A Land of Monsters and Poison

by PunkRyuki

Summary

What if it wasn't just pop culture that remained stagnated by the war, but also social views. What if the racism, sexism, and homophobia of the 1950's never really changed. This is a look into how a woman raised in the restricted views of her time is suddenly flung forward to a post-apocalyptic world where all of those dated ideas are history. How will she change? Is it really changing, if it was who you were all along?

A story about growing up, love, and the courage to choose your own path. Told in three acts.

"It's funny how it took the world ending for mine to start."
Welcome to this behemoth that is A Land of Monsters and Poison (I really don't mean for that to sound like a Homestuck planet, but I think it fits.) For any of you who are waiting for my HP fic, Agape, it's still coming, and to be fair, I actually wrote this long before I ever started that series.

This came from an idea I had about what life had really been like before the war of 2077. In a world where social advancement stopped before the Civil Rights Movements of the 60's, where Women's Rights, LGBTQ+ Rights, and basically anyone that wasn't a WASP male was still marginalized (well, more overtly marginalized). What if someone, such as the Sole Survivor, woke up to a world without any of these social constraints? So this fic will touch on some of these points, and I must clarify that while this fic takes the point of view of this type of person, I, in no way, condone any of these types of views. While my warnings are harsh, there is no harsh or blatant bigotry in this (well, aside from the usual crap you get from the Brotherhood). It's more internalized.

That being said, what I ended up with was an epic-long Lady and the Tramp-esque love story. It will have 3 acts. I'm uploading all of Act 1 for you right now. I'm almost finished with Act 2, and Act 3 is a vague outline right now. I hope you enjoy, and I welcome all feedback. I do take comments into account in my writing.

Also, there is a playlist that goes with this fic (as any of you who know me, I like to make playlists for my writing.) It can be found here: https://8tracks.com/punkryuki/a-land-of-monsters-and-poison It will change and update and grow as I write more, and find more musical inspiration.

Also, it seems a little bit silly giving a spoiler warning for a game that came out nearly two years ago, but I reference a lot of stuff, and this definitely goes over all the major factions and their endings and subsequent plot twists (especially the main questline).
No Call for Sanctuary

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ACT 1

Leading the settlers to Sanctuary, it finally struck home that the world I once lived in was truly gone, blown away by an atomic bomb. When I had first stumbled out of Vault 111, I hadn't even recognized the neighborhood. The dilapidated buildings and rusted cars looked like something from some junk yard, not the neighborhood rated #1 in Boston's *Housewives Weekly* as the best place to raise a family. It had been the perfect little suburbia, no deviance from the societal norm, with cookie cutter houses painted in pastel, and the pasty white families with their 2.5 children. We had been on our way to that 2.5.

Now, I could see my old home in the derelict structure. The kitchen still had one of Shaun's bottles in the sink from the night before. He had woken me up at two in the morning, hungry and in need of a diaper change. And there, on the kitchen island was that undrunk cup of coffee Codsworth had made for me that fateful morning. It was beyond cold now, but I still took an experimental sip, curious as to what a 200 year old cup of coffee tasted like. It tasted like dust and rotted earth. I didn't dare to swallow, and spit it back into the cup with disgust. A shame that this mug of bean water should survive but not my diploma. A useless piece of paper now, to be sure, but it had been my pride, proof of the first woman in my family to earn my degree, and in the practice of law, no less. Oh well, it's not like I was ever going to put it to use anyway.

With a vile taste in my mouth--and not from the long expired coffee--I strolled down the hallway and into the nursery. I felt a small stab of envy that Shaun's toys and crib, and even that little rocket ship mobile that Nate had built, were still relatively intact. It felt stupid to be envious of an infant, my own son even, but nothing of mine had survived the years. Quickly, I turned away and went into my bedroom. The bed was only a pile of wood now, completely unsalvageable. Shame. We had spent a lot of money on the latest in mattress technology, and it was a damn comfortable bed. With a sigh, I pulled open the folding doors to the closet. The clothes were all in tatters, not even useful as dishrags, but for Nate's three piece suit that he used for special meetings in his suitcase. It was the same suit he had worn when he'd asked for my father's permission to marry me. A mere formality, seeing as how he had been handpicked by my father in the first place.

I closed the suitcase delicately, looking around the closet. Most of it was a pile of useless deteriorated junk, but--ah, there in the back, a wooden case, once a splendid polished oak, now dusty and cracked in places. I knew exactly what was in this case, and I opened it slowly, hope clogging my throat. Yes! It was still intact. Sitting there on a bed of faded velvet was an original Winchester .308 mm hunting rifle. It could use a little cleaning, but it was otherwise unharmed. Thank God. I gingerly picked it up and blew away the dust. The brass engraving on the side was still legible, an image of a burly arm hurling a lightning bolt.
"Zeus," I whispered reverently, stroking the walnut handle like a devout believer. My grandfather's old gun that he had gifted to me on my sixteenth birthday, to the icy disapproval of my parents. "It strikes like lightning and makes a clap like thunder," Papa used to always say. Grammy always made fun of him for how he would spew love poetry to his guns, that she would feel jealous if she wasn't a better shot than him. "Women have steadier hands," the old woman had stage-whispered to me conspiratorially. She had been a Russian sniper once, before the USSR fell from power, a time she never talked about directly.

I set the gun in my lap, searching for the tiny maintenance kit that should be underneath it. My fingers stopped just short when I saw a crinkled polaroid on top. Bent at odd angles, a faded elderly couple smiled as their cheeks sandwiched a little girl between them, strawberry pink frosting dotting their faces. Tears fell before I had even recognized the picture. I really would never see them again, would I? Everyone I had ever known was dead. I tried to wipe my eyes, but the tears kept coming faster than I could wipe them away. I had to move Zeus, the moisture and salt was not good for the wood.

"That's a nice gun," Preston Garvey said in way of greeting with a tip of his leather hat. Preston was a nice guy. He reminded me of those boys that would offer to walk you home and then decline your offer for a drink when you finally arrived.

"Thanks, it was my grandfather's," I smiled down at Zeus, polishing it with a an oiled up cloth, the cleanest one I could find. "I'm surprised it survived. Your laser musket's pretty nifty, too. I've never actually gotten to use any laser weapons until yesterday." They were strictly for military use. Nor had I ever used power armor and fought off a monster straight from hell either, but I had been encountering all sorts of firsts ever since I woke up from my cryo chamber.

"Your eyes look a little red. Are you alright?"

"I had been scavenging through my old house earlier, kicked up a lot of dust," I responded coolly. He didn't look convinced but continued anyways. "Look, I wanted to talk to you about the Long's, Jun and Marcy. We've all noticed you've been a little...standoffish with them compared to the others."

I froze. I knew exactly what he was talking about. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He leveled me with that same look my mother used to give me when she knew I was trying to pull a fast one on her. "You're nicer to Mama Murphy, and I know how you feel about chems. I find that I agree with you there, but I don't see what the Long's have done to offend you. I know Marcy's a bit...much, but it's just the stress of losing their home, and Jun's--"

I held up a hand. "They haven't offended me. I've offended myself. I'm sorry, I don't mean to, I know they've done nothing wrong, but... Look, Preston, I'm from the time of the war, when the Chinese were our greatest enemy. We were taught to fear anyone with slanted eyes, and even back then I knew it was stupid, but I can't help feeling off about them."

Preston hit me with such a powerful deadpan look, it physically hit me in the chest. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard anyone say." He folded his arms across his chest. "None of us could even point to China on a map. The war's been over for 200 years, Susie."
"I know, I know." I really hated being lectured, even if it was well deserved.

"If you know, then you should go apologize. Marcy may be a bit rough, but Jun doesn't deserve any of this. They've been through enough with Kyle."

Now I really felt like an ass. I had forgotten about their son that they had lost to those raiders. Mind made up, I stood up, slinging Zeus's strap over my shoulder and headed off with a nod to Preston. The Longs were in the garden, tending to the melons and gourds that grew there. They were talking softly to one another, their heads bowed. Standing just outside of the white picket fence, I could see the stress that weighed down their shoulders, the limp and greasy look of their hair (a fate my own was starting to reflect). They still hadn't noticed me, leaving me a little unsure of what to say. Luckily, I needn't have said anything, for Marcy finally looked up with a glare. "What do you want?"

My knee-jerk reaction was to spit out something terse, but I reminded myself of why I had come over in the first place. With the fall of society, these settlers and squatters weren't one for niceties and manners. "Marcy, Jun, I...I've come to apologize for my behavior lately. I've been very rude to the two of you, unnecessarily so. I've been treating this world like it was before the war, but I'm slowly learning the way of things. So...I guess what I'm trying to say is I'm sorry." I looked down at them still crouching on the ground in silence.

No one said anything for an uncomfortably long time. Then Marcy snorted. "You stink at apologies. You make them all about you, just like everything else."

I frowned. Look, lady, I'm trying to be nice here.

"Don't mind Marcy," Jun's skittish voice broke through their animosity. "Thank you for apologizing. Most people aren't mature enough to admit their own mistakes. Let's just forget about it and move on from here, yeah?"

I smiled at him. He was as fun as bad news, but Jun was much more agreeable than his wife. I probably wouldn't have liked Marcy even if she hadn't married an Asian. Her way of dealing with tragedy was very caustic. "I was about to go over to Sturges to see what needed to be built to make this place liveable. Any requests?"

"It'd be nice to have some clean water," Marcy said. "Hard to grow edible food if we're poisoning it with irradiated river water."

"Noted." I nodded, and then headed off to the local mechanic. The guy was a real jack-of-all-trades. He could build anything he put his mind to. I found him in one of the houses, scrounging for any salvageable material. This had been Edna and Tommy Jones' house. Tommy had been working on restoring an old car with his son. They had been shuffled off to the cryo chamber and then left for dead. The residual memory left me with chills.

"Oh, it's Susie. What can I do for you?" He held up an alarm clock, the same faded red as the car (and I knew at once that it had belonged to the son), examining it all over before tossing it into a bucket dangling from his elbow.

"I was wondering what I could do to help."

"Well, right now we really need the basics: food, water, beds. After that, we'll need to worry about defenses. Luckily, this place seems to be off the radar, but the bigger we grow, the more of a target we become for raiders. Don't suppose you know how to build a turret?"
I was pretty sure my face conveyed just how inexperienced in that I was. "I can sew..."

He chuckled. "Alrighty then. Find whatever materials you can and make us some beds. If you find enough for more, then it'd probably be for the best. Preston intends on making this a thriving settlement. I wouldn't be surprised if he was building a recruitment beacon right now to let the people of the commonwealth know about this place."

"He knows how to build a radio tower?" He didn't look like an egghead. Seemed more the shooty soldier type.

"Everyone has a little bit of knowledge on gizmos like those. You have to learn to build what you can with what you get out in the wasteland."

My cheeks felt warm. None of these skills were expected of a well-off housewife. How was I going to survive in this apocalypse? "I'll just go make some beds then."

Five days later, Sanctuary was living up to its name. We had plenty of food, a water purifier, and beds in patched up houses. Mama Murphy even got a special chair for her back. We'd set up crude defenses, and Sturges managed to build a turret, although sometimes it would shut itself off for no reason. He was still working on that part. He had taught me a lot of things about mechanics and building structure, and in return, I taught him how to modify and improve their weapons. Many of the settlers had makeshift pipe pistols that were taped together. A miracle none of them backfired or exploded in their hands. I had actually just finished my own personal project: a doghouse for the stray that followed me around. Dogmeat sat impatiently next to me, tail wagging excitedly.

"Alright, boy. It's not pretty, but it's ready."

The dog let out a happy yip before he leapt into the small house and began sniffing every single board and nail. He made a lot of huffs, like he was barking under his breath.

"I know, I know. I'll have to find some paint somewhere. I doubt there's any in the neighborhood."

Dogmeat barked again. I liked to talk to him, because it made the world less quiet, but sometimes I wondered if he could actually understand me and talk back. Perhaps the radiation had caused dogs to gain human-level intelligence? The roaches had grown to a disgustingly large size, maybe this is what happened to the dogs?

Is this what I would have been doing if the bombs hadn't fell? The thought came unbidden and unwanted. I had been trying not to think of what ifs. Would little Shaun have grown up with a dog? Would he have begged his father, and then me for one, until we finally caved and let him learn some responsibility? Would I have been happy?

Something wet on my hand drew my attention away. Dogmeat nuzzled me with his nose, looking up at me with large brown eyes. "Where is he now? What would those murderers want with a baby anyway?" Dogmeat had no answers for me this time. "I've been putting this off for long enough."

Shoulders squared, I headed into my house.

Half an hour later, I stood in front of Preston, large pack of supplies and Zeus strapped to my back.
"I was wondering when this moment would come," Preston said with a smile that looked like a sigh. "You've been very helpful in keeping the Minutemen alive, even if it's just the two of us, but that's my life's quest, not yours."

"I...when I woke up in the vault, my son was taken." I spoke quickly before the horrible memory could resurface. "Taken by my husband's murderer. I have to find him. He was...is just a baby."

"I'm so sorry. Do you know where you'll go?"

"I have no clue, but I can't stay here. Who knows what's happening to him?"

Preston shifted his weight. "I wish I could help you, but I'm all these people have got. The wasteland is dangerous to travel alone." Then he smiled in his good-natured way that always settled my nerves just a little. "Honestly, I'm not sure if I should be worried for you or not. I've seen you take down a Deathclaw almost single-handedly, and yet you ran away from a couple of bloatflies."

"Giant bugs are one of my worst nightmares," I grimaced. God, I felt itchy all over now.

Preston gave little huff of laughter. "You're going to be sorely disappointed, I'm afraid." His smile faded. "Look, I don't condone what Mama Murphy does, but her Sight has been pretty accurate so far. You should go ask her for some advice before you go, so you at least have a direction."

"Thanks, I will."

"Good luck out there, Susie. Sanctuary will always be here, if you ever need it."

With a smile, I went to Mama Murphy's house further down the cul-de-sac. The old woman was a bit loopy, but kind. She had this whole gypsy fortune-teller vibe, even if she had to shoot up some chems in order to have her visions. I still had my reservations, but even Marcy seemed to believe in the Sight, after it saved them. The woman was found in her chair, smiling dreamily.

"I was expecting you, dear," she spoke softly, as if still dreaming, her glassy eyes looking through me. "I knew this day would come. You were never meant to stay with us."

"I've come for a fortune-telling."

She looked up, smacking her lips as if tasting a delicate wine. "Hmm, I believe it will be Jet this time. Yes, I need Jet in order for the Sight to come through. Jet for time."

"Ok, that was lovely, but where was I supposed to find some drugs? Wow, this is such a weird situation. Who would have guessed that I'd have to find drugs so an old lady could tell me where to find my son? I feel like Alice in Wonderland. I don't have any--"

"My stash is in the cupboard over there, in a small tin." She pointed to a small bureau with the door hanging off its hinges.

Oh. I quickly retrieved her stash, handing her the small red inhaler, with a wrinkled nose. Drugs were nasty things that turned even the most upstanding gentlemen into trash, but if it was necessary...

Mama Murphy took a big whiff, pupils blowing wide. "Ah, that's the stuff. Yes, Yes, I can see it now. Diamond City holds answers, but they're locked tight. You ask them what they know, but people's hearts are chained up with fear and suspicion. But you find it. You find that heart that's gonna lead you to your boy. Oh, it's... it's bright. So bright against the dark alleys it walks. That's... that's what you need to do, kid. Follow the signs to the bright heart." She heaved a great breath,
coughing a bit. "Sorry, kid, but that's all the Sight will show me. It always takes a bit out of me. I need some rest."

I didn't understand most of that, but Diamond City sounded like a physical place I could travel to. I'd have to ask Preston to point me in the right direction. "Thanks, Mama Murphy, I guess."

I turned to leave, but a bony hand grabbed my wrist with startling strength. The old woman looked up at me with cloudy, unseeing eyes that gave me the heebie-jeebies. "Don't push the button, Susan. Don't open the door. The devil's words are always honeyed over a rotten corpse." This time, her voice was less dreamy and more frantic, frenzied... foreboding. With a slow blink of her wrinkled eyelids, her face relaxed into its normal dreamy smile. "Oh, and you should take Dogmeat with you," she puffed. "You'll need the company."

I blinked. "Are you sure? I thought Dogmeat belonged to you, or someone."

"Dogmeat doesn't belong to anyone. We belong to Dogmeat. He's chosen to go with you. You should take him along with."

Not that I was complaining. I liked dogs, after all. I looked down at my canine companion, and scratched him behind the ears affectionately. Well, one good thing had come out of the nuclear apocalypse: I've got a dog now.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if you can tell, but there's going to be a lot of Dogmeat love in this fic. He's so cute.
The Road to Diamond City

Chapter Summary

Susie finds out the hard way that life's not all Deathclaws and Power Armor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On word from Mama Murphy, I headed southeast to the point Preston marked on my pip-boy. Dogmeat tagged alongside. The old woman had been right: I needed the company. Who would have thought that the apocalypse would be so damn quiet? There were no sounds of cars, not even the vague hum of insects and general sound of fauna that permeated the outdoors. No birds. Nothing. There wasn't even a breeze, it almost made it feel like there was no air at all. I tuned into the radio on my pip-boy, listening to the nervous titter of some failure of a jockey. He really wasn't good at this, but the sound of another human was comforting.

I could understand why it was called a nuclear winter now. The trees were bare, and the shrubbery scraggly and uninviting. Even the silence was like that muffled by snow. It really looked like a snowless winter day. I didn't dare to breath too loud. I had already encountered the local wildlife and didn't want to chance another. The broken road I followed was littered with the carcasses of nuclear automobiles, rusted over the centuries. Through the pillars of trees, I could see distant buildings in various states of disrepair, from Red Rocket stations to houses.

The walk through Concord was eerie. Memories of the battle to free the settlers echoed in my mind. There, the Museum of Freedom where I had sniped from the rooftops, shooting at ant-size figures, and there, the barricade the townsfolk had built up to defend themselves made of canvas bags riddled with bullet holes bleeding out sand. The street leading up to the building was littered with bodies, raiders who had tried to prey on the poor folk. God, the smell was something awful, and it looked like some of the corpses had been ravaged by wild animals, their guts staining the pavement an ugly rust brown.

*I probably killed one of these people.* Everything had happened in a rush, and I had felt nothing shooting at small moving dots, but it just now hit me that I had killed someone, possibly more. Between that realization and the smell, I fell to my knees and upended the Sugar Bombs I had snacked on that morning. They were as enjoyable coming out as they were going in.

Dogmeat's wet nose felt refreshing against my heated cheek. He whimpered softly in concern.

"I'm alright, boy," I wheezed. "Or I will be, as soon as I find something to rinse this taste out of my mouth." That something turned out to be a Nuka-Cola in one of the old shops on the main street. The carbonation had fallen flat after all these years, but it still burned the bile flavor out of my mouth. After that, I quickly left Concord, not even stopping to loot the place.

The sun was beginning to fall down the sky when I came across my next stop. It looked like one of those Drumlin Diners, little truck stop restaurants with decent burgers, or at least, they were. I had intended on completely passing the building by, when I heard shouting and went to investigate. I didn't get very far before three thugs in leather jackets stopped me.
"You best walk away if you know what's good for you, stranger," a guy with a short ponytail threatened, gun pointed right at me.

I froze, hands up in surrender. "Woah, woah, I don't want to stick my nose in anything. I'm just passing through." Beside me, Dogmeat growled protectively.

Before the man could reply, a shot rang out from the diner, and a woman cursed out, "You goons better leave before I make you!"

The toughs flinched, but the shot had only been a warning. Ponytail guy holstered his weapon, crouching slightly to avoid anymore stray bullets. "Alright, here, look, I'll let this whole thing go if you do me a favor."

Let what go? I didn't do anything.

"That lady that was firing at us, Trudy, her son owes me money. Now, I'm not a man of violence, I prefer to do things the gentlemanly way. Hows abouts you go in there and try to talk some sense into her? I just want my caps."

"Caps?" All this for some bottle caps?

"Yeah, you know, ching-ching, the stuff that lets you buy other stuff?" He turned to the woman beside him with an exasperated sigh. "Probably should've chosen someone a little brighter."

I can hear you, you know. "So you want me to mediate?"

"Yeah, just convince the lady to give me my caps, and we'll walk away, no problem."

"Yeah, alright." I doubted these guys would let me leave, and even if, this whole situation looked like it was going to end in blood without me. With a nod, I crept forward, hands in the air. "I'm coming to negotiate," I shouted. "Don't shoot."

When I got to the metal door, it was quickly opened, and a wrinkled hand tugged me inside. "Quick, get in here."

Trudy turned out to be an older woman, probably in her fifties or sixties, wearing a dirty plaid flannel shirt and sporting a rather mean pistol and an even meaner glare. "You with Wolfgang and his goons?"

"No, I've just been coerced into settling this dispute between you two."

"Dispute? Ah yeah, I've got a dispute alright. That punk got my boy addicted to Jet, and now he's demanding payment. I'm not giving him a single cap. He can go to hell."

"Your son?" I looked over her shoulder and finally saw the young man cowering in one of the booths. Gee whiz, was he an awful sight. His spine must have been made of gelatin.

"Yeah, my Patrick. He's a good kid, dumber than a radroach, but a good kid. He's not having his life ruined by those drug pushers, and I ain't got the money no how. So you can tell Wolfgang that the only metal he's getting from me is a bullet in his head."

"Alright, alright, just calm down." Figures those thugs were drug dealers. There was no way I was going to help some drug dealer ruin a family. "Look, I'll go out there and talk to him, convince him to leave."
Trudy lifted an eyebrow incredulously, hip cocked. "You really think you can do that?"

"Not one hundred percent," I admitted. "So I'd have your gun ready, just in case."

"I...thanks, stranger." The woman looked a little surprised, and definitely more calm now, which was a plus. Calmer heads meant less blood.

When I returned to Wolfgang, he looked at me impatiently, arms folded across his chest. "Well?"

"I think you should cut your losses and just go."

That was definitely not the answer he wanted. His hand twitched towards his gun. "I think you should go back and renegotiate if you know what's good for you."

My heart thudded in my chest. There was a very real possibility that I could die here. "Look, Mr. Wolfgang, you have to look at this logically. How much does Patrick owe you?"

"400 caps."

What was the exchange rate between caps and dollars? Was that a lot? "And how much do you make selling these drugs to the average person? Give me an estimate of how much you make in a day?"

The woman beside him frowned. "What does any of this have to do with anything?"

"Please, just answer the question."

Wolfgang frowned. "It varies per day, but around 300 caps, give or take."

"So you could easily make back the money Patrick owes you in a few days. 400 caps isn't that hard of a hit to your...business."

"Yeah, but it's not about that, it's a matter of business integrity. He used my product, so he has to pay up, otherwise it's just plain theft."

I nodded in faux sympathy. "While that is true, and sadly there is no police force anymore for you to file your complaint with, you have to look at the consequences of your actions and deem if they are worth it. Trudy is going to take her pride and her money to her grave. You're going to have to kill her. Then what? Do you think Patrick is going to be a returning customer after you killed his mother? Likely, he'll fly into a fit of revenge and attack you. Of course, you'll have to defend yourself, which means killing Patrick too. Obviously, you can loot their dead bodies, but Trudy has already confided in me that they don't have the money anyway. So you kill them both, get less than your due, and are down a returning customer, which will make you look tough, sure, but it will scare away new customers."

"But if I just let him walk away, my reputation will go through the gutter. Folks are gonna start thinkin' they can just walk all over me."

"I was telling you the best case scenario. Worst case scenario, I get more involved in this than I already am, and the three of you die." I stroked the barrel of Zeus over my shoulder and gave Dogmeat a scratch behind the ears. He growled ferociously at the chem pushers. Good boy. "So tell me, Wolfgang, is your life and the lives of your friends here worth less than 400 caps?"

"So you're going to take the old hag's side?" Wolfgang grabbed his gun, but took a step back.
"I'm on your side, Wolfgang. Cut your losses and leave. There's no situation in which you don't lose."

"Let's kill them all, Wolf," the woman demanded. "We should have just done that in the first place."

Finally, the other goon spoke up. "I don't know about you, Simone, but I'm not willing to die over a handful of caps. It's just the one guy. He can be replaced with some other yutz."

Wolfgang stood there in pregnant silence, finger still on his trigger, but the gun was not pointed at me. "We're leaving."

"What?" the woman spat. "Did your balls just shrink? We can take some vault-dweller and an old woman and her druggie son."

"Leave it, Simone." His tone brokered no argument. "It's not worth it, just like Abe said." He holstered his gun again, then turned to me with a threatening finger. "If our paths ever cross again, there'll be no words. Only bullets. Capiche?"

"Got it," I shrugged easily, even as my stomach turned.

They left without looking back, and I returned to the diner on shaking knees. Trudy ushered me in much more nicely this time.

"I can't believe that worked."

"Trust me, no one's more surprised than I am." I collapsed into one of the dusty booths, my lungs heaving as if I had just run a mile. That had been about as scary as fighting that monster, but at least I'd had some power armor then. *Shame there were no more fusion cores.* Not for the last time, I marveled about how crazy my life had become.

While Dogmeat went to sniff Patrick, who looked as equally a nervous wreck as I was, Trudy shuffled around behind the counter and came back with a bottle of whiskey and a plain white coffee cup. "Here, I believe you've more than earned this." She poured about two fingers of the amber liquid into the cup and slid it towards me.

I grabbed it, took a large swig and then regretted it. "Ooh, that's some strong stuff." Already I could feel the warmth spread through my body and calm my nerves. "Thanks," I handed the woman back the bottle, but Trudy pushed it back towards me.

"Honey, after what you did for me and my boy, you can keep the bottle. And here." She handed me a small drawstring pouch that jingled.

I opened it to reveal a pile of Nuka-Cola bottle caps. So people really did use bottle caps as currency now. I once knew a boy who collected bottle caps for fun. Good lord, and those goons were carrying hundreds of these around? Did people just walk around with giant sacks full of bottle caps all the time?

"That's all we got, but it should go to you, since you saved them from going to those damn thugs."

"Oh no, Trudy, I can't--"

She shook her head, silver hair falling from her bun. "Take it. It's really not a lot, trust me. And if you want, I actually run a little trading post here. I'll give you a special discount."
After the confidence boost from the Drumlin Diner incident, I should have expected the wasteland to give me a rude awakening. I wasn't on a Sunday stroll, but on a quest through a land of monsters and poison. By the time I had passed the billboard welcoming me to Lexington, the last rays of the sun were fading. I cursed my stupidity of not thinking to spend the night at the diner, and hurried into town to find shelter.

It was still off-putting how little light there was at night. Before the bombs fell, you couldn't even see the stars with the neon glow from the city. Now, the sky was much brighter than the ground. I turned into the first intact building I encountered, which turned out to be a Super Duper Mart. The inside was incredibly dark, and I had to turn on the flashlight function of my pip-boy just to make sure I didn't trip over any of the rubble. Dogmeat sniffed the ground and whined. I could agree.

Something felt off, so I pulled Zeus off of my back and turned off the safety. As we crept through the store, I found the occasional skeleton of some poor shopper, metal baskets full of chips and Insta-Mash. Some were mere bone and tattered clothes, but a couple still looked juicy, flesh smooth and hairless and sagging. I didn't dare breathe. This place didn't feel safe. I doubted I'd be able to sleep here, I should probably try somewhere else—

Wait a minute, wasn't there a corpse right there just a second ago? I looked towards a pile of rubble where the ceiling had caved in a bit. I was almost positive that one of the fleshy corpses had been lying there.

The first thing I heard was Dogmeat's warning bark, then a guttural hissing sound, and then something hit me in the back of the head. It knocked me down to my knees, but I quickly turned around to defend myself, as stunned as I was. To my horror, what had attacked me was the missing corpse. It looked like something out of a Francisco Goya painting: its eyes lidless and unseeing, the head was tilted at an unnatural angle and the bottom jaw had fallen off so the mouth was forever gaping. The thing swung its arm at me, like it was a dead limb. I screamed.

Before the monster's arm could hit me, Dogmeat barreled into its side, fangs latched onto the thing's grotesque neck. Ugh, that must taste horrible. Luckily, his attack gave me enough time to pull it together and fire two rounds into the corpse's head. When it stopped twitching, Dogmeat unlatched, muzzle bloody, and returned to me.

I could hear the geiger counter on my pip-boy ticking under my breath. "What the hell was that? Some kind of zombie?"

The only answer I got was the same garish gurgling noise echoed across the store. Oh no.

I spotted one rushing at me from aisle three and fired two rounds. Before the body even fell to the ground, I was firing at another zombie climbing over one of the registers. I had to stop to reload. Before I could finish pulling the bullets out of their case, a zombie tackled me to the ground, teeth latching onto the arm I had raised in defense. Augh, did that mean I was going to turn into a zombie? I bashed it in the head with the butt of my rifle, before it ripped itself away from me, some of my flesh still in between its teeth. My throat felt hoarse from screaming and crying, but the inside of my mind was a string of curse words that would make a sailor blush. The zombie had knocked the box of bullets from my hand, and now they were scattered across the dirty tile floor.

