the wall, and crouched down next to it. The open door to the yard on her left, and if she stuck her head out, she had a good view of the dark, hazy hallway to her right.

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The wooden staircase creaked under his weight as he cautiously made his way upstairs. His pistol trained on the railings above him for any movement.

The smoke was thicker on the second floor. Shafts of daylight peeking through a few of the open rooms along the corridor.

A corpse lay at his feet staring blankly up at the ceiling. MacCready knelt next to the body. The tattoo on his forehead identified him as a gunner. A broken, bloody nose. A gunshot to the knee, shoulder and chest.

This was the fourth body he’d found on his way up, including the two outside. The place, it seemed, wasn’t heavily guarded. Which wasn’t surprising considering the losses this Mr. Olsen had supposedly suffered the night before.

It seemed the gunners had yet to replace his losses.

A single shot shattered the silence, and his pistol was up and pointed down the dark, hazy corridor in an instant. But he could barely see anything through the smoke and the scattered light ahead.

The sound of heavy, muffled footsteps around the corner, causing him to quickly duck into one of
the dark, boarded up, side rooms.

He waited, as the footsteps grew closer. His pistol at the ready.

And there it was. A dark figure cutting through the smoke, like a serpent through murky water, and his opportunity was gone. The smoke preventing him from getting a clear shot as they passed by and headed for the stairs.

‘A woman?’ He muttered. ‘Was she alone?’ He had to be sure. He didn’t need any more surprises.

He slipped back into the corridor and made his way in the direction the stranger had come from. ‘Piper, I hope you’re out of sight’.

Piper poked her head out from the small alcove and squinted down the dark, hazy hallway. The single shot she heard had her on edge.

‘Was MacCready okay?’ ‘Should she try to find him?’

This waiting around doing nothing was stupid, and it was starting to irritate her. She stepped out of her cover, intending to go find him, but immediately dashed back in at the sound of footsteps down the hallway.

“Crap!”, she muttered and chanced a quick peek around the wall.

Barely able to make out the profile of a person as they got closer. It wasn’t Mac Cready, that much was clear.

She ducked back behind the wall, her heart racing as she took a few quick breaths. She didn’t want to kill anyone, but if it came to that, she wouldn’t hesitate.

‘Was MacCready still alive?’

The footsteps drew closer, and closer, and then stopped. Piper stood deathly still, holding her breath, listening for any sound. Her pistol held to her chest.

Confused, she hugged the wall and leaned out to take a look. It was in that moment that a hand shot out, and someone grabbed her by the collar and the wrist, yanking her out of her hiding spot.

She cried out in shock, her world nothing more than a blur as she was spun around and slammed against the wall. “Gah!”.

“Drop it!”, the stranger ordered in a muffled voice. Their fingers tightening menacingly around her wrist, forcing her to drop the gun”.

“Oh! Okay!”, Piper coughed, her eyes still shut tight from the sudden jolt of being slammed against the wall.

The stranger had their arm pressed against her throat and a leg jammed between hers, pinning her to the wall.

Piper dropped the gun and it hit the wooden floor with a muffled thud.

“C-can-I can’t breathe, please”, she managed to choke out, her free hand pushing against the arm on
her neck.

The pressure eased up on her throat and the grip on her wrist relaxed in response. Piper gasped, took a shaky breath and opened her eyes.

“Where’s your friend?”, the stranger asked. A woman’s muffled voice. A hood over her head. Cloth covered her upper body and the lower half of her face. The top half concealed behind a visor of some sort.

“F-friend? I-I don’t…”, Piper stuttered, her heart thundering in her chest.

“The man in the tan duster. Don’t lie to me”, she stated flatly. Only the slightest hint of a threat behind her words.

Piper swallowed. So MacCready was still alive. She hadn’t found him yet. That shot she heard wasn’t meant for him.

She closed her eyes and braced herself. “I…I don’t want to say…”.

But nothing happened. A few seconds of silence as the woman presumably deliberated her fate.

“What’s your name?”, the woman finally asked, and Piper slowly opened her eyes once more.

“P-Piper, Piper Wright. I-I’m a reporter for the Publick Occurrences in Diamond city and…”.

“Piper”, the woman cut her off, releasing her wrist and taking a hold of her collar. “Show me your hands”, she ordered, pressing her pistol against Piper’s ribs.

“Wait! Please I…”, Piper lifter her palms.

“Calm down. Just answer my questions”, the woman cut her off again.

“N-No offense but it’s a little hard to stay calm with that thing pointed at me”, Piper offered the stranger a nervous smile.

“Then answer my questions quickly”, she countered. “That man you were with, who is he and why are you both here?”

“He’s…he’s a mercenary I hired to…”, Piper began, but again the woman cut her off.

“Gunner?”, she asked.

“N-No, he’s just a hired gun. See, this family hired me, well not me exactly. I shouldn’t even be here. They hired a friend of mine to find their lost kid, and somehow I got roped into…”.

“Stop”, the woman interrupted her rambling.

“W-what?”.

“Short version. I just need the facts”. The woman’s even toned voice helping to calm her.

“Right, short version”, Piper took a deep breath. “We tracked down a kidnapped boy to a slave trader named Vincent Olsen. This is supposed to be his hideout. I-I didn’t have any other way of getting the kid out, so I decided to try to buy him back. That’s why I’m here. There are caps in that bag over there, you can have it, just…”.
“Relax”, the woman stepped back and lowered her pistol. “You can put your hands down”.

Piper did as she was told, folding her arms defensively across her chest. “Just so we’re on the same page. You’re not going to shoot me, right?”.

“Not if I can help it”, the woman replied.

“Then can I get your name?…Because I don’t think you’d like the one I have for you in my head right now”, Piper smirked nervously, testing the bounds of the stranger’s civility.

There was a pause, a slight quirk of the stranger’s head, that Piper hoped was a sign of amusement. Her face still hidden from view.

“Leona”, the woman offered. “At the end of the corridor. The last door on your left leads to the basement. The kids are locked in there”, she continued.

“Leona…”, Piper repeated to herself. “Wait, what about the Gunners and that Olsen guy?”. 

“Olsen’s dead and so are the Gunners”, Leona explained. “If you’re here for the kids, I’d hurry up and take them some place safe before anyone else shows up”.

“Wh…”, Piper was at a loss for words. “Why are you doing this? Who are you?”, she managed.

Leona paused for a moment, seemingly deciding on her response. “I’m looking for someone. A kidnapped baby boy”.

“An infant?”, Piper repeated thoughtfully, biting her thumbnail. “I don’t think a slave trader would bother with a baby. Too much responsibility, and I doubt it’d be worth the trouble”.

“I thought as much, but I couldn’t ignore the possibility”, Leona agreed. “That being said, I don’t have any leads. I don’t know where to even start…”, a hint on frustration creeping into her voice.

Piper frowned in thought for a moment, looking her over. “Look, I… I know someone, that friend I mentioned. He’s got a real knack for tracking people down. Maybe I can-”.

“Come here”, Leona cut her off. Suddenly grabbing her by the collar and pulling her in close.

“W-What are you doing!?” Piper squirmed. She was facing the dark hallway. Leona held her from behind, with an arm securely across her chest.

“Calm down. I need you to tell your boyfriend to stand down”, Leona ordered. Her voice tickling Piper’s ear.

“My boyfr-what!?” Piper asked incredulously.

“Down the hall, behind the bookshelf”, Leona directed, and Piper squinted at the darkness.

“I can’t see anything. And can you get that thing out of my side. You already said you aren’t going to shoot me”, Piper hissed.


“Fine. MacCready?”, she called, but there was no answer. “MacCready, she knows you’re there”, Piper added after a few seconds of silence.

“Piper are you alright?”, came MacCready’s disembodied voice.
“I’m fine. You can come out. Everything’s under control”, Piper assured him.

“Not from where I’m standing”, he replied, finally emerging from the shadows. “Let her go, lady”, he demanded, pointing his pistol at them.

“I’d love to”, Leona replied. “As soon as you drop your gun”.

“That ain’t happening. I’m not gonna ask you again. If you think you’re safe behind her, you better think again”, MacCready warned.

“She’s not here for my protection, slick”, Leona replied. “I’d prefer to avoid any more bloodshed this evening, so drop the gun and kick it over”.

Piper sighed. “Let me go”, she whispered.

“How about, no”, Leona whispered back.

“Just, trust me. Please?”, Piper pleaded.

“I don’t”, Leona stated flatly.

“Hey, I trusted you”, Piper sounded mildly hurt.

“Because you didn’t have a choice”.

“That’s beside the point”, Piper growled.

“Fine…”, Leona relented after a brief pause, releasing her hold and levelling her sidearm at MacCready as Piper stepped forward.

“MacCready, put the gun away. She’s not with the Gunners”, Piper ordered, standing between them.

“Piper get over here! She’s dangerous!”, MacCready shouted.

“No, really? As if that wasn’t blatantly obvious!”, Piper hissed. “Now put it away, we’re on the same side for crying out loud!”, Piper hissed through clenched teeth.

“Piper, get-”, MacCready began again, but was cut short at the sounds of feral growling behind him.

MacCready whirled around, to face the new threat.

“Stop!”, Leona ordered, before MacCready could bring his gun up.

Leona’s sudden outburst and the shift in her tone startling Piper. “You so much as point that gun at my friend and this standoff is going to take a quick and ugly turn”, Leona warned.

MacCready’s shoulders relaxed in defeat, and he shook his head, muttering something under his breath. His gun was pointed at the floor and there was no way he could bring it up in time.

“Dogmeat. Easy, boy”, Leona called as her companion emerged from the shadows.

“Dogmeat?”, Piper whispered thoughtfully. “Dogmeat! Hey boy, c’mere!”, she called, motioning the dog over as she knelt.

Leona watched in bemusement as her companion barked and happily trotted over into the reporter’s waiting arms.
“Hey boy!, haven’t seen you around in ages”, Piper grinned as she played with the dog.

Leona quirked her head at the display before returning her attention to MacCready.

“Piper!”, MacCready growled at the oblivious reporter kneeling between them. “What the f…hell are you doing?!”.

Leona quirked an eyebrow at him.

“Huh?”, Piper looked up at him with the audacity to look confused.

“I don’t know if you noticed, but we have a situation here!”, MacCready hissed, gnashing his teeth in annoyance.

“There’s no situation”, Piper shot back, wincing as Dogmeat licked her cheek. “I told you, we’re on the same side”.

“Drop the weapon, slick”, Leona repeated.

“I’m not giving up my gun, lady”, he stubbornly refused.

“Then put. It. Away”, Piper growled. “She can shoot us both right now and she hasn’t”.

“Enough of this”, Leona cut them off, tucking her pistol behind her and relaxing her stance as she folded her arms.

MacCready looked at her, confused for a moment before Piper stood up again between them.

“There. See? We’re all friends now, right?”, Piper coaxed the mercenary.

Piper barely knew anything about MacCready, and as for the stranger, next to nothing. But she’d always trusted her instincts, and right then, it told her that they were all on the same side.

Still, she didn’t know what Mac Cready would do in response to the stranger’s show of good faith, now that he had her at a disadvantage. And so she thought it prudent to stand between them, hoping to prevent the situation from devolving once more.