When I took the moment to gauge the situation, I saw Dogmeat fending off three of the monsters at once. As amazing as that was, I could see twice that crawling over the aisles towards us. I had no
time to get the other box of bullets and reload, even if I could, there was no way the two of us could take on an entire supermarket full of zombies. "Dogmeat, run!"

The corpse that had bit me earlier lunged again, and I smacked it away with my rifle, using the momentum to pivot around and head back towards the double doors. A blow to my back sent me skipping over my steps. It hurt like a bitch, but at least it got me to the door quicker. I knocked them open with my elbow, blasting through the dark city streets, nearly tripping over empty canisters of Mr. Handy fuel piled out front for sale. I spared a glance to see Dogmeat running behind me. Good.

My feet pounded the pavement like it owed them lunch money, and I found myself drawn towards the giant red rocket on top of the old gas station. Maybe I felt drawn there because I had found Dogmeat at a similar station. Either way, the inhuman hisses chased me all the way into the tiny office. I turned around, kicked a zombie that had gotten too close, and then slammed the door close, turning the lock. The door shook on its hinges, the sounds of certain death leaking through. I trialed backwards, clutching Zeus to my chest with blood-slickened hands. Whether it was the knocking of my knees or the stray wrench on the floor, I tripped, my back colliding painfully with the wall of the small room. I slid down, landing on my butt, watching the door with my gun ready to fire, bawling my eyes out. Dogmeat stood ready too, growling at the door as it shook and shook.

Only when the sounds finally faded into silence did I have the thought to dig for a stimpak in my bag. I watched in blurry amazement as the wound on my arm slowly healed and the pain in my back eventually dissipated. I spent the whole night, clutching onto Dogmeat, eyes never leaving the door.

Chapter End Notes

I always really liked that a female Sole Survivor was a lawyer, and so I imagine she has a high Charisma stat.
A Wonderful Guy

Chapter Summary

After encountering the Brotherhood of Steel, Susie finally makes it to Diamond City and meets up with a most interesting detective, and an even more interesting Mayor.

Chapter Notes

Fun Fact: I am terrified of zombies, can't stand zombie games. And yet somehow, radioactive zombies are fine? Maybe because I started on Fallout 3, and the graphic weren't good enough to make them scary. (I was more scared of the Deathclaws than the ferals.) But I imagine they would be much more terrifying in real life without a VATS system.

The night of terror left me jittery and skittish, even with the comforting rays of morning. Luckily, no monsters lay in wait outside of the door when I finally unlocked it. Honestly, I was surprised the thing had held at all. One thing had become certain to me: I needed to find a weapon that didn't require reloading. As an after thought, I grabbed the pipe wrench I had tripped over last night. It was something, at least.

After a lethargic breakfast of canned food, I headed south. The going was long, as I had to sneak around two raider camps and stumbled upon a nest of giant mole-like rodents. After the grocery store from hell, picking off rodents, even of such unusually large size, had been relaxing, despite the exhaustion seeping into my bones. Of course, the closer I got to the heart of the town, the more the monsters came out. Shouldn't the monsters be away from civilization?

My pip-boy had picked up some kind of military radio frequency. I followed it, drawn in by the lure of friendly human people, that I didn't think about how it was a distress signal. The radio led me towards the Cambridge police station, and the place was under attack by those horrible zombies. I felt a little bit of surprise to see them in the daylight. Some part of me expected them to only appear at night, like most boogiemen. They weren't so terrifying in the daylight, but my legs still shook so much that I missed my shot a couple of times. This time, when Zeus ran out of lightning and I didn't have time to reload, Dogmeat jumped in front of me as a one-canine barrier. I didn't even need to use my pipe wrench. Without the cover of dark, these things weren't so surprising when they leapt at you, and with Dogmeat pinning them down so I could fire off some shots, they fought their way to the barricaded station.

We were welcomed by military-looking types, some in power armor with giant machine guns, and some running around in uniforms with laser rifles. We didn't have much time to exchange pleasantries before the next wave came. Hiding behind one of the barricades on the raised metal platform built around the entrance made for a good spot to snipe. The things weren't so terrifying when I was picking them off before they could even cross the barriers. And any I missed were taken
out by those soldiers with laser rifles. Now that I wasn't so terrified, it was actually kind of fun. It reminded me of hunting trips with my grandparents.

When all signs of the zombies had died, I found myself greeted by one of the soldiers in power armor, though he had taken his helmet off in order to speak with me. "You did excellent work there, civilian," he spoke stiffly, with no emotional inflection. "But might I ask what you are doing here?"

"I heard the radio signal asking for help," I shifted a little. It was uncomfortable having to look up at this walking metal tank. "I needed to see a friendly person, find safe harbor, just for a while."

"While we thank you for your help, this is a Brotherhood compound. We can't let an outsider in."

My heart sank. I was so damn tired now that the adrenaline had worn off. My feet were killing me from all the walking I had done lately, my arms ached from the recoil, and my stomach was clenching in either hunger or sickness. "Brotherhood? Please, I just need a nap. I won't be any trouble, I promise." I looked down at my feet, suddenly crying. "I haven't felt safe enough to sleep, please."

The man shifted uncomfortably at that, scratching the back of his neck, which was a bit awkward in the power armor. He looked at my blue Vault 111 suit. "How long have you been on the surface, vault-dweller?"

"About two weeks now. Look, I'll pay you. I have caps. I don't even need a bed."

He grimaced and held up his hand. "That won't be necessary. This isn't exactly protocol, but you did help us out. This can be your reward. Please stop crying."

I looked up with a sniffle, wiping my eyes. With shame, I realized that the other soldiers were looking at me. I didn't mean to break down like this in public, but the last few days had been really stressful, and I was just so. Damn. Tired. "Thanks."

He held up a hand. "Before I let you into the compound I need to know who you are."

"My name is Susan Quinn. As you guessed, I'm from a vault. Vault 111, to be precise."

"What are you doing on the surface? You vault types don't usually leave your bunkers."

"I'm headed for Diamond City. Look, don't you think you should introduce yourself before you begin with the interrogation?"

The man looked stricken. "I...you're right. Paladin Danse, Brotherhood of Steel."

"Who are the Brotherhood of Steel?"

A quirk of the lips that could have been either a frown or a grin. Hard to tell. "You really haven't been up here for long, have you? Our order seeks to understand the nature of technology. Its power. Its meaning to us as humans. And we fight to secure that power from those who would abuse it."

"Who's to say you guys won't abuse it?"

If I expected him to be offended, I was to be disappointed. "A fair question. We follow a strict code of ethics. We do not obtain this technology for our own gain, but for the betterment of humanity. If you have any more questions, our scribes can answer them inside."

The inside of the police station was fairly intact, except for one room that had collapsed in upon
itself. A handful of people in the Brotherhood uniform watched me warily. I was introduced to a pretty young woman referred to as Scribe Haylen who showed me to a bedroll on the floor, away from everyone else. Thankfully, I laid down and instantly went to sleep.

I woke up to someone softly humming a song. It took me a while to realize it was "A Wonderful Guy." The wave of nostalgia hit me like a freight train, and the homesickness was nauseating. I turned my head to see Dogmeat snoozing away by my knee, and the source of the humming scribbling away at something on a clipboard. Ah, Scribe Haylen. I remembered her now.

The woman put down some gizmo she was looking at and turned to me. "Ah, you're finally awake."

"What time is it?" She had been working by lantern, but then again the electricity was out and the building was windowless.

"It's sunrise. You slept all through yesterday and through the night. You weren't kidding when you said you were tired."

I chuckled sheepishly. "Yeah, it's hard to find somewhere safe out here to sleep." I didn't know how these people could live like this. Weren't they in constant terror of the dangers around them? "What were those creatures that attacked you guys yesterday? I had encountered them before..."

She tipped her head quizzically. "Those were ferals. People whose brains soaked up so much radiation it turned them rabid. They're mindless monsters now."

Ah, so that's why my geiger counter was ticking in their presence. How much radiation exposure did people nowadays go through? How much had I retained in contact with them? Hell, one of them had bit me. I checked my pip-boy, and its scanners told me I had a little bit of radiation poisoning. Probably why I was so tired. I should probably stock up on some anti-radiation medicine. With the threat of war, you could find them in every first aid kit, so they shouldn't be hard to find 200 years later. Right? "I don't suppose you guys have any Rad-Away you could spare or anything?"

"We do, but I'll have to ask the Paladin for permission. You are an outsider after all. We can't just give you our supplies."

"I have caps."

"We're not running a trading post," she said good-naturedly. "I'm sure the Paladin will let us part with one or two. He's a very by-the-books kind of guy, but he's a good man." Then her smile gained a teasing glint. "Not to mention his one weakness is a damsels in tears."

I flushed. "I was really stressed out. That's not normal for me."

"That's alright. Everyone cries. We're only human. Despite how the Paladin acts, he is indeed human too, though I've never seen him cry."

"He reminds me a lot of my late husband." I had no idea why I was telling her this. Maybe because I hadn't encountered a woman my age that I could talk to. It felt like those nights in college, burning the midnight oil with my roommate and best friend, just chatting about our lives. "He was the perfect soldier: stoic, strong moral fiber, a ridiculous hero-complex. He was a good man."

She smiled. "Yeah, that does sound a lot like our Danse. I'll have to warn him not to put the moves
on you, if you're weak to his kind."

She said the words as a tease, but they left a cold weight in my belly. "Please do." To encounter my husband again... What a horrifying thought.

Maybe she could sense my tension, because she gracefully changed the subject. "Cute dog you got there. What's his name?"

"Dogmeat."

She laughed. "What kind of a name is that?"

"I don't know. I didn't choose it."

"Oh, is he someone else's?"

"No? I think he's a stray that just attaches himself to people on a whim."

She opened her mouth, but was interrupted by a growling voice from the doorway. "You two girls done having your sleepover?" The man standing in the doorway wasn't Danse, but he wore a similar orange jumpsuit that I had seen other members of the Brotherhood wearing, including the off-putting glare.

"There's nothing wrong with a little chat, Rhys." Haylen frowned.

"The sooner the outsider leaves, the better. She doesn't belong here."

"Rhys!"

"No," I held up my hand to stifle the oncoming argument. "No, he's right. I've imposed myself on your organization enough. I really only wanted a safe place to rest my head for the night."

"Good." Rhys nodded and then walked away.

"I'm sorry about him," she smiled sadly. "He has a lot of issues that he likes to take out on others. The Brotherhood just means a lot to him. You know, you should think about joining us. You've already proven that you can handle a weapon, and you'd have the support and companionship of the Brotherhood behind you. You don't have to fight. You could become a scribe like me."

I shook my head. "No thanks. I'm not really buying into your whole modus operandi. Besides, I have something I need to do."

She nodded, accepting. "Alright. It was nice to meet you...?"

"Susie."

"Susie. If you ever find yourself back in the area, feel free to drop by for a chat. I'm not sure how much longer we'll be operating here, though."

I smiled. Maybe Haylen was feeling as lonely as I was. "Thanks. I will."

With Haylen's helpful instructions, I managed to find my way to Diamond City. She'd even tipped
me off to known raider camps so that my trip was battle free. It helped that there were signs pointing in the right direction. Turned out Diamond City had gotten its name not from precious gems but because it was housed in Fenway Park, the old baseball diamond. The place was well fortified. The streets were lined with barricades, turrets, and guards in old umpire uniforms. The walls stood tall and green, and the only entrance was barricaded by a large metal wall that looked like it came from one of those large crates you saw in warehouses. Through some roundabout chatter, some reporter in a red leather jacket out front managed to convince the gatekeeper over the intercom that I was some kind of merchant, and so they let us in. I didn't fully understand the woman's argument with the man, and when they got inside he didn't look like he fully believed her story.

As it turns out, her name was Piper Wright, and she was the head (only) reporter for the local newspaper Publick Occurrences. She had written some article claiming the Mayor, a pudgy and pasty man with slicked back silver hair and a politician's smile, was a "synth."

"What is a synth?" I had asked her.

"You're not from around here, are you? Synthetic people, agents of the mysterious Institute. No one knows where it is or what they want, but they've got their hands all over. There's two kinds you gotta watch out for: the obvious fakes that they send to do all the dirty work and scavenging, and the flesh-and-blood types that replace people, completely indistinguishable, as covert spies."

"If they're indistinguishable, then how do you know they are synths?"

She shrugged, adjusting the newsy cap on her head. "You can't, really, unless you bust them open and look for robotic parts. Trust me, many people have done just that. Mayor McDonough calls me a rabble-rouser, that I'm making the city paranoid, but what's the alternative? To just ignore all the missing persons? To just live with our heads in the sand, ignoring the boogie man?"

"So that's why you write this newspaper? To warn the people?"

"Well, someone's got to. Speaking of newspapers, I'd like to interview you." She smiled, all teeth. That nearly made me trip over my own feet. "Me? Why would anyone want to know about me?"

"Are you kidding, Blue? That vault suit and pip-boy are a dead giveaway. You're not from around here, probably just crawled out of the vault not too long ago. I'd like an outsider's perspective on all of this."

"Umm, alright, sure..."

I followed her to the pieced together shack from which she both lived and printed her paper. Outside, her little sister Nat stood on a crate, hocking bundles of the newspaper for sale. From the looks of it, they didn't get a whole lot of customers, and the guards gave them intimidating looks. The inside of her house was just as motley as the outside, full of worn mismatched furniture and junkyard pieces. She did have a desk with one of those RobCo terminals. Amazing how much of them survived the fallout.

She led me to one of her armchairs, all of the cushioning worn out, but it was still nice to be off of my feet. Dogmeat set to sniffing around the house, content to be ignored. I was offered refreshments and snacks, so of course I chose the Sugar Bombs. How courteous. Piper sat on the couch across the small cocktail table, notepad and pen in hand.

"Alright, Blue, let's start off with the basics. What's your name?"

"Susan Quinn."
"Susie Q, eh? Cute name. So I get that your from a vault. What was life like down there?"

"What does any of that matter?"

She tapped her pen on the edge of her paper. "This is a perspective piece. The people of Diamond City need to know where you're coming from, to understand that you're an outsider."

Fair point. "I don't know much about the vault. We were frozen the whole time."

She nearly dropped her pen. "No shit, really? You were in the fridge? Wait, don't tell me you're from before the war? 'The Woman Out of Time.' Wow, this is even better. Tell me, what was life like before the bombs fell?"

This felt like a tangent. "It was...louder, brighter. There were so many people, and the cars were this constant noise in the background. At night, the city was so bright that you couldn't even see the stars. It was..." Safe. Boring. Imprisoning. "I certainly didn't fear for my life whenever I went outside, that's for sure."

"Next question. I think I speak for all of the Commonwealth when I ask: what is the point of a television?"

"A TV?" I supposed it would make sense that no one would be airing programs anymore. "It's like a radio, but with picture as well. We would hear the news, but also watch shows. I had always liked The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin growing up, and The Silver Shroud was supposed to be getting a TV series, but I suppose that's not going to happen anymore." To think of all the things I would have lost from the war, it would be the Silver Shroud. Nate used to always tease me for my love of comics, but I loved the heroes overcoming the odds and saving the day. It was always obvious who was bad and who was evil, and good always triumphed. It was silly and cliche, but I couldn't get enough.

"I'm sorry, I didn't think that question would depress you as much as it did." Piper adjusted her scarf. "Let's just move on then, shall we? So you've seen the Commonwealth, Diamond City. How does it compare to your old life?"

"It's...terrifying, there's monsters everywhere and the place looks dead, but..." I looked out of her small window, past the dirty glass to the people walking about the market. "Despite all of that, you people have built a home, have eked out a living from this wasteland. It kind of gives me hope for humanity, y'know? And you care about such different things. In my old neighborhood, your hair had to be styled the right way, you had to have the right job, marry the right guy, look the right way." My blonde hair, once curled precisely now hung limp and greasy. My mother would have worked herself up into a right state at the sight of me. "But here, people don't care what you look like, they don't care if you're a woman or your skin is a different color. All that matters is survival. It's comforting to see that even on its last thread, people are still willing to help each other out." I thought of Scribe Haylen, of Preston Garvey and the people of Concord. There were some bad guys, like Wolfgang and the raiders, but there were also some people willing to do some good.

Piper's eyebrows were nearly inside her flat cap. "That's a surprisingly optimistic response."

"I do miss the cars, though. Walking everywhere is tiring."

She chuckled. "I can only imagine. Hard to believe those hunks of metal used to actually move. Now they're just landmines. Their nuclear engines explode if hit with a stray laser or explosion. So you gotta be careful when fighting the wildlife out there."

That was certainly good to know. Car crashes tended to be fatal.
"So next question, why did you come to Diamond City? What are you searching for?"

That's an answer I was still looking for. "My husband was murdered, and my son taken from me. I was...told that this would be the place to find help."

She set her pen and pad down, looking especially serious. "Oh, wow, Blue, I'm sorry. It's always heartbreaking to hear about a child separated from its parents, and to have your spouse murdered too... Look, this is off the record, but I know a guy who could help you find your son. He's a private eye here by the name of Nick Valentine. A good man, though most people tend to stay away from him. He's looked into all the missing persons cases in Diamond City, the only one who will do anything about it. If anyone can help you find your son, he can."

Why would people stay away from him? "Thanks, I'll look into it."

She nodded and picked her notepad back up. "Ok, moving on. I know this is hard for you, but do you think the Institute might be the one behind your son's kidnapping?"

"I don't know, but it definitely sounds like a possibility." So far they were the only likely suspect.

"Alright, last question: what do you have to say to all those families out there who have lost family members to the Institute? What advice would you give them?"

What advice? I wasn't sure if I was really the person who should be dispensing advice. I wasn't like these grieving families. "Well, you've really only got two options: hold out hope, or give up and move on with your life. I guess I'm the first type."

Valentine Detective Agency was tucked away in one of the back alleys, a neon red heart pierced by an arrow indicating the entrance. Upon entering the small building, I was welcomed by a grouchy looking young woman at a desk. "Welcome to Valentine Detective Agency. My name is Ellie Perkins. How can I help you?" The monotone couldn't have been any duller.

"I'm looking for Nick Valentine. I heard he could help me with a missing persons case."

"Ellie? Is that a new client?" The grizzly voice of a man drifted from upstairs. Down walked your stereotypical private dick, trench coat and fedora, pale black tie hanging loose from his neck, cigarette dangling from his lips. As he got closer, however, I noticed something a bit unusual. Parts of his skin were missing, chipped off to reveal robotic parts underneath. Piper had just gotten through telling me about the horrors of synths, and here one was.

"You're a synth?"

The robot frowned, and Ellie frowned even more. "Yes, I'm a synth. Look, I got built, I got old, and then I got tossed. I'm not a part of the Institute, not that I even remember anything about them. But first and foremost, I'm a detective."

I held up my hands in a placating gesture. "I'm sorry, I meant no offense. It's just that this whole city seems completely paranoid about synths, I didn't expect to see one walking about so openly."

Valentine quirked a wry smile at that. "Oh believe me, they'd be more scared of me if my metal parts
weren't showing. They're afraid of the monster they can't see." His eyes flickered to my furry companion at my feet. "Why, hello there, Dogmeat. Good to see you again, old pal."

I did a double-take between the two of them. "Wait, you know him?"

The synth detective nodded. "We've worked together on a couple of cases before. He's the best in the field." The field of what? "So, if my being a synth isn't going to be a problem, then what can I do for you?"

"I was told you could help me find my son."

"I will certainly try to," he inclined his head, glowing yellow eyes disappearing under the brim of his hat briefly. "Follow me to my desk. Take a seat."

He led me to a desk behind Ellie's, cluttered with folders and papers, and lit by a solitary desk lamp and the glow of a computer terminal. The chair was wooden, but comfortable, shaped to fit the contours of the body. Dogmeat sat beside me on the floor, tongue lolling happily.

Valentine sat in the chair behind the desk, pen at the ready to take notes. "So, tell me everything you can."

I did. I told him about how my family had been cryogenically frozen, and then woken up 200 years later. How I watched some man in a leather jacket shoot my husband in the head when he wouldn't hand his baby over to the mysterious figures in hazmat suits. How they froze me again, and then I woke up to an empty vault.

"Hmm, I think I might have a clue on who your guy might be, but I can't be sure. It would be easiest if I could see for myself."

"See for yourself?"

"Yeah, I'm going to look at your memories, with your permission, of course. Ever been to Goodneighbor? It's this little town full of rejects not too far from here. They have a place called the Memory Den where you can see any memory of yours. With that, I can view your memories to see if this is the guy I'm thinking of. Any little detail can help."

"That sounds...a little invasive."

"Of course, none of this happens without your permission. If you want, I can go off my hunch and work on that."

I shook my head. "No, no...you're right. It makes sense. This all sounds a little expensive though. I don't really have much money on me."

Valentine held up a metal hand. "I won't ask for any payment until the job's finished. No point in taking your money if I can't deliver. And don't worry about the Memory Den. The lady that runs the place owes me a favor."

"I...thank you, Mr. Valentine."

"Please, call me Nick." With a smile he held out a hand for me to shake, the one with the synthetic skin still intact. I shook it eagerly. What a swell guy.
The trip to Goodneighbor only had the one incident in which I became very acquainted with a super mutant, a giant burly green man with serious anger issues. It reminded me of this one comic I had read in a gas station once. Luckily, Nick proved to be a good shot, so we made it to the little door that led into the walled town with little fuss.

Of course, upon entry, we were greeted by some street tough in a black leather jacket, smoking a cigarette and flashing me a greasy smile. It dropped when he noticed my synth friend behind her. "Well, well, it's the detective. Tracking down another husband to his wayward mistress?"

Nick had a quip ready. "Why? Someone stand you up?"

The man growled, his voice destroyed by what was likely many years of chain smoking. "Don't try that evasive language on me." The goon turned to her. "And who are you, huh? His new dick-in-training?"

Were all the thug types in this world this asshole-ish? "Client, actually. If you're quite done, may we proceed?"

"No, actually. I've got a little offer for ya. Goodneighbor's a dangerous town, you'll need some insurance. So here's the deal: you give me everything in that bag of yours, and you won't encounter any 'accidents.' Big, bloody 'accidents.'"

Now that didn't sound like a deal at all. I was just about to tell him so, when someone behind the thug interrupted. Up walked the strangest character. The first thing I noticed was his faded red colonial uniform and his tricornered hat, then it was his horribly mottled face, like the man had walked through a fire. He had no nose, only a skeletal hole, and glittering black eyes. My first thought was to those ferals I had encountered before, and I almost reached for my gun, but this was no crazed monster. He walked and talked like a normal person.

"Woah, woah. Time out." If I had thought the thug had a scratchy voice, this guy's was a deep gravel. It was strangely soothing, instead of off-putting, like a purr. "Nick Valentine makes a rare visit to town, and you're hassling his friend here with that extortion crap?" He turned to give Nick a nod in greeting. "Good to see you again, Nick."

"Hancock." Nick nodded back.

"What do you care?" The thug spat. "She ain't one of us."

Hancock shook his with a theatrical sigh. "No love for your mayor, Finn?" Then his smirk dropped and so did the octave of his voice. It sent a shiver down my spine. "I said let 'em go."

Perhaps that leather jacket made this Finn guy immune, because he just kept arguing. "You're soft, Hancock. You keep letting outsiders walk all over us, one day there'll be a new mayor."

"Come on, man," Hancock slinked forward, chummy smile on his face. "This is me we're talking about. Let me tell you something." Then he drew the man forward, hand on his shoulder, as if to whisper a secret into his ear. Then next thing I knew, he pulled a knife from behind his back and stabbed the man three times in the chest.
I jumped back with a soundless shriek, hand over my mouth.

"Now why'd you have to go and say that, huh?" Hancock sighed over the body on the ground.
"You're breakin' my heart over here." He looked up at me. "You all right, sister?"

"I... You killed him!" Why was no one doing anything? Everyone was just standing around, while this man was murdered in broad daylight.

He shrugged his shoulders, wiping his hands on his coat, and I had the fleeting fantasy that maybe once the coat had been white. "Yeah, needed to be done. A mayor's got to make a point sometimes."

"But you just killed a man, even if he was bad."

"You're quite the shrinking violet, aren't you?" He looked over my shoulder to Nick. "You got yourself the genteel type here, Nick."

"I don't approve of murder either, Hancock."

"Bah!" The man waved a hand in the air. "You two are a couple of squares. Anyway, welcome to Goodneighbor, home of the misfit toys. We're of the people, for the people, ya feel me? Everyone's welcome." His charming smile fell briefly. "So long as you remember who's in charge."

My stomach clenched. "I don't see how I could forget after that scene."

"And that's why I pull stunts like that. And don't worry. I'll get someone to clean this mess up. See ya around, Nick." With a two-finger salute, the man was off.

I turned to Nick, my shock written across my face.

"Yeah, Hancock is quite the character."

"What happened to his face?"

Amazing how the android could make such minute facial expressions. His construction was really quite impressive. "Have you never seen a ghoul before? They're people who through whatever science suffered radiation damage from when the bombs fell, but survived. It left them looking like this."

"Wait, from when the bombs fell? These people are 200 years old? They're immortal?"

"Not exactly. They just age very slowly, and it's not like they can't be killed the good ol' fashioned way."

"Wait, so is Hancock from before the war?"

"Not quite. But that's his story to tell. This place is full of ghouls, as they won't be accepted anywhere else. They're second-class citizens in this world. So I'd avoid asking them any of these questions. Don't want to be rude."

He began walking, and I followed him. Goodneighbor looked like the sleazy nighttime version of Diamond City's sunny neighborhood life. Diamond City had its hierarchy, with the social elite living up in the stands looking down upon those living in hobbled together shacks. In Goodneighbor, however, everyone seemed to be on the same level, although that level looked to be pretty low.

"So if they're the victims of radiation damage, then how are they different from ferals? Was there something about the radiation back then versus the exposure now?"
"What are you talking about?" Nick looked as confused as I was.

"Those monsters, ferals, the ones that look like zombies. Someone told me that they were people who got too much radiation damage. I just figured that was a result of this nuclear wasteland, which reminds me, I need to stock up on some Rad-Away. Anyway, you said that ghouls were from before the war, except for Hancock somehow. So I was wondering if there was a difference in the radiation over time, or maybe it's getting hit with a blast of it versus slowly gaining radiation?"

That didn't clear up the confusion on his face, and I could hear the whir of gears working into overtime. "Feral ghouls are from the same time. They're ghouls whose brains have rotted from the radiation, making them violent."

I stopped walking. "So you're telling me that those monsters were people from before the war?" This shouldn't have been such a huge realization, but it felt daunting. It suddenly became difficult to breath, and I leaned against a brick wall for support. "Oh god, all those people. I could have known them." I had shopped at that Super Duper Mart many times before. What if one of those monsters had been that young boy with the terrible acne who worked the register? The one who always complained about his job to me while he rang up my groceries. "What if that's what happened to my parents?" Of course, now I knew they could have ended up like Hancock. Could I see some of my old friends, just horribly mottled and burned?

"Susan, you need to breathe," Nick put his hand on my back, a cold weight. "Calm down. You really are pre-war, huh?"

After a while of him rubbing my back, I finally managed to calm down. "Thanks, Nick. I'm sorry, I shouldn't be so surprised. I guess I'm still getting used to this world." And learning to accept that my old world was gone.

We made it to the Memory Den with no incident. The joint looked like one of those high-class gentlemen's clubs, complete with red velvet chairs and a sultry blonde in a scandalous red feathered dress. A new addition looked to be these big oval metal pods, and all sorts of wires and electrical equipment.

Nick walked up to the blonde with a chivalrous tip of his hat. "How are you doing, Irma?"

"Much better now that you're here, Nick," she flirted. "Though something tells me you're here for Dr. Amari and not a social call."

"I promise I'll take you up on that offer to get drinks soon."

"Oh well. I swear that metal heart of yours will be mine someday, Nick," Irma smirked. This must be some kind of running joke between them. "Dr. Amari is in the back." She jerked her head over her shoulder.

"Thanks." We went past the lounge chair that Irma reclined in and went down a hidden set of stairs to the basement level. Inside was more of a workshop than the velvety area above. There were two pods and work tables full of tools and whatnot. Inside stood a brown-skinned woman in a white lab coat.

So this must be Doctor Amari. The woman turned around to regard us openly. "Ah, Mister Valentine. I see you have need of my services again. Is this your latest client?"

Nick nodded. "We're looking for her son. I need to see into her memory of the incident."

Dr. Amari bobbed her chin up and down. This must be old hat for her. "How recent is this
"memory?"

"Only a few weeks old," I answered.

"Good, that will make it easier to recall, and I imagine there is a lot of strong emotion attached to it. Those are the kind that we can pull." She went to one of the pods and began to press some of the buttons on the control panel on the side. Then she turned to me with a serious look. "The first time can be a bit traumatic. Memories can be intense. Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

If it was to find Shaun... "Yes, of course."

"Alright, then. Please sit in the lounger here." She gestured to the metal pod she had been activating. The glass lid lifted up to reveal a comfortable looking chair.

"Go ahead," Nick added softly. "I'll be out here, watching."

Feeling strangely comforted about someone watching a rather personal memory, I sat down in the lounger as the doctor called it. It felt like I was in the dentist's chair. The glass lid closed over me, a white monitor blocking my view. I had to remind myself to breathe.

"Alright, it's important that you try to remain calm and focused in order to maintain the memory. This is a delicate science. We'll be monitoring your vitals the whole time."

Well, that was comforting.

"Focus on the memory for me please." I could hear her typing on something. "Searching the hippocampus...ah, yes, there it is."

With a last click, the monitor in front of me flicked to life, and I suddenly found myself in a different glass chamber. It took a moment for me to remember that I was in a memory and not really transported back to that cryo chamber. Lord, it was so cold, I couldn't feel anything. I could barely move my arms. I heard an artificial voice say, "Manual override initiated. Cryogenic stasis suspended." The feeling of deja vu was both obvious and painful.

From behind my frosted glass I saw an older man with a scar running over his left eye. Flocking him were two figures in white hazmat suits. They walked over to the chamber across from mine, where I could see Nate slowly waking up, Shaun in his arms. They slowly opened the door, fog spilling out. I knew what happened next.

"Oh god...I can't watch this again..."

Nate was a good man. He loved that baby more than anyone else. He was just trying to protect Shaun. He didn't deserve this. "Don't make me watch this again." I tried to escape, numb fists banging on the thick plexiglass window. *It should have been me.* Nate would have done a better job protecting Shaun.

"Your blood pressure is spiking," a female voice that didn't belong spoke from seemingly everywhere. "You need to relax."

"I've seen enough," a man's deep baritone answered her. "Pull the plug on this thing. Get her out."

"I can't just yank her out like that, there could be brain damage. Wait, hold on, the memory's changing."

Sure enough, the cryo chamber disappeared as did the mysterious figures. I found myself lying on a
hospital bed, propped up on pillows, hooked up to a heart monitor that beat a steady rhythm. Before I knew what was happening, I began to cry, heaving sobs wracking my entire body. I understood when I saw a nurse, fretting nervously about a woman in a cashmere coat, her entire face drawn in hard 8B pencil. My mother.

"I don't understand. Why don't you want to hold your own child? Your son?" Not an ounce of sympathy was on the cold woman's face. If the woman still existed to this day, I would have said she was a synth.

"I never wanted him. I never wanted a kid." I knew now why I was crying. I had realized that after all that pain, that I had lost any freedom I had once obtained. My life was over.

"What are you going on about? This should be the happiest day of your life. You're going to start a family, every woman's legacy. This is what you've always wanted."

"No, mother, it's what you've always wanted."

She took a step back, frozen rage dancing across her thin lips.

The nurse anxiously tried to calm my mother down. "She doesn't know what she's saying. Your daughter is still a little loopy from the pain medication. I'm sure this is just her hormones talking." No one looked convinced.

The disapproving glare on my mother's scrunched up face faded into a bright white light. I blinked rapidly, spots darting across my blurry vision. Slowly, I saw Nick and Doctor Amari looking at me with matching worried looks.

"I'm so sorry, dear," the good doctor apologized hastily. "When strong emotions become involved, sometimes the memories can get a little carried away. I couldn't pull you until they'd played themselves out. Messing with the brain is always dangerous."

"I got all I needed to see," Nick continued quickly. "I'm sorry we saw more than we should. Here." He pulled a pale blue handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to me.

I took it, confused, before I realized that I was still crying. How embarrassing. I dried my eyes. I really needed to stop crying in front of all these strong men like some damsel in a flick. "Nick, I think I need some time alone."

He didn't look put off. "Don't be. Take all the time you need."

I nodded, only realizing once I was at the top of the stairs that I hadn't thanked Dr. Amari for her services, but it was too late now. No way was I going back down there ever again. In a hurried pace, I headed out the door, stopping by Irma to ask for a place to find a good drink. She smiled a sad, knowing smile, and pointed me to the Third Rail. "People come here to remember," she had told me. "They go there to forget."

Chapter End Notes
"You're giving up your dream."
"No, mom, I'm giving up YOUR dream."

This is sounded an awful lot like a straight-to-TV coming-of-age movie on the Hallmark channel.
A Good Neighbor

Chapter Summary

Susie thought she was a little too old to be having a babysitter.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning, it gets a little graphic here. If you're squeamish about blood, you might want to skip from "I wasn't sure what witty comeback I had planned on saying," to "Hey there, doll, you alright?" It's an important scene, but I understand graphic murder isn't palatable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Third Rail was a bar located in an old subway station underneath the old statehouse. It looked like the kind of sleazy joint that my parents wouldn't be caught dead in. I liked it. The smoke from many cigarettes picked up a glow from the strings of lights hanging from the ceiling. The bar was mostly dim mood lighting, except for a makeshift stage where a single woman in a red sequined dress crooned out some smooth jazz. All manner of folks (a good number of them with the same unfortunate skin problem as the mayor) were lounging about, beer or cigarette in hand, just listening to the music. Behind the bar was a Mr. Handy with a little bowler cap on. How cute.

"Oi, no pets allowed in my establishment!" The robot was decidedly less cute now. What was with that ridiculous accent? "Didn't Ham stop you at the front door?"

The ghoul in the black suit and fedora holding a mean looking submachine gun had only smiled and scratched Dogmeat behind the ears. "No. He didn't seem to mind."

"Well, you ain't gettin' no drinks, 'til that mutt gets out of my bar."

That's no good. I really needed a drink.

"Ah, let her be, Chuck," a familiar voice from behind me introduced a new arrival. I turned to see none other than Mayor Hancock, still decked out in that red frock coat, but now I realized that he had the whole get up, white dress shirt and blue vest included. There was even an old American flag tied around his waist. Did this guy steal his outfit from a museum or something? "If the dog makes a mess, she can clean it up. He looks potty trained." He sat down on the stool beside me. I quickly averted my gaze to the wooden bar.

"Well, if our illustrious mayor says so, then I guess he can stay." The robot didn't look too happy about it, as much as a hovering robot with no face could. Codsworth was also very expressive. Maybe it was something in their programming?

"And get this lady a drink, on me." I wondered what kind of expression he was making, but it was hard to see out of my periphery.
"Thank you." I took the stool beside him, and Dogmeat sat down underneath the bar, his warm breath tickling my ankles. I thought about buying him something to eat, but I didn't want to push my luck with the robot. None too gently, one of the robots arms pushed a bottle of beer towards me. I couldn't help pursing my lips. Beer tasted like piss. I took a sip, and nearly spit it back out. That tasted worse than piss.

Beside me, Hancock let out a great belly-deep guffaw. "Yeah, the stuff tastes like shit, right? But it gets the job done. Here. To wash the taste out of your mouth." He passed me a bottle of vodka.

Now that's what I'm talking about. I grabbed the creamy white neck, skipped the empty glass he handed me and took one large swig straight from the bottle.

"Woah there, sister. Had a rough day in the couple of hours that you were here?"

I could feel my brain cells dying. Man, this stuff was great. Maybe they would be the cells that contained my memories of that horrible day. If I drank enough, maybe I could forget my mother entirely. Despite how much my throat burned, I took another swig.

A rough, warm weight pushed my hand down and the bottle along with it. I looked to find Hancock's leathery hand on mine. "Pace yourself." His hand fell back onto the bar, the drag of his mottled skin tickling my own smoother skin. "Maybe you're not the dainty daisy I thought you were. You certainly like your liquor."

"Sorry. I'll pay for the bottle." I watched his hand for a second longer before looking steadfastly at the shelves of dirty glasses behind the bartender.

"No need. I've got it. Think of it as a welcoming gift."

Wasn't that the stabbing? I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything at all. Despite the heat in my face, I still felt so cold, all the way down to my bones, deep in the cockles of my heart. How much liquor would it take before I could feel warm again?

"You know, not lookin' at me is just as rude as starin'."

In knee-jerk reaction, I looked up at Hancock. Despite not having any eyebrows, or nose, or lips, he could still be very expressive, and right now he had one non-eyebrow tipped up expectantly.

My face heated up to melting point now. "Oh, I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend."

"It's ok," he waved it off. "I take it you haven't seen many ghouls before."

"You're the first one I've ever met, actually."

"Oh? I feel honored. Glad to be your introduction into this rad freak show. Here, hand me that bottle. You're not drinking that all by yourself. I don't want to have to explain to Nick why his latest client is passed out." He took the bottle from my limp hands and poured himself a shot. Unlike me, he waited after slamming it down.

"I don't think you'll have to worry about Nick. He went back to Diamond City." I grabbed the vodka and poured myself a generous amount. This time though, I decided to savor the flavor. It tasted like fire and battery acid. Perfect.

"Oh? I didn't think he'd leave his damsel all alone in distress."

I frowned at that. "Now look here, mister mayor. I don't need a chaperone. I'm a grown-ass woman,
and I got here just fine on my own. Well, Dogmeat was with me, but I did most of the shooting." Interesting. The words felt pleasantly fuzzy in my mouth. I might have been a bit tipsy.

Hancock chuckled. "I stand corrected. Or well, sit corrected." Then he hit me with a roguish smile. Now that I was allowed to look at him, I could see that he really was quite handsome underneath all that corrugated skin. "No one's ever called me mister mayor before."

My frown deepened. "No offense, but why are you talking to me? You're giving me booze and chatting me up. Trying to figure out why I hired Nick Valentine?"

He leaned back a bit, a genuine look of surprise on his face. "You're sharper than you look."

"You're damn straight I am." Huh, my glass was suddenly empty. Hadn't I just filled it a minute ago? Oh well, I'd just pour myself another glass. "I've got my degree to prove it."

"Degree? What's that?"

"A piece of paper that says I'm smart."

"Nice. Where can I get me one of those?"

"I doubt you can anymore. The university's probably rubble by now."

"Hmm." Hancock was silent for a pause, studying me carefully. I saw him take out a small tin and pop a white tablet into his mouth. I knew what those were. They were banned from schools so you couldn't cheat on your tests. Mentats. "You're from before the bombs fell, aren't you?"

I blinked owlishly. "How'd you know?"

"Well, the vault suit's a dead giveaway that you're an outsider. You might want to get rid of it if you don't want to be taken advantage of. Plus you're talking about old world things. Doesn't take a genius to figure it out. What I don't know is how."

"Cryogenics."

"Ah. That'd do the trick." He rested his chin on his steepled hands. The gaze from those black orbs was too intense; I had to look away with a flush. No one had ever scrutinized me so hard before. He must find me wanting. "I wonder though... People who come to Nick are usually looking for something they lost. What did you lose?"

My old life. "My son. He was kidnapped. The bastard that took him shot my husband too. Right in front of me."

"Ah shit, doll. I'm sorry. I hope you get to be the one to put a bullet through his brain."

For a second, I was confused and thought he meant that I be the one who shot my husband, since that's what happened to him. But then I realized he meant his murderer. "Oh, um, thanks, I guess." I couldn't get the image of me shooting Nate out of my head though. It played in the back of my mind on repeat, like a haunting melody.

Hancock finished the last of his drink with a satisfied "Gwah!" Then he leaned his chin on his fist while his elbow dug into the wooden top of the bar. "If you don't mind me sticking my non-existant nose where it don't belong, might I ask why you're still here if Nick's already headed back to Diamond City?"
Should I answer that? Could I even answer that? "He's doing his thing, and I'm doing mine."

Hancock took the evasive answer in stride. "Well, if you're going to be staying here, you should get a room at the Hotel Rexford. Tell them I sent ya, and they should give you a discount." He stood up, apparently this drinking session was over for him.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" No one had been this nice to me so far without me having to prove myself first. If anything, Hancock should have started off with a bad impression of me.

He paused, hitting me with a casual grin. "Goodneighbor's a home for the lost, and you look a little lost. Just give it a little time, you'll make a couple of friends here, and then next thing you know, you'll be calling this place home. Everyone does." With that, he left me to think over that encounter.

I did end up taking his advice and heading to the Hotel Rexford. It looked like King Kong had taken a big chunk out of the top, but the neon sign still glowed strong. The inside was an improvement, but only barely. The marble floor was still dirty, despite one woman endlessly sweeping, and any color or decoration had decayed with age. The old woman working the counter didn't care much for Hancock promising a discount, so it turned out that renting the room only cost nine caps per night instead of ten. Some guy named Fred Allen tried to sell me chems in the lobby, while an elderly janitor started waxing lyrical about some robot. It was becoming clear to me what kinds of people lived in Goodneighbor. This place really was the slums.

I followed the front desk attendant's directions to the top floor. I was just about to head to my room when one of the doors opened and out walked a ghoul in a yellow trench coat and hat. Something about him looked familiar, but I didn't realize what until he noticed me and spoke.

"What? No, it can't... It's...It's you! From Sanctuary Hills, right?"

"Wait. Are you from Vault-Tec?"

His face scrunched up. "I am Vault-Tec. Twenty years of loyal service, and now look at me. I wasn't on the list. But you. 200 years and you still look perfect. How? How is that possible?"

I remembered the salesman who had come to my door, annoyingly cheerful and pushy. He hadn't asked to speak to my husband, the man of the house, as most would have. It was because of him that I was still alive right now. Hell, I might have become a ghoul too. "We were frozen. I only recently thawed out."

His black eyes narrowed. "What? The company never told me anything about that. Unbelievable. Well, I had to get to the future the hard way. Living through...the decay, the filth. The bloodshed! Look at me. I'm a ghoul. A freak."

My knee-jerk reaction was to refute him, but it would sound like a heartless platitude. "I'm so sorry this happened to you. I had no idea..."

"You know...you're the only person I met from...before...I, um..." The poor guy looked like he was going to cry. Could he? "Oh god, I've been so alone here. No settlement in the Commonwealth wants a ghoul with 200 years of Vault-Tec sales experience."

I really wanted to give this guy a hug, he looked so sad, but we were technically complete strangers. Oh, to hell with it. I threw caution to the wind and wrapped him up in a loose hug, in case he wanted...
to escape. If I got in trouble for it, I'd just blame it on the booze, which was likely the truth anyhow. He tensed, but then he began to shake, like he had a bad case of hiccups. It hit me that he was sobbing, though no tears were shed. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders, squeezing me tightly. Poor guy needed a hug bad.

"Hey buddy, what's your name?" I asked softly as I rubbed soothing circles in his back.

"David."

"Alright, David. How about you go back to Sanctuary Hills? I've built a little settlement there. You can be our local town vendor. After all, you've got 200 years of sales experience. I can't think of anyone more qualified."

He pulled back, hands on my shoulders. "Really? Will they let a ghoul in there?"

I had no idea what their thoughts on ghouls were, but it was my damn house, my damn town, and if I said he can live there, then he can. "They're nice folk. Just in case, I'll write them a letter of introduction."

"And you'll come to visit me?"

I hadn't planned on going back to Sanctuary until I'd found Shaun, but after that I'd likely end up living there, if I survived. "Yeah, of course. I promise." It'd probably be good to check up on Preston and the others, give them an update on the rest of the world, and bring back a couple of rare items for building, like circuitry and whatnot.

"Oh, thank you. I'll head over there right now. I'll see you there!" The man excitedly went back into his room to pack up. I worried about him making the trip, but I supposed he had survived all these years on his own.

I woke up from a restless sleep. I had a nightmare that I had been the one to shoot Nate and take Shaun. When the strangers in hazmat suits asked for the baby, I gladly handed him over. The raging hangover didn't help matters either. Even throwing up didn't alleviate the roiling of my stomach. Dogmeat rested his head on my arm from where I sat crouched over the porcelain toilet. Luckily, the plumbing still worked in this building. I went downstairs for some breakfast. The hotel didn't have anything complimentary, so I bought myself a package of Sugar Bombs and some crispy squirrel bits for Dogmeat. If Sugar Bombs couldn't solve this, then I don't know what could. I was seriously beginning to miss the home-cooked meals of Sanctuary. Although no food was safe from radiation.

That reminded me. I needed to stock up on Rad-Away and Rad-X, although now I knew I was more likely to die from radiation poisoning than turn into a feral ghoul. Could Rad-Away be used on dogs? Dogmeat always seemed to bounce back from whatever injuries he sustained during battle. Maybe he was mutated, and had regenerative healing qualities? I laughed to myself. That sounded like something out of a comic book.

Walking through the narrows streets of Goodneighbor, I noticed how a lot of the residents seemed to be ghouls. In retrospect, Diamond City hadn't had any at all. Perhaps there was a related reason? Nick had said that ghouls were treated like second-class citizens. I couldn't understand that. They were all burn victims, not to mention basically immortal. I would have thought that they'd be worshipped as demigods or something. Although, perhaps I shouldn't be too surprised. Subjugation
I found myself at Daisy's Discounts, a shop set up near the entrance to town, right next to Kill or Be Killed, an aptly named weapons and munition store. Daisy turned out to be a ghoul with a sweet smile. She still had a full head of hair, though I wasn't certain it was not a wig. I went there to buy some medicine, and ended up chatting with her about pre-war life. It was rather refreshing to meet people who knew what life was like back then. As it turned out, Daisy was a bit of a bookworm, although she was more of a romance novel than an adventure and comics kind of lady like me. We both loved The Lord of the Rings, though. Somehow, I ended up leaving her store with a promise to clear out the Boston Public Library of super mutants and was sent to another ghoul named Kent Connolly.

The two of us almost didn't meet. He lived in the Memory Den, a place I wasn't sure I wanted to go back to so soon. It turned out to be worth it, to meet another fan of the Silver Shroud. He would escape the crimes of this world by using the memory pods to relive old memories and to rewatch episodes he had seen. A smart idea that I almost considered copying, but who knew what my memories would show me.

"I'm so glad I got to meet someone from the olden times who loves the Silver Shroud," Kent smiled at me. "I'll have to thank Daisy next time I see her for sending you my way."

"Yeah, I think one of the saddest things about the war is that there will never be anymore new episodes of the Silver Shroud." I looked at his faded and torn up poster of the hero himself. His little room had a lot of old memorabilia, and he ran the Silver Shroud radio, replaying old episodes that he still had. I really wished I had a car so I could travel to my grandparents' farm out in the country. They still had my old holotapes of some of the episodes. I could have added to his collection.

"Yeah, that and the dangerous monsters, and the lack of clean food and water...oh, and the rampant theft and murder. This world is a mess." Kent sighed, but then looked up at me with a sparkle in his eyes. Strange, that he didn't have the solid black eyes like other ghouls, but the whites had simply turned red. "I've got a plan, though, to bring the Silver Shroud back to life."

"What do you mean?"

"The Silver Shroud is just what this world needs: a hero to bring hope to the people. If the Shroud were here, he'd just kill all the bad guys. A happy ending." He patted Dogmeat affectionately.

"That does sound nice." If there were no raiders, no sleazy drug pushers, if people started to help each other instead of taking advantage, life wouldn't be so bad. "But how?"

"I've built my own custom machine gun, even better than the original. But to make this work, I still need one important piece: the Silver Shroud costume herself. They've got the genuine article right here in Boston, for the show. I've been meaning to get it. It's at the Hubris comic book store, but the road there is dangerous. There's a lot more raiders on the road nowadays than normal, and I've seen a few super mutants prowling the streets outside Goodneighbor. I don't think I'd make it. I tried hiring a couple of mercenaries to go get it for me. They didn't come back though. I don't know if they died on the job, or if they just took my money and left. They were expensive, too."

I frowned. Kent was quickly becoming my best friend here in Goodneighbor, but he seemed like the type that got bullied. I feared that he might seriously hurt himself in his quest to bring back the Silver Shroud. "What if I got it for you?"

He lit up like the Fourth of July. "You'd do that for me, Susie? Really?"
"Well, I admit I have a bit of a selfish interest in seeing the costume in person."

He nearly leapt up out of his chair. Dogmeat wagged his tail excitedly, sensing the energy in the room. "Oh wow, you are one stand-up gal, you know that? You are just something special."

I said my goodbyes and left the Memory Den, wondering why I kept making all these insane promises. Super mutants were scary, well, more intimidating than scary. Now ferals were something to be truly frightened of. Who knew what dangers lied in between here and the comic book store? I was going to need more guns.

"You know," a voice from the alleyway next to me nearly caused me to leap right out of my skin. "I never pegged you for a comic book fan."

I flicked around to see Hancock, leaning casually against the wall. How long had he been standing there? Was he waiting for me? Despite how my heart was pounding away from the scare, I managed to reply coolly, "I'm not the type of girl who likes to be easily pegged."

"Really? I love to be pegged." That toothy grin he gave told me that he had made some kind of double entendre that I didn't understand.

"How'd you know about the promise I made to Kent? I just said it a few minutes ago, and you most certainly weren't in the room."

"I talked to Daisy. She told me how you promised to clear the library building of super mutants for her, and that she sent you to a kindred spirit. Kent's been talking about his Silver Shroud plan for years. It wasn't a big leap to guess that you'd promise to help him too. You're turning out to be quite the bleeding heart, sister."

"Kent is something pure that must be protected." He had such childish wonder and hope. It made me wonder how old he was before the ghoulification froze him there. He looked like an adult but acted like a kid.

"Yeah, he's a good guy. The world needs more people like him. I'm glad I could bring someone else into his corner."

This guy talked like apple butter, but he was incredibly perceptive. Was it those Mentats, maybe? "Did you send me to the Hotel Rexford so that I'd meet David?"

Hancock shrugged nonchalantly. "He's pre-war, you're pre-war. You came from a vault and he worked for Vault-Tec. I admit, it was a bit of a gamble, but it seems it paid off."

"You're some kind of evil genius," I gaped. "I see how you've been mayor this whole time."

Now he sported a truly wicked grin. "Glad to see someone appreciates me."

"Then why have you been following me around? I doubt the mayor pays this much attention to every newcomer."

"On the contrary, doll, I pay exactly this much attention to newcomers. I know everything that happens in my town."

Hmm, something didn't add up. I doubted he'd add this much of a personal touch, so what made me different? Aha! I could practically see the light bulb blink on over my head. "Nick asked you to look after me, didn't he?"
He scratched his chin idly. "Hmm, not bad. I may have underestimated you."

"So why would you follow some nuisance like me around? What do you owe Nick?"

"A favor, let's just leave it at that. I'll admit, I could have just sent one of my boys to tail you, but you got me curious. You're so very different from the people of the Commonwealth. I know why now, of course."

"I'm not like the other girls," I joked.

Hancock laughed. "You're definitely a special case. Only time will tell if this wasteland will make or break you. I'm gonna start a betting pool." He pushed himself off the wall, stretching idly. "Well, now that the cat's out of the bag, I'm gonna stop stalking you. Oh, one thing, though. Whenever you decide to make good on those promises, bring me along, would you? I want a front row seat for this bloodbath." And with a wave, he was gone as suddenly as he arrived. That man was like a tidal wave, you just couldn't help getting swept up in his flow. An evil genius, indeed.

Despite better judgement, I invited Hancock along like he asked. There had been a mercenary for hire down in the Third Rail, but I couldn't afford him. A girl's got to eat after all. The ghoul's long red coattails fluttered behind him, and I had to admit, the outfit did make the man look mayoral. The roads outside Goodneighbor were littered with piles of debris, making it a bit hard to walk sometimes. We headed west, walking at an easy pace. The comic book store wasn't too far, and I had been around this part of Boston all my life, although it barely resembled the beautiful city it had once been. We came across a pack of wild canines, whether wolves or dogs, that had gone rabid. They attacked us on sight, and it broke my heart to have to put them down.

"Oh please don't tell me you're going to cry over a couple of mongrels," Hancock rolled his eyes. "I get that you're a dog lover, but they were trying to kill us."

"Only because they were starving. Poor things were skin and bone." The pitiful creatures had been hairless and pale, clearly sick with radiation poisoning. It made me wonder how Dogmeat turned out the way he did. I had spotted a couple of cats running around Diamond City, but never any dogs. Oh no, I better not be about to cry over some dogs in front of Hancock. That time of the month must be approaching. What did the ladies of the wasteland use for periods? I'd have to ask Daisy. But wait, did ghouls even still get periods?

"Look, sister, it's a dog eat dog world," he chuckled at his own pun. I found it in poor taste considering Dogmeat was standing right there.

We continued encountering one of those rodents of unusual size again, but this one was practically glowing with radiation poisoning. Hancock called it a molerat, which I guess made sense. After that, we didn't talk much. The guy was considerably less charming when I was sober. He was a special kind of condescending that disguised it as a joke. As chummy as he may act, I got the distinct feeling he didn't think much of me.

He pulled out a familiar metal tin from his coat pocket, and popped a tablet into his mouth. When he caught me staring, he offered one.

"No thanks," I declined with an ill concealed look of disgust.

"What about some Jet? You look like the kind of gal who'd enjoy a good Jet high."
"I don't do drugs. They're disgusting."

"Oh?" He was smiling but his tone of voice didn't sound too happy. "So you're one of those high and mighty types who thinks they're better than everyone else."

"I don't think I'm better than everyone else, I just don't like to put poison in my body, and then become dependent on it."

"I'm sure we can find a doctor to get that stick out of your ass. You just can't have any fun, and so you don't want anyone else to have any fun. You're just like those Diamond City bastards."

I thought of Piper, of Nick. I could feel the hair on the back of my neck bristle. "I think you're just jealous of Diamond City. They have clean streets and happy, law-abiding citizens. Not to mention a much better dressed mayor."

Hancock stopped walking to hit me with a dirty look. "Ok, now I know you're full of shit, because no one is better dressed than me. Also, McDonough is an overweight sack of brahmin shit, and so is the rest of Diamond City. You ever noticed how there isn't a single ghoul in that green monstrosity? It's because their illustrious mayor kicked them all out. Some of them made it to Goodneighbor, got used to life there, but the rest are likely dead by now. He as good as pulled the trigger himself. All of those cowards."

All of my ire left me. "Hancock, I had no idea..." It all made sense now. I didn't actually like Mayor McDonough. I had only said those things to get back at Hancock, but I never thought he would kick out an entire people into the city ruins to fend for themselves. I imagined Daisy or Kent, wandering these streets full of super mutants and raiders, and had to push down the bile in my throat. "I'd like to say that's something new for humanity, but it would be a lie." Everyone knew about the Chinese internment camps out west. And none of us thought anything of it.

His passions seemed to cool as well, for that scrunched up look of rage on his face smoothed away into a neutral expression. "You had nothing to do with it. You're--" Whatever he was going to say was cut off by a bullet whizzing past him. If Hancock had a nose, he certainly wouldn't after that.

In unison, we flicked around to the direction of where the bullet came from to see a ragtag group of people on a skywalk, guns pointed at us. "Shit, raiders!" Hancock called out before dodging a laser beam. He whipped out a pipe pistol and began to return fire.

I ducked behind an old newspaper stand, slinging Zeus from over my shoulder. At this moment, I was glad that I had decided to add a scope to the rifle. It made the distance no problem at all, and I quickly picked off raiders left and right. One bullet for each little head in my range. It reminded me of the time in Concord and at the Brotherhood compound in Cambridge. When there was this distance between me and the enemy, I felt more confident, safe. It was just target practice back at Papa's backyard, knocking root beer bottles off of barrels.

In no time at all, all the raiders were dead, and the silence after all that gunfire was deafening. Hancock sauntered over to me, smug grin on his face. "You handled yourself pretty well there, sister." It seemed I had gained a few points of approval with him.

I wasn't sure what witty comeback I had planned on saying, because out of the the building next to me ran a new handful of raiders that we had apparently missed. I heard the loud repeat of Hancock's shotgun and Dogmeat barking, and without thinking, I smacked a woman with black grease painted over her face with the barrel of Zeus. The raider turned away, but not before hooking her foot around my leg, knocking me off my feet. Zeus clattered to the ground out of my range.
Before I could get back to my feet, she was on top of me, large combat knife in hand. I screamed in
fear, and the adrenaline gave me enough of a boost that I could buck her much hulkier form off of
mine. She came back for another attack with a war cry, but I had enough time to grab the pipe
wrench from my belt and to knock the knife out of her hands. Her wrist looked red and swollen from
the hit, most likely broken. Pipe wrenches were heavy. The pain didn't deter her, however, and she
launched herself at me like one of those rabid dogs I had fought earlier. She got her hands around my
throat -- Ok, I guess her wrist wasn't broken -- and I could feel my airway constricting painfully. I
thwacked the wrench over her skull, blood leaking from her temple, but her fingers only constricted
more. My vision began to blur. I smacked the woman with the wrench two more times before her
grip finally loosened, and I was able to switch our positions. She still growled ferociously under me
and struggled weakly. Frantic, I brought the wrench down on her face over and over and over. I
heard someone screaming, but all I could think about was how I had to make this woman stop
moving, or she would kill me. With one last hit and the crack of bone, I clambered off of her chest,
panting like a diseased animal, and stood over the mangled corpse.