Leona watched the mercenary over Piper’s shoulder. Her arms folded beneath the shawl that covered her upper body. Her shoulder holster concealed by the fabric. Her fingers wrapped firmly around the handle of the pistol under her arm.

“Fine”. MacCready replied finally after a few tense moments of silence.

An audible sigh from Piper as she visibly relaxed. “Great”. “Hey…uh…”, she turned to Leona.

“What is it?”, Leona asked. Her voice muffled and her arms still folded.

“About those kids”, Piper continued.

“Head down the hallway and turn left. Keep going. It’s the last door”, Leona directed.

“Are they okay?”, Piper asked.

“I didn’t get a good look at them while I was clearing the place. But they’re alive. You should probably hurry before more of these…people, show up”, Leona explained.
“R-Right”, Piper nodded. “C’mon MacCready, let’s go”, she called as she passed the merc, with Dogmeat at her heels.

“Hang on”, MacCready stopped her and turned to Leona, who still hadn’t moved an inch. “What about you. What are you gonna do?”. Piper watched as the stranger paused for a moment before answering. A slight quirk of her head.

“I’ll be here. Someone has to keep watch”, Leona stated flatly. “Go, do what you came to do”. MacCready frowned in thought as he looked her over, clearly trying to discern her intentions.

“MacCready”, Piper prodded.

“Yeah…yeah, I’m commin”, he finally tore his gaze from the stranger and turned to follow Piper down the hallway.

Dogmeat paused midway down the hallway and turned to her. A slight nod of her head telling him it was okay to follow the duo, and off he went after them.

Leona sighed and turned towards the front door, flicking a switch on her visor and pulling down the cloth from her face. The light from outside giving the doorway the appearance of a portal to another world.

She leaned on the doorframe, scanning the street outside. It was all clear for now, but with the smoke and the noise from earlier, staying here too much longer would just be inviting disaster.

“I can’t see anything”, Piper said as she squinted down the dark staircase leading into the basement.

“Wait”, MacCready’s hand on her shoulder halted her descent down the stairs. “Let me”, he offered, squeezing past her on the narrow staircase and flicking his lighter as he drew his gun.

Six scared and dirty faces stared back at them in the dim light.

“Put that away”, Piper pushed his gun down as she brushed past him. “Hey there, it’s alright, we’re not going to hurt you”. She showed them her palms as she approached the small group huddled together in the dark. “My name is Piper and that’s- that’s my friend, MacCready. We’re here to get you out of this place, get you back to your folks”, she smiled and held out her hand. “What do you say?”.

“But there are men with guns and-“, one of the children squeaked.

“The bad men are gone now, sweetie”, Piper stooped down in front of the group. Boys and girls. None of them likely older than twelve. Tattered clothing and grimy faces. “I know you’re scared, but we can’t stay here much longer. We won’t let anyone hurt you, I promise. But I need you to be brave for just a little while longer”.

“There was shooting just now”, one of the boys spoke up. “And this nice lady found us. She said she’d come back for us when it was safe”.

“She’s upstairs”, Piper nodded. “Keeping watch. That’s why we have to go now, before more of those men show up”.
“You’re Joseph right?”, MacCready interjected from behind her.

“Y-yes sir”, the boy answered.

Piper looked over her shoulder at her companion, in confusion. “How did you?-“.

“That list I mentioned. The description matches”, he explained. “Come on, we need to get moving”.

Leona stood beside the front door of the orphanage as Piper and MacCready emerged from the hallway with the six kids in tow.

Backlit by the fading light from outside. A large duffel bag over her shoulder and a rifle at her side. Upon noticing them, she wordlessly turned on her heel and headed out the door, with Dogmeat bolting past them to follow her.

“I honestly thought she’d have taken off before we got back”, MacCready muttered.

“Mmm”, Piper grunted distractedly at his side, thoughtfully regarding Leona’s retreating form as the evening light enveloped her. There was a story there. She could feel it.

There was still blood on the steps, but the bodies were gone. “Hey!”, Piper called to Leona as the woman exited the gates and kept walking, while Dogmeat waited for them on the sidewalk.

Diamond City’s guards were waiting for them in front of the city gates when they arrived. The woman had apparently informed the guard of the situation when she arrived ahead of them, but she was nowhere in sight.

Nick stood in front of the gates waiting for her. The tension finally leaving her shoulders when she noticed him. A smile of relief tugging at her lips.

“You okay?”, he asked solemnly. Concern etched in his face.

“Always. You know me”, she forced a smile, absently thumbing the cut on her lip. She turned her head to the side in an attempt to hide the bruise on the side of her face. Under the guise of watching the guards shepherd the kids through the gate.

“Piper…”, Nick pressed.

“I’m fine Nick. God, I’ve been in worse situations than this. You know that”.

Nick sighed. “What were you thinking!?”. “Wh-?”. His sudden outburst catching her off guard.

“I had to hear from Ellie that you somehow got it in your head to make a deal with Olsen by yourself. You know better than that Piper. That was a boneheaded move, going in half-cocked like that. We could have made a plan, gathered more information-“.

“There was no time Nick!”, she cut him off. “If we’d waited much longer, Olsen would have disappeared. He was already paranoid enough as it is-“.
“Paranoid? W-“, Nick asked, but one of the guards interrupted him.

“Miss Piper, we need you to answer a few questions”, the guard informed her.

“Yeah, yeah just-just gimme a minute, will you? I’m not going anywhere”, she waved him away.

They waited until the guard left before they continued.

“Look”, Piper sighed. “I’ll fill you in on the details later. I know it was a dumb thing to do, believe me. But if I could have waited for you I would have. I had no choice”.

It was Nick’s turn to sigh. His expression softened. “I know. I shouldn’t take it out on you. This was on me. Ellie was worried sick, we both were. I shouldn’t have asked you to do this alone. I’m sorry”.

“Don’t be”, Piper shook her head. “I’m not”.

“I’m starting to think Ellie may have a point about me taking on a full time partner to lighten the load”, Nick mused.

Piper smiled at him. “I think that might be worth a shot. But I would have done this whether you brought me in on it, or I found out on my own. Don’t stop calling on me Nick. What we’re doing is worth it, and I wouldn’t have it any other way”.

Nick seemed to be deep in thought before he finally spoke. “We can talk more about about this later, but you did a damn good thing today. There’s going to be a lot of grateful families because of this”.

“Yeah, things turned out pretty well, but this wasn’t me”, Piper explained.

“Oh?”, Nick raised an eyebrow, urging her to continue.

“I don’t know what would have happened when I met Olsen. Wasn’t exactly walking in with a solid plan here”, Piper admitted with a self conscious grin. “But luckily I didn’t have to find out. Some lady hit the hideout before we got there. Took care of Olsen and the gunners he had with him”.

“You don’t say. Sounds like you’re already gearing up for a story”, Nick observed. He knew her well enough to see the signs.

“Oh yeah. There’s something there Nick. I know it”, Piper grinned. A look of excitement and determination. “Speaking of which, you didn’t happen to see her did you? Tall, dark clothes, carrying a large bag. Her head was covered, couldn’t get a good look at her”, Piper bit her thumbnail as she recalled their meeting, trying to remember any detail that she’d missed.

“Can’t say that I have”, Nick thought. “I’d be interested in hearing the details when I get back though”.

“Get back?”, Piper asked. “You’re…heading out again?”.

“Yeah, I got a solid lead on that Darla case. Now that I know you’re safe and those kids are headed back where they belong. I figure it’s a good time to put this case to bed as well”.

“Wh-Do you need a hand, I could-“, Piper began but Nick shook his head.

“You’ve done more than enough today, and you’ve got your hands full already”, Nick nodded to city guards under the gate. “I’m sure Natalie is worried about you, and see Ellie when you get the chance, alright?”.
Piper looked like she wanted to protest. Her mouth opening and then closing as she relented with a nod, “Alright”, she agreed.

Nick in turn nodded with a smile, placing a hand on her shoulder as he started to move past her. But instead, stopping when he noticed MacCready sitting at the base of the statue in the courtyard.

“That MacCready?”, he asked, nodding towards the mercenary, who was idly tapping his boots on the sidewalk as he took a drag of his cigarette.

“Yeah”, Piper followed his gaze over her shoulder. “Things probably wouldn’t have worked out so well if he wasn’t with me”.

“I see. He’s looking a little jumpy there. You might want to talk to him before you check in with the guard. We’ll talk when I get back”, he finished and continued past her.

Piper could guess why, after their meeting with Winlock and Barnes earlier in the day.

“Nick”, Piper called.

“Hm?”.

“Be…uh, be careful, alright?”.

The detective flashed her a smile and tipped his hat.

She watched him as he headed down the road and disappeared past the barricades.

“Hey, think fast”, Piper’s voice snapping him to attention in time to catch the small pouch headed for his face.

MacCready looked up at her. She was smirking almost playfully at him.

“Two fifty, like we agreed”, she informed him.

MacCready frowned at the pouch in his hand.

“What’s with that look. It’s all there”, Piper assured him.

“It’s not that”, MacCready looked up at her. “I don’t feel like I’ve earned this”.

“Yeah? Well then give it back you jerk”.

“Wa-Now just hold on a minute”, he held up his palm. “I’ll tell you what. You ever need a hired gun, come see me. The next job’s on me”.

“Hah”, she clicked her tongue and folded her arms, apparently considering his offer. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I really hope I don’t have to do that any time soon”.

“Fair enough. But the offer stands”, he pocketed the caps and stood, crushing his cigarette out beneath his boot. “Diamond city security looks like they want to have a word with you. Want me to tag along?”, he offered.

Piper looked over her shoulder. One of the guards was waiting for her just inside the gate. She
sighed, “I’ll take care of it. You can head back to Goodneighbor, or get a room in Diamond City for the night. It’s not that expensive”. Piper suggested.

“I think I’ll do that”, he decided, absently scratching at the stubble on his jaw. “Maybe I’ll see you around”, he straightened his duster and nodded. “You take it easy”. And with that he headed for the gate.
“I’m home”, Piper called when she shut the door.

“I’m up here”, came Natalie’s voice from Piper’s room.

“Did you eat yet?”, she threw her hat on the sofa.

“Yeah”.

“What about your homework?”, Piper asked as she ascended the stairs to her room.

“Did it”.

“All of it?”, Piper probed as her little sister came into view. She was seated at Piper’s terminal. Her attention focused on her favorite video game, Red Menace.

“Ye-es”, came her sing-song reply.

Piper leaned in the doorway and watched her for a moment. Her sister seemed completely engrossed in the game, oblivious to everything else. An almost comically adorable expression of concentration on her face, and Piper couldn’t help but smile.

A stack of papers next to her bed caught her eye. “Hey is this tomorrow’s issue?”, Piper grabbed one and began leafing through it after taking a seat on her bed.

“Mhm, the motor’s acting up again. I think it’s going to go soon”, Natalie informed her sister, without taking her eyes off the screen.

“Yeah? I’ll take a look at it in the morning, but it’s been doing that for week-“, Piper began, but a sudden outburst from her sister startling her.