Oh god. There was so much blood. It was all over me. None of it was my own. I realized now that
my vision wasn't blurry because I had been losing oxygen, but because I had been crying the whole
time. I stumbled back, dropping the bloodied pipe wrench from my shaking fingers. "Oh god, oh
god, oh god..." I covered my eyes with my hands so I wouldn't have to look at the scene of my crime
anymore, but that was so much worse. All I did was smear blood on my face.

"Hey there, doll, you alright?" Hancock's deep voice was that soothing soft tone it had been that
night at that bar.

I felt his hand on my shoulder, and I flinched, but it didn't go anywhere. "I'm a m-murderer," I
choked out.

"You weren't wigging out like this before."

"That was different. They were...targets, they weren't p-people, but this...this..." This had been up
close and personal. This had awakened something dark and primal inside, and it terrified the hell out
of me. There had been a point when the woman was incapacitated, but still alive. My life was no

My knees gave out, and I collapsed on the ground. The sobs were so heavy that my entire body
shook with them. Hancock's hand remained on my shoulder all the way down, and he knelt beside
me.

"Look, Susan, there's something you gotta understand here. It's probably the most important thing
you'll ever know in your life. She had to die."

"No, she didn't!" God, even my voice sounded wet. I went to wipe the snot running out of my nose,
but only smeared more blood on my face. Dammit. I needed to stop doing that. "I could have
escaped. We both could have lived."

"No, no she couldn't." He untied the flag he used as a belt and gently wiped my face. I wanted to say
thank you, but my lungs were going into overdrive and talking was difficult. "If she had lived, she
would have just attacked some other poor schmuck on the road. What if the next person she attacked
had been Kent? Or Daisy?"

Daisy looked like the kind of woman who could probably hold her own, but Kent would have been
another smear on the road. But these weren't mindless monsters, these were people, just trying to
survive in this wasteland like the rest of them. "They were just like those wild dogs. They were just
trying to survive. Who knows what circumstances forced her into a life of plundering?"

"Nuh-uh, she made that choice to attack innocent people. And she would likely make it again. So yeah, she was just like those feral mutts, and had to be put down too, for the safety of everyone." He grabbed the sides of my head to force me to look into his dark eyes. They had a bit of a sparkle to them, like tiny stars, as if I were looking up at the night sky. This close, I could see that his eyes weren't completely black, but simply had a dark film over them. Beneath it, I could see what were once beautiful hazel eyes. "This wasn't a crime here. This. This was justice."

I took a moment to think on his words and get my breathing back under control. He had a bit of a point. These raiders, yes, they were people, but they had made their decision to attack others. We didn't live in a society with prisons and police anymore. There was no humane way to stop these people from attacking others again. The only surefire way to get them to stop was to kill them. Just like the Silver Shroud kills bad guys. If it was raiders, then I shouldn't feel any guilt.

Hancock let go of my face, leaning back a bit to give me some air. "Understand?"

I nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I understand."

"Good," he spoke with too much cheer, standing up and dusting off his hands. "Now, the second thing you gotta learn. Once you kill the baddies, you get to loot their bodies!"

I turned a bit green at the gills.

He laughed at me. "Ok, just this once, I'll perform this service for you, but I'm getting the good stuff." He returned later with an armful of loot. He pocketed any chems the raiders had and took most of their ammo, which was fine with me, since they didn't have any that would fit Zeus. I got the handful of bottle caps, a familiar looking combat knife, one of their pipe pistols, and a pile of leather armor. "Since your so attached to that vault suit of yours, you should at least wear armor on the outside of it. And you definitely are going to need more than one gun, and while you proved to be pretty handy with that wrench, a knife is quicker and makes them bleed more." He shot me a wicked grin at that. "I'm going to have to teach you how to use it, though. You've got absolutely no skill."

"Where would I pick up hand-to-hand combat skills? I was a housewife."

"We've all got our downfalls, but that's no excuse." He helped me up to my feet and led me a little ways north towards a creek so that I could wash all the blood off of me. My vault suit was horribly stained, and like it or not, I'd have to trash it and find a new outfit. Hancock helped me put on the leather armor. It didn't cover much, but it did make me feel better. The combat knife though...I knew exactly from which corpse he had looted that. I decided to keep it after all, as a reminder.

Finally, we made it to Hubris Comics, the store sunken down below street level so that you had to take stairs down to its entrance. The shop windows were completely covered in grime and dust, so it was impossible to see inside. It seemed a little anticlimactic to have fought all those raiders just to come to a quiet, empty store.

Hancock seemed to share my feelings. "I don't know, something don't feel right about this place."

"We'll just sneak in real quiet and scout the place out. I doubt it's full of raiders. They would have lookouts and attacked by now."

"There's more than raiders out there that want to kill us," Hancock retorted, but carefully opened the door, taking point.

Inside the store was dark and dusty, the crowded shelves of decayed comic books making the store
appear smaller. The entrance popped them right next to the registers, so we crept along behind the counter. The walls were covered in old, torn up posters. I saw a cardboard cutout of Grognak the Barbarian, the top of his axe broken off, and his head so faded that you couldn't make out his face. Dogmeat sniffed around, then put his ears back, crouched low and let out a soft whine.

Hancock stiffened, looking at something in the shadows. Softly, he whispered to me, "Hey dolly, you and the mutt need to get out of the building. Do it real slow."

"What about you?" I said as loud as I dared. I didn't know what dangers lay in the dark, but Hancock looked dead serious.

"I'll be fine. I promise. Please just go outside and wait for me. I'll get everything you need."

I wanted to tell him off for brushing me aside, that even though I was a woman, I could handle myself just as well as any man. But this was the same guy that had told me that murder was necessary and would teach me how to use a knife. Logically, I knew this wasn't about gender, maybe not even about my skill with a gun, but it still grated on my nerves. I nodded, and slowly skulked back out into the sunlight. At Hancock's gesture, I closed the door.

I waited for about half an hour, and the store remained as silent as the grave. I wondered what had been in there, if anything. Hancock hadn't fired his gun at all, so maybe it wasn't about whether or not I could handle myself in a fight. He returned easily, no worse for wear, but carrying a huge load of stuff. He even had a life-size cardboard cutout of the Silver Shroud himself. I eagerly went to help share his burden.

"Thanks, but are you going to tell me why I couldn't do the thing I promised to do?"

"Ferals. The place was full of them. They won't attack other ghouls, so I figured it'd just be easiest on everybody if only I went in." Hancock shrugged his shoulders.

The thought of being in the dark, in those cramped corners where any of those monsters could jump out at me. A cold sweat broke over my back. "I...yeah, thanks."

He gave me that scrutinizing look again, like he was reading an old newspaper and some of the words had faded beyond legibility. "Come on, let's get out of here. I could use a drink."

When we returned to Goodneighbor, we went our separate ways. I headed to the Memory Den where Kent awaited eagerly. The kid practically jumped for joy and was even happier about getting the memorabilia.

"So now you've got the costume," I told him, sitting in the chair next to his. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Actually, I was thinking of giving it to you," Kent said shyly. "Hear me out. I'm just not Silver Shroud material. He's strong, capable. But you, you could do it. You've already got your own origin story and everything, what with the cryovault and all."

"But why me? Why not just hire a mercenary?"
"After what happened last time? Nah, besides, you helped me out when the rest of the world just laughed at me. Plus, I'd rather it be a true fan of the Shroud, such as yourself. For authenticity, you know."

"But I'm a woman. The Silver Shroud is a man."

"The Silver Shroud is a title, a mantle to be passed down, so that the hero lives on forever, long after the man dies."

Wow, Kent was quite the poet. "You know, I bet you would have been a great writer for the TV show."

"Ah, shucks, you really think so?" Kent scratched his cheek shyly, but a small smile was hidden behind his hand. "So will you do it? For me? For Goodneighbor?" He looked at me with sad puppy dog eyes.

How could I resist that face? "Yeah, I'll do it."

"Oh thank you, Susie, you're the best. A real dynamite gal. The costume and the gun are yours. I'll call in any crimes over the radio and then you go in and dispatch justice. Oh, and here's some...calling cards, I guess. So that people know it was the Shroud."

I took the stuff and left. What had I gotten myself into?

Strangely enough, I didn't hear any crime reports on the Silver Shroud radio station, even though I stayed up nights listening, just in case. It was simultaneously aggravating and relieving. I was kind of looking forward to dressing up as the Shroud, even a lady version, but I still wasn't sure if I could go up to a guy with the intent of killing him, no matter how bad he was. I understood what Hancock had told me that day, but putting it into practice was turning out to be a challenge.

Soon, though, I was going to run out of caps, and I figured I should start with the promise I made to Daisy. Super mutants were scary, but I could take them, if I was smart about it. And I was sure I could find some loot worth selling. When I went to leave Goodneighbor, however, I was stopped by a guard at the door.

"Hey, let me through."

"Not yet, ma'am. You're not to leave here unaccompanied. I've sent someone to fetch you an escort. Mayor's orders."

I gaped. "I don't need a babysitter. I'm a grown woman. Besides, I thought this was a free country? 'Of the people, for the people.'"

"Sorry, ma'am. Just following orders."

Damn, Hancock was taking Nick's request way too far. How badly did he owe the guy?

Finally, my "escort" showed up, a woman decked out in metal armor, carrying an impressive
minigun. Her fiery red hair was completely shaved down the side of her head, exposing a rather nasty burn on the side of her face. Apparently fashion was blown to smithereens too when the bombs fell. Why did everyone look like they had just fallen out of a trash compacter? "The name's Fahrenheit. Hancock sent me to babysit."

I felt a growl bubble up in my throat. Ok, this woman may have some pretty nice eyeshadow going on, but I got enough condescension from Hancock. "Well, I don't see any babies around here, so you'll just have to sit somewhere else."

The corners of her mouth twitched. "Look, sweetie, it's simple. If you want to leave Goodneighbor, you'll have to take me along with. You're heading to the library, yeah? Trust me, you'll want the backup."

Ok, she may have a point, but that didn't mean I had to like it. "Fine. Try not to shoot my dog with that overcompensating gun of yours, alright?"

Again, Fahrenheit's mouth twitched, almost like she was about to laugh. That bored look remained, however. "Lead the way, Short Stack."

I was not that short. She just had high heels in her boots. Grumpy, I led the way out of Goodneighbor, following my pip-boy. The library was a bit further than the comic book shop, but thanks to traveling there the other day, the road was already cleared.

"You know, Hancock's never sent me to protect someone else before. I'm his bodyguard, you see." For such a stoic looking character, the woman was sure being chatty. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was sweet on you, but you're not his type."

I grit my teeth. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were jealous."

This time, she did actually smirk. "It's a good thing the two of us know better, then."

Not soon enough, we reached the library. Fahrenheit began walking to the front double doors, but I waved her to the side. "Not that way, Tin Can. Follow me." I led her around the side of the building to a smaller door. Beside it was a small intercom. I could only hope it was still working. I pushed the button, and was gladly greeted by an automated voice.

"Welcome to the Boston Public Library. The library is currently closed. Only employees and those with a scheduled appointment may enter. All other guests are invited to return during normal business hours."

"I'm an employee here," I answered. Or at least, I had been 213 years ago, when I interned there. I highly doubted my old ID number would work, but there was a well known secret among the library's staff.

"Please provide your six-digit employee ID number," the intercom buzzed.

"123456."

Fahrenheit shot me a look like I was the biggest moron on the planet.

"Welcome, Mr. Mayor. Please enjoy your visit." There was an audible click of the door unlocking. I turned back to Fahrenheit with a smug grin.

"I can't believe that worked." She genuinely looked impressed.
"The perks of living pre-war," I quipped. "I interned here through college." I opened the door and stepped through.

The inside of the library was a mess, like a tornado had passed through. Furniture was strewn about, and some of the walls and floor were missing. There, under a light, was the return terminal. I slid the book Daisy had given me into the slot of the machine and took the tokens it dispensed. They were completely useless now, but they had been part of a reward program to encourage the timely return of books. So many people just stole them.

"That's it?" Fahrenheit griped. "We came all the way here to return a book to a library that's not even open anymore?"

"No, not completely. There's supposed to be super mutants around." The place was eerily quiet. Completely devoid of life. "Maybe they're in the subway tunnels underneath the library?" Either way, I headed past the terminal and through a broken part of the wall to get to the entranceway to come upon the stairs that led down towards the subway tunnels. I walked over to the front desk, relieved to see that the terminal was still functioning. Say what you want about RobCo, but they built their machines to last.

I sat down in the chair, and booted up the command prompt. Login required. Hmm. A few quick keystrokes, and I was in. Of course, they hadn't bothered to change their password. Although I supposed a library had no need for strict security measures, although with the amount of protectrons in the place, you'd think it was the Pentagon. I typed in the command to boot up the turrets and the protectrons, using the old mayor's ID number for authentication. With a beep, the once idle robots standing in their pods began to move, announcing their boot-up sequences in a fuzzy electronic voice.

Beside me, Fahrenheit tensed. "Did you hear that?"

"What, you mean the robots?"

On my other side, Dogmeat began to growl.

"No, th--"

Suddenly a horde of super mutants ran up the stairs from the subway tunnel, growling and armed. Immediately, the robots and turrets turned to fire on the oncoming mutants. Fahrenheit turned her minigun to send out a volley of bullets. They must have had some kind of incendiary coating on them, because the super mutants were all on fire. Between that, and the lasers, the mutants fell in waves before they could even get near the front desk. I didn't even bother to stand up from my chair.

In only a few minutes, the protectrons were buzzing out the all-clear. Fahrenheit turned to me, eyebrows raised.

"No point in wasting expensive ammunition," I shrugged. "I told you I didn't need a babysitter. I had a plan."

"I was wrong about you," she admitted with cocky smile. "You've got some fire in you." She went over to the bodies to begin looking for anything valuable. "Maybe you are Hancock's type."
When we returned to Goodneighbor, we were greeted by Mayor Hancock himself. "So, Fahrenheit, how'd our girl do?"

"She's cute," the redhead answered instantly, seemingly expecting this interrogation. "Now I'm thinking it's Valentine that's sweet on her. Why else would he want you to protect her so badly?"

"She's an important client," Hancock shrugged. "Besides, I don't think that ol' bucket of bolts has the parts for that. How else could he resist Irma's advances?"

She laughed easily, much more open than she had been before.

My eyes darted between the two of them. "What was this? Some sort of test?"

"In a manner of speaking," Hancock had trouble hiding his snickering. I was starting to feel like the butt of some joke.

Fahrenheit turned to me. "I wanted to check out the girl that's dragging Hancock off into danger. I am his bodyguard, after all."

"Just his bodyguard?"

Now the two of them really were laughing. "Oh, definitely," Hancock wheezed.

"You're more my type than he is," she said.

I'm more her type? How? I'm--Oh. These things weren't unheard of, especially in college, but people never spoke about them out loud.

"Oh, how cute. She's blushing."

"Down, girl. I'm pretty sure getting eaten up by you goes under her protection clause."

Hancock had some weird friends.

I quickly excused myself to run off to Daisy's Discounts. The ghoul was grateful for a job well done and gladly gave me extra caps for all the miscellaneous items I sold to her. It was technically all profit, but it wouldn't last long, especially if I had to keep buying all of my meals.

"Honey, you've got a little blood on your outfit," Daisy gestured to my vaultsuit. "A little" was a bit of an understatement.

"Yeah I tried getting it out, but something about the material just soaked it all up. I dunno, I kind of like it now. Makes me look tough."

Daisy gave me a look to show how much she thought of that. "That's hardly hygienic, but hell, look at where we are. I don't think I even know what 'clean' looks like anymore."

"Hey, Daisy, I don't suppose you got another paying favor you want done?"

"Nothing I'm willing to pay for, sorry. But if it's caps you need, you should check out Bobbi No-Nose. I hear she's got some big project she's planning, very hush-hush, but she's been hiring workers."

"You don't have any idea what she's planning?"

"Not a clue, but then again, I'm not the nosey type. There's a ghoul joke here somewhere."
Strange, how in a town like Goodneighbor, where everyone knew everyone's business, that there could be a secret. "I'll check it out."

"Good luck, sugar. And thanks again for doing me that favor."

With Daisy's directions, I managed to find the rusty metal door hidden in a narrow alleyway. I almost passed the place up twice. It looked more like a back entrance. When I knocked on the door, a tiny slot was opened to reveal a squinting pair of red eyes. I was right; Bobbi was a ghoul, though it wasn't that hard to guess. I was offered a job on the basis that I didn't mind manual labor nor asked too many questions. Gee whiz, the people of Goodneighbor sure were shady.

After managing to haggle the pay up a bit, Bobbi let me through the doors. The building was relatively empty, and the majority of it aside from a large room downstairs was caved in. Bobbi sat down in a lone chair and crossed her legs. She wore a brown wig in a short bob and what looked to be gentlemen's slacks and shirt with an opened black vest. She lit a cigarette, and I wondered how much of her scratchy voice was from the radiation and how much was from the nicotine.

"You had to bring your furball?" She gestured to Dogmeat, who was sniffing about the room.

"He's nonnegotiable. Don't worry, he won't be in the way of whatever we're doing."

She glared at the dog. "Well, I don't suppose he can tell anyone what's going on down here. You're going to be doing some digging."

Oh, so it really was manual labor. Suppose that beat mercenary work. Much less likely to die from this. "Are we searching for buried treasure?"

"You could say that. But seriously, lay off the questions." She blew smoke out of the hole in her face where her nose should be. "The other two are already down there. Go give them a hand."

Bobbi was a little rude. This whole thing seemed suspicious, but what harm could come from digging? She was probably searching for some pre-war junk underneath all this rubble. I found my way to a tunnel headed further down into the ground. Just as it was opening up to a larger chamber where lights were set up, I heard the two other workers discover something. I went on ahead, though the dust from their digging made it difficult to see. I ended up inside some kind of underground tunnel system, with pipes and stairs. Perhaps part of the sewers? I didn't have much time to think on it, before I heard the two men cry out in alarm.

When I looked past them, I saw giant monster crabs crawling towards me. These things were even taller than Fahrenheit. Though I supposed I shouldn't be surprised. I'd already seen all sorts of mutated animals, why not the crabs too? Once I learned that their weak point was their faces, they went down easily. Giant crabs weren't scary in the least bit compared to all the other crazy shit I'd seen. When I looked around, I found that the other two workers had run off. I didn't even get to say hello to my new coworkers before they quit.

I went back through the tunnel to encounter Bobbi. "What's going on in my tunnel?"

"It's got crabs. Giant ones."

"Mirelurks? Well, you stuck around at least. I guess that means you get promoted to my new gun."

"What's going on here, Bobbi? There was nothing in that tunnel."

"I'll explain later. We're going to need one more guy. An old friend. He'll want a fair cut, but we saw where being cheap got me."
"Ok, where is this friend of yours?"

"That's what I'm going to find out. I've got some business in Diamond City. Meet me at the noodle shop there. If I'm not there when you arrive, just order yourself a bowl and wait."

"I thought ghouls weren't allowed in Diamond City?"

"They're not, so if you'd be discreet, I'd appreciate it. Meet me there, you got it?" Bobbi left before I could even answer. Sheesh, that woman needed to learn some manners.

I hadn't really planned on returning to Diamond City yet. I wasn't ready to see Nick again. He saw a side of me I'd never planned on showing anyone. Oh well, it was a big town. We could easily avoid each other, surely?

Chapter End Notes

In which the author waxes nostalgic about V for Vendetta.

Fun Fact: Fahrenheit was originally supposed to be Hancock's daughter. How awkward would that have been? I really like her character, and honestly, I wish she could be a companion, or like, a sub-companion that will follow you and Hancock around some times.
The Hunt for Kellogg

Chapter Summary

Kellogg should have known better than to piss off an embittered housewife.

Chapter Notes

How did Kellogg even know what cobbler was anyway? There's no way such a complex desert existed after the war.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I almost expected to be stopped by the neighborhood watch at the gates, but when I told them I was merely headed to Diamond City, they let me through. If I had known that, I would have just said that last time. The trip to the Green Jewel of the Commonwealth was much easier the second time around. The door to the city was already open. I suppose it had only been closed that one time to keep Piper out. Maybe I should pay her a visit? Who knew how long Bobbi would take with her errand?

As it turned out, I didn't need to buy a bowl of noodles from the strange robot that only spoke Japanese after all. When I got to Power Noodles, bright neon noodle sign lighting up the dark evening sky, I found Bobbi seated at the bar, cold bowl of noodles in front of her. I nearly passed her. The gas mask she wore completely obscured her face, though now I knew the reason for it. Wait, if she had a gas mask on, how was she eating tho--

"'Bout time," she groused. "I was wondering when you would show up."

"I just got into town," I grumbled. "I didn't think you'd be so quick."

Bobbi waved her hand dismissively. "The sooner we get this done, the less likely it is to go belly up. Let's get down to business. You see that big glass wall looming over the city? That's the mayor's office. Most folks don't know this, but right underneath it is a strongroom. Mayor's just sitting on top of it. That's our target. The guy has it coming, if you ask me. The way he treats my kind, maybe he deserves worse."

Ah, so this was about revenge. That was something I could get behind. I could still remember the passion in Hancock's voice, the subtle undertone of betrayal.

"All for a good cause."

"Don't get me wrong. The caps are my main goal. Taking it from a bigot is just icing on the cake. So what do you say we make this party a little bigger? I managed to track down my tech guy. His name's Mel and he's right here in Diamond City. The guy can make a gadget to solve any problem. Thing is, he's a bit locked up right now."
"He's in jail? What did he do?"

"What's it matter? All you need to do is get him out. This isn't maximum security prison, and it isn't heavily guarded. Surely you can handle that. Bribe a guard if you have to."

"Alright, I'll do it." Performing a heist was one thing, but breaking someone out of jail... I really hope this guy wasn't some evil serial killer. I didn't want to release a criminal out on the public. The more I did this job, the less I wanted to do it.

The security office for Diamond City was built into the old locker rooms, and it still smelt like one too. The stink of sweat and musk was heavy in the air, but not so thick that I was choking on it. They really should prop the door open to let in some air. The jail consisted of only one cell in the center of the room, and completely visible from everywhere. No chance to pick the lock then...

One of the guards standing by a stone pillar noticed me, though I couldn't make out his face from behind that umpire's helmet he wore. "Is there anything I can do for you, ma'am?"

Alright, let's try to wing this. "Yes, I'm here to pick up Mel, actually."

"Huh, didn't think the guy had any friends. Sorry, lady, but his time's not up until the morning. You'll just have to wait."

"Oh? And how long has my client been in jail already? What was his crime?"

"We caught him trying to hack into Takahashi. He said he wanted to fix his communication programming or whatever. But the mayor has expressly forbid it. Says Takahashi is a landmark."

"The robot that runs the noodle shop? That's hardly a malicious crime. Tell me, who owns the robot?"

The guard shifted his weight uneasily. "I, well, no one, I guess? He's just always been there? I suppose you could say he belongs to Diamond City."

Aha! "Ah, then did Mel really perform a crime? As a resident of Diamond City, he also owns this robot. As a co-owner, he has every right to change Takahashi's programming as he pleases. My friend here has been wrongly imprisoned. Was he even given a trial? This place is a mockery of justice."

"Wait, what? Agh, you know what, take him, lady. His time's almost up anyhow." The guard begrudgingly opened the gate, and the hunched over figure inside eagerly walked out. Mel was a plain looking man with ginger facial hair and a neat blue jacket. He hardly looked like a hardened criminal. "Just take him and go. You're giving me a headache."

"Thank you, officer." I nodded, guiding Mel out of the security office.

When we got outside, he stopped to talk. "That was some pretty impressive tongue-wagging back there. You talked circles around that guard. You must be Bobbi's new toy."

"You were expecting me?"

"Bobbi has been planning something for a while. Only a matter of time before she involved me. Not that I'm ungrateful, but couldn't she have waited a day? It wasn't a life sentence. What's this all about?"

"Bobbi will explain when you meet her."
He snorted. "You have met her, right? She's not very explanatory. Oh well. I'll meet you at her place, alright?"

With a wave, the man was off. He seemed like a nice fella.

"This whole thing better be worth it, Dogmeat," I sighed to my companion. He barked back in response. Something encouraging probably. I made it as far as the market, before I was stopped.

"Blue? Is that you?"

I turned around to see Piper jogging up towards me in her red leather coat. Well, I suppose I had been thinking of visiting her. "Hi, Piper."

She stopped in front of me, not hiding the once-over she gave me. Her brows knitted together. "Maybe I should start calling you Red. You know bloodbaths aren't literal, right?"

"I couldn't get the stains out."

She paused, her frown deepening. "You look different. And I'm not just talking about your suit, either. What happened to you?"

So many things. "I'm just learning to survive out there. It was inevitable that I would change."

"I suppose that's true." She shifted nervously. "Hey, if you ever want to just talk, my door is always open. It'll be completely off the record, I promise."

I thought of Scribe Haylen and smiled. I wondered if it would be possible to have a girl's night out sometime. Just me, Piper, and Haylen, and Daisy too. Maybe even Fahrenheit. A childish part of me wanted a sleepover, where we would stay up all night complaining about boys and having pillow fights. Married women didn't have sleepovers. "Thanks, Piper. I'd like to do that sometime."

"So are you here to see Nick? Is he helping you find your son?"

My smile dropped. Suddenly, I found the stitching of her boots to be incredibly fascinating. "No, I mean, yes, he's helping me; no, I'm not here to see him. I was just leaving, actually. I'll talk to you later, Piper. See ya." Before she could answer, I decided to put an egg in my shoe and beat it.

When I returned to Bobbi's tunnel, I found Mel and her already waiting for me with a strange looking eyebot. Mel introduced her as Sonya, and she could dig tunnels with sonic pulses. As it turned out, those sonic pulse were very loud. Left my ears ringing and the dirt crumbling. With Bobbi leading the way, Sonya carved a way for us underground until we reached the subway system. We found more of those "mirelurks" as Bobbi called them, but they proved to be easy hunting.

We kept heading southwest, and every time I felt like we should have reached Diamond City by now, Bobbi told us to keep heading further. I really wished we would get there already. The deeper we went, the less lighting the tunnels had, and in some places, the only light was from my pip-boy.
To be honest, if it had just been me and Dogmeat, I would have turned back. But I had to see this through.

Finally we got to the end, as Bobbi claimed. We were right under the storeroom.

"Are you sure this is the place, Bobbi?" Mel voiced his concerns. "I've been mapping our journey out in my head, and by my calculations, Diamond City should be a little north of here."

"I don't have a doubt in my mind." Bobbi snapped. "How about a little trust for the boss here? Now, all we need to do is go up. You think your little robot can handle that?"

Mel looked up at the dark shadows above us. "Have you seen this place? The foundation is crumbling. If we're doing this, I'm not gonna be in the room."

"That's probably a good idea," Bobbi agreed.

We cleared out of the room, except for Sonya. The robot gave one final maximum blast, and the ground shook. I was almost afraid we'd be caved in, but when we returned to the room, I could see light pouring in.

"Oh no, no, no, Sonya!" Mel cried from behind me. I turned around to see him kneeling over the smashed body of Sonya.

Bobbi heaved a great sigh. "Pull yourself together, Mel. We don't need that thing anymore."

"But..."

"You can make yourself a new robot with the haul from this strongroom."

We travelled up into some kind of warehouse. After spending so long in the dark tunnels, the sunlight from the high windows and the halogen lights nearly blinded me. I heard a voice speaking to Bobbi. It wasn't Mel. Wait, who was in here?

"You seriously didn't think Hancock would catch wind of your little scheme?"

Huh? Hancock? My vision was slowly starting to adjust, and I could tell that there were three figures on top of a metal walkway above us.

"He took you in, Bobbi, and you're stealing from him?"

"Don't listen to her," Bobbi spoke in a clipped tone.

Wait a second. "What does this have to do with Hancock?" I turned away from Bobbi, back towards the walkway, and I finally recognized the woman standing on the platform. "Fahrenheit?"

"Short Stack?" She looked as surprised to see me as I was to see her.

"Wait, you two know each other? Shit." Now Bobbi was the shocked one. Everyone got a surprise. Hurray. "Figures you were too good to be true. Some doe-eyed vault dweller walks up to my door... Should have known."

"Bobbi, what's going on?" Mel was beginning to sound a little frantic.

"I see you were in the dark about this," Fahrenheit said to me. "This is Hancock's special store room."
"Ah shit, Bobbi, seriously? Hancock? I don't want to get mixed up in this. That guy tends to hold a grudge."

Really, I shouldn't have been surprised. I knew this whole thing was shady from the start, but I didn't think a citizen of Goodneighbor would turn against its mayor, and a fellow ghoul, no less. "What's this about, Bobbi? Why lie about this?"

Her fingers clenched her submachine gun a little tighter. "I knew no one in their right mind would help me rip off Hancock. Everyone's so damn afraid of him or so damn in love with him. He thinks he's invincible. I wanted to show him he wasn't. I thought an outsider like yourself wouldn't mind. Should have known he'd get to you too."

Fahrenheit interrupted from above. "It looks like No-Nose duped the both of you. Guess what, you two just crawl right back in that hole, and we'll forget this little misunderstanding. Short Stack, you better come with me."

"I've got a counter offer." Suddenly, Bobbi's leathery arm was around my neck and the barrel of her gun was pressed right above my ear. "You seem real chummy with this one here, so how about you leave, and I won't paint the floor with her brains."

No honor among thieves, I guess. I could see Fahrenheit's hand twitch on the handle of her minigun. I could feel the dilemma in her stance all the way from down here. She needed to protect Hancock's goods, and likely his reputation, but he was also honor bound to protect me, and by extension her. She wasn't a sniper. Her weapon was meant to cover a large area. If she tried to take out Bobbi, she'd likely kill me as well. I suppose this was in my hands then. Despite the cold barrel pressing into my skull, my pulse didn't quicken.

"Bobbi, you can still walk away from this." My mouth felt dry, and I had to lick my lips before I could continue. "You said you wanted to teach Hancock a lesson. That he wasn't invincible. You've already done that. Someone broke into his storeroom right from under his nose. You don't have to die here."

"I..." I could feel the barrel of the gun lowering, but I didn't budge an inch. "There's still a lot of caps on the line."

"Are those caps worth your life? Do you really think you can take them on all by yourself?"

She was silent for while. I couldn't see her reactions, but slowly, her arm and gun dropped. "You're right. I'm not one to give up, but I know when I'm outmatched." She turned to Mel. "Let's go."

The fidgety man looked relieved, but upset. "Sonya died for nothing."

"Oh, it was just a damn robot. Get over it." The two bickered all the way back into the tunnel.

I turned around to find Fahrenheit walking down the steps towards me. "I'm impressed, Short Stack, or maybe I should call you Silver Tongue now. I didn't think that was going to end without blood."

Her eyes roamed my form, looking for any injuries. Hancock was not gonna like this development, but at least his promise and his stuff were still intact, if not his store room. "Every time I think you're the damsel in distress, you turn the situation to your benefit. You're going to be a force to be reckoned with one day."

"She says to the woman who was duped into traveling through a dark tunnel all night for nothing."

The ginger-haired woman chuckled. "Come on, let's head back to Goodneighbor."
Fahrenheit led me up the stairs of the old state house, Hancock’s office and home. I’d never actually been inside before. The building was completely different from all of the others, built in the colonial era, but it still had its wears and tears from the centuries. She led me up to his office door, where he usually resided, and knocked. We could hear voices from inside. Looked like he was already in a meeting with someone else.

Hancock beckoned us inside, and so Fahrenheit opened the door to reveal none other than Nick Valentine.

"Nick? What are you doing here?"

Hancock, who was leaning up against a table, smirked at me in his usual cocky manner. "Looks like Daddy came back to pick up his kid from daycare." I was too surprised to be angry about the teasing.

Nick took one good look at me and then turned a stern face to Hancock. "I thought I told you to return her to me without a scratch on her."

"What are you talking about? I'm returning her in even better condition. Now she can defend herself."

The detective didn't look amused. "She was a good kid, Hancock. Untainted by this world, this time."

Now Hancock lost his jovial grin. "Nick, you and I both know that wouldn't have lasted long, even without my help."

I didn't appreciate them talking about me like I wasn't there. "Hello, does anyone want to clue me in on what's going on?"

"I know the deal was for you to come to me in Diamond City when you were ready," Nick's yellow eyes flittered down and to the side nervously. "But Piper came to see me..."

Oh. I knew what this was about then. It irked me a bit that she would go tattle behind my back like that.

"It's been a while since I've seen you, kid. I thought you were just going to take a couple of days."

Hancock tilted his head at a curious angle. "Oh? And here I thought she was waiting on you."

Nick continued as if the ghoul had never spoken. "I've found your guy. He's a man named Kellogg, the best and most ruthless mercenary in the Commonwealth. He bought a house in Diamond City not too long ago. I went to check it out, and I think I might have a serious lead, a way to find him...if that's still what you want."

Was it possible to both blush and lose the color in your face at the same time? I became hyper aware that both Fahrenheit and Hancock were still in the room. "Of course I still want to. You must think I'm some kind of monster." *He saw! He saw!* Dammit, I fought the urge to run away and throw a
tantrum like a toddler.

"No, I don't think that at all," Nick consoled. "Look, I may be a synth, but I have implanted memories of a detective from that time. So I understand what kind of a world you lived in. So, no, I don't think you're a monster. Just human."

_Not going to cry. Not going to cry._ "He doesn't deserve any of this. He doesn't deserve a mother like me. The least I can do is save him." Nick's face was full of pity. I didn't dare look at the other two to gauge their reactions. I'd had enough of their pity for a week.

"We'll find your son and your husband's killer."

I nodded, trying my hardest not to look at anyone. "Right. I'm ready to go now. Sorry it took so long. We should get started immediately." Before anyone could say anything, I was already headed back to my room at the hotel to pack up what little belongings I had.

It was only when the two of us were halfway back to Diamond City, that I realized I had never gotten to talk to Hancock about Bobbi.

Nick took me to one of the nicer houses in Diamond City, up in the stands and away from the common rabble. The house looked completely normal, if a bit sparse. There was evidence that someone lived there, and yet there were no personal touches. However, Valentine walked up behind the desk and reached under it. I heard an audible click, and beside me a wall opened to reveal a safe room, full of all the supplies you would need to hide out safely.

"Kellogg purchased this house some time ago," Nick spoke as I looked around.

Oh sweet, Nuka-Cola Quantum. That stuff was limited edition.

"He had a young boy with him, around ten years old."

I frowned, pocketing the glowing blue bottle. "That can't be Shaun, then. He's not even a year old."

"Maybe it's his own kid, maybe it's someone else's. Perhaps he's kidnapping children on purpose."

"Why only children? With no ransom? To what purpose?"

"Can you think of nothing?"

I swallowed. I sincerely hoped it was none of those things. In a lawless land like this, I honestly wouldn't be surprised. "You said you had a lead?"

He nodded, heading towards a small wooden table beside a plush velvet armchair. On the table was a cigar box, an empty bottle of ale, and an ashtray with the burnt nub of a used cigar in it. Nick picked up the nub. "This."

"A used cigar?"

"Exactly. It's been in his mouth, has his scent. This is where our trusty canine friend comes in." He
turned to Dogmeat, the dog's tail wagging happily at the sudden attention. "Some dogs can track a scent for miles, and Dogmeat's one of a kind."

"So this is what you meant about him before? You've had him sniff for clues on cases?"

"It's always good to have a fresh perspective on a case. So Dogmeat leads us to Kellogg, and hopefully Kellogg will lead us to your son."

Here's to hoping this would work.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, a giddiness bubbled up in my gut. This was just like an episode of *The Adventures of Rin Tin Tin!* I was Rusty, Nick was Rip, and Dogmeat was Rin Tin Tin, of course. Too many times, I had to remind myself to stop having fun.

Dogmeat led us far west, amazingly able to track down this guy across the Commonwealth, to Fort Hagen. The trip had been fraught with dangers, the trail not avoiding all of the dangerous wildlife. With Nick and Dogmeat at my back, I wasn't afraid, not even when the daylight began to fade and we encountered a couple of ferals.

Fort Hagen had been heavily defended. Turrets on the roofs, and synths patrolling the inside. This was the first time I had encountered a synth aside from Nick (well, as far as I knew.) These must have been the older generation ones he had told me about. They looked more like walking mannequins, and some just straight up looked like robots, metal workings exposed.

"Trespasser," they spoke in automated voices with no emotional inflection. "Kellogg has ordered your termination."

"Guess we're in the right place."

We fought through the building, making our way down to the basement levels. The synths had strange laser weapons that fired blue instead of red. I didn't know if it was merely an aesthetic choice, or if they were somehow superior, but when I got hit on the hip, it burned like crazy. While the stimpak healed the damage, a ghost of the pain still remained. This wasn't fun anymore.

"Are you alright?" Nick was by my side in an instant.

"Yeah, yeah. Let's just get this over with."

Suddenly, a voice over the intercoms interrupted. A voice, like sandpaper across your ears. I'd recognize it anywhere. "Well, if it isn't my old friend, frozen TV dinner. The last time we met, you were cozying up to the peas and the cobbler."

*Their names were Nancy and Jeffery, you bastard. They were my neighbors, and now they are dead,* I wanted to yell at him, but I was pretty sure the speaker system only went one way. Instead, I elected to ignore him and continue moving forward.

"Sorry your house has been a wreck for 200 years, but I don't need a roommate. Leave."
"Fat chance, pal," Nick grumbled under his breath.

We passed the doors into the command center.

"Hmph. Never expected you to come knocking on my door. Gave you 50/50 odds of making it to Diamond City. After that? Figured the Commonwealth would chew you up like jerky."

"It almost did," I whispered to myself. So many times, I wished I could somehow turn back. I even thought of returning to Sanctuary Hills and pretending none of this had ever happened.

"Look. You're pissed off. I get it. I do. But whatever you hope to accomplish here? It's not going to go your way."

Funny thing was that I wasn't. Not like I should be. I didn't feel righteous fury as Zeus blew up the head of another synth. My heart didn't race with rage as I ducked behind some barrels for cover. The truth of the matter was that I didn't know what I planned to do once I met Kellogg.

Kellogg was silent for a while, as we continued our descent. I had wondered if he'd lost interest in this one-sided discussion, but then his voice buzzed out across the building. "You've got guts and determination, and that's admirable. But you are in over your head in ways you can't possibly comprehend."

I didn't remember this guy being so chatty. Was he really that desperate to convince me to leave? Was he that scared of a housewife, a robot detective, and a dog? From the way Nick talked about him, I had thought this guy to be more of the grunting type.

"It's not too late. Stop. Turn around and leave. You still have that option. Not a lot of folks can say that."

He was. He was seriously trying to convince me to leave. Maybe he wasn't any good in an actual fight. After all, he was hiding behind this army of robots.

"This guy must be pretty dumb if he thinks we're just going to walk away now," Nick sighed. Couldn't agree more.

We walked into what looked to be some kind of presidential safe house, walls thick and lead-lined, and stocked up with all sorts of supplies. We took no hesitation in looting those. God must be smiling favorably on me today, because I found a whole crate full of more thunder bolts for Zeus.

"Okay, you made it. I'm just up ahead. My synths are standing down. Let's talk."

Oh, I'll make you talk.

We walked through a door, some stairs, and then another door till we ended up in some kind of laboratory. The room was littered with synths, but as Kellogg had promised, they merely stood there, watching with their deathless eyes. Kellogg himself stood in the center, looking exactly as he had done on that day. I could see him easily lifting his arm, smoking pistol in hand, ending a good man's life. He died as he lived: protecting an innocent. Now I was a little pissed.

"Where is Shaun?" I said in lieu of a greeting.

Kellogg didn't look impressed. For someone who had been so desperate to get me to leave, he didn't look scared. "Lady, I'm just a puppet like you. My stage is a little bigger, is all. Shaun's a good kid. A bit older than you expected, am I right? He's doing great, only with the people pulling the strings."
So that had been Shaun? But if he was ten years old... "Cryogenic sequence re-initialized." Oh god. They froze me again. For ten more years. That's how I was "the backup." But why? "Why keep me alive?" Unlike the synths and Kellogg, I didn't lower my weapon. "It's clear that Shaun was your target, but why kill my neighbors? Some of them had kids too. Why kill Nate, but not me?"

The mercenary looked thrown-off by the question. "Look, lady, I don't know. The Institute hired me to retrieve a baby from Vault 111, to leave a spare, if possible. Your husband was being difficult so I shot him. I didn't think too much on it."

"Didn't think too much on it?" How could he not? When I had killed that raider, there were so many thoughts going through my head that I couldn't focus on a single one. I had mourned her death, even as it saved my life. How could he be so callous?

"Where is the Institute? How do I find him?"

The bald man laughed. "Haven't you been paying attention? You don't find the Institute, the Institute finds you."

So he couldn't help me find Shaun. And this man was a killer, an evil criminal just like that woman. If he were to leave this room, he would only kill again. "This. This was justice."

"But I think we've been talking long enough. We both know how this is going to end. So...you ready?"

I lined up the shot. "I am now." Before the man could reach for this pistol, Zeus let out a crack of thunder, striking the mercenary right between the eyes. He flew backwards, a comical look of surprise permanently frozen onto his face.

I didn't have much time to savor before a blue laser beam hit my wrist, causing me to drop Zeus. Dogmeat tackled the synth responsible, but those machines could neither bleed nor feel pain. They were unhindered by fangs embedded between the wires of their arms.

Luckily, I had Nick as backup, and the old detective helped me to take out the remaining synths. I wondered distantly whether he felt anything about killing his brothers. If he felt any connection to these robots. Judging by the way he kicked the broken torso of one of them out of the way, I guessed not.

I went over to Kellogg's corpse. I hadn't been the person to do the looting until now. It was...awkward, unsettling, moving this dead weight around that I had just talked to not five minutes ago. Out of some morbid desire, I decided to keep his gun, the same pistol that killed Nate. Maybe I'd use it to kill whoever ran the Institute. That sounded poetic enough. The man had a couple of caps, and several more rounds of ammunition stashed away in his pockets. In a last minute decision, I decided to undress him, which turned out to be even more awkward than digging through his pockets for stuff.

"What in the blazes are you doing?" Nick asked over my shoulder.

"I'm stealing his clothes."

"Why would you do that?"

"It's ok, I'm a pretty good tailor. I can adjust it to my measurements."

"That's not..."
I rolled up the clothes and stuck them in my bag. Now Kellogg was naked, except for his underpants, and looked a little ridiculous lying there in a pool of his own blood. I was probably going to have nightmares about this for a long time. When I had finished, we convened to decide our next step.

"So we now know where Shaun is, but not how to get there. I may be a synth, but I've never once stepped foot inside that place."

"Really? You don't remember anything?"

"Look at me. I'm outdated, junk. I was thrown out with the rest of the garbage. They didn't exactly leave me the keys."

"Then that's their loss."

Nick's smile turned from bitter to sincere. "You're sweet for saying so. Anyhow, the only person I know willing to snoop up the Institute's tail feathers is Piper. I say we pay her a visit."

"I did promise to have a chat with her."

We began the trek back, feeling a little off after all the work it took to get to this point. My feet slowed, feeling as heavy as lead. The man that killed my husband was dead, avenged by my hand. I should feel better now, shouldn't I? Somehow the knots in my gut were worse than when we had started. Despite everything, I didn't hate Kellogg. If I had known, before we got into those cryovaults, what would happen, if I could somehow travel back in time, would I have taken Shaun from Nate's arms? When the Institute came for my baby, would I have struggled, or just handed him over? I was afraid that I knew the answer.

The morbid spiral of my thoughts was halted by a cold finger under my chin, lifting my head up to look at synth yellow eyes. "Chin up, kid. I know the night just got darker, but it won't last forever." For good measure, he ruffled my hair.

The pull of the muscles in my cheeks to form a smile felt nice after days of disuse."If you keep spoiling me like this, I'm going to start calling you Daddy-O."

"Please don't. It makes me feel like a dirty old man."

Between the rainclouds and the late hour, it was dark by the time we made it to Piper's house. The shops were closing up, and the street lights were glowing faintly. When we knocked on the door, we were greeted by her younger sister Nat. She glared up at us, pouting. "What do you two want? It's late, you know."

"We just want to talk with your sister," Nick answered easily, unfazed by the teen's glower. "Is she in?"

From somewhere behind the door, Piper's muffled voice drifted out. "Nat? Who's at the door?" Then the woman herself was standing behind her little sister, looking over their head. "Blue? Nick? What's going on?" This was the first time I'd ever seen her without her hat and red coat. It made her look
like any old normal settler. How unsettling.

"Nothing too terrible. We've made progress on Susie's case. We were wanting to discuss it with you, get your perspective."

Piper didn't answer immediately. She gave me a quick once-over, frowned, and then ushered me in. Only me. "I believe that conversation can wait until the morning. What did you do to poor Blue here? She looks terrible."

"I didn't--"

"This calls for a sleepover. She's going to spend the night here. You go on back to your charging pod, or whatever." Before either of them could object, Nick was shooed off of her doorstep into the late night drizzle, and I found myself sitting on the edge of her couch, afraid to get it wet.

"Sorry about ol' Nick there," Piper said when she returned with a mug of hot tea. "He forgets sometimes that people need to sleep."

"I'm fine though, really," I gratefully took the mug, cupping the warm ceramic closely.

She gave me a look that told me how much she believed that statement, then handed me a couple of Fancy Lad Snack Cakes on a chipped yellow plate. They didn't pair well with the tea, but they filled the belly. When I had finished those, Piper checked out the window to see that the rain had let up. She took me to the public baths, over by that water purifier run by that kid. Thanks to the rain, no one was using it right now. By some grace of god, they had heated water for their baths. It was utter heaven. When was the last time I had had a bath outside of a river? Piper gave me some tattered cotton pajamas clearly designed for a man to borrow. They were thin, but so much more breathable than the vaultsuit.

Nat elected to ignore us upon our return, too busy playing with Dogmeat. She went to her room, while the two of us went upstairs to Piper's room. We ended up on her bed, Piper braiding my hair, undoing it, and then starting over, while I worked on tailoring Kellogg's clothes to my size. I remembered my grandmother with every stitch. She had taught me how to sew and make clothes, a useful skill for those who couldn't afford new clothes from a department store.

"So, Blue, tell me about you're life before you were turned into an ice cube."

"What do you want to know?"

"I dunno. What did you do?"

"I was a housewife."

"What was your husband like?"

I stopped working for a second. "I'd rather not talk about that."

Piper kept on, not offended in the slightest. "Alright, so what did you do before you got married?"

"I was in college. To be a lawyer."

Piper stopped braiding. Startled, I glanced over my shoulder to see a silly look on her face, like she was trying not to laugh. "Woah, seriously? You're a lawyer? I'm a reporter, and Nick's a detective. No wonder we get along so well."
Now that she pointed it out, we did seem to form the holy trinity of crime fighting. "And all of us vigilantes." I returned to my work, and Piper undid the plait she had just made and started over again.

"Just imagine if we'd all lived during your time, taking down the bad guys."

"I never actually did any lawyering. I got married right after I passed the bar exam." It had been my one demand.

"I don't understand. Why did you stop just because you got married?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but couldn't find the words. How could I explain it to her? I could barely explain it to myself.

Piper skipped a beat, and then pressed on. "Whatever, it's not like it really matters. This is merely a fantasy. So, tell me what kinds of cases we would have worked on."

We talked like that into the night, imagining the adventures of Piper, Susie, and Nick. I learned that Piper had already had many of the imaginary brushes with death that I had pictured Nick rescuing her from. Diamond City had no love for their nosy reporter. That night was the first time I went to sleep to the sound of another human being's breath. Normally, Dogmeat's breathing would lull me, but the little mutt had betrayed me and went to sleep cuddled with Nat.

For a while, long after Piper had begun to snore, I lay awake, thinking about the past. I wish I had traveled backwards. There were so many things I wanted to change, to do differently. "Why did you stop just because you got married?" I held my hand up above my face, gold band on my finger glinting dully in the moonlight. I went to take it off, but hesitated.

"He's dead. Your parents are dead. There's no one else to hold you back. Still, as much as I willed it, my fingers felt weak. Things are different now. "I'm going to be different."

"Are you going camping?" Piper's voice nearly made me jump in the quiet stillness of the early morning.

I flicked around, feeling like a kid caught with their hand in the cookie jar. I wasn't really doing anything wrong, per say. Were there any city regulations on how close you could build a fire to a building? The smoke caught the first rays of the sun, looking like a gossamer curtain billowing in the dawn breeze.

"I didn't mean to wake you. I'm just burning some trash."

"You know, that's the exact same excuse serial killers use." The reporter came closer, glancing into the fire. "Is that your vaultsuit? So that's why you got the new threads? You didn't have to burn it though, did you?"

"It was covered in blood."

"Adds to the character."
We stood there in pensive silence, watching the flames dance. "Guess you can't call me Blue anymore, huh?"

"You didn't get your nickname from the vaultsuit." She didn't elaborate further.

We kept vigil there, in silence, until we were staring at ashes and the gold band on my finger didn't reflect anymore firelight.

Nick didn't comment on my new outfit. Just looked me up and down, nodded, and then sat down in the armchair. Piper had on her hat, scarf, and coat again. It felt like I had been awaken from some dream land. We brought Piper up to speed on my case.

"I'd like to say I'm surprised that the Institute's behind this, but your story is all too common, I'm afraid." Piper nibbled on her finger in a nervous tic. "Looks like this Kellogg guy handed them Shaun, right? That must mean he had access, in and out."

"We have a problem. Dead men tell no tales." Even if he was alive, I doubt we could have gotten him to talk. We weren't exactly the torturing type.

"'Murderer Gets His Brains Blown Out By Avenging Parent.' A shame the story can't just end there."

"Hmm...'gets his brains blown out'..." Nick focused hard on the cocktail table, gears in his head whirring. "His brains...you know, we might not actually need the guy at all."

"What are you thinking here, Nick?" Piper looked skeptical.

"I have no idea if it's even possible, but we could try getting Dr. Amari to see if she can pull any memories out of his brain. If anyone could get a dead man to talk, it would be her."

"Wait, you're not seriously...? Ew, Nick. Just ew."

It was pretty disgusting, but if it worked, then it would be terribly clever. "We should go talk with Dr. Amari first. No point digging through a guy's skull if it's not possible."

"You two are so gross."

"Putting aside the fact that you two want me to defile a corpse, you do realize that the memory simulators require an intact, living brain to function?"
"It does kind of have a bullet in it," I conceded. It's a good thing we came to ask first. Looks like it wouldn't work.

"Come on, Doctor," Nick kept on pressing. "Wouldn't you want to be the first scientist to say they can glean information from the dead? Not to mention that this man knows about the Institute, the greatest mystery of the Commonwealth."

"This isn't a matter of willingness, Mister Valentine," Dr. Amari sighed, arms crossed. "It's a matter of possibility. Without the neurons firing, I'll have nothing to read. It's not likely."

"Gives us the odds. Is there even the smallest chance?"

"...Maybe a one to two percent chance, this is a little explored field."

"Then we have to try."

Dr. Amari gave in. "You must be really desperate. Alright, bring me as much of the brain as you can, especially the hippocampus. And try to keep it all intact."

"Thanks, Doctor," I bowed my head to her.

"Don't thank me yet," she snorted, and then bid us farewell.

We left the Memory Den, waving goodbye to Irma on the way. "Maybe you should stay here while I go get the...gray matter," I told Nick.

"Are you sure? It was a dangerous trip there."

I nodded. "I'll have Dogmeat with me. I'll be fine. Besides, I don't have a lot of confidence in this plan. He did take a bullet to the brain, after all. I'd like you to stay here and figure out plan b, just in case."

"Oh sure, give me the hard job," Nick teased. "Well, I'm not one to push myself on a woman. If you want to go alone, then be my guest."

"Ah, don't worry, Daddy-O," I teased back, patting the cheek that was still intact.

Nick glowered coolly, but our conversation was interrupted by a newcomer. Up to us walked Fahrenheit, bored expression on her face. She reminded me of a girl I knew in high school, that used to wrap her hair, smoke cigs behind the bleachers, and when she wasn't smoking, she was chewing on some bubblegum. She too always wore that same look, as if everyone were tiny yapping chihuahuas nipping at her heels.

"You come back, and don't pay the mayor and his amazing bodyguard a visit?" Now she smirked. "Hancock would like a word with you."

"So he sent you to come fetch me instead of coming himself?" He certainly seemed to like showing off, for a guy that claimed to be like the little people.

"That appears to be the case, doesn't it?"

I bid Nick farewell and followed Fahrenheit to the old state house. With little fanfare, she left me in his office. Hancock sat in a chair, some kind of red inhaler in his mouth, inhaling happily. I didn't know he was asthmatic. Maybe that voice wasn't always the ghoulification...

"Ah, there's my favorite dolly," he smiled at me dreamily. "I see you took my advice and lost the
vaultsuit. Good. You look much less likely to be taken advantage of now."

Something about him seemed...off. "Thanks, I guess. So what did you want to talk about so bad that you had to send someone to come get me?"

"I wanted to talk about this business with Bobbi. You ran out on me last time."

Oh. Yeah. Was I in trouble? "Look, I had no idea what she was planning."

"Yeah, I know. Fahrenheit told me everything. I'm not angry at you. Not even angry at Bobbi, really. I'm impressed actually. Both with the heist, and that you managed to convince her to back off. I'm all for killing those that need killin', but it just would have been a waste with Bobbi."

He sighed, setting the inhaler down on a small end table, and leaning his elbows on his knees. "It just got me thinkin', you know. Have I become the man? Am I turning into a tyrant? It wasn't too long ago I would have been scheming along with the likes of Bobbi. Now here I am, killing a man just to make a point." He sat up, leaning back with his arm thrown casually over the back of the chair, and his legs crossed. "That's the kind of shit Vic would have pulled."

Not that this wasn't all lovely, but what did it have to do with me? "What are you trying to say, Hancock?"

"I think it's time that I went on a little trip," then he chuckled to himself, "Well I can check that off the list." He shook his head, and then looked up at me properly. "I need to get a grip on what really matters. Living free."

Living free. That was something I could get behind. "You're wanting to leave Goodneighbor? Can you do that if you're mayor?"

"Hey, the mayor's the mayor, whether he's 'in residence' or not. I've walked out from time to time. Keeps me honest. This is where you come in. You're traveling the Commonwealth, searching for your son, as I understand it. I want to come with."

That...was not what I expected. "You want to travel with me? Wherever I go?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "You seem like my kind of trouble."

"Really? After the last time we traveled together..." And I had a mental breakdown. "...I didn't think you'd want to weigh yourself down with me."

"Are you kidding me? You're an amazing shot. And I did promise to teach you how to use that knife." Then he smirked, looking down his...well, not his nose...at me. "Unless you don't think you can roll with the big boys."

I was clearly being baited, but I chomped down on the hook willingly. "Alright, Hancock, you can come along. You'll be shadowing Dogmeat. Try to learn as much as you can from him."

"I'm beneath the dog?"

Dogmeat let out a happy bark.
Afterwards, Hancock had gone out onto the balcony to give a little farewell speech to his people. While they had been talking, Fahrenheit had been out there gathering everybody. As far as speeches went, it was pretty informal, but still much better than Mayor McDonough's "I'm not a synth" speech. Once that was all done, we headed out, but not before Hancock's bodyguard threatened to feed me my own entrails if I got him killed. I had no doubt that the woman would actually do it too.

The second trip to Fort Hagen was no trouble at all, despite Nick's worries. We encountered another pack of molerats and some radroaches, but they were easily stomped out. The military base was as quiet as a graveyard, littered with the broken bodies of synths. The lab that Kellogg's body lay in still had the lights on, a couple of the terminals still working. Hancock took one look at the mostly naked body, then looked at my new outfit, and I could see the puzzle pieces slide into place in his head.

"You killed they guy and then stole his clothes?" The ghoul burst out into gut-wrenching laughter.

I felt my cheeks flush. "It's not like that's unheard of."

"No, but to see the woman who had freaked out about one raider, not only kill a man but then loot his clothes...priceless."

Despite the teasing, I felt a little bit of pride. I had come into this building with the intent to kill a man, and I had put a stop to any wrongdoings he might have done in the future. "And now we're going to cut into his head." Saying it out loud nearly made me upend my lunch.

Hancock sobered up after that. I took out the bone cutter that Dr. Amari had given me, a little motored saw, and then knelt before Kellogg's corpse. The blood around his head had already sunk into the concrete and stained it a dark ugly red. I tried not to think about how it would stain my pants, as I shakily turned on the bone cutter. Where did I even start? Should I do it around the bullet hole? How far did I press down? What if I went too far and pressed into the brain matter?

Suddenly, my hand was steadied by another on my own. I looked to see Hancock right behind me, chest-to-back. It was stupid, for my heart to skip a beat. I was about to cut a man's head open and steal his brain. Neither of us said anything, just brought the spinning blade down on his temple. I had expected this gory spray of blood, but after we cut past the skin, it only trickled gently down. Luckily, it seemed the bullet wound had drained most of the blood already. Cutting through the skull was a bit different. Flecks of it shot into the air, some of it hit my face and I tried not to gag. I tried to imagine I was sawing through a piece of wood, that mere sawdust was hanging in the air.