“Nooooo!”, Natalie cried out, burying her face in her palms as the words Game Over flashed on the screen.

“Geeze Nat!”

“Sorry, but I was sooo close”, Natalie pouted.

“Yeah well, them’s the breaks kiddo”, Piper grinned as she slipped off her boots. The initials PIP still at the top of the high score screen. “Now scram, go brush your teeth. I’ve got a little work to do”, she tapped the back of the chair.

“What’s that on your face?”, Natalie asked reaching up to touch her sister’s cheek and recoiling when Piper winced. A flash of pain on her big sister’s face. “Piper what happened?!”.

“It’s nothing”, Piper insisted. “Had a little scrap on this last case. Zigged when I should have zagged”, she grinned.

But it was clear from Natalie’s expression that she didn’t appreciate her sister’s levity on the matter. “It’s not funny! You always act like it’s a joke. This is the third time this month. Why do you keep doing this?!?”.

“It’s my job Nat. Things tend to get a little hairy sometimes, but it all worked out. Everything’s fine”,

When Our Eyes Met
Piper insisted as she reached out to her sister, but Natalie backed away.

“No it’s not!”, she shouted and ran out of the room.

“Nat!”, Piper called after her, hearing her footsteps as she ran down the stairs. “Natalie!”, she stuck her head through the doorway just in time to see her sister slam the door to her room downstairs.

Piper sighed, brushing her fingers through her hair and blowing a few errant locks from her face. “Great job Piper”.

She stood there for what felt like minutes, her gaze absently darting across her room. Lost in her thoughts.

*What she was doing mattered. It was fulfilling, kept a roof over their heads, and she was damn good at it.*

*Usually.*

*But Nat was a kid, and excuses like that wouldn’t matter to her.*

She *had* been getting a little reckless…careless, during her recent jobs though. That much was obvious.

She’d been working with Nick a lot more in recent months. Both on her own cases and his.

Maybe…maybe she’d been relying on him a little too much. Losing her touch…

*Nick had been trying to warn her about that for a while now,* she realized.

Working together wasn’t a bad thing. Quite the opposite. But maybe she was so used to working alone that she had trouble adjusting to the little *semi partnership* thing, they had going on. Becoming overly complacent and careless, knowing that Nick always had her back.

But that wasn’t the only problem. A few scrapes and bruises were just a part of what she did. But she’d been spending more and more time at home recently. Making it harder to hide things like that from her sister.

She closed her eyes and let out a slow, measured breath as she rolled her head, feeling the stiffness in her neck.

She needed a walk.

“Nat?”, Piper knocked lightly on her sister’s door. “I’m just stepping out for a bit. Do you want anything?”.

There was no answer.

She sighed and headed for the front door, stopping in the living room to adjust her jacket. The sound of Natalie’s door squeaking open catching her attention, and she turned just as her sister barreled into her, wordlessly wrapping her arms around Piper’s waist.
“Are you okay”, Piper asked, running her fingers through her sister’s hair as she hugged her.

“Nat?”, Piper asked again when her sister didn’t reply. Her face buried in Piper’s jacket.

“I don’t want to lose you too”, came Natalie’s muffled reply.

“Wh-Hey”, Piper dislodged her sister’s arms and knelt in front of her. “Hey now. I’m not going anywhere”, she held her sister in front of her, holding her gaze. ”You’re not going to lose me”, she smiled.

“But you keep getting hurt and“, Nat cried.

“I know kiddo”, Piper cut her off. “I messed up- I’ve been, messing up. You’re right. I’ve been acting a little reckless lately, but I promise, I’ll be more careful”. Piper searched her sister’s face, but Natalie averted her eyes, “I’m not going to leave you alone. Do you hear me?”. “Hey”, Piper craned her head to look her sister in the eye, “It’s you and me, kiddo, remember?”

Natalie nodded solemnly, wiping at her cheeks.

“C’mere”, Piper pulled her sister close, wrapping her in a tight embrace.

Piper leaned back against the door of the Publick. The cool evening air nipping at her cheeks. The sky tinged with the orange glow of the retreating sun.

The town was busy. Bustling with the influx of residents, traders and wanderers, filtering in to escape nightfall out in the wastes. Most would be spending the night at one of the many bars, out on the streets, or just outside the city gates.

MacCready would most likely be at home in one of the bars, considering where she’d met him.

But what about...’. Piper pushed off the door, shoved her cold hands in her pockets, and stepped out into the crowded streets.

“Sorry, s’cuse me”, Piper apologized, as she squeezed past a drunken group crowding the entrance to the Dugout Inn.

The smell of booze, smoke, and scavvers who hadn't bathed in a month. The place was absolutely crowded. The clink of glasses, incoherent chatter and bouts of exuberant laughter, drowning out her apologies as she stumbled her way to the bar.

“Vadim!”, Piper called to the barkeep, who was cleaning glasses behind the counter.

“Pipeeer!”, he grinned from ear to ear, setting his glass down and wiping his hands as he made his way over to her. “ So you have finally decided to come publish Vadim’s latest tale of herism yes? He-hero-ism, that’s it heroism. I don’t say this word too often”, he greeted in his thick Russian accent.
“What’d you do this time Vadim?”, Piper asked warily as she took a seat.

“You will not believe. So, I awoke after night of fun to find myself wearing a coating of robot coolant. And nothing else!” he laughed. “So wh-“.

“Vadiiim. Pleeease. Stop. Now”, Piper cringed, rubbing her temples in annoyance. “Can I just have a beer?”

“Hahaha. Too much information, yes? Yefim tells me I talk too much. I can’t help it. It is who I am”, he fetched her drink and set it down in front of her. “I have to say, it is unusual to see you in here. Not that I am complaining”

“I can see that. Looks like business is good”, Piper took a sip.

“It is not bad, but most people you see, just want to get out of the cold. I have so many empty rooms in back, but hardly anyone can pay”.

“About that”, Piper downed most of her drink and set the glass down. “As great as the beer is, I actually came here looking for someone. Maybe you can help me”.

“Ah, you are on a case, then?”, Vadim leaned in closer, uncharacteristically lowering his voice. “As much as I would like to help. I cannot be…”, he paused for a moment, searching for the right words. “…spilling the beans, on my customers. It’s bad for reputation, you understand”.

“Oh, no, no ,no”, Piper waved his concerns away. “I’m actually looking for a friend of mine. Well, not a friend exactly. But they helped me out of a bind earlier and I just wanted to say thanks, see how they were doing. You know?”, she smiled innocently.

She could hear him scratch at the stubble on his chin as he thought it over. Unsure if he bought her story.

“This person, what is their name?”, he asked.

“Th-Uh, Leona. She’s…uh. Well she’s tall, and she…uh-“.

“Ah! The pretty brunette with the-“, he began to make a cupping motion in front of his chest, but caught himself midway and instead pretended to clear his throat. “She paid for room. A whole week in advance”.

“So she’s planning on sticking around for a while. She did say she was looking for an infant…” Piper mused.

“Your friend. She is…mercenary, or something?”, he asked.

“I’m…I’m not sure, actually”, Piper admitted.

Vadim leaned over the counter and whispered. “I do not mean to speak ill of your friend, but there is something…off, about her yes?”.

“Off?”, Piper looked at him in confusion. “Did something happen?”.

“Nothing happened”, Vadim shook his head. “She is polite. Does not talk much. But I have a… ‘weird feeling’ around her. I do not know how to explain”.

“That’s helpful’, Piper resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Could you, uh… tell me what room she’s in?”
“Room three. The last door on the left side”, he directed.

“Is she in right now?”, Piper probed.

“This I can’t say. It is hard right now, to keep track with all these people.”

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‘Ray Smith is Right Behind You Baby.

-I mean it’s his song, he’s not actually behind you. I di-I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle anyone. You should turn around cause there might be someone behind you, but it’s not Ray Smith, cause he’s singing.’

You can run like a rabbit, fly like a bee.

No matter what you do you’ll never get away from me

Because I’m, right behind you, baby

Right behind you, baby.

Well I’m right behind you baby and you’ll never get away from me.

The Pip-Boy lay on the table, amidst rows of guns, knives, medical supplies and other utilities. The radio was turned up, almost drowning out the sound of running water.

Dogmeat lay resting on one of the couches surrounding the table.

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Cold water beat down on her back and neck as she leaned forward against the wall, absently watching the soapy water cascade from her hair and down her body.

She closed her eyes. Images flashed across her mind. The more recent, cold, bloody, brutal and horrific. A jarring contrast to the warm embraces and loving smiles from another lifetime.

The freezing water massaged her shoulders with a rhythmic thrumming, and the music faded as she drifted somewhere between dream and reality.

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Warm sunlight kissed her face. Nate’s arm around her shoulders, and her baby, Shaun, in her arms.
They sat on a park bench. She could feel Nate’s lips on her cheek. She could feel his warmth.

His scent, calming. His touch reassuring and safe.

He spoke but she couldn’t hear him. Couldn’t turn to see his face.

Her baby reached up to touch her. His tiny hands wrapped around her finger.

Innocent and beautiful.

She brushed a thumb gently across his cheek, leaving a streak of red. She turned her hand around to reveal her palms stained with blood.

Nate was gone. His warmth replaced by chilling cold.

Her baby cried, as crimson blood spread across his blue blankets.

A final chilling scream snapping her awake.

Her eyes shot open and she gasped loudly in utter shock. Freezing water ran down her body. And the sound of the radio outside registered in her mind once more.

Her breath came in rapid, shallow bursts. It was almost a minute before she regained control.

She squeezed her eyes shut. A whimper escaping her lips as she bared her teeth in frustrated anger, forcibly banishing each memory that flashed across her mind. As always, she wouldn’t dwell on these things. These thoughts served no purpose. Not now.

Well you can fly through the clouds, sail on the sea

No matter what you do you’ll never get away from me

Because……

She let the music help drown out her thoughts as she stood up straight and wiped the hair from her face. The freezing water was starting to become too uncomfortable.

Piper knocked lightly on the door, putting her ear against it when there was no response. Not that she needed to. She could hear the muffled music while just standing in front of the door.

She bit her lip as she subtly looked around. There was no one else in the hallway and she was hidden
from the view of anyone in the bar area. Reaching into her jacket, she retrieved a bobby pin and got to work on the lock.


So don’icha say I’m smart, and have the kindest heart

Or what a wonderful sister I’d be

Just tell me how you like my

(Ruff?)

Personality…

The lock clicked and Piper cracked the door open. The first thing she saw was Dogmeat on the long couch. His ears perked up in her direction. His tail wagging excitedly when he recognized her.

‘Well this is the right place’, Piper mused.

An excited half bark from Dogmeat, prompting her to bring her finger to her lips to silence him, as she quietly closed the door.

She could hear the shower running, through the closed door nearby. It was a small, single room. A living space near the entrance consisted of a short table surrounded by three couches. A desk in the back of the room, and the bathroom on the right.

Piper lingered by the door, scanning the myriad of munitions and gear laid out on the table. A Pip-Boy blaring the radio in the middle of it.