By the time we managed to cut open a hole and remove some of the skull, my nerves were completely shot. I turned off the bone cutter and set it down, and just sat there, staring blankly at the gooey gray mass. Luckily, it seemed Hancock had an iron stomach, because he reached past me gently and began to pull out the brain. At that point, I did vomit, but luckily I had the strength to take a few steps away.

"Well, would you look at that?" Hancock's voice turned my curious eye away from my stomach bile. I returned to find him holding a tiny piece of the brain, still a bit pink, but most noticeably with metal parts and wires.

"A cybernetic implant?"

"That sounds like it'll be much easier to hack into than a brain."
As it turns out, it was. When we returned to Dr. Amari, she looked much more hopeful about the implant. "What's this? The hippocampus? And attached to the outside...a neural interface?"

"Those circuits look awfully familiar," Nick said.

"From what I've seen of the Institute, all of their devices have a similar architecture." Then she looked at Nick, the spark of an idea in her eyes. "Mister Valentine, you're an older model, but still a synth. If we're lucky, it should hook right in." Then she frowned. "Of course, you'd be taking on a huge risk, wiring something to your brain. Who knows what lingering side effects may remain?"

"Nick, you don't have to do this for me," I clutched my hands tightly over my chest. This man had already done so much for me. "This is too big of a risk. What if you don't come out the same person? What if this changes you forever?"

"Every case changes me forever," Nick smiled, despite his words. "That's what people do, they change, even an old synth like me." He patted my arm. "Besides, if this can help us find your son, I'd gladly do it."

Touched, I didn't say anything, only nodded.

Hancock looked impressed. "You know Nick, you're one stand-up guy...or robot."

Nick only chuckled, and took his seat. Dogmeat rested his chin on the man's knee, seemingly also giving his thanks. "If I start talking like a grizzled, old mercenary, pull me out, alright?"

The good doctor went to work, peeling back the synthetic flesh and digging into the wiring in the back of his head. The sight was a little unnerving, but not nearly as bad as what I had done to get here. Turned out we had a problem, though. The memories were encrypted. Dr. Amari had the brilliant plan to somehow use both of our brains to hack it. A plan I wasn't too comfortable with.

*If Nick's willing to risk his brain for this, then so should you.* I wasn't as good of a person as Nick, but I could at least do this.

"This sounds like it's going to be one hell of a trip," the mayor joked

I sat in the memory lounger, my stomach in knots. The lid closed over me, and the screen that clouded my entire vision flashed white. It will be fine. These weren't my memories. It will be fine.

I sat on my bed, gazing at my collection of comics in pride. I had more than any kid in the whole west. Mom sat in the old brown armchair next to me, reading a book and listening to the radio in disgust. She cared nothing for the NCR, though it wasn't a concept I really understood back then. I was only a little boy.

"Turn down that goddamn radio! I'm trying to sleep!" Dad's voice was angry, as usual. He spent more time drunk than sober, I wondered if I had ever known the real man at all. I should have killed the man, looking back. I should have protected Mom. Instead, I just ran away, from the NCR, from this life.
"Mrs. Quinn, please focus. Remember who you are."

Where did that voice come from? Wait...walls of my house were missing, beyond them was an endless dark void, with sparks of activity dancing across, like shooting stars...or like the electric signals passed from nerve end to nerve end.

"You are experiencing these memories as Kellogg, but try not to get lost in them. Remember who you are."

That's right. I'm Susan Quinn. I'm looking for my son. Nick... How could I have forgotten?

"That was a little scary for a second there, Doctor," a deep, gravelly voice sounded from nowhere. "I thought Nick was the only one we had to worry about."

"She just got a little disoriented. She would have remembered who she was when we removed her from the memory. Now, this doesn't seem to be the memory we're looking for. I've found another in temporal sequence, follow the simulation to it, and we'll head out from there."

Out into the void, was a glowing purple bridge of nerves. I followed it, shedding the skin of that young boy and walking as an adult woman. The path led me to a small kitchen, where a man and a woman were cooking dinner together. This time, I felt what the man felt, but I did not become him as before. I remembered who I was. I knew now, the man to be Conrad Kellogg, and this woman, with whom I felt an alien love for, to be Sarah Kellogg, his wife. I left them to find a crib, placed far enough away not to be in danger from the cooking, if possible, but close enough to keep an eye on. Inside lay a little baby girl, Mary, wriggling around happily, content to stare at the broken ceiling in mindless wonder. Mary was much more energetic than Shaun. He liked to sleep a lot and eat everything, even if it wasn't necessarily food.

We continued on through his memories, learning about how he had taken up with raiders, lost his family, and lost all hope. I watched him grow up, become the ruthless murderer he was up until the day I killed him. I could see now, in retrospect, where everything went wrong for this man, this boy. He could have lived such a different life. So many times he had the chances to be happy, was truly happy, but he didn't realize it then. I mourned him.

Even as I watched Nate's murder through his eyes. It really was nothing personal, he even felt a stab of remorse as he pulled the trigger, saw him shooting the younger Kellogg in his mind's eye. If the man had just handed over the baby...oh well. The job's done. It felt strange, to look at my own face. I didn't even recognize myself, but knew it had to be me since it was across the hall from Nate. Did I really look like that? That woman in the pod was horrified, crying, and helpless. I thought she looked ugly.

"...Shit, Susie...Glad you killed that bastard."

"I'm so sorry you had to go through that again. I've found another intact memory. Whenever you're ready."

I wasted no time in traveling the bridge to the next scene. I saw Kellogg, sitting in a chair, cleaning his pistol with the most love I've seen since Sarah. On the floor, a proud collection of comics strewn about him, was a young boy, around ten. Shaun.

"Is that your son? This memory seems to be pretty recent, so that must be good news."

The boy sitting on the ground... I didn't recognize him. I thought I would, some maternal instinct or something. But I felt no connection, no part of him reminded me of Nate or myself. This boy was a
stranger who spent ten years being raised by someone else. Who knew what kind of person he became.

The nervous titter of Travis Miles sounded through the radio, though neither occupant in the room seemed to be listening. They looked comfortable, I could almost mistake them for a real family. Just a man and his son relaxing in the afternoon. Kellogg felt the same way, enjoyed this bittersweet bliss, even as he knew it to be temporary. Knew that this was all some machinations of The Old Man, could picture him now, silver hair and beard, a smug look on his face like he always had the upper hand, would always win in this game of chess. This had all been a plant, a lure for me. Even his own murder had been a part of The Old Man's plan all along.

Sure enough, the time to play family was over. In a flash of light, a stoic man in all black, even his skin, stood in front of the entranceway. If I had thought Kellogg was a cold-hearted bastard, nothing about this man looked even the slightest bit human. There wasn't a single trace of emotion in his face at all, though it was hard to tell behind those sunglasses. I remembered what Piper had told me, about synths that looked completely indistinguishable from humans. I knew then, almost instantly, that this stranger must be a synth. Though, if they all acted like that, it was a wonder people couldn't tell right from the get-go.

Kellogg slowly lowered the pistol he had raised at the sudden intruder. "One of these days, you're going to get your head blown off, just barging in here like that."

"Minimizing my exposure to civilians is a priority," the man, a Courser from the Institute, Kellogg's brain supplied, spoke matter-of-factly. I imagined everything he said was a matter of fact. "New orders for you. One of our scientists has left the Institute. His name is Doctor Brian Virgil. We know he's hiding somewhere in the Glowing Sea. Here's his file."

Kellogg raised his eyebrows, clearly impressed. "Wow. Some heads are going to roll for this. Capture and return or just elimination?"

"Elimination. He was working on a highly classified program."

"No kidding. One of the top Bioscience boys..." Kellogg set the folder down on the desk beside him. "So I guess you're taking the kid back, huh?"

"Affirmative." The man didn't even nod. Definitely a synth. "Your only mission is to find and eliminate Virgil."

I can't believe they were talking about a hit in front of this kid. The boy didn't seemed fazed. I wondered how much of this was normal everyday conversation for him. He looked up at the Courser, a little bit of hope in his eyes. "You're taking me home to father?"

My heart skipped a beat. I knew it to be impossible, but for a second I thought the boy had meant Nate. Obviously, he was referring to whoever had raised him. He likely didn't even know that Nate existed.

"Yes. Stand next to me and hold still." The synth stood a bit away, and the boy followed him eagerly.

"Goodbye, Mr. Kellogg. I hope I get to see you soon." The boy wouldn't see that man again, thanks to me. I shouldn't feel guilty about separating a kidnapper from his kidnappee, but I could feel the pang of loss in Kellogg's heart.

Then the two were struck by lightning, a strange phenomenon considering they were inside a house.
When the light dimmed from my blinded vision, they were gone. Vanished.

"Teleportation. Now it all makes sense. Hold on, I'm pulling you out."

The world faded to white, and then the lid to the memory lounger lifted up. I stood up, knees wobbling, like Bambi when he had first learned to walk. Strong arms steadied me, and I found myself supported by Hancock, a worried expression on his burnt face.

"Careful, slow movements," Dr. Amari held her hands out in front of her, as if to catch me should I fall. "We don't know what sort of side effects may occur. Nothing like this has ever been attempted before."

"I'm fine. My leg has just fallen asleep from sitting for so long." I stood up straight, holding my own weight. Hancock let me go, and I missed his warmth instantly.

"That's good. But I want you to monitor yourself for a while, to be sure there's no long-term damage. So, you have your answer?"

I nodded. "We need to find this Virgil. He could answer a lot of questions for us."

"I didn't even know Institute scientists could defect. And he's in the Glowing Sea? That's going to be a problem."

"A problem? Why?"

This time, it was Hancock who answered. "The Glowing Sea is named for the glow it gets from all the radiation there. It's where the bomb fell. And there's no way a human could survive traveling through that."

"Then how did this Virgil guy? And on that thought, why would they send Kellogg the human, and not just one of their synths?" Something in Kellogg's memories tugged at me. Upon his death, he had realized that he had only been set up as a lure for me. Perhaps... Perhaps this was all just a clue.

He shrugged. "You've seen what the radiation has done to the wildlife around here. How much worse do you think it is the closer to ground zero? I doubt their robots could have made it through. But Kellogg was skilled."

"Besides," Dr. Amari stepped in. "There are ways to combat the radiation. Chemical compounds, such as Rad-X or Rad-Away, though you would need as much as you could carry. And a hazard suit would be good, if you could get your hands on one. Or maybe even a suit of Power Armor."

Power Armor...That gave me an idea. "Where's Nick?"

"I unplugged him first. Removed the implant while you were waking up. He's waiting for you upstairs."

"Thanks." I headed that way, but was stopped by Amari.

"Good luck, Mrs. Quinn. And...be safe."

I smiled with as much confidence as I could muster to put her kind heart at ease. "Thanks, Doctor. I will." Before I took another step, a thought occurred to me. "Do you think there might be any chance that you could do this again...maybe with someone who's been dead for a little longer?"

She had a knowing look in her eyes, full of pity. "I'm sorry, my dear, but I only think this worked
because of the implants. I doubt a brain that's been dead that long would be useable."

Thought as much. Just would have been nice to know what he thought about me. Did he know how I truly felt about him? I shook my head and left.

I found Nick sitting on one of the benches by the foyer, scratching behind Dogmeat's ears idly. He looked up at me, a dark smirk on his face, and I instantly knew something was wrong.

"Hope you got what you were looking for inside my head. Heh. I was right. I should have killed you when you were on ice."

"Kellogg?"

The smirk got even smugger, if that were possible. "It's like some kind of bad joke, isn't it? You kill a man, have to dig through his brain, literally, then live his life. Kind of makes it hard to detach yourself, huh? Life's just one big joke, kid. I can't wait until you hear the punchline to yours." He laughed then, as if someone had really just delivered the punchline right then. "Oh boy. All this time, searching for your little baby boy, traveling the whole Commonwealth, fighting all these nightmares. I wonder what you'll do, when you finally find him. Will you even want him back?"

I bristled. That hit a little too close to a part of myself I wasn't trying to look at. "What would you know?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Nick blinked his yellow eyes owlishly. Ah, he was back.

"You were talking crazy earlier," Hancock supplied. "Sounded like Kellogg. It was creepy."

"Did I? Dr. Amari said there might be some mnemonic impressions leftover. Anyway, I feel fine. So let's keep going."

Why was he being so laid back about this? He had essentially been possessed by the memories of a man he helped me to kill. "Our next stop is the Glowing Sea. I'm going to need some time to gather the equipment I'll need to even be able to walk through there, not to mention I hear I'm going to need some serious ammunition. Why don't you pick up those other cases you were working on in the mean time? I'll come back to you when I'm ready."

Nick frowned. "Are you sure? I may have other cases, but they've gone cold. I can still devote all of my attention to yours."

I shook my head. "There's no point in you helping me scavenge for some stuff. Besides, Hancock here has decided he's going to travel with me for a spell. And you know what they say, three's company."

"Hancock?" He turned to look at the ghoul. "This is all...surprising. Well, if you want to split up, we will. Just...last time you told me to wait, it took a week."

I'm not sure if the synth was guilt-tripping me on purpose or not. "I'm not going to lie. I'm not sure how long this is going to take. I promise that I'll bring you with me when it's time to find Virgil. I want you on this case, Nick. If it hadn't of been for you, I wouldn't have made it this far."

"Yeah, yeah, you just want a little time apart. Why does it feel like I'm being dumped?"

"Can't help it if the ladies love me. No hard feelings, Nick." Hancock threw his arm around my shoulder and leaned on me with swagger.
"She'll come back to me eventually," Nick joked back, and then left with a dip of his hat.

Dogmeat whined at the loss of a good ear scratcher.

Still leaning on me, Hancock whispered to me. "Hey, this isn't because you think Nick's possessed by that mercenary, right?"

"I trust Nick."

"That's not a no."

That night, we camped inside of an old hound, the long grey bus rusted and the glass broken, but at least it gave some kind of shelter. We made a campfire to cook the molerat we killed. It was tough and chewy, but at least it filled the belly.

"You know, I think the thing I miss the most is seasonings," I mourned, as I put my chewed up hunk of meat down for Dogmeat. "They didn't seem to be able to survive the fallout. And salt is so very rare to find. I wish we'd stumble onto a salt factory or something."

Hancock shrugged. "I never really noticed. Is that why all the pre-war food tastes like acid?"

"No, those were all junk food. They're basically like eating sugar. Hmm...if I could find some cooking oil, maybe I could crush up some sugar bombs and make a cake?" Darn, I wish I had a copy of *Housewives Weekly* to find one of their money-saver's recipes. They had all these neat substitution tricks that I could really use right now.

After dinner, Hancock began to teach me how to use my combat knife, as he had promised. I never really expected the man to follow through, but he seemed dead serious about upholding his word. He started off with showing me some defensive moves.

"It's all about redirecting that energy," he slowly moved, as if to stab me in the heart, then used his free hand to direct mine, knocking the incoming knife away. "You don't have to stop the charging Yao Guai, just push it in another direction. Less work for you, understand?"

I nodded. This time, when he came at me, I didn't need the guidance to knock his hand to the side.

I got the chance to put his moves into practice the next day. We didn't get very far when we encountered a group of raiders. Smalltime, but still armed. I had picked off as many as I could from a distance. Dogmeat and Hancock worked for great distractions, but one slipped through. He was an older man, his dark beard had flecks of silver in it, and he charged at me with some kind of handheld buzzsaw. I bet it would sting worse than a bee if it hit me. He made a downward slash; I dodged to the left, then he came at me with a horizontal swing. I knocked it up, ducking, and then drove my knife into his ribs. Before he could bring his weapon down on me, I rolled to the side. The rocks, and I think an old tin can, dug into me, but it was worth it, when I saw the weapon where my head used to be. The raider cried out in pain, holding his middle, then charged at me, weapon a straight charge for my heart. Just as Hancock had shown me, I batted his arm to the side, ducking slightly to the right, before I lunged forward and sent the butt of my palm into the man's nose. It made a sickening
crack noise, and then I drove the bone into his brain. The man fell down dead as a doornail.

Together, we looted the place, and came up with a sizeable amount of caps and ammo. I found some more leather armor to put over Kellogg's clothes (I should probably stop thinking of them as his clothes), and I felt just a little bit more powerful.

"You're a real smart cookie, you know that?" Hancock praised me. "One night of lessons and you've already got them mastered. I haven't made it to counters yet."

The compliments were like a warm drizzle of honey over my heart. "It seemed like the next logical step, I wasn't really thinking at the time." I scratched my cheek bashfully.

The ghoul muttered something under his breath that sounded an awful lot like "praise kink, huh," but I couldn't be too sure.

After a couple of stops to either loot an abandoned building or help some settlers with a raider problem, we eventually made it to Sanctuary Hills, my old neighborhood. The place had been spruced up a bit while I was gone. A couple of the houses had all of the holes in them fixed, and two turrets welcomed us at the bridge. I noticed a few new faces, people who heard the recruitment beacon and decided to try their luck here. It was a wonder raiders didn't listen in to the radio and decide they were easy pickings. Preston spotted us first, coming to welcome me back plus one more. Some of the settlers watched Hancock warily, but Preston smiled politely and shook his hand. The new guys seemed a bit suspicious of strangers for being new themselves, but I guess the outfit would look a little weird.

"Follow me, you can stay in my house," I waved Hancock over. My house was a little patched up, but some rooms were still only support beams. It didn't bother me none. It's not like I was in town much anyways. My room was completely bare except for two mattresses on metal frames and a small end table with melting candles for light. I'd have to find something to use as sheets and a blanket soon. Luckily, the nights were warm. "Pick whichever one you want."

He just shrugged, the two beds being completely identical, and took the one furthest from the door. I sat on the opposite, taking off my boots. I was going to share a room with another man, I realized with a flush. We weren't in the same bed, no, but my mother would have fainted at the thought.

Dogmeat jumped on top of the end of the bed, keeping my feet warm and cozy.

"I'm sorry everyone kept staring at you," I said in lieu of a distraction. "The outfit's a little strange, I guess."

Hancock turned to me from where he reclined on the mattress, head propped on his arms. "That's not a funny joke, Susie."

What? "That wasn't a joke."

"They weren't staring at my clothes. They were staring at my skin. Ghoul, remember?"

The only time I had seen ghouls was in Goodneighbor where they were the majority. I had forgotten that they were considered second-class citizens. "Oh. Right. Do you...get that a lot whenever you travel?"

Hancock rocked his foot on his other leg, so that it slightly shook the mattress. "Eh, sometimes. Depends on where you go. Some folk only care whether you're friend or foe, livin' a tough life, but there are some who will straight up shoot at ya, think you're no different from the ferals."

"That makes no sense, you're nothing like a feral." Ferals were terrifying monsters, Hancock was the
most personable person she knew. "If anything, you guys are superior. You're basically immortal, immune to radiation, not to mention the centuries of knowledge you have. How come you guys haven't banned together to take over the world or something?"

"The same reason humans haven't all banned together to recreate America or whatever. Because we're people."

We fell silent after that, the both of us just staring at the ceiling. Night had fallen outside, eerily silent without crickets or cicadas. The candle was reaching the end of its little stub. Dogmeat let out a quick breath through his nose. Poor babe was tired.

I didn't turn to check if Hancock had fallen asleep when I spoke next. "You know, when I was little, I used to play with these country boys a lot. I practically lived at my grandparents' house, out on their farm a few miles west. There weren't any girls my age in town, and I loved the outdoors, so everyday I wore these muddy overalls with sneakers and no socks, and the boys and I would play in the dirt and catch frogs out in the creek."

Hancock didn't say anything, but his breathing was too fast for a sleeper.

"I did this almost every day for nearly nine years. These boys were my childhood friends, my closest confidants and partners-in-crime. Up until a month after my thirteenth birthday." I blushed now. "I got my first period. Suddenly, I was now considered a woman, despite being flat as a board. My parents forced me to wear dresses from now on, threw away all of my overalls and pants, expressly forbid me from getting dirty and playing outside with those boys. So the next time I was to stay over at my grandparents' and I wore the dress and went outside to play with them. To my surprise, the boys wouldn't let me play with them. Said I was a girl, and girls weren't allowed to play with them. I told them that I had been a girl the entire time, I don't see why my clothes should make any difference. They said that I couldn't play, because what if my skirt flew up? I said what if and then flashed them." I chuckled at the memory. It had been hilarious to watch grown boys fall over themselves trying to cover their eyes, like we hadn't gone skinny-dipping when I was younger. "I got angry and threw some mud at them. Started a fight. When I came home covered in filth and scratches, I got a beating, and then I only spent summers there, and I wasn't allowed to play outside." My parents had hired a nanny, a real human one, for all those days that they couldn't supervise me, and then when I got old enough, they just left me home alone.

"I'm sorry, I had a point with this somewhere..." I glanced towards the broken wall, ashamed of my rambling. He had told me about how his whole people were subjugated and I tell him the story of my first period? I was usually more charming than this.

"No, I get it."

I flipped onto my other side, surprised to see him looking at me. His eyes told me that he really did understand, that whatever message I had been trying to send had made it through. With a smile, I went to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Hancock: "I returned her even better than before."
Nick: "You've ruined a perfectly good vault dweller is what you've done. Look, now she's got anxiety."
The Adventures of the Silver Shroud

Chapter Summary

Hancock and Susie get into a little bit of genderbend cosplay.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As expected of the tech savant, Sturges had a plan to fix up the power armor sitting in my garage. He could give it a radiation resistant plating, but he'd need a lot of specific materials. The kinds of stuff that you don't just find lying around your local Super Duper Mart. Not to mention, I was going to need to stock up on supplies for this expedition. From what I've been told of the Glowing Sea, I was going to need a lot of stimpaks, and those got expensive.

While I decided where next to explore this new Commonwealth, we hung around Sanctuary for a while longer, helping out with maintenance. Hancock didn't need to help, he was my guest after all, but the ghoul took up a hammer alongside everyone else. He even laughed along with them when David and I reunited. The old Vault-Tec rep turned ghoul pulled me into a sudden sobbing hug upon seeing me.

"You came to visit! I mean, I know you promised, but you actually did it." What kind of life had this guy led? He looked so broken, clutching onto me like a lost child.

"Of course, David. How's my favorite Vault-Tec rep doing? Everyone treating you alright?" I gently coaxed him into releasing me.

"Yeah, better than Diamond City, I suppose. But look at you, 200 years later and you still have your old house. Must be nice."

I frowned at that. The pity I felt for this guy could fuel a Mr. Handy for years, but that felt distinctly like a guilt trip. "It's not much of a house anymore. More like a skeleton of one. Besides, you'll be getting your own house, with a nice little store on the first floor maybe?"

He lit up. "Oh really? My own place? Most of us have been bunking up in the same building, since most of them still have holes in the roofs."

"Yeah, I mean, it's the future. We can do whatever we want with this place. And you know, I've always wanted to turn that big old tree in the cul-de-sac into a treehouse. Maybe make it into some kind of club or something." I could picture it now, strings of lights tangled in the tree's branches, a jukebox in the corner, and a bar for drinks. It'd be up high, have a great view. Keep the top part uncovered so that you could gaze at the moon.

"That does sound pretty nifty. I think we'll need to chop down more trees for that though." Most of the trees in the neighborhood that were small enough had already been used for lumber. They'd have to go beyond Sanctuary's borders. Was deforestation a problem when the land had radiation poisoning?
David left to go plan out his new house. I was glad to see him looking towards a bright future instead of wallowing over the past. Hancock walked up to me when the ghoul had left, tilting the front point of his hat up a bit for a better view. "He seems to be doing much better here. I'm glad. He was like a ghost living up on the top floor of that hotel."

"Yeah, I'm glad no one's giving him a hard time because he's a ghoul. I'll make sure they'll accept him." I couldn't be here 24/7, but I could come back to check up on things, and get an update from Preston on Minutemen business.

"You can't change people, Susie. That's a fool's road you don't want to go walking down. And don't let David guilt you into doing stuff for him. It's not your fault you got into the vault and he didn't. Let him keep his bitterness to himself."

"I...thanks."

He glanced at me skeptically. "For what?"

"For looking out for me."

"Someone has to. You're like a lost little lamb in a field of Deathclaws."

I took offense to that. "When have I ever not proven myself to you?"

He laughed, using my shoulder as an arm rest. Why did tall people have to do that. "Are you kidding me? When I first met you, you looked like you had fallen out of the vault that day. You've gotten a little better, I'll admit, but do I have to remind you about Bobbi?"

I hoped my pout was fierce and threatening. "I wasn't the only one fooled by her."

He dropped the cocky smirk at that.

With no specific destination in mind, I decided to help Preston set up more settlements for the Minutemen. Hancock didn't seem to mind what we did, so long as we got to kill some bad guys. "Someone needs helping, we help 'em; someone needs hurting, we hurt 'em. It's not hard." What really surprised me had been the grudging mutual respect between him and Preston. The Minuteman didn't approve of Goodneighbor, thought it was a hive of criminal activity (which he wasn't wrong about), but respected Hancock for sticking up for ghouls and creating a safe place for them. Hancock thought Preston was a stuck-up party pooper, but respected what the Minutemen did. You'd think men with such fine hats would get along better.

Preston sent us east, and we scavenged what we could along the way. I even found a decent red kerchief off of a raider I had killed that I decided to tie around Dogmeat's neck. He looked so cute and dashing. A real hero. If only I could find a little cowboy hat to go right between his ears.

We encountered a little town called Covenant. The place was completely walled, with actual brick and mortar, and turrets perched on top of the corners. The houses (at least the tops of them that I could see) looked like they hadn't even been touched by the war. My suspicions were raised before I
even talked to the man sitting outside, reading a pre-war magazine lazily. He didn't look like much of a guard, wearing the typical greaser outfit, and no weapon visible. But then Mr. Swanson told me that I had to take some kind of test to get in.

"Why would you have a test for people to even get in?"

"We're trying to build a happy town here," Mr. Swanson smiled at me politely. He'd probably given this spiel a hundred times before. "Our mission is to go back to the quality of life we've lost since the war. To do this, we have this test to root out any...undesirables." His eyes flicked to Hancock behind me.

I bristled. "I see what kind of place this is. Nevermind. We'll be on our way." Before anyone could get a word in edgewise, I pivoted and continued following the road east, feet stomping on the broken concrete. We passed by a caravan camped outside, and they scooted a little closer to their fire as we passed.

Hancock caught up to me, keeping with my furious pace. "Woah there, sister. I thought we were recruiting settlements for the Minutemen?"

"The Minutemen don't need a settlement like that. Besides, they look pretty well defended. They can handle themselves."

"You sure? It's getting late, and we should find a safe place to rest for the night. They look like they have all sorts of useful resources."

I stopped to give him a stern look. "We don't need people who will be picky about who they come to aid. You can't really want to go back there?"

Hancock shrugged his usual devil-may-care shrug, hands in his pockets, strutting past me. "Nah, I just wanted to check if you did." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, pulling one out with his teeth and lighting it. He smiled at me, teeth glowing gold in the cigarette's flame.

For some reason, I felt a surge of pride, as if that smile was the highest praise. With renewed energy I led us through the wasteland. Or maybe that was just the Sugar Bombs I had been snacking on.

A few places we found were deserted, but good locations for a settlement, so I built a recruitment beacon to draw in people willing to work the land. The first real settlement to join us was Greentop Nursery, a small little greenhouse farm worked by a single couple. At their behest, we cleaned out a nearby raider gang that had been leaning on them, then used whatever materials we could find to help build up their defenses. It wasn't much, but it would help them against a small company.

"I thought our main goal was to look for materials for your power armor?" Hancock asked wryly. "Why are we giving them all of our junk?"

"They need it more than we do. We'll find more."

The couple had been grateful for our help, and given us shelter and food for the night. Their mutfruit
juice was pretty good, if a little bit warm. If only there were a nearby river or creek. Grammy would bury beer and wine bottles deep in the riverbed, for days the power went out. That way they could have cold drinks on a hot day. I'd have to see about getting a fridge fixed up.

I sat outside on a rusted patio chair without the patio, watching the stars, warmed by the cooking fire, mere embers now, and drinking the mutfruit juice out of a dusty glass. Dogmeat was asleep somewhere in the house, where the settlers were sleeping soundly, tired after a hard day's labor. I should be tired too, fighting a quarry full of raiders was no stroll through the irradiated park. Instead, I found my mind restless, just as my body was a limp weight. The crunching sound of dead grass alerted me to a new arrival. "Hancock? I thought you were asleep?"

He took the matching blue chair beside me. It creaked ominously under his weight. "Ghouls don't need much sleep. What about you? Don't you need your beauty sleep?"

"No amount of sleep can fix this," I grumbled into my glass. I wasn't a vain person, but survival wasn't good for your skin. I'd kill a man for some moisturizer. Putting my hair into a braid helped some, but it was still greasy and dull.