Here’s a real classic from good old Nat King Cole. Orange Colored Sky. And it’s—it’s a good one, no matter what anyone says’

She took a single cautious step forward, and Dogmeat sat up on the couch, quirking his head at her odd behaviour.


I was humming a tune, drinking in sunshine

When out of that orange colored view…
What exactly was the endgame here, Piper asked herself. What exactly was she trying to accomplish by breaking into this stranger’s room.

Someone with this many guns and sharp objects might not take too kindly to her trespassing.

‘No’, Piper dismissed the thought. The woman she’d met at the orphanage was reasonable.

‘Because you weren’t breaking into their room!’, The voice of reason in her head finally winning out.

But it was too late. She saw Dogmeat turn before she heard the shower door open.

A single pale, long leg, emerged from the shower room.

Time seemed to slow to an absolute crawl for Piper, as she watched the unfamiliar woman step out into the living area.

_I was walking along, minding my business_

_When love came and hit me in the eye…_

Piper’s gaze traveled the length of toned legs and beautifully curved hips.

_Flash! Bam! Alakazam!_

_Out of an orange colored, purple-striped, pretty green, polka-dot sky_

She watched the muscles of the woman’s arms and shoulders tense and relax as she dried her face with the towel. The towel, which was just long enough to preserve her modesty, as she hugged it in front of her.

It was as the woman lifted her head, and emerald eyes met amber, that Piper’s heart skipped a beat, and she knew she was done for.

_Flash! Bam! Alakazam! and goodbye!_

Piper blinked as her mind caught up, to find that the stranger had a gun pointed at her.

“Don’t make me ask you again”, the woman warned in a familiar voice, un-muffled by layers of cloth.
“Whoa! Whoa!”, Piper held up her hands and backed up against the door. Apparently the woman had asked her a question, but for the life of her, Piper couldn’t remember hearing it.

“Don’t shoot! It-It’s me P-Piper Wright! We met earlier? At Olsen’s place? I was-“

“I know who you are”, Leona cut her off. “That door was locked. Why did you break in?”. She asked in a firm yet calm voice.

While she didn’t look even remotely pleased. She didn’t look like she was ready to start shooting either. That, and her finger wasn’t on the trigger, Piper noticed.

“Was it really? I didn’t-“, Piper began, but the subtle narrowing of Leona’s eyes, killed her attempt at levity.

“Okay! Wait! You’re right, it was locked. But in my defense, I didn’t know if you were in, and-“, Piper stopped herself, realizing what she’d just said.

Leona quirked her head, and Dogmeat groaned as he settled back into the couch, ignoring them both.

“Wh-Uh…Can-Can I, try that again?”, Piper pleaded.

She saw Leona’s jaw tighten.

“I-I’m…I’m really sorry. I’m a reporter, and getting into places I’m not supposed to be is kinda my thing”, Piper explained. “After what happened today, I was a little curious and-“.

“I get it”, Leona cut her off again, for no other reason than she was freezing, and her patience was wearing thin. “Sit down”, she ordered, carefully bending down to lower the volume on the Pip-Boy.

Piper did as she was told, taking a seat on the couch nearest the door, and facing Leona.

“Here”, Leona backed up and kicked the opposite couch, facing away from her. “I’m not putting on a show”, she added.

“R-right! Sorry”, Piper mentally slapped herself as she approached Leona cautiously, and took the seat facing the door.

“Don’t, turn around”, Leona ordered and disappeared behind her, in the back of the room.

Piper sat rigid on the couch, her hands in her lap. Her heart thundering in her chest and she wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t fear. She was in no danger and she knew it.

She found it impossible to ignore the barely audible sound of rustling fabric behind her.

Her gaze wandered over the weapons and gear laid out on the table, settling on the Pip-Boy.

“You’re…not a vault dweller are you?”, she asked.

“I’m from a vault, yes”, came Leona’s reply. “Why?”.

“Nothing. I just- without a Pip-Boy or blue jumpsuit, I honestly wouldn’t have guessed”, Piper
admitted. “You seem more like- Hey this symbol, it's...it's the Minutemen isn't it?”, Piper raised the blue sash over her head.

“Mhm”, Leona confirmed.

“What about the stars and lines below it?”, Piper traced her fingers over the stripes.

“Those are General’s stripes”, Leona replied. “Just a reminder. It should go without saying, but touch one of the weapons on that table and we’re going to have a problem”, she added a-matter-of-factly.

“Ye-I, Uh…I Got it”, Piper replied, almost dropping the sash.

Everyone knew about Quincy by now, Piper mused. The Minutemen were gone. Betrayed by one of their own and tragically wiped out by the Gunners.

Was this woman affiliated with the Gunners? A former member turned enemy maybe?

“How did you get this?”, Piper asked, quickly following up with, “I mean, if you don’t mind me asking”.

“From the Minutemen. Where else?”, Leona grabbed the sash from her as she passed by and took a seat on the couch with Dogmeat.

Now dressed in navy green long pants and a black sports bra. She dropped the sash in the duffel bag next to the table, as she ran a small towel through her hair.

Piper caught herself staring and quickly resumed her questions before Leona looked her way. “I, um. I thought the Minutemen were all wiped out at Quincy. Or…well, disbanded at least”.

Leona looked her over as she ran her fingers through her wet hair. “There’s at least one man that didn’t hang up his hat”.

“And…is he, still alive?”, Piper probed.

Leona paused for the briefest of moments. “I hope so”, she said finally. “He rescued a handful of civilians from the massacre, and eventually they found somewhere to settle down”, she explained.

‘So she didn’t kill a Minuteman for the sash. Considering her recent actions, and the fact that she was a vault dweller. Assuming it was all true, her being previously affiliated with the Gunners seemed less and less likely. Maybe’, Piper reasoned.

“Where are they now?”, Piper asked, as Leona retrieved a small case from her bag. A medkit, if the cross on the front was anything to go by.

“They’ve been through enough”, Leona replied. “They don’t need the attention”.

Dogmeat snaked his head under Leona’s arm and rested on her lap, watching as she organized the items on the table. “Traitor”, she teased, making a face at the dog. To which he simply huffed and grumbled, before settling once more on her thigh.

“Strictly off the record”, Piper continued.

“There’s no such thing as off the record, when it comes to reporters”, Leona countered.

“That’s not true, I-“, Piper’s words faded when Leona got up and made her way over, taking a seat on the table, directly in front of her. Very much in her personal space.
“Wh-What are you doing?”, Piper asked, sinking backwards into the couch. But Leona ignored her as she sorted through the medkit at her side.

Not that Piper noticed. Her mind being completely fixed as it was, on the fact that Leona’s knee was brushing against her inner thigh. She did however notice the wet trails that Leona’s dark hair left over the pale skin of her right shoulder, as well as the snug bandage on her left. Even the single drop of water rolling down her collarbone and travelling south over rolling hills and deep valleys.

Piper’s detail oriented mind didn’t always work the way it was supposed to.

“Come here” Leona finally turned to her, and casually beckoned with her fingers.

“Wha-Why?”, Piper stuttered, even as she obeyed and leaned in.

Leona tapped her own lips in response to the question, which only served to draw Piper’s attention there.

“Closer”, Leona directed, and Piper squirmed in her seat. Her heart thundered like a jackhammer in her chest as she inched even closer. Her mind was blank, having temporarily lost the capacity for coherent thought. Her gaze focused solely on pink lips. A pleasurable ache building in her lower regions.

They were mere inches apart when Leona cupped her jaw and tilted her head to the side. Piper’s eyes widened slightly at the jarring course correction, before Leona dabbed a cotton swab at her lip.

“Ow! Geeze! What the hell!”, Piper winced.

“It’s supposed to sting. Stop squirming!”, Leona scolded. “And stop talking”, she added.

Piper quietly endured the sustained assault. Acutely aware of Leona’s touch as she tilted Piper’s head this way and that.

As awkward as she felt being face to face, in such close proximity. It did allow her the opportunity to burn every contour and detail of the woman’s face into her mind.

Piper’s gaze traced the length of a defined jawline, lingering on enticing lips before drifting upwards and drowning in a sea of emerald green.

It wasn’t long before their eyes met, and Piper diverted her gaze towards the ceiling.

“What is it?”, Leona asked.

“What’s what?”

“You were staring”, she explained.

“No I wa—Well you’re in my face. What else am I supposed to look at?”, Piper grumbled.

Leona brushed it aside and instead, pressed a strip of synthetic fabric to Piper’s cheek. “Hold this here”, she directed.

“Itsh warm”, Piper stated as she held it to her face and flexed her jaw.

“It’ll help with the bruising. Leave it on for a half-hour”, Leona explained while she finished packing the medkit. “Now then. You said you knew someone that could help me with my search”.

“Ow! Geeze! What the hell!”
“Huh?”, Piper recalled their conversation at the hideout. “Wait. Is that why you didn’t just kick me out?”

“That’s why I didn’t shoot you and then kick you out”, Leona corrected her with an almost imperceptible smirk. Almost.

“Hah! That, that’s just great. You’ll have to forgive me for not sharing your amusement”, Piper pouted, making a face at her. “Unfortunately, he left on a case, just as we got back. I don’t expect him back for at least a day”.

“I see…”, Leona bit her lip, lost in her thoughts for a moment, before finally coming to a decision. “That’s fine. I can wait”.

Piper caught the unmistakable flash of frustration and pain in her face, but it was gone in the blink of an eye. “Sorry. But I know he can help you when he gets back. His name’s Nick Valentine, and there’s no one better at tracking people down”.

“Yeah”, Leona forced a smile as she brushed the damp hair from her face. “I hope so”.

She started to get up, but Piper stopped her.

“Hey wait. I, uh…I wanted to ask you when we met earlier, but… This infant you’re looking for….is, he yours?”.

The look on her face was all the confirmation Piper needed.

“Oh boy”, Piper whispered. “I…I’m so sorry”, she offered.

“His name is Shaun. He’s three months old”. Leona’s gaze settled on the floor, distant and unfocused.

A sombre silence fell between them.

“Wh…What happened?”, Piper risked, when it became clear that no elaboration was forthcoming.

Leona took a deep breath and sat up straight. “Look uh, Piper?”, she asked and Piper nodded. “It’s been a long day and-“.

“O-Of course, I understand, I’ll, get out of your hair, but, um…”, Piper sighed feeling utterly powerless. “It’s not much but…I know this city pretty well and, a lot of people pass through here everyday. If you want, I can show you around tomorrow, help you ask around?”. Piper offered. Concern and sympathy etched on her face. “O-Or if you just want to talk. I’d…I’d really like to hear your story. I-I mean not as a journalist or anything, I just-“

“Thanks”, Leona cut off her rambling with a grateful smile. “That actually sounds like a good idea”.

Leona stood, and Piper followed suit, sensing her cue to leave.

“I can meet you here in the morning. Is that okay?”, Piper asked as Leona held the door open.

“That’s fine”, Leona offered her a polite smile. “Just, knock next time, alright?”.
The lock clicked and Leona leaned back against the door.

Pain flashed across her face and she cupped her throbbing shoulder, running a thumb along the bandage. She lifted her hand to her face, watching it tremble as she made a weak fist.

It felt as if the stimpaks were becoming less and less effective.

She let out an unsteady breath, shivering as she made her way to the table. She grabbed a bottle of pain killers and downed three in one gulp, before carelessly tossing the bottle back on the table.

“Scoot over buddy” she said as she stopped in front of the long couch. Dogmeat jumped off, allowing her to lay down before he hopped back on and settled next to her.

Concerned whimpers as he licked her chin.

“I’m okay”, she whispered, scratching him behind the ears. Words meant for her, as much as him.

She reached into her pocket, retrieving two rings, holding them up to the light before reverently slipping them onto her finger. 'I Promise…'

She’d been running on little sleep for a few days now. Her body ached and her mind fared little better.

Her consciousness faded. As always, she would find no sanctuary in sleep.

NOTES:

I used lyrics from a few songs in this. They were all featured in the game itself.

Right Behind you Baby - Ray Smith  
v=Q29FaWHnvu8

Personality - Johnny Mercer & The Pied Pipers  
v=xKYari2aMSo

Nat King Cole - Orange Colored Sky  
v=ad6EL-qTG18
Orange Colored Sky is about love at first sight and the feelings associated with that. Tried to use it to emphasize how Piper felt in that moment. Don't know if it came across well, but I tried something^^.

Absolutely adore those songs and others featured in the game.

So yeah Piper is pretty much lovestruck. For Leona however, that's the absolute furthest thing from her mind right now.
“Piper?”. Someone was nudging her shoulder.

“Piper!”.  

“What?”, Piper groaned. Her face half buried in her pillow.

“It’s time to get up”, Natalie insisted, standing beside her sister’s bed.

Piper tilted her head and cracked an eye open, barely able to see from beneath the hair tumbling down her face. “What time is it?”, she asked, squinting up at her sister.

“Oh, morning?”, Natalie supplied cheekily.

“Kay, go bathe and get ready for school. I’ll make breakfast in a minute”, Piper yawned and buried her face in her pillow once more.

“I did all that”, Natalie informed her. “There’s food on the counter. I came to wake you up before I left. Didn’t you have a thing this morning?”

It took all of three seconds before Piper exclaimed, “Shoot!” and bolted from her bed, instantly awake and startling her sister. “Damnit! No, no, no, no”, she scrambled out of bed and stumbled over to her desk terminal.

“Crap! That’s the time?!”, she exclaimed, darting around her room, picking up the articles of clothing and papers scattered on the floor. “Why today!?”.  

Natalie watched in amusement as her sister scrambled frantically around the room. “Do you have a hot date?”, she teased, absently picking up a magazine and Piper’s jacket from the floor.

“It’s not a date!”, Piper denied, sounding a bit more defensive than she intended. Her voice muffled as she wiggled out of her T-shirt. “It’s not more of a…a…It’s not a date!”, she insisted, throwing the shirt on her bed in frustration when she finally managed to free herself from it. Her hair ruffled and untidy, covering half her face as she stared at her sister, unimpressed. “Give me that!”, she snatched the jacket and magazine from her grinning sister’s hands. “Scram. Get to class if you had breakfast already”, Piper ushered her sister to the door before diving back into her room.

“Okay, I’m going”.

Natalie sat in the living room tying her laces when her sister hurried down the stairs wrapped in a towel, and darted into the shower.

A moment later, Piper screamed in shock. A string of muffled, incoherent expletives, echoing from behind the shower room door.

Natalie giggled and ran to the front door, stopping and calling over her shoulder, “Forgot to tell you, I used up all the hot water!”, before she made her escape.

“You brat! I’ll get you back for this!”.
Piper closed the door to the Publick and adjusted her cap. Pastor Clements waved to her from across the street as he swept the front porch of the All Faiths Chapel. She didn’t have time for small talk, and returned the greeting with a nod and a polite smile before filtering into the morning crowd, rehearsing various apologies in her head.

As she weaved through the faceless march of the morning crowd, a familiar sight caught her eye. Leona stood in front of doctor Sun’s makeshift clinic, chatting with the good doctor himself.

Piper was convinced that, even if she had not spent the previous evening burning every physical detail of the woman in question into her mind, she would still have picked her out of the crowd. Unlike the previous evening, she was dressed more modestly in a black tanktop. A pair of narrow, rectangular sunglasses resting low on the bridge of her nose, as she examined the various medical supplies on offer.

Piper stood in the midst of the bustling crowd for a moment as she stared at the woman, trying to decide on her approach.

“Ugh!”, Piper grunted, staggering forward as someone elbowed past her.

“Stop standin in the middle of the road!”, the passer-by growled before disappearing into the sea of bodies. Piper scowled in their general direction but otherwise held her tongue. Instead she took a deep breath to calm herself before approaching her quarry.

“Hey Blue”, Piper offered as she ascended the steps of the clinic.

Leona’s face was the picture of intense focus, as she examined the plastic bottle in her hand. Her expression softened however, when she saw Piper approach.

“Piper”, she greeted with a polite smile, and for a split second, Piper had to remind herself to breathe.

“Did you…just call me, Blue?”, Leona asked as she adjusted her sunglasses.

“Well, yeah, I figured since you’re a vault dweller and all”, Piper smiled, nervously playing with her hands. “I mean I know you’re not wearing the blue jumpsuit. But when people hear ‘vault dweller’ that’s usually the first thing that comes to mind”.

Was it too presumptuous of her to assign a nickname to this woman she barely knew? Piper wondered. Did Leona mind it?

“Ahh Ms. Wright”, Doctor Sun interrupted them from behind the counter. “I am pleased to say, the children you brought in yesterday are doing well. Two of them have already been returned to their families”.

“Really? That’s good to hear. But I kinda expected Diamond City Security to hold them for at least a few days”, Piper mused.

“Ideally, yes. I would have preferred to have my people observe them for a while longer, but the Mayor insisted we track down the families as soon as possible”.

“Ugh”, Piper pinched the bridge of her nose in annoyance. “Sanctimonious asshole”, she muttered under her breath. “I should have seen this coming. He’s going to take credit for this, just like the last
time. Exploit it and prop himself up like some paragon of—"

“Be that as it may”, Doctor Sun interrupted her tirade. “Those children are indeed fortunate you were able to get to them when you did. And I’m sure the families are beyond grateful”.

Piper folded her arms in a huff. “It just pisses me off. He always does this. I mean, I barely did much of anything this time. If anyone should be thanked for this, it’s—”. She glanced over at Leona, but the woman discreetly shook her head as if to say ‘don’t’. “-Nevermind”, Piper took the hint and instead turned her gaze to the busy streets as she tapped her foot in annoyance.

“I’ll take these”, she heard Leona say, and turned to see the woman set the bottle down next to the small pile of medical supplies.

“Very good. All together, that comes to, one hundred and sixty caps”, the doctor informed her.

Leona set her backpack down on the counter and fished out a handful of caps before setting them down in front of him.

“What is it?”, she asked, upon seeing his confusion.

“This…this is far too much”, the doctor said as he sorted through the caps.

“I don’t think so. My math isn’t that bad”, she spread the caps on the counter. “Here. Three twenties, two fifties”.

“This—”, Doctor Sun held up one of the caps to her. “This is fifty, not twenty”.

“What about this?”, she pointed to one of the caps. “I was told this is worth fifty”.

“These are Nuka Quantum bottle caps, extremely rare. They’re worth one hundred each”, the doctor corrected her.

Leona closed her eyes and lowered her head as she leaned over the counter. “Son of a bitch”, she muttered under her breath.

“Wh—wait”, Piper chimed in. “Didn’t you pay for a room yesterday?”. Leona pushed off the counter, sighing as she ran her fingers through her hair. “Yeah. Apparently the proprietor is just the latest person to rip me off these past few weeks”.

“Vadim?”, Piper asked. ”Are you sure? He doesn’t strike me as the type to—“.

“Not the bartender. The other one”, Leona corrected her.

“That would be Yefim”, Piper informed her. “C’mon let’s go. I’ll talk to them. We’ll get this sorted out”.

“I’ll handle it. Later”, Leona insisted as she set the correct amount on the counter.

“But—”, Piper tried to argue, but the doctor interjected.

“Even the vaults have need to trade with the outside world from time to time”, he explained. "The value of commonwealth currency should be basic knowledge, even for those secluded vault dwellers. It is strange that you would lack that knowledge”.

“There are other active vaults?”, Leona asked, her interest piqued.
“Well, yeah”, Piper replied. “Not many. The only one I know that still has actual vault dwellers, is Vault 81.”

“They don’t allow anyone from the outside to enter the vault”, doctor Sun interrupted. “Instead they send out representatives to do business with the trade caravans. But if you are indeed a fellow vault dweller, they may perhaps make an exception”.

“And where is this Vault 81?”, Leona asked as she packed her bag.

“It is not far from here. There is a trader by the name of Cricket, that makes regular visits to the vault. You can usually find her shop outside Diamond City’s gates for a day or two, on her way to and from Vault 81 and Bunker Hill.

“I see. Thanks for the heads up. Keep the change”. She finished packing her backpack and threw an extra fifty unit cap into the pile, before turning and heading down the stairs.

“Ms. Wright”, the doctor stopped Piper before she could follow.

“Hm?”

“If that woman is a friend of yours, you may want to keep an eye on her. Show her how things work out here in the Commonwealth”, he leaned over the counter. “There is no shortage of people that would not hesitate to take advantage of her ignorance”.

“Believe me, I know”, Piper replied.

“Hey”, Piper caught up to Leona and fell in step with her. “Are you sure you don’t want me to talk the Innkeeper? Vadim owns the place with his brother, and I think he might have a thing for me”.

Leona flashed her a genuine smile of amusement.

“What?”, Piper laughed. “Not that I would use that. I’m just saying. I can be pretty persuasive”.

“I bet”, Leona replied. “But I’ll take care of it myself”.

“Okay, but if you change your mind-“.

“Thanks, really”, Leona caught Piper’s eye and nodded appreciatively.

“Mhm”, Piper smiled, feeling a touch of warmth in her cheeks, and she turned her head, pretending to scan the various stalls that they passed. “So, uh, I wanted to apologize, for not meeting you this morning. I mean I’m not exactly a morning person, but I don’t usually oversleep this late. Except for this one time wh-“

“It’s alright”, Leona cut her off. “Looked like you had a pretty rough time yesterday”.

Piper shook her head. “Chaotic more than anything. But yeah, if you’re still willing, I’d be happy to help you ask around”.

“I’ve spoken with most of the traders and a few random people already. Made a few inquiries”, Leona stopped walking and turned to Piper. “Honestly, I’m not sure what else I can do but wait for
“I’m, really sorry”, Piper offered. She felt helpless, but Nick was the best person for the job. And Piper wasn’t sure if she wanted to risk upsetting this woman by prying into what was no doubt a very emotional topic, before it was necessary. Nick would need to hear her story when the time came, and Piper would be there. “I can imagine what it must be like. Not knowing…the waiting. I knew it was a longshot just randomly asking around. But I figured I could give you the tour, you know…keep your mind distracted for the better part of the day”, Piper offered her a tentative smile.

“Sounds like you’re speaking from experience”, Leona quirked her head and caught Piper’s eye.