"What's there to fix?"

Charmer. "Flattery will get you nowhere." I still smiled though.

"Darn. Usually the ladies all swoon at my feet. Not many people can resist my sexy pirate king of the zombies look." He chuckled, popping a Mentat into his mouth before lighting another cigarette. He took a long drag, then exhaled a thin cloud that filtered into the night sky. "Actually, I kind of wanted to talk with you about something."

"Ok. Shoot."

His cigarette now sat nestled between two of his fingers as they dangled over the arm of the chair. He stared into the dying orange glow of the campfire. "It's been on my mind for a while, this whole business with Bobbi. I'm not proud that you were put on the spot like that, that the situation even came to be in the first place. To be honest, if you hadn't convinced her to leave, I was going to have to put her down. That kind of dictatorial shit ain't usually my style. Hell, that's more the previous mayor's gag."

"Goodneighbor had a mayor before you?"

"Of course it did."

"I dunno, I guess I always just thought you created the place."

"Nah, Goodneighbor's always been around. It used to be a real slum though--" More than normal? "-w asn't safe for anyone there. I made it into a place where everyone could live equally. The previous mayor, some ass named Vic ran the town for who knows how long before I came along. The guy was scum. Used us drifters like doormats."

"Sounds like a bully."

Hancock took another drag, snorting grimly. "Like a Deathclaw is a kitty. Guy had his own personal squad of goons, and sometimes he'd let them loose on the populace at large. They get to blow off some steam, and we get a reminder of who's in charge. Folks with houses, they could lock their doors, but us drifters...we had it the worst." I wondered what bloody memories danced behind those black eyes. "One guy, must've said something to them. They cracked him open like a can of Cram on the pavement. And we all just stood there and did nothing." He bit down on his cigarette, splitting
it in half, so that the longer piece fell, and the golden band was in his mouth. Ugh, that must have tasted awful.

"Don't beat yourself up. If you had done something then, it would have been two cans cracked open." The platitude felt empty, even to my own ears.

He shot me a glare that nearly made me drop my empty glass. "It was still spineless, like a radroach running away from the light. I could tell myself those excuses all day, but the fact still remains that all of us stood there and watched a friend die. Even now I'm still disgusted with myself back then." He pulled out another cigarette. "I promised myself I wouldn't run anymore..."

He shook his head, lit the new cigarette, took a drag, and then continued his story with the exhale. It was strange to watch smoke trail out of the two holes where his nose should be, and it reminded me of Bobbi. I wonder what happened to her. No doubt she was no longer welcome in Goodneighbor. "I felt terrible, like less than nothing. I got so high, I blacked out completely."

I frowned in distaste, but withheld my judgement. Hancock was trying to open up to me; it was no time to lecture him on the dangers of addiction.

"When I came to, I was on the floor of the Old State House, right in front of the clothes of John Hancock, first American hoodlum and defender of the People. I might've still been high, but those clothes spoke to me, told me what I needed to do. So I smashed the case, put them on, and started a new life. As Hancock." That cocky smirk was back, and I felt a rush of relief that the bad memories hadn't completely darkened his mood.

"Wait...the clothes spoke to you?" I failed to hide my snicker.

"I don't actually believe the clothes spoke," he swatted me playfully on the head. "I meant that I felt a sort of, you know, connection. I wasn't that high. Anyway," he shot me one last look before he grew somber again, "I got clean for a bit, got organized, convinced KL-E-0 to loan me a bit of hardware. Got a crew of drifters together and headed out into the ruins. We trained for about a week, before Vic's boys went on their next tear. That night, we all got loaded, Vic and his goons all got hammered, and we burst in from the windows and rooftops where we'd been hiding. They never saw it coming. We didn't have to fire a single shot. Didn't have to, but we sure fucking did. It was a massacre." He said the words with a manic grin, like he had been talking about a trip to the candy store. "We strolled right through Vic's quarters in the State House, wrapped a rope around his neck and threw him over the balcony. You know, there had been talk for many days about making him into a landmark, but the smell got so bad, it started attracting bloatflies."

How long was that body hanging there?

"So there I was on the balcony, gun in hand, draped in Hancock's duds, looking at all the people of Goodneighbor below. I had to say something. The first time I said them, they didn't even sound like my own words: 'Of the people, for the people.'"

Oh no. Did I tell him? It's probably for the best he didn't get a hold of the Gettysburg Address. It would ruin his whole image.

"I became Mayor Hancock of Goodneighbor that day. And from then on, I vowed never to stand by and watch. Ever again." His eyes were hotter than the ashes he stared into.

"If you fought so hard to become mayor, why leave?"

"Look, I ain't really the ponderous type. When an instinct takes hold, I listen. My instincts told me to
go with you, and it seems I was right.” He flicked the tip of his hat up, a habit I was starting to notice that he did when he wanted to gauge my reaction fully. "Traveling with you so far, it's been real fun. Nice to have someone to kill the baddies with."

I felt like that was my cue to blush, but I was stuck on his phrasing. "'Kill the baddies'... Hancock, I think I've got an idea where we should go next."

"You just wanted an excuse to wear the costume, didn't you?"

"What?" I feigned ignorance as I adjusted the silver scarf around my neck. In the cool of the night, it felt comfortable, even if the material was a bit scratchy. "I made a promise, and it was nearby."

"It took us half a day to get back to Goodneighbor."

"I don't want you to be separate from your people for too long. It'd be good to check up on them."

"Fahrenheit's got it covered. Besides, anyone who's met you will know it's you. The pip-boy is a dead giveaway."

True. The device was much too clunky to wear underneath the jacket, but it was way too useful not to keep on either. "The Silver Shroud could use a pip-boy. It's the future. The pip-boy is part of my new origin story. Besides, most of them won't live long enough to tattle.” I held up the silver plated submachine gun. I would have preferred to use Zeus and take them out from afar, but this had to be authentic. Even if automatic weapons were imprecise wastes of ammo. They did have a certain appeal to them.

"That's--hold on. Turn up your radio." He turned the knob on it before I could even process his statement.

Normally, Silver Shroud radio just played old episodes that Kent had collected on repeat. But now, a familiar voice was making an important announcement.

"The Silver Shroud is back and he's gonna clean up the streets! Everyone heard how Wayne Delancy murdered Miss Selmy and her kid, all over a few lousy caps. Death is coming for you, Wayne."

"Well, sounds like my first target."

Finding him was a piece of cake. Wayne Delancy was in an empty back alleyway, completely out of sight. The kind of alleyway that crimes occurred in. He looked me up and down, not a speck of kindness or humanity in his dark eyes. "What's with the fancy duds? Looks expensive. Maybe I've found a new 'friend.'" Scum like Wayne were old hat, and he wouldn't stop. Killing him would only be a service to the Commonwealth.

In as deep a voice as I could muster, I declared, "Your crimes have gone unpunished for too long.” Yeah, I sounded just like him. Beside me Hancock snickered, drawing Wayne's attention to him.
"Oh, it's our illustrious mayor. What are you doing with this nutjob?"

Hancock held up his hands. "Hey, I'm just an audience. Don't mind me."

"Is this some kind of shake-down? Look, whatever it is you and the mayor want, I'm not interested."

The man was starting to take his leave. I had to think of something quick. "Uhh....Death has come for you, and I am its Shroud!"

"Are you crazy or something? Nothing a few bullets can't cure."

Funny. I was thinking the same thing myself. I whipped out my gun in lightning speed, and filled him full of lead. The recoil was much stronger than I expected, so my spray of bullets made a wide arc along the wall behind him. Damn, I didn't like automatic weapons.

While I looted Wayne and put my calling card on his bloody chest, Hancock strolled up to me, looking at the smoking holes in the brick. "Your aim is a little off."

"Oh stuff a cork in it. I'm not used to guns like these. I've only ever worked with hunting rifles. I'll get better." I stood up and turned to him. "First things first, the mayor of Goodneighbor doesn't make for a good sidekick if all the bad guys get spooked by your presence. You're going to need a disguise."

"Hey, I like my outfit."

I tapped my chin ponderously with my finger. "Hmm...Kent's already called dibs on Rhett Reinhart... Maybe you could be my Mistress of Mystery."

"Not that I doubt I could pull off a dress, but I've got a reputation to uphold here."

"I think it fits. We'll be a genderbend universe. And, alright, you don't have to wear a dress--" *As much as I would like to see that.* "--besides, I don't know where we would find her costume anyway if it wasn't with the Shroud's." Hmm, he couldn't just wear any old suit. He had to look like the Mistress of Mystery. "Give me a few days. I'll need to make it."

So that's how, three days later, Hancock wore his new costume: a dark purple suit with the wide cream colored ruffled collar with a green pendant reminiscent of the Pterror-dactyls cover of *The Unstoppables*. I had struggled with the sleeves the most. The Mistress of Mystery wore a sleeveless dress with long gloves, but that would just look silly on her male counterpart. I ended up just keeping long sleeves with black gloves. He wore a green belt and black boots, and instead of getting him a wig as I had originally intended I just let him wear a black fedora too.

"Wow, I really feel like I'm looking at the Mister of Mystery, although you'll need a .44 pistol, like the Mistress uses," Kent applauded. Maybe I should let him borrow Kellogg's pistol? "I wouldn't even recognize Hancock if you didn't tell me."

"Really, Kent," Hancock sighed, fussing with the rumpled collar. "I wouldn't have expected the
whole 'all ghouls look alike' schtick from you."

"It's n-not that," Kent rushed to explain himself, unaware he was merely being teased. "It's just that everyone associates you with the red coat and the hat, you know? It's mainly the hat. I'm sure Fahrenheit would recognize you immediately."

"And I doubt we'll encounter her on our crime fighting adventures, unless there's something you want to tell me about her?" I raised an eyebrow at him as best as I could. I had never been able to pull that off.

"Yeah, we'll be fine. I still think Dogmeat got the better costume." He gestured towards the dog. There wasn't much I could do for a functioning dog costume, so I cut off some of my silver scarf and tied it around his neck, and then put some goggles on him, for the whole masked vigilante look.

"I think you mean the Silver Hound!"

Hancock just slammed his face into his palm. "I'm surrounded by dorks."

"Hey, stop fussing with the collar," I swatted his hands away and began to smooth out the wrinkles. "It's not like this is any more ridiculous than your normal outfit. Besides, you could have been Grognak the Barbarian. We did find his costume at the comic book store too."

A bitter chuckled escaped his lipless mouth. "That would send our enemies running: the sight of my bare ghoul chest."

"I was more worried about finding the right wig." That seemed a little more self-deprecating than usual. Could Hancock be ashamed of his body? No way, he had this cocky smirk, and not too long ago, some settlers we passed by had given him a "tour of the town."

Kent chuckling brought our attention to the ghoul whose eyes kept darting back and forth between us. "Sorry, it's just that you two reminded me of my ma and pa."

My blush was instant and uncontrollable. I suppose we had looked a little domestic just then, like a wife fussing over her husband's tie before sending him off to work. Normally the quaint scene would make me want to throw up, but if it was Hancock instead of Nate... I could just picture myself adjusting the tricorner hat on his head and giving him a peck on the cheek before busting down the door to some gang hideout and slaughtering everyone inside.

"W-We should go fight crime now that we got our costumes," I inwardly kicked myself for stammering and steadfastly ignored the look Hancock was giving me. I bolted out of the Memory Den, not running away, no, just eager to clean up the streets of Goodneighbor. Belatedly, I realized that I could have just asked Kent where the next bad guy was while I was there.

"You ran out of there awful quick," Hancock sauntered up beside me lazily, hands in his pockets. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that devilish grin of his on his face. Oh no... "You know, I'm starting to think there was another reason you chose this outfit for me. The Mistress of Mystery and this Silver Shroud guy used to be lovers, right?"

Curse my fleshy skin for blushing. Ghouls couldn't blush. No fair. "How did you know that? I thought you didn't read the comics?"

"I don't, but we've been listening to the radio for the past few days waiting for bad guys, and I kind of got the gist from the show." He leaned on my shoulder again as he liked to do when teasing me. "There are other superheroes in this team, right? You could have picked anyone else, even that barbarian guy, just like you said."
"The Silver Shroud and the Mistress of Mystery often worked together, especially outside of the Unstoppables comics. I was just going for authenticity."

Hancock hmmed in a manner of complete disbelief. His arm left my shoulder to retrieve another Mentat, and give me that calculating look again. He certainly did eat a lot of those.

"Hey, look, if you really don't want to wear the outfit, you don't have to. This is my own selfish request, so you don't have to follow me around."

"What? And miss the Silver Shroud in action? Nuh-uh, sister, you ain't getting rid of me that easily. This is way too fun to miss out." Then he threw me a hooded look. "Besides, where would the Silver Shroud be without her Mister of Mystery?"

If I paid attention to all of the fluttering of the butterflies in my stomach, I was going to be sick, so instead, we went to find a chem dealer who sells to children, some yutz in a flat cap named AJ. Surrounded by his goons, the criminal didn't look the least bit scared.

"Oh for Christ's sake. Did Kent put you up to this? Look here, hows abouts I pay you 50 caps, just to shut up and leave me alone. And maybe get Kent off my back while you're at it?"

Really? A measly 50 caps? "Stop selling to children, miscreant. Or face my wrath."

Then, Hancock opened his mouth and spoke the most beautiful line I had ever heard, in the sultry, breathy voice of the Mister of Mystery. "Pesky peddler, we're putting you down."


This time, I was expecting the recoil and my aim significantly improved, though it was still hard to control the spray of bullets. Luckily, having multiple targets did well for that. We mowed them down, and then I left my calling card.

"You know, Susie, if you keep your mouth hanging open like that, you're going to catch flies."

"I'm just still amazed by that line, Mister of Mystery." I'm sure the wide grin on my face was at the shit-eating level, but I couldn't help it. "You're having fun, aren't you?"

"What's not to love about killing assholes?" He moved his shoulder around. "Costume's a little tight though."

"I'll make some adjustments. I didn't exactly have your measurements."

"You should have asked. I would've let you take them." The look he gave me left no room for misinterpretation.

That was a road I didn't let my mind walk down. Not yet, at least.

We continued to clean up the crime on Goodneighbor's streets. A couple of times, they had been
such petty offences that killing the guy hadn't been worth it. But by the week's end, Goodneighbor's act was shaping up, and people began to whisper about the Silver Shroud. Daisy kept giving me a knowing look whenever I walked into her shop, but so far no one had confronted me about my identity as the Silver Shroud. It's not exactly like I was wearing a mask or anything. Absolutely no one suspected Hancock of being my sidekick though. Apparently the outfit really did make the man.

Currently, I lay on the bed of my room, staring at my pip-boy in annoyance. Dogmeat was chewing on a molerat bone idly, and the dull hum of the streets outside my broken window nearly lulled me to sleep. It'd been days since Kent announced my latest victim, and there had been no reports of crime. Had I done such a good job that all the bad guys were too scared to act out anymore? It seemed a little counterproductive to wish for crime when the whole point was to stop it.

A knock on my door announced Hancock's arrival. "I just finished my mayoral duties, and then Fahrenheit tells me you've been moping about in your room the past couple of days." I felt the bed sink with his weight when he sat down next to me.

"I wanted to play Silver Shroud some more. It can't just end like this." I had already listened to the entirety of the show on the radio about 60 times. I could probably quote the whole thing by now. Kent needed new material.

"Aww, don't get down, Sunshine," he patted my head. "There will always be bastards out there for you to kill. We could go out and kill some raiders in your costume."

"Not the same. It has to be evildoers he announces or it's pointless. Besides, I don't have that many calling cards."

"Well, you can't lay in bed all day waiting for people to kill. You need to get out and get some fresh air. Well, I use the word 'fresh' lightly. Come on, I've got just the place."

With an effort, I dragged myself out of bed and followed Hancock. He led me out of Goodneighbor and into the ruins. Despite how dangerous the trip usually was, we didn't encounter any trouble on the way. The building we stopped in front of was not what I had expected. A little corner store with a fancy sign that read "Bark Avenue." The windows were broken, but I could see remnants of paintings of cartoon dogs. He took me inside, a little bell above the door ringing dully to announce our entrance. The inside of the store looked as trashed as most of the shops nowadays, burnt magazines littering the floor and broken pieces of metal made walking a treacherous mine field of tetanus. Oddly enough, this shop didn't have human mannequins as were littered about the Commonwealth (and made for many wasted headshots on my part), but had dog mannequins of all breeds and sizes. Some of them still had scraps of cloth attached to them. One immediately to my right, a dusty gray mannequin of a chihuahua still wore a bejeweled pink collar. Was this some sort of pet boutique?

At my curious look, Hancock explained, "I found this place some ways back, before I became mayor. There's nothing really useful in here, so it's been overlooked by raiders and scavengers. I just used it as a quiet place to shoot up, but I thought maybe you might find something in here, you know, for Dogmeat. You were always wishing you could find a little hat for him or something, right? I'm sure they got something here somewhere. Honestly, most of the stuff is trash, and some I wouldn't be caught dead in, let alone my dog, but you've got weird tastes, so I thought--Oof!"

The force of my hug nearly knocked him over, but the ghoul remained standing. "Oh, thank you, thank you. I can't believe you found accessories for my dog, this is the best gift ever."

He patted me awkwardly on the head, likely unused to this sort of physical affection. Or maybe he was used to it? He was always boasting about his many conquests. I couldn't see his face from where
mine was smooshed in his dirty ruffled shirt.

"Uh, yeah. You're welcome."

I let go, and dashed into the store to see what I could find. Most of the front was damaged from the blast, but the further back I went, the better condition the stuff was in. Most of the sizes were meant for little lap dogs, the kind you'd find in some rich old lady's purse. I ignored the leashes.

"Oh, hey look, Dogmeat, 200 year old doggie biscuits," I showed him the box of bone-shaped treats. He sniffed at it curiously, then put his ears back and whined. "Yeah, I wouldn't trust them either." They were probably as hard as a rock by now.

And then I found it, the hats section. All manner of tiny headgear hung on a rack on the back wall. Everything from little bows to full on headpieces, and nestled between a sunflower headband, and one with antlers like a reindeer, I found a miniature strap-on cowboy hat. I picked the largest size in the row, and put it on Dogmeat's head. I couldn't contain the screech that left my throat. "You're so cute!" I grabbed the sides of his head and squished his little doggy cheeks all about. "Who is the cutest little cowboy in the Commonwealth? It's you! It's you!"

Dogmeat barked happily, tail wagging so hard it shook his entire butt.

"Ah! You look just like Rin Tin Tin! I'm so happy, I think I might die."

"I would heavily advise against that," Hancock deadpanned, but he had a little smile on his face.

"Oh I wish I could find a little Minutemen hat for you," I mused, scratching beneath Dogmeat's chin, just where he liked it. "Maybe the Minutemen had uniforms for any one of their canine soldiers? I wonder if Preston knows anything."

"You're going to make an entire wardrobe for this mutt, ain't ya?" He didn't look as disapproving as his words sounded. In fact, he made an expression I had never seen on him before. I'd go so far as to call it fond. Perhaps even a little bit of pride in there for his gift being such a success.

"Dogmeat's the first pet I've ever really had." And it was a bit of a stretch to call him a pet even. The dog was so intelligent and independent, it was more like he was a traveling companion than a creature that I owned. "My parents didn't allow pets, thought they were filthy. And when I went to college, I didn't have the time or money to take care of another living being. My grandparents had this mouser in their barn that they kept around to keep the rats away, but it was more of a stray cat, than a pet. I did name it Tom though, after the old cartoons. The thing didn't care much for people though." I showed him a tiny scar on my left hand. "It especially didn't care for me, as determined as I was to befriend it. I gave up around the third grade." I snuggled Dogmeat again. "But you're not a grumpy old cat, are you?" I received a lick in answer.

Hancock sat down in a lacquered fold-out chair, the pastel blue paint chipping off to reveal the rusted metal underneath. He held a Carmen Miranda fruit headpiece meant for a chihuahua, turning it every which way to examine it. "I used to have a cat when I was a kid. Well, it was a stray that everyone fed, so I guess it was the town's cat. We called it Nuka, cause it liked the drink. Strangely enough, it didn't live very long." He shrugged, tossing the hat on the ground. "I dunno. Not many animals are friendly, so it's rare to actually have a pet."

"I don't know. I think you could domesticate a Deathclaw if you raised it from birth."

"I'd like to see the crazy fucker that tries that."
"So you and Hancock have been playing dress up, huh?"

"Oh, fuck, how did you know?"

Fahrenheit leveled me with the most deadpan look. "I'm Hancock's bodyguard. I know about what you guys get up to outside of Goodneighbor. You think I don't know what he's doing inside the city?" She snorted, tossing her hair, and bumping her hip off the wall so that she was standing in front of me with her arms crossed. "It's not exactly like you two were disguised or anything. I mean, at least wear sunglasses, damn."

I grabbed the ice cold ale that Buddy dispensed from his torso. All these years of science and technology to create a robot that hands out cold beers and only knows five jokes. Amazing. I wasn't a fan of beers, but the Gwinnett Ale was okay. "No one else has realized though, right?"

"Everyone knows you're the one in the black trench, with the pip-boy and all, but people just think it's Kent in the other get-up." She finished her beer and tossed it into the metal waste bin nestled against a pillar of the hotel lobby. She fixated me with a look, not unlike the one Hancock gives me once in a while. "You know, that's the first time I've ever seen him wear anything else ever since he became mayor. What kind of dirt do you have on him to get him to wear that ridiculous getup?"

"Hey, it's not ridiculous, it's my interpretation of a male Mistress of Mystery."

Fahrenheit rolled her eyes. I could just hear her calling me a dweeb.

"And for your information, I didn't blackmail him at all. I just told him to put it on and he did."

"Really? Interesting."

Was it really? "How long have you known Hancock?"

"I've known him since he moved to Goodneighbor, back when he was a useless junkie like the rest of us. He was just another drifter to me back then. I think I might have shotgunned with him once, but to be fair, much of my days were a haze, so it easily could have been someone else. I never really noticed him until my cousin was murdered. He was the only one who stood up to Vic and gave me the chance for some revenge."

Wait..."the can of cram" was her cousin? "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. The kid was a dumbass with a big mouth. He would've gotten himself killed eventually. Still felt good to watch that bastard swing. Thanks for the thought though."

Her wicked grin sent chills down my spine. I could only imagine that she was the most bloodthirsty of the drifters.

"Anyway, it was nice sharing a cold one with you," Fahrenheit excused herself with a salute. "If you ever get tired of Hancock's ghously ass, my door's always open. And I get better reviews. Oh, and you might want to listen to your radio. You know which station."
I waved at her retreating back dumbly. I wasn't sure if I would ever get used to this strange new world. I had a feeling Fahrenheit was truly the scariest person in all of Goodneighbor. Taking her advice, I tuned in to the Silver Shroud radio. What great luck! Another target. Time to go grab Hancock.

After questioning Whitechapel Charlie, the strange bartending Mr. Handy, the Silver Trio headed out to Water Street Apartments in search of this Kendra woman. Unlike the others, this woman had an entire building of henchmen that we had to battle through. At the end, we found her in some kind of drug lab, though it seemed she had been expecting us. Regardless of whatever spider metaphors she made, the woman still fell to a bullet in her head.

Hancock dug through her body, apparently finding something upsetting. He held up a piece of paper, a contract for a kill. "I had my suspicions, but I was hoping...We got a problem."

"What's wrong?" I set my calling card down.

"All these lowlives we've been taking out, they belong to one bigger lowlife, a guy named Sinjin. He's taken two bit criminals and made them...scary. Small fish now, but if left alone..."

"So we've been taking out his men this whole time? You think he will retaliate?" Oh god, oh god, this was becoming just like one of the episodes. We're gonna fight the mafia!

"Not personally. Not at first. We'll definitely be getting some feedback, though." He stood up, dusting off his purple suit.

"So what's the plan to get to Sinjin then? We've obviously got to take out the big bad."

The smile he gave me jolted me stronger than a Nuka-Cola Quantum. "I just so happen to know where two of his inner circle are, much higher up in the food chain than what we've been taking on."

The two honchos Hancock pointed me to were definitely a cut above Kendra, not to mention that they were expecting me, and we were welcomed by an entire squadron of triggermen. Smiling Kate was batshit, laughing as she attacked, and Northy was a coward, ran away before I'd even said anything. Both were six feet under now. Well, no, their bodies were still rotting topside. In fact, Hancock was crouched over Northy's corpse right now, while I picked the lock to the safe in the room. There were some good pickings in there.

"So, now I guess we wait for Sinjin to come knocking on our door?" I pocketed the pistol I found.

"I'd rather he not knock on my door, thank you very much," Hancock chuckled, pulling out a
holotape from Northy's jacket pocket. "Hello, what's this? Here, play it." He handed me the small orange tape, and I put it into the player on my pip-boy.

"Northy, Sinjin wants you to keep up the recruiting efforts. We're gonna need more warm bodies after we deal with the costume. And don't worry, Kate's gathering a bunch of meatheads to take the Shroud out."

"That worked out well for her, didn't it?" Hancock joked.

"The boss ain't happy. Now's not a time for failure." This was just like that one episode against that one Russian mafia boss that forced people to play a deadly game of roulette. The Shroud had just thought it was small time crime, but then Rhett Reinhart figured out this was an entire mob funded by the remnants of the USSR, and then the Mistress had been kidnapped--

"He's gonna pay the Shroud's flunky friend a 'special' visit in Goodneighbor. After he's done with that. He'll check in and expect results."

My heart dropped into my stomach. Kent...oh no.

"Shit. Kenny boy's been announcing his location this whole time on the radio, that dumbass," Hancock grit his teeth.

"We have to save him, Hancock. He's a good kid. He can't go out like this." God, this was all my fault. I had been playing dress-up and doing whatever I pleased. I should have known my actions would have consequences.

"We'll find him, Susie, don't you worry. And we're gonna gut the bastard that took him." He took out his shotgun, his preferred weapon, and pumped it one-handed. "Come on, let's head back to Goodneighbor."

We hurried back as quick as we could. I screamed in frustration every time some raider or stingwing decided to hinder us. When we bust through the door to the Memory Den, Irma was standing there, wringing her hands, her perfect blonde curls in a disarray.

At the sight of us, she ran up to me, fingernails digging into my arm. "Oh sugar, they took him. We tried to stop them, but they had all these guns..."

"Sinjin," Hancock growled. "Where did they take him, Irma?"

Irma wiped the smudges of running mascara from her tearful eyes. She looked like any dame in distress on the TV, beautiful and helpless. Not too long ago, that would have been me, but I had a gun, and a desperate fear in my heart. "They left a message for you, on Kent's radio. It's been on loop this whole time. I didn't dare stop it..."

I patted her arm as comfortingly as I could. Slowly, I felt her deathlike grip release my arms. "We're going to find him, Irma. I'm going to save my friend."

"I know you will, sugar," Irma seemed to have calmed down. "If anyone could, it would be you." She left us to it.

Her small episode had been hysteric enough for the both of us it seemed. Now, all I felt was focus and a solid will to kill everyone that had ever allied themselves with Sinjin. With a shared look with Hancock, we went to Kent's room. It looked like a crime scene: toppled over chairs, a small spray of blood. I turned on the radio in his room with dread.
"Oh god, what's happening?" Kent's voice. So full of fear. There were the distant pops of gunfire. The filthy voice of Sinjin's goons.

Then I heard the breathy voice of none other than Sinjin himself. "This is the Silver Shroud's headquarters? Then you must be her little friend."

"Y-yes." Muffled, warbling.

A moment of silence, presumably for Sinjin to pick up the microphone to Kent's ham radio, because now his voice was much clearer and louder. "If you want to see your friend alive, Shroud, meet me at Milton General Hospital."

"Don't do it, Shroud, it's a trap. Save yourself!" Sweet Kent, so brave.

There was a loud bang, and then Kent's cry of pain. "Do it, Shroud! Do it! Oh, my knee..."

"Tick-tock, Shroud. Don't keep me waiting." And then the message began to play over again. I turned off the radio.

"Poor Kent, what did they do to him?" I clutched my Silver Shooter tightly.

Hancock put a hand on my shoulder. "Nothing we can't fix. They'll keep him alive as bait. Now, we know where to go."

The old hospital was in shambles, parts of the walls had to be boarded up just to keep the elements out. Despite all that, it still amazingly had power. Unfortunately, the building across from it was also a Super Mutant base, so we had to be very careful about sneaking in. No point in wasting ammo. The front lobby had been empty, covered in a dusty quiet. Past that, though, we were greeted by machine gun turrets and henchmen. The battle through the building was tough. These weren't lowly goons, but the best of Sinjin's gang to guard their headquarters. Luckily, a hospital was supplied with plenty of stimpaks.

"How's the leg?" Hancock asked me in a whisper, as we huddled behind an overturned table. His suit was more than a little worse for wear, dirty and torn. It wasn't likely to be salvageable by the end of this operation. Shame.