“Me?”, Piper shrugged. “You could say that. But then again you’d be pretty hard pressed to find anyone in the commonwealth that doesn’t have a tragedy or two in their-“.

“Ahhhh!”, Panicked screams rang out from somewhere behind them, and they turned just as a scavver burst into the market district from one of the side alleys, knocking over several bystanders as he scrambled to his feet and made a mad dash in their direction with a gun in hand.

Leona pulled Piper behind her, out of the road. Her hand gripping the sidearm in shoulder holster, just as another man dashed into the street from the same side alley.

“Out of the way!” he shouted. A tan duster, flapping behind him as he sprinted through the crowd before suddenly stopping. His boots skidding on the dirt road as he sunk to one knee and drew his pistol in one smooth motion, firing a single shot that caught the scavver in the leg.

The injured man screamed and stumbled forward several paces before hitting the ground hard, in front of the two women. His pistol tumbling out of his hand and skating to a halt beneath Leona’s boot.

“Gahhh!!”, he screamed. His face twisted in agony as he clutched his bleeding leg.

“Show’s over, people. Go about your business”, the man in the tan duster trotted towards them, waving off the onlookers in his way. Two of Diamond City’s finest, burst into the street behind him. They were clearly after the same scavver, and they slowed to a brisk jog when they saw the situation had been dealt with.

“Not so much of a tough guy now, are ya?”, he tucked his pistol into his duster and twisted the scavver’s arms behind their back before yanking them to their feet.

“MacCready?!”, Piper stepped out from behind her as Leona crouched to pick up the discarded pistol at her feet.

“Miss Piper?”, MacCready looked up at her in surprise while he tried to keep the struggling man on his feet.

“Wh?“, Piper began, but the two security guards cut her off as they caught up. “We’ll take him”, they stated, and MacCready handed the groaning man over to them.

“Hey”, Leona called as the two officers turned to leave. “He dropped this”, she handed over the pistol.

“Ma’am”, the guard nodded, looking her over from beneath his catcher’s helmet, before leaving with his fellow officer.

“So, you’re working with Diamond City Security?”, Piper asked. A hint of disapproval in her voice.
“Nah. Been taking on a few local small time bounties, right here in the city. It’s easy money”, he smirked. “Even got a room up there in the upper stands”, he pointed to the shacks and structures built atop the bleachers. Aside from being elevated from the rest of the city, it didn’t look any different from the shanty houses and structures that were packed into the old stadium.

“Seriously? You can afford the rent up there?”, Piper shielded her eyes against the sun.

“Normally, no. But I know a guy. Got me a good deal on a room for a couple days”, MacCready informed her.

“Of course you do”, Piper muttered.

“So who’s your friend?”, he asked, looking to Leona.

“Oh! Uh…MacCready this is Leona. Leona, you-well you already know MacCready”, Piper introduced them.

“I…don’t think we’ve met”, MacCready offered his hand with a frown, trying to recall meeting her.

Leona looked down at his hand hanging in the space between them, and shook it just before the pause became overly awkward. “Yesterday. You pulled a gun on me”, Leona informed him. Subtle traces of amusement colored her eyes, but didn’t quite make it to her lips.

“H-Hey come on. We sorted that out already”, Piper chimed in, sensing the faint tension in the air. “It was just a misunderstanding”.

“You? Hmph, I thought you’d be…”, MacCready began.

“-Be what?”, Leona tilted her head, emerald eyes staring at him from above her sunglasses, daring him to finish.

“…Nothing. Hey, no hard feelings huh? You can’t be too careful out there”, MacCready finished.

“That’s true enough”, Leona nodded and folded her arms.

Leona’s curt response and body language told him she wasn’t interested in small talk, and he turned back to Piper. “So, uh, I gotta go check in with security about that bounty”, he motioned over his shoulder. “But I’ll be around for a few days. We should go grab a drink some time”, he offered.

“Uh, Wh-Ye-yeah, sure”, Piper stuttered, his request catching her slightly off guard. “I mean, sure, that—that sounds good”.

“Alright then. Well, I’ll see you around”, He offered Piper a polite smile, and Leona, a wary nod before turning and walking away.

“Whew. Well, that wasn’t awkward at all”, Piper joked.

“That was almost adorable. I felt like a third wheel there for a bit”, Leona admitted.

“What? No! We’re not-It’s not like that. He was just being…you know? …Friendly”, Piper assured her. “I only met him yesterday, for that whole kidnapping thing”.

“Hey, it’s none of my business”, Leona laughed.

“Really! it’s not lik-“.
“Come on. How about that tour?”, Leona smirked and walked off. “You can stand around and blush later”, she called over her shoulder.

“It’s not like that!”, Piper growled. “Hey!”.

“We can go through there”, Piper pointed to a narrow chain-linked gate, shaded by a large, tattered, red tarp overhead. Planks of wood created a winding path over the muddy ground that led to the gate.

She followed Piper into one of the many back alleys that snaked the outskirts of the trading district.

“Valentine Detective Agency”, Leona muttered, reading the neon sign stuck to the wall of a rusted shack. An arrow pointed further down the alleyway.

“C’mon it’s just through here”, Piper called.

Above them, the alley was shaded from the elements by a haphazard construction of red tarp, planks of wood and wireframe meshing. Faded posters and flyers depicting advertisements and propaganda from her old world, lined the walls on both sides.

Sunlight peaked through the makeshift roofing above them, and Leona watched as patches of dappled sunlight cascaded off of Piper’s shoulders as she led the way.

The chatter of a pair of workmen off to the side, as they repaired a broken fuse box, caught her attention. “Sometimes you gotta wonder. Does anyone fight back? The Institute has to have enemies, right?”, she heard one of them say.

“What, you mean the Railroad? That’s a fairytale man. They don’t exist”.

“Nah. I heard from my cousin. He knows a guy that works for em. They got a code phrase and everything. ‘Follow the Freedom Trail’”.

“The hell is that supposed to mean? You’re full of it, and that kinda talk is gonna get you snatched up by the synths”.

The institute. The shadowy organization Paladin Danse mentioned. It seemed they were more infamous, and their influence more widespread than she initially thought.

She noticed Piper’s gaze lingering on the two men as they passed. Their conversation clearly catching her attention.

“What do you know about the institute?”, Leona asked, quickening her pace to walk side by side with Piper.

“The Institute? Pfft, don’t get me started. The Commonwealth’s boogeymen”, she raised her clawed hands menacingly. “Rumor is, they snatch unsuspecting wastelanders in the middle of the night, and replace them with synth replicas so convincing, that even their friends and families can’t tell the difference”.
Piper sighed, “I’ve been writing about them for almost two years now, but not everyone wants to hear the truth. Most folks think burying their heads in the sand will keep them safe. I’ve got a backlog of stories and interviews from people all over the commonwealth. Stories about friends and family members disappearing for days, only to return, not quite the same. Stories of traders and settlers meeting their synth dopplegangers out in the wastes and fighting for their lives.

“Gen 3’s..”, Leona muttered, remembering Danse’s words.

“Y-yeah. Piper narrowed her eyes in confusion. “I don’t think I’ve ever used that term in my articles though. How did you-“.

“A soldier I met…out there. He told me a bit about the institute”, she explained. “Do you believe them? The stories I mean”, Leona asked.

“Not all of them. There are a’lotta crazies out there”, Piper grinned. “Ghosts, aliens, UFO’s, you name it, I’ve had to sit through all of it with a straight face some point. But hey, if you want to read more about the institute, like I said I have a lot of material back home. You’re welcome to it”.

“Sure” Leona nodded with a smile.

“Annd, here we are”, Piper stopped next to another neon sign and took a left turn into a short dead end alleyway off to the side, to a single faded, red door at the end.

Piper tried the handle but the door was locked. “Ellie!”, she called, gently knocking on the door, but there was no answer. “Ellie, it’s Piper!”. Piper bit her lip and smiled sheepishly at Leona. “Maybe she’s out”.

“Or maybe she’s in the shower. Why don’t you go ahead and pick the lock?” Leona offered helpfully, with such a deadpan delivery that Piper had to do a double take to make sure she was teasing.

“Oh, harr harr. You’re not going to let me live that down are you?”.

“I dunno”, Leona smirked. “I’m still a little bitter about th-“.

“Oh Piper!”, Ellie gasped as she flung open the door and wrapped her arms around the reporter, startling them both.

“Uh…”, The look on Piper’s face, a mixture of surprise, confusion and embarrassment. Her hands rigid at her side from the unexpected embrace. Leona suppressed a smirk as the reporter looked to her, helplessly.

“Why didn’t you see me when you got back yesterday”, Ellie broke her hug and held Piper at arm’s length, fixing her with a look of disapproval. “You weren’t home when I went to check on you. I had to find out from security if you were alright, and-“.

“I’m sorry”, Piper held up her palms. “I meant to drop by but, well, I got sidetracked answering these inane questions from the guards, and when I got back I, sort of, got distracted”, Piper glanced at Leona who stood by, silently watching their exchange. “And it totally slipped my mind”.

Ellie visibly relaxed. The tension leaving her shoulders as she sighed. “That was a really reckless thing you did, you-“.

“I know”, Piper cut her off. “I know. Nick already chewed me out about it, and I’m probably gonna get another earful when he gets back”.


“Good, as far as I’m concerned, you can’t hear it often enough”, Ellie Huffed and glanced to Leona. “So are you going to introduce me to your friend, or did that slip your mind as well”, Ellie asked, sounding borderline passive aggressive.

“You didn’t give me a chan-“, Piper growled.

“Leona” Leona cut her off and offered her hand. “It’s nice to meet you”.

“Ellie Perkins”, she offered Leona a warm smile as she shook her hand. “It’s always nice to meet a friend of Piper’s”.

“Ellie”, Piper groaned.

“Come in, come in”, Ellie held the door open as they entered. “Can I get you anything? I just made coffee”, she offered as she closed the door.

“I’m fine thanks”, Leona held up her hand. “I actually just wanted to see where the place was. I understand Mr. Valentine is out right now?”.

“Yes I’m afraid so”, Ellie nodded. “But I expect him back today, this evening at the latest. Is this about a case?”, she asked.

“I’m trying to find someone. A kidnapped child”, Leona revealed as she looked around the darkened room. A single light bulb overhead and a desklamp in the far corner illuminated file cabinets and boxes of paperwork stacked against the walls of the office area.

“Oh, dear”, Ellie frowned, bringing her hand to her chest. “Is, the child yours?”, she asked and Leona simply nodded.

“I’m…sorry to hear that. Missing persons cases are unfortunately very common, outside the wall and even right here in Diamond City”, Ellie explained. “But as common as they are, very few turn out to be kidnappings. The Commonwealth is a dangerous place”. Leona listened as she spoke but continued to scan the room and the papers on the desk next to her. “Travelers run afoul of raiders and bandits. Children wander off on their own. Are you sure this was a-“.

“I saw them take my son! I was there when they kil…”, a touch of anger and hostility crept into her voice, startling the two women, and Leona held her tongue when she saw the flash of surprise on the secretary’s face.

“Hey, hey it’s okay”, she felt Piper’s tentative hand on her shoulder. “Ellie’s just trying to help”.

“I-I’m sorry I-“, Leona apologized, swallowing her embarrassment and guilt.

“No need to apologize” Ellie shook her head, offering her a sympathetic smile. “I know how hard this must be, I didn’t mean to be so blunt. Nick might not be here right now but we can go over the details and I can take note of your story in the mean-“.

“I, um…”, Leona interrupted, clearing her throat. “I think I’ll wait until Mr Valentine gets back, if that’s alright”.

“Of course. I understand”, Ellie nodded.

“I should go. It was nice meeting you”, she gave Ellie a polite nod. She needed to get out of there. “Piper, take care”, Leona forced a smile as she reached for the doorknob.
“Hey, wai-”, Piper called just as the door closed.

“Piper”, Ellie called as Piper reached for the door. “Let her go”.

“But-“.

“Trust me. Give her a few minutes alone”, Ellie advised and Piper sighed loudly as she leaned back against the door.

“Why don’t you have a seat in the meantime, honey. I’ll get you a cup of coffee”, Ellie offered, before disappearing into one of the back rooms.

“Ellieee”, Piper groaned. “I don’t want any”, she folded her arms, impatiently tapping her foot on the floor and drumming her fingers on her elbow.

“So how long have you known that one”, Ellie asked. Her disembodied voice accompanied by the clink of glassware.

“I only met her yesterday”.

“Oh. Was she the ‘distraction’ you were talking about?”.

“Ye-…I guess. Why?”, Piper asked as Ellie entered the office with two steaming cups.

“She’s pretty”, Ellie smirked as she handed Piper a cup.

“Ellie, she’s lost her child, and I’m pretty sure those are wedding rings on her finger”, Piper wiggled her fingers at the older woman. “I’m not trying to…to-“.

“Good. But that isn’t what I meant”, Ellie took a seat on Nick’s desk. “There’s something…unsettling about her. There’s a lot of anger there”.

“Yeah no kidding, and she has every right to be. Hell, she’s got it more together than I would be, if-if anything ever happened to…”, Piper let the thought hang in the air, unfinished. “She said something about a killing just now”, Piper frowned, deep in thought as she held the warm cup between her palms.

“Just…be careful, and try not to get too attached to-“.

“I just want to help her, Ellie”, Piper cut her off, finally coming to a decision and pushing off the door. “I’m gonna go look for her”, she set the cup down next to Ellie and headed out. Ellie sighed and wordlessly watched the door close.

“It’s beautiful”, she whispered. The warm winds danced wisps of dark hair across her face, fluttering her dress and drifting across the endless golden fields, creating gentle waves across the rolling hills and open plains.

“You’re beautiful”, he whispered in her ear, feeling her body shake in response, as she stifled her laughter.

“What?”, he grinned, holding her tighter. “Now that’s just rude, lady”.


His chest, warm against her back. His arms, snug around her waist.

“Sorry”, she beamed, leaning her head back to steal a kiss.

The setting sun hovered just above the fields. It’s golden orange light, bathing the clouds and melting into the dark, blue sky.

“I’m glad we decided to stop here”, he said, resting his chin on her shoulder.

“Mhm. I don’t think I could spend another night in a motel”, she agreed.

Laughter carried on the winds, catching her attention as a group of children circled them before chasing each other along the edges of the of the fields. Dried stalks of barley crunching beneath their feet as they played.

She watched as their mother scolded them, scooping up one of the children and waving a silent apology in her direction, to which she simply shook her head and waved back with a smile. Her gaze lingered on them as she leaned back against Nate’s chest. Squeals and laughter as their father threw them over his shoulder, and the family retreated to the small Bed and Breakfast.

“You know, that’ll be us in a few years”, Nate said, his hand roaming over her growing tummy. She turned to face him, biting her lip to suppress a grin as she wrapped her arms behind his neck.

“Chasing an army of rugrats around the yard? You’re pretty confident, mister”.

“Hey, I’m up for it if you are, sweetheart”, he smirked as he touched his forehead to hers.

“That’s not what I-“, she laughed. “-We’ll see if you feel that way after the first one, pal”.

He smiled, that warm, wicked smile that never failed to melt her. His hand snaking its way up her back, slipping the strap from her hair, letting it tumble down and dance upon the gentle winds. His warm, calloused hands on her cheek before she could protest, as he tilted her head and tasted her smiling lips.

“Looks like they’re ready to serve dinner”, was the first thing he said when their lips parted, earning him a sharp jab to the side.

She felt him jump before she pulled him close and buried her face in his chest. “Jerk”, she grinned. “Can we just, stay like this for a little while longer?”, she said as his arms encircled her.

“We can stay here as long as you want”, he whispered in her ear.

They held each other like that, gently swaying in rhythm with the wind. It was almost a full minute before he whispered. “Honey, I feel I need to tell you something”.

“Hm? What is it?”, she asked, searching his eyes. His face was the picture of seriousness. Almost as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. But she knew him too well. Well enough to spot the crinkle in the corner of his eyes or the subtle twitch of his lips.

“I am, starving”.

“Pffft-“, she snickered into his chest.

“With all that time on the road, I don’t think we’ve eaten a proper meal since-”

“Me too”, she laughed.
She raised her head from her arms. Greeted by a familiar sunset over the stadium and a warm, gentle breeze on her face, her bittersweet smile slowly fading as reality rushed to meet her. She sat alone atop the roof surrounding the stadium, atop the bleachers, her knees to her chest and her back against a low wall.

It felt almost liberating, being this high up. She felt even more detached than usual from the world below, but it did nothing to quell the ache in her chest. If anything, it hurt more in these quiet moments alone when her mind could wander.

“Blue?”, a familiar voice startled her and she turned to see Piper. The reporter pausing mid-step when she saw Leona’s tear-stained face. “S-Sorry, I didn’t mean to…”, Piper’s heart fell when she saw the pain in her eyes. “I can, um…I can, go”, she pointed over her shoulder, “if…if you want to be alone”.

“No”, Leona sniffed, wiping her cheeks and avoiding eye contact as she tried to compose herself. “You can stay...if you want. I could use the company”, she forced a smile.

Piper returned her tentative smile as she slowly approached and sat down by her side, hugging her knees to her chest, unsure of what to say. ‘Are you ok?’, seemed like a pointless question. “Here”, she retrieved a small handkerchief from her coat and offered it.

“Thanks”, Leona whispered.

Piper tried not to stare, sensing her embarrassment. Instead she focused on the sunset as it made its slow journey to the horizon.

“I’m sorry”, Leona apologized.

“For what?”, Piper turned to her.

“For back at the office...For making this awkward...You were right. I usually try so hard to block everything out, but when I have nothing to keep my mind occupied, I-”.

Piper smiled, “Don’t worry about it. Like Ellie said, you don’t have anything to apologize for. And you’re looking at the queen of awkward”, she jabbed a thumb to her chest. “Awkward I can handle”, she grinned, stretching her legs out in front of her and leaning back against the wall. “I tried to find you after you left this morning”, she said as she gazed out over the stadium.

“Sorry…I left the city. Took a walk to clear my head. To kill some time”, Leona admitted. "Had Dogmeat with me for a while before he ran off again. How did you find me up here?”.

“Uh…Honestly, I didn’t expect to find anyone up here. I usually slip the guard five caps to let me up. I come up here sometimes, to think, to get away. You know?”, Piper offered her a gentle smile and she returned it. “How did you get up here?”.

“I just…asked the guard, and he let me pass”, Leona said innocently.
“Wait, for free? They just, *let* you pass?”, Piper asked incredulously.

“Y-Yeah”, Leona replied, tilting her head. “Do they ask you to pay?”.

“Well, no they don’t ask, but Danny told me….”, she paused, and Leona watched as some hidden realization dawned on her face.”…Danny Sullivan!, that little! Rrrgggh! I’m gonna wring his neck!”, Piper growled, folding her arms and scowling. Her sour expression melting when she heard Leona’s muffled laughter behind the handkerchief. The older woman fixing her with an amused smile.

“How much have you spent coming up here?”, Leona asked.

“More than I’ll admit to”, Piper sighed and knocked her head back against the wall. “It’s like I paid five caps to see you”, she grumbled.

“Was I worth it?” Leona laughed, her smile was contagious, unguarded, and Piper couldn’t help but mirror her amusement.

Piper playfully appraised her with a critical eye, pretending to give it some serious thought, while scratching at an imaginary beard. “I dunno…I’d say you’re worth, pffft….at least seven caps”.

“I’ll take that”, Leona smirked, holding Piper’s gaze for a moment before turning back to the horizon. Piper’s eyes lingered on her for a moment before she followed suit and a silence settled between them as they watched sun set.

‘Should she say something?’, Piper wondered. She felt anxious. ‘Was it ok to just sit here with her in silence?’

“I would come up here sometimes, after work”, Leona finally broke the silence, her voice somber and distant as she stared straight ahead. “To watch the teams practice as the sun went down. To unwind”. Piper studied the side of her face, and listened in silence. “You could look down on the street from the other side. There’d be bumper to bumper traffic every evening, as far as you could see”.

“We’d come up here some weekends, when Nate got leave. Spread a soft blanket right here”, she placed her palm in the narrow space between them. “Security would let us raid the concession stands. We’d make a picnic of it. Spend the afternoon watching the players practice. Talk for hours, as we laid back and watched the clouds, until it got dark”.

She was saying some strange things. Things that didn’t make sense. That distant look in her eyes, it was almost as if she were talking to herself.

“I, don’t understand. You said you were from a vault”, Piper’s words snapping her back to the present.

“Yeah”, she glanced at Piper and took a deep breath as she closed her eyes, leaning her head back against the wall. “The morning the bombs dropped, we were ushered into the vault with a few other families. It was supposed to be a new life. I remember thinking, *what possible future could my baby have underground*. *What possible future could we have as a family*. Everything happened so fast”.

“They lied to us. Froze us in these, pods, under the guise that we were being ‘decontaminated’ before we could proceed further into the facility”.

“-Wait, they boxed you up in a fridge? The whole time?”, Piper shifted to face her. “And you’re saying you were alive before the war? You saw everything before they blasted it into pieces?”
“Behold, I am immortal”, Leona joked, adjusting her position so that she sat cross legged beside Piper. The reporter, barely aware of Leona’s knee resting on hers, as distracted by her story as she was.

“Wh-You, kinda, are”, Piper grinned, unable to hide her surprise and intrigue. “I mean I’ve met pre-war ghouls before, but this…this is…something else. What about your son and…”.

“I woke up some time after. Still trapped in the cryo pod, barely conscious. I could see Nate and Shaun in the pod across from me. There was a man and a woman. They opened his pod, tried to take our baby, but Nate wouldn’t let them”, she paused, absently toying with the lace on her boots. “They shot him…murdered him, and took Shaun”, she bit her lip and drew an unsteady breath. “And I couldn’t do anything…just, watch…”.

“Hey”, Piper whispered, snapping her out of her memories with a gentle hand on her thigh.

“I’m fine”, Leona shook her head and offered Piper a forced smile. “I’ve told one other person this story. It’s gotten easier to talk about it since then”.

“What about the other families? There had to have been other sur…”, Piper reasoned, but Leona shook her head.

“They put me back under after they took Shaun. I…don’t know how long I was asleep for the second time. It looked like the cryo pods had failed, but I was the only one that was revived. The families that made it to the vault with us had died in their pods. The vault was a tomb. The staff were long dead. Terminal entries showed evidence of infighting and revolt between the staff and those in charge, within the first few years. It’s been a few weeks since then, since I woke up. So…yeah, that’s…”, she shrugged, “that’s my story”.

“Whew”, Piper leaned back on her heels. “Well I can honestly say, that’s, definitely not at what I expected”, Piper offered her a sympathetic smile. “That would make for one hell of a story though-“.

“Piper I don’t-“, Leona began, worry coloring her features, but Piper held up a hand, cutting her off.

“Relax, Blue. I’m not going to put it in the paper. I told you yesterday, anything you say stays between you and me”.

“Thanks”, Leona replied, the tension leaving her shoulders.

“Hey I’m…I’m glad you trusted me enough to tell me your story, Blue”, She said, catching Leona’s gaze, and noticing for the first time how close they were sitting. Leona’s knee was practically in Piper’s lap, and Piper’s hand rested absently on the older woman’s thigh.

‘When did this happen?’, Piper wondered. ‘Was this weird? Did Leona notice? Did she mind? How could she remove her hand without drawing attention to it?’ These thoughts raced through her mind as her heart raced in her chest.

‘Blue, huh?’, Leona smiled, as she mulled over the nickname.

“Sorry, I wasn’t sure how you felt about-“, Piper used the opportunity to casually remove her hand, instead pretending to adjust her cap.

“No, it’s fine”, Leona assured her. “It’s kind of growing on me actually. Wonder if I should I call you ‘Red’”.

“Pffft. God no”, Piper replied without missing a beat as she brushed her hair behind her ears.
“Fair enough”, Leona smirked, reaching over to pluck something from Piper’s cap.

“Wh-Hey!“.

Leona turned the little slip of cardboard around in her fingers. The writing on one side simply said ‘Press’. “Cute”, she teased.

“Give me that”, Piper snatched it from her hand, attempting to hide her smile behind a mask of playful annoyance. “It’s not ‘cute’. It’s my job and I take it very seriously”, she insisted.

The sun had all but sunk below the horizon. The last vestiges of golden red light, highlighting her amber eyes as she frowned at Leona and fixed the title on her cap. “You have really pretty eyes”, Leona remarked as she absently observed Piper. A simple statement, said with such an innocent and casual tone, yet that didn’t stop Piper’s heart from skipping a beat or her breath from hitching in her chest. She held Leona’s gaze for the briefest of moments, searching for traces of some hidden meaning behind her words and feeling the heat creep into her cheeks.

“Uh…Th-thanks, I um…I mean”, Piper stuttered. ‘What was she supposed to say to that?!’. Her brain had taken a time out and her panic grew with every millisecond of silence that passed.

“You and that kid really do make a pretty adorable couple”, Leona saved her the embarrassment of a reply. Piper could only look at her in stunned silence. Her mouth moved but there was no sound.

“What was his name?”, Leona continued, pretending not to relish the reporter’s reaction.

“Junior?…no…S…Sparky….Skippy…n-“

“Mac Cready! His name is Mac Cready!”, Piper sputtered. “And I told you, h-he’s not…I’m n-We’re not a….a…”, Piper wracked her brain for the right word, finally settling with, “…a thing!”. ‘I’m not blushing because of him’, the voice in her head screamed. “I’m. Not. Blushing”, she growled.

“C’mon, you say that, but you blush every time I mention him”, Leona smirked.

‘I’m not blushing because of him’, the voice in her head screamed. “I’m Not. Blushing”, she growled.


“God. I actually want to hit you with something right now”, Piper turned back to the horizon, sitting cross legged, mirroring Leona’s position as she folded her arms and tried to look annoyed, despite the smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

“I’m sorry, really”, Leona apologized sincerely with a smile. “You’re just so…easy”.

‘Easy?’, Piper pinched the bridge of her nose in annoyance. “Leonaaa…“.

“I meant ‘easy’ to get a rise out of. And what happened to ‘Blue’?”. “I’m thinking I should have just gone with the name I had for you when we first met. Wanna know what that was?”, Piper asked.

“I think have a pretty good idea”, Leona shot her a cheeky grin before settling back against the wall. The city below was starting to come alive, with bright lights and bustling crowds.

Piper smiled to herself and risked a glance to Leona as they both sat in silence, but Leona caught her and returned her smile. “What’s so funny?”, she asked Piper.
Piper shook her head, “Nothing”, and turned back to the city lights below. “You know, Nick’s probably back by now. We can go see him if you want”.

“Tomorrow”, Leona replied.

“Oh…I thought you’d want to see him as soon as you could”.

“I do”, Leona admitted. “But it’s late, and if he just got back, I’m sure he wants some time to himself. To get some food and rest. I can wait a few more hours until morning”.

“Are you sure?”, Piper pressed. “I really don’t think he’d mind. He doesn’t sleep, doesn’t eat, always on a case”, she smirked. Piper knew exactly what she was doing. A little payback for the older woman’s teasing.

“I know the type”, Leona smiled. “Still, I’ll see him in the morning”.

“Hm. Suit yourself”, Piper pushed herself to her feet, and after a moment’s hesitation, turned to Leona. “Um…A-Are you hungry? There’s this place that serves the best noodles in town and-“.

“Yeah, actually. I could eat”, Leona stood and dusted the seat of her pants. She toed the edge of the roof, looking down at the warm lights and crowded streets below before following Piper.

’I’ll tell her about Nick while we eat’, Piper reconsidered. Considering how important this was to Leona, a heads up was probably a good idea, to avoid an awkward meeting for both her and Nick.

“Hey. What was with that look when you said he doesn’t eat or sleep?”. She heard Leona ask from behind her.

‘Damnit!’

“Morning”, Leona called as she opened the door to the office with a light knock. Ellie was seated at the desk while Piper knelt in front of her, with her hands on the secretary’s shoulders. They looked up as she entered. “Blue!”,

“What’s wrong?”, Leona asked. It was clear that Ellie had been crying.

“Nick didn’t come back yesterday”, Piper informed her and turned back to the secretary. “Where did he go Ellie?”

Ellie avoided Piper’s eyes, hesitating for a moment before replying, “Park Street Station”.

“Park St…”, Piper whispered, mulling over the name in her head for all of five seconds, when realization dawned on her face. “Skinny Malone?!”, she blurted out. “Jesus Ellie! Why didn’t you tell me yesterday?! Why didn’t Nick-“.

“What’s going on?”, Leona asked, confused by her reaction. “Who’s S-Skinny Mal-“.

“Skinny Malone”, Piper cut her off. “Local mob boss and leader of the Triggermen. He deals in weapons and chems mostly. Nick and I had a bit of a run in with him on a case a few weeks back.
He’s had it in for us ever since”, she explained.

“I begged him not to go”, Ellie buried her face in her palms. “He made me promise not to tell you. I told him it was too dangerous, but he just…smiled and walked out the door like he always does”.

‘Shit’, Leona muttered, brushing her hair back as she leaned against the door, while Piper tried to console Ellie.

“What was Valentine after at Park Street”, Leona asked, interrupting the two women.

“Um…he was…”, Ellie fanned through the papers on the desk, retrieving a single folder and flipping through it before handing it over. “The Darla case. A missing person”.

“And what do you have on the triggermen and this Malone person”, Leona asked as she flipped through the folder.

“That’s…um”, Ellie wiped her cheek and made her way over to the file cabinet. Piper stood up as Ellie brushed past her. She watched as Leona scanned the Darla file, her brow furrowed in concentration. Barely any trace of the woman she’d sat with above the bleachers the previous evening.

“Here. This is everything we have on them”, Ellie handed over another folder and Leona did a cursory scan of the contents before closing it.

“I’ll find him”, she said simply. “Can I borrow these?”.

“Yes, yes of course, Thank you”, Ellie offered her a shaky smile. “Please bring Nick back safely”, she added. Leona nodded wordlessly before turning and heading out the door.

‘Of course it wasn’t going to be this easy. She should have seen this coming’, Leona thought bitterly to herself, fighting to keep the scowl from her face. Her fingers squeezing the flimsy cardboard folders in her hand.

“Hey”, Piper called. The reporter caught up to her in the alley just outside the office. “I’m coming with you”, she said, standing in front of Leona, cutting her off.

“Hmm…No…”, Leona paused, folding her arms and mockingly pretending to give it some serious thought. “…No…I’m pretty sure you’re not”, she shook her head and tried to get past the reporter, but Piper stepped in front of her once more.

“Do you even know where Park Street Station is?”, Piper asked.

“I’m from the old world, not another planet, Piper. I know where I’m going”.

“W-Well…yeah, ok fine…”, Piper sputtered. “…but I’m still going with you”, she insisted.

“Listen. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’ll slow me down. I’ll have a better chance of getting him out if I don’t have someone else to worry about”, she brushed past Piper and continued down the alley.

Leona managed a few steps before the reporter stalked ahead of her, cutting her off for the third time. A fiercely determined look on her face, and one she hadn’t seen before. “No, you listen. Don’t treat me like some…some…simpleton! Nick is my friend, and I know you want to find him, but I can guarantee you, not as much as I do!”, her fiery determination giving Leona a moment of pause. “I know you’re, like…two hundred years old and you’re good at…shooting people, and whatever. But
I’ve been out there doing this for a lot longer than you have. I’m not some liability, so stop tr-“.

“You’re right”, Leona cut off her tirade with an apologetic look. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that”, she apologized.

Piper’s expression softened as she met Leona’s gaze. Her heart thundered in her chest as much from her long winded tirade, as from her shock at having directed it at this woman in particular. “I’m sor-“.

“Don’t apologize”, Leona chuckled. “Not after that. You were right, I was being-“.

“A jerk”, Piper offered with a smirk and Leona nodded in amusement.

“Yeah”.

They shared an awkward moment of silence. Piper fidgeted nervously, avoiding eye contact.

"Look", Leona said finally. “Why don’t you get what you need and meet me at the Dugout Inn when you’re ready”, Leona resumed walking and Piper fell in step with her.

“Alright, but, listen. That guy, Mac Cready, still owes me, and I’m thinking this would be as good a time as any to collect on it”.

She saw Leona sigh. “There’s going to be a lot of trigger happy mobsters there Blue, and if talking doesn’t work, then another gun on our side wouldn’t hurt”.

“Fine. Bring your boyfriend along”.

NOTES :

Sorry for the delay on this one. I decided to scrap the first draft.

Initially had her confront Yefim about the money. Kneecap a loanshark. Get kicked out of the Inn and end up staying with Piper. Fun times^^

It felt totally off, but I might use some parts of it later on.

Also have a house being built next door, right outside my window, so the sound of buzzsaws and hammering isn’t making it very easy to concentrate and immerse myself in the story. Hope my characterizations didn't suffer too much from this.

Marking this chapter for significant edits further down the line, but overall I’m happy with it for now.
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