"The stimpak's healing it, but it still feels like I've been shot." I grit my teeth, tasting blood. Luckily, the raider bullet had passed through, not injuring any bone or major arteries. But stimpaks did nothing to soothe the nerves.

"Here, take some Med-X," he handed me a long plastic syringe.

It remained clenched between his fingers. "I told you, I don't do drugs, Hancock."

He frowned. "Do you really think now's the time to get up on your high horse? You can barely walk from the pain alone."
I still didn't lift my hand to take it. My parents, my school teachers, hell, there were even PSAs on TV, that drilled into my head about how bad drugs were, how addiction ruined lives. Chem use seemed to be much more prevalent, if still looked down on in this world. Preston certainly didn't approve of them.

"Come on, it's medicine. It's got 'med' in the name and everything." He opened my fingers and put it in my hand. "You're not gonna become a mindless, slobbering addict like me from just one use, alright? So just take it already, before some knucklehead catches us with our costumed pants down."

Well, he had a point. Med-X was used for medicinal purposes as a powerful painkiller, and I was getting a headache from the burning in my leg that my nerves were positive was truly there. Still, my hand shook as I uncapped the syringe. Medicine or not, I had never liked needles. Hancock rolled his eyes at my trembling, took the needle from me and promptly stuck it into my thigh without hesitation. The sudden stab made me cry out and swat him on the head in retaliation. He took it in stride, helping me up on my feet once all the purple serum had worked its way through my system.

"Alright, princess, can we go save ol' Kenny boy now?"

"Call me that again, and you're gonna be eating silver."

"That's my girl. Let's go."

With the help of the Med-X, I plowed my way through the bad guys. It was so much easier to take them down when you couldn't feel anything. Throw in a few stimpaks, and the three of us stood in front of the elevator that would take us down to Sinjin, a bit tired, but otherwise unharmed. The elevator was unnervingly shaky, and the light flickered sometimes, but it got us to our destination.

The doors slid open to reveal a handful of raiders, guns all pointed at us, with the exception of the man who must be Sinjin, a ghoul surprisingly enough (though I don't know why that would be surprising) who had his gun pointed at the back of Kent's quivering head. The two of them were on a raised platform, along with some other henchman. Kent was on his knees, hands tied behind his back. I imagine that if ghouls could cry, Kent would be a sobbing mess.

"Hey, Shroud. I wanna talk to you," Sinjin yelled, his damaged vocal cords straining his voice. "If any of you guys turn tail, I'm coming for you and your families."

I carefully stepped forward, submachine gun at the ready, but at stand-down, so as not to threaten any of these trigger-happy goons.

"Don't take another step closer, or we get to see what's inside Kent's head," Sinjin threatened. "I see you couldn't come here alone, had to bring your mutt and your sidekick."

God, poor Kent. This close, I could see the look in his red eyes. He didn't think he was going to get out of this. He needed a hero. His hero. "You shield yourself behind an innocent. You are craven, Sinjin, and you shall fall before me."

"Don't talk to me like that," Sinjin snapped, the barrel of his gun moving from Kent's head to mine. Good, that's where it should be. "Some of these losers think you're some sort of legend, like you stepped right out of a comic book. But you and I know, you're human. And you're weak. And you came here for what? Your little sidekick? Little bitch started crying the minute we put the hurt on 'im."

Oh this bastard was going to eat his own bullets. This time, when I spoke, there was a darkness in my voice that even gave me chills. "I have cut a path through all your thugs. Who can truly say I'm
"Don't listen, men. She's a phoney. Some chick who started playing dress-up and stuck her big nose where it don't belong. Silver Shroud's not even a woman."

"The Silver Shroud is no mere flesh and blood. The Silver Shroud is a symbol, an idea. And ideas are bulletproof."

Sinjin didn't look impressed. "Let's test that out, shall we?" He fired, bullets piercing my gut and slicing through my arms, causing me to drop my Silver Shooter.

Distantly, I could hear Hancock calling out my name, my real name. Idiot was going to break my cover. Luckily, the Med-X was still pumping through my body, and I didn't feel a thing. When Sinjin's short burst ended, I remained standing, the blood hard to see in my black trench coat. I laughed, amazed at how powerful Med-X was, and how I had planned on coming in here without using it.

"Holy shit! The Shroud is real!" The raider closest to me screamed.

"The Silver Shroud is coming for us!"

"Oh, screw this. I'm outta here!"

All around, Sinjin's henchman turned tail and ran, dropping their guns foolishly. Sinjin flicked his head around, shouting profanities at his yellow-bellied men. "Cowards! I'll do this on my own. I'm gonna kill everyone here, and then I'm going to burn Goodneighbor to the ground."

"Like hell you are," Hancock shouted, shotgun aimed.

"Don't; you'll hit Kent," I held out my bleeding arm in front of him.

"Don't worry," Sinjin smiled grotesquely. I had never really thought ghouls to be truly hideous until I saw this man. "I'll do it for you."

Suddenly, it was like my world was in slow motion. I could see the barrel of his gun slowly descend to the back of Kent's head. The Silver Shooter had clattered to the ground, too far away to pick up and take aim. Instead, I reached for Zeus, strapped to my back as he always was. The Med-X was definitely wearing off now, because every movement felt like I was pulling a muscle. The gun flipped over my shoulder, the strap sliding around my torso, and I didn't even give myself a second to line up the shot before I fired. With a clap of thunder, Sinjin fell backwards, as if struck by lightning, blood pouring from his forehead in a beautiful arc of crimson. His assault rifle clattered to the ground.

I dropped Zeus, my arms suddenly feeling too weak to carry anything. Ouch, it was really starting to sting. "Kent, are you alright?" I shuffled over to him, one arm holding my guts in while the other undid his bindings.

"Am I alright?" He looked at me as if I had grown a second head, which shouldn't be that surprising to see in the wasteland. "How are you still alive?"

"That's a good fucking question," Hancock was by my side suddenly. Huh...when did he get there? "What the hell were you thinking pulling a stunt like that?"

"I wasn't really thinking much at all," I admitted, and even now, thinking was proving to be hard through the pain. God, I could really go for some more of that Med-X. If I had thought getting shot
through the leg was bad, this was so much worse. Even breathing was painful, and the world was moving from under my feet. Oh wait. I fell. Luckily, it seems that my loyal Mister of Mystery caught me, because I was looking up at the bottom of his chin.

"Silver Shroud!" Kent cried out, dropping to his knees beside me. "No, you can't die! Not now! The world still needs a hero. I-I still need a hero. Please, my friend, don't die."

I coughed, something wet filling my throat. "'Heroes get remembered, but legends never die.'"

Kent, smiled sadly. "Manta Man, issue #27."

I smiled, my mouth tasting like copper. God, it was really bright now that I was looking up at the ceiling lights. I let my eyes fall closed, and somehow that seemed to help the pain a bit.

"Shit, shit, Susie, wake up," Hancock's voice was right by my head, and he sounded so upset, but for some reason I just couldn't open my eyes. I felt a sting in my arm. "Dammit, Kent, get me more stimpaks."

"Oh, god. Silver Shroud, no."

"Dammit, man, she's not the Silver Shroud, she's Susie, and she's going to die if you don't find me some more stimpaks pronto."

"R-right."

The last thing I remember before falling asleep was Hancock calling me a string of curses that would make my mother blush.

Chapter End Notes

Quotes from V for Vendetta (I really like that movie) and Sandlot.
Chapter Summary

Hancock and Susie work through their relationship, and Susie makes a very important decision.

Chapter Notes

A surprise cameo from a Fallout: New Vegas character.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sound of voices aroused me from my deep and dreamless slumber. The room was dimly lit by a lantern and the light drifting in from the open door, from whence the voices came. From all the posters and paraphernalia, I knew I was in Kent's room, lying on his bed. Honestly, I felt so cozy and at peace, I really didn't want to get up, so I didn't. Instead, I focused on the conversation happening just outside the room.

"I was t-tortured. Almost died. It's not like the radio plays at all." Really? I disagree. I thought it was exactly like the radio plays, just that it looks a lot different when you aren't the audience. Poor Kent sounded so strung out though.

"Hey, who hasn't been tortured from time to time?" I'd recognize that lackadaisical attitude anywhere. "The price of throwing down with the man is always a few scars. Pick yourself up. Goodneighbor's just a little bit safer thanks to the two of you."

"You helped out too, Mister of Mystery."

"Bah, I was just a spectator along for the ride. If you had asked me to be the Silver Shroud, I would have turned you down flat."

"Yeah, and look how well that turned out for Susie. I almost lost my best friend just because I wanted to play at being a hero."

Kent... I struggled to get out of bed, my body feeling more lethargic than usual, especially considering I must have taken the deepest nap of my life.

"Hey, she made her own dumbass decision to get shot at." Wow, thanks, Hancock. "But maybe next time, don't announce where your headquarters are on the radio for all of your enemies to hear, yeah? There's a reason all these heroes have secret lairs."

"You're right. I should leave the crime fighting to the real heroes."

Finally, I made it to the door. My foot had fallen asleep, so walking had been a bit difficult. I leaned against the doorway. "What would the Shroud be without her faithful friend Rhett Reinhart?"

"Well, if it isn't the Night of the Walking Dead. How you feelin'?" Hancock was back in his mayoral
uniform. The Mister of Mystery outfit was likely trash by now, which was probably for the best. This whole thing had gotten a little out of hand.

"Strangely tired, for someone who just woke up," I shrugged, stretching. I turned to the other ghoul. "Look, Kent, I'm sorry you got kidnapped. This is all my fault, playing the hero. I thought I was invincible."

"You think this is your fault? I'm the one that asked you to do this in the first place. This was all my idea." Kent hung his head.

I couldn't resist. I'd always been a sucker for the sad puppy eyes. He found himself in a tight embrace. "I'm just so glad you're alive. I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if you had been killed."

With a soft gasp, Kent hugged me back. "The same goes for me."

Our bonding session was broken up by Hancock's sarcastic, "Aww, how sweet. I feel my shriveled heart growing three sizes."

I turned my head on Kent's shoulder to send him a withering glare. "You're just jealous because our friendship is pure."

Still, Kent pulled away shyly. "I... Th-thanks, Susie, for saving my life, but I quit. I'd rather you be my friend and alive, than be my hero and dead."

"What? Me? I'm fine. I'm still up for this thing."

He shook his head. "You almost died, Susie. We pumped you with so many stimpaks, I was afraid we'd kill you with an overdose if the bullets didn't. And just...I'm tired."

"So you're giving up? Just like that? The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.""

Hancock took a step closer, nodding. "If you just give up like this, then the bad guys have already won."

"You're...You're right. But I'm not going to do the radio announcements anymore. I've learned my lesson. If I hear about something, I'll let you know. Discreetly."

"Ah, there's my man." Hancock hit him playfully on the shoulder.

Kent smiled, the hope filtering back into his eyes. Good. "I'll go fetch us something to eat. I bet you're starving after sleeping all day."

Now that he mentioned it, I was. Honestly, I could go for a good brahmin burger right now. With some grilled corn. Yum. Kent left to who knows where, leaving just me and Hancock standing in one of the many hallways of the Memory Den. He was smiling at me, a weird mix between fond and laughing at a joke. "What?"

"Now I see the lawyer part. I can just imagine you giving some impassioned speech before a judge."

That had been the dream. "You'll have to stick to your imaginings. I never actually got to go to court."

"What do you mean? You've already been in court. I've seen you dole out justice many times."
I suppose that was one way to look at it. Still, I was smiling when Kent came back with some tato soup and razorgrain bread.

"Grognak's going to die if you don't use recover."

"That'll take up another move. The orc's almost dead. I'll just kill him real quick."

"Assuming you roll a high enough attack. He's still got 15 health left."

"Would you rather play the game instead," I shoved my pip-boy in his face. The guy was a horrible backseat gamer. I had been playing this Grognak game I found on a holotape, and it was getting pretty addicting, but Hancock kept trying to tell me what to do.

"Don't mind if I do." He tugged my arm, so that he could better reach the pip-boy. However, my body had to follow along behind it, causing me to practically have my entire upper-body in his lap. And that brought my face unbearably closer to his.

Completely involuntarily, my gaze flickered to his mouth. I need only lean up a little bit and then... With a yelp, I leapt off of his lap, yanking my arm out of his hand. "Hey, get your own pip-boy." In my effort to avoid his eyes, I noticed the spectator standing in the doorway to Hancock's office.

Fahrenheit had the stupidest grin on her face. "I'll leave you two kids alone."

"Wait, no!" I cried out a little too loudly, grabbing her sleeve to keep her from leaving. "What was it that you came here to say?"

Fahrenheit raised a single eyebrow. Her smirk told me that she knew why I was sweating suddenly. "I just had a little job for the two of you, since you've been in such a mood for community service lately."

"We'll do it. What's the job?"

"One of my men was transporting some...goods." She looked to Hancock briefly. "They haven't made it to the checkpoint, and I need someone to go check on them."

That sounded easy enough. "Sure, where is their last known location?"

"We communicate on radio signals, on frequencies only we know about. There is supposed to be two pips if everything is going fine, three pips if danger, and one pip if there are complications, and then I wait for a message. Two days ago, I got two pips from the checkpoint at Graygarden. They should have reached Oberland Station by now, and sent me pips, but I've heard nothing. My men are always on time, so something must have happened."

"That is strange," Hancock admitted.

"We'll look into it right away, Fahrenheit." I resisted the urge to salute.

She smiled at me with a nod, and then bid her farewell. As we gathered our things to prepare for the
trip to Graygarden, I couldn't resist asking Hancock about the "goods" Fahrenheit's men were carrying.  "It's a robot," he answered easily. "For a client of Whitechapel Charlie's. We monitor all goods that come in and out of the town, and Fahrenheit was paid good caps to retrieve this particular bot."  "A robot selling robots? That seems a little like human trafficking...or robot trafficking, I guess."  "Says the lady who got a beer-dispensing robot for some stranger."  I socked him on the arm. "Hey, Buddy is a free spirit and a swell robot. I'm not saying I won't do the job, just feels weird you know? It'd be really hypocritical of me. I own a Mr. Handy, after all."  Hancock laughed suddenly, hearing a joke I never intended to say. "Oh, trust me, this robot puts a whole new meaning on 'Mr. Handy.'"

Apparently, this adventure had a theme. Graygarden was a farm run entirely by robots from the Mr. Handy line of General Atomics. They hovered about, happily pruning and weeding, though why robots would bother cultivating fruit if they don't eat it was beyond me. Three of them, the supervisors, had been programmed with some eccentric personalities. Apparently, their creator, Dr. Gray, had a great love of television and had programmed the robots to mimic the personalities of his favorite TV characters.

"Genius abhors stagnation, darling," Supervisor White floated around the greenhouse, one of her robotic eyes trained on us while the others looked at the tato plant she was trimming. "My creator grew tired of the normal Mr. Handy personalities, and so he found inspiration in his favorite TV characters. But that is not what you have come here to ask, now is it?"

"You're right. We were sent by Fahrenheit. Her men stopped by here, with a robot, and they haven't been heard from since. Do you know what happened to them?"

"Can't say that I do, darling," White bobbed in place. "I do remember these men. They looked like your friend back there." She pointed her eyes at Hancock, as close to a nodding gesture as a Mr. Handy could get I suppose. "I did not speak with them nor did I pay them much mind. They did stop to talk with Supervisor Greene, though. He handles the trading."

So we left her to go talk to Greene, who had been programmed with the personality of a game show host. It felt exhausting just talking to him. "Supervisor Greene? I was told you could help us."

"And here we have contestant number one! What will she ask?"

"I'm looking for a group of men that have disappeared. They had a robot with them. White says you talked to them?"

"Correct! You have just won a prize. Your prize is...some information. These previous contestants left with some lovely new mutfruit and a bushel of corn. They were mighty hungry. They headed south, following the tracks. Their prize was a brand new vertibird!"
"A vertibird?" I looked at Hancock inquisitively. That wasn't something you saw outside of the military, but the war was over.

Hancock didn't look pleased with this new information. "The only assholes I know who cruise around in one of those are the Brotherhood. This ain't good."

"You think the Brotherhood attacked them? But why would they do that?"

"Because they had a robot. Because they're ghouls. They'll think of any damn excuse."

"Actually, I know of a Brotherhood base of operations not too far from here. They were nice folk, though, so I'm sure they didn't attack your people. We'll just go ask them what they know."

"Yeah, lets." The look in Hancock's eyes said he didn't plan on doing much talking.

The Brotherhood compound looked just as I had left it, including the power armor wearing soldiers patrolling around the front. Atop the old police building was a vertibird. That hadn't been there last time. I strolled up to the barricade, but stopped when all of the guards pointed their guns at us.

I held up my hands. "Woah there, fellas. We come in peace."

"What business do you have with the Brotherhood?" an older man with a laser rifle yelled from behind the barricade.

"I'm here to speak with Paladin Danse."

"On what business?"

"I believe that is between the two of us."

I heard the click of someone loading their gun.

"Look, can you just tell him Susan Quinn, the vault-dweller, is here to see him? Or grab Scribe Haylen, even better."

The man grumbled, too far away for me to hear, but he turned and left anyway. The other soldiers kept us in their crosshairs though.

Hancock leaned a little to me to whisper, "How do you know these guys?"

"They helped me out when I first traveled through the wasteland. It was only the once, a long time ago, but they were little friendlier then. I helped them fight off a horde of ferals."

Hancock didn't say anything, only straightened back up and kept his eyes on all the guns directed at us.

The soldier returned with not only Paladin Danse but Scribe Haylen as well. Neither of them had
changed a bit. Danse still looked all grim and robotic, and Haylen friendly and normal in comparison.

"Who are you, and why have you brought this...freak with you?" Danse demanded, and I suddenly became aware of the laser rifle in his armored hands.

Wow. Rude. "I know we only met the once, but you guys made such a big deal about me taking a nap, I figured I must have left an impression. You guys were much nicer the first time."

The scribe looked between me and Dogmeat, and I could see the light bulb turn on in Haylen's mind. "Oh, it's you! Paladin, this is that civilian that helped fight off those ferals from before. That was about a month ago. Remember, she started crying and you got all flustered."

Danse turned red, which was a little comical considering he still had that stern expression on his face. "Ah, that's enough. Scribe. I remember now, Susan Quinn, I do believe. Forgive the rude welcome, but we didn't recognize you, and your..." He looked over my shoulder to give Hancock a distasteful look. "...companion raises suspicions."

"Yeah, you look way different now," Haylen laughed, despite the glaring contest happening right beside us between the two men. "I guess the outfit does make the woman." She looked ready to dive right into a fun chat, which normally would have been great, but I held up a hand to stop her.

"I'm sorry, but is there something wrong with my friend here?" I gestured to Hancock.

"Ghouls aren't allowed into the compound."

"And why the hell not?"

Hancock turned to give me a bitter smirk. "The Brotherhood thinks all ghouls are monsters. I'd like to see them make a move." He turned to fix Danse with a glare. "I'll show 'em who the real monster is."

"Is that a threat, freak?"

"Hey!" I stood between them, arms out. "Don't call him that. He's my friend and companion and a damn fine man. And you," I turned to Hancock. "Stop picking fights. We've got a job to do, remember?"

"Oh? What business do you have with us?" Danse was decidedly less polite than when I had first met him, and that's saying something.

"We're looking for a couple of men transporting a robot. Do you know anything about that?"

"The Brotherhood has nothing to hide. Yes, we have encountered the group you describe, though 'men' is a strong term. We were patrolling the area when we encountered two ghouls with a strange looking robot. When we confiscated the machine, they became hostile, and so we arrested them. They are in holding until we can determine the nature of this machine."

"I'm surprised you didn't just shoot them on sight," Hancock growled. "You've got plenty excuses for taking technology away from others, why even bother making them up when ghouls are involved."

"I eagerly await the order to execute them."

Hancock's fingers were itching to where he hid his switchblade, so I quickly stepped in. "You can't
just confiscate a person's private property and unjustly imprison them. What gives you the
authority?"

"The Brotherhood of Steel is duty bound to gather up all dangerous technology so as to protect
humanity from itself. Until we have determined the nature of this robot, we cannot let it go free. If it
is some kind of weapon, it must be dismantled and studied by our scribes."

Hancock laughed, which seemed an inappropriate reaction. "If you really want to know what that
robot is for, you just gotta turn it on." He laughed again at his own inside joke.

Paladin Danse frowned, sure he was being laughed at. Haylen stepped in before a fight could break
out. "We've tried, but there doesn't seemed to be any kind of switch or button. My guess is that it
requires some kind of vocal code."

"You're right there, sister," Hancock lifted his chin. "And I know the code. If you want me to
activate the robot, then you gotta let me in to see my boys first."

"We're not releasing them until we know the nature of this machine."

I held up my hands again. "He didn't say to release them, just that we can go see them, to confirm
that they are in good health. If they have been harmed it will be seen as an attack on Goodneighbor,
and I'm sure the Brotherhood doesn't want to start a war with the Commonwealth. It would be bad
for PR. As soon as we see that our friends are in fact unharmed, we'll activate the robot for you so
that you can see that it is not for military use. And then we can all go on our merry way, alright?"

The Paladin didn't look like any of this was alright, but he nodded. "Affirmative, but only you. The
ghoul stays out here."

"I'm afraid he has to come. He's the only one that knows the activation code. So it's with him or not
at all." I gave him a hard look to show I meant business.

"Fine, but you keep him on a tight leash. If he starts anything, it'll be on your head." Begrudgingly,
Danse led us into the building, all of the soldiers watching us with distrust. "You've changed, vault-
dweller, and not entirely for the better."

"I'm going to have to disagree with you there." The previous me would have been steamrolled by
these meatheads.

Fahrenheit's men were kept in the old holding cells in the police station. They were indeed two
ghouls, dressed like any of the drifters you would see in Goodneighbor. I didn't recognize either of
them, but Hancock did. They looked glad to see him too.

"Lucky for you, crewcut. They look just fine."

"We are not a group of violent thugs like the kind you'd find in Goodneighbor."

"See, and that's why no one invites you guys to parties."

"Just uphold your end of the bargain, freak."

I wanted to tell Danse not to call him that, but Hancock held his hand up in front me. He shook his
head. Not worth it, his eyes said. We were led to another room where a protectron stood, completely
immobile. I could see what Haylen was talking about. The thing had such a sleek outer shell, there
didn't seem to even be a plug for the charging pod. One hand seemed to be some kind of drill, but it
was more oblong and rounded, made of some type of rubber. Didn't seem like it would be very
useful in a fight or anything.

"So?" Danse looked to Hancock.

The mayor shot him a knowing smirk, and then said, "Wake up, Fisto."

The robot beeped to life, the glass casing around it's head lighting up with yellow dots. It's hands spun around in place for a second, and then it turned to Hancock and spoke in its electric monotone, "Hello, lover. Assume the position." It's claw hand made a clamping motion, but the other one that I had originally thought to be some kind of drill began to piston back and forth, like a jackhammer, and then buzzed with vibration.

Oh my god. Oh my god. I lost it. The tiled floor hit my knees as I couldn't hold myself up with the intensity of my guffaws. "It's a sexbot," I wheezed, tears in my eyes. "You guys wanted a sexbot. Oh my god." I rolled on the floor, cackling like a hyena.

"I know you guys were into technology, but I never thought you'd literally get into technology." Hancock had the smuggest grin. I couldn't blame him. At least the man had the composure not to laugh as hard as I was.

Danse, on the other hand, looked horrified. "This is absolutely disgusting. Who would want such a thing?"

"What's wrong? It's self-lubricating."

That sent me into another wild fit of laughter.

"Civilian, contain yourself," Danse snapped at me, but it was easier said than done. When he heard a snicker to his side, his head flicked around to pin Haylen with a fierce glare. "Scribe! At attention!" Haylen dropped her smirk, and stood at attention, her arms folded behind her back. Then he turned to Hancock. "Take your men, and your filthy machine, and leave this place immediately."

"With pleasure," Hancock purred, picking me up off the floor.

By the time we made it out of the compound, the buzzing sound of Fisto following behind us at a slow, but steady pace, I could breathe normally, though I was sure I would be smiling for days. "I can't believe you named the robot Fisto."

"I didn't name it, sadly. I would have picked something cooler, like Metal Daddy, or Mr. Dick 3000."

"Who would even want something like that?"

"Everyone's got their kinks," Hancock shrugged. "Some people crave the cold hard touch of a robot, others," he shot me a heated look, "the rough touch of a ghoul."

I couldn't look him in the eye after that.
"Oh, I love this song." I cheered as I turned up the volume on my pip-boy. Even with a companion that could talk back, the wasteland was too quiet for me. Especially since Hancock was just the type to let comfortable silences lie.

"Well, you're in luck. You'll probably hear it again in 20 minutes."

I chuckled good-naturedly. If I had thought the radio stations back in my time were repetitive, try having one that only knew a handful of songs. We traveled through the irradiated countryside, no particular destination in mind. The Commonwealth was a treasure trove of junk, and people with odd jobs that they'd pay good caps for. "You know, when I was younger, I used to have the biggest crush on Nat King Cole. I thought he was so cute with his charming smile and his greased up hair. You can imagine my disappointment when my mom told me he was nearly a hundred years dead."

"You were one of those girls who whined about being born in the wrong decade, weren't you?"

This time, my chuckle was much more embarrassed. "You know me too well. You can't blame me for my actions as a kid. We were all dumb back then."

"Ain't that the truth, sister. I can't tell you how much dumb shit my brother and I used to get into."

I almost stopped walking. "I never knew you had a brother."

"Oh yeah, he's the biggest sack of shit to ever walk the planet. Back when we were kids though, he was just a normal brother, you know. The kind that would throw a rotten tato down your shirt and then slap your back. The asshole kind."

"Oh. I take it you two don't get along?"

"That's putting it lightly."

"Oh." The conversation died after that.

The power plant we came across was dead, luckily, but had plenty of the materials we would need for the power armor, even more lucky. Unfortunately, the stuff was so damn heavy, we had to make our way back to Sanctuary to drop some of it off. A half a day's travel from Sanctuary, we camped for the night in an old convenience store that had gone out of business before the war. There wasn't much inside, but it was shelter. We built a little campfire outside on the concrete. Dogmeat was off, sniffing around digging in spots that only his keen smell noted as interesting. Hancock resumed our hand-to-hand combat lessons. It had started out normal at first, but then somewhere along the way, the mood changed.

"No, you don't want to lunge like that," he damn near whispered in my ear, causing the hair on the back of my neck to stand at attention. His arm wrapped around from behind me, shriveled hand on my wrist, where it loosely held a switchblade. "You want to do it like this, smooth." He moved my hand back and forth in the same motion a fish travels through the water.

My face felt like it was on fire. He had never been this hands-on before. Every single nerve ending was trained on the weight on my back, on every single point of contact. Were all ghouls this warm, or was it just the campfire? And was that--yup, Hancock's thumb was definitely rubbing circles on my wrist. I leapt out of his hold as if I had been electrocuted. "W-What are you doing?"

"Teaching you how to wield my knife." If I didn't get the innuendo before, the overt eyebrow waggle would have clued me in.
"You weren't so touchy the last lesson," I folded my arms across my chest, suddenly feeling cold. "Are you...flirting with me?"

"I will admit to some impure thoughts." He chuckled. "It's so much fun to tease you, makes me wonder what it would be like to tease you in bed too."

Maybe I was a synth, because I'm pretty sure my brain just short-circuited right then. When I spoke a hundred different thoughts came out all at once so that it sounded like a jumbled mess. The connection between my mouth and my brain seemed to have been severed.

Hancock looked amused. "You've never been hit on before, have you?"

Finally, my cognitive functions began to work properly. "Of course, I have. I have been approached by plenty of men before." And one woman, now.

His jovial nature tamped down a bit, though he still smiled, rubbing the back of his head, looking to somewhere beside me. "Look, if it's making you uncomfortable, I understand. I'll stop."

"If you're just looking for a fling, I'm afraid I can't oblige. I'm not some five dollar tramp." I rubbed my arms.

Hancock frowned, as if he had just been insulted. "I ain't tryin' to buy ya." I saw his eyes flicker to the firelight bouncing off the gold of the ring on my finger. "I get it. I meant no offense, my lady." He mock bowed. "I'll be a perfect gentleman from here on out."

I nodded. "Thanks." So then why did I feel just a little bit disappointed?

As soon as we unloaded our junk, Hancock headed off on his own. I didn't want to be clingy, so I let him go, despite how much it felt like a mistake. Sturges was impressed with our haul, although we still needed more lead for the radiation resistant paint. He set right to work, waxing nostalgic about his old man. After a friendly little chat, I headed over to Preston to update him on the settlement situation. He was pleased, as always, but had a whole slew of new missions for me. There was always a new settlement that could use the Minutemen's help.

"As much as I would like our job to be over," Preston sighed over his map on the table in the room we had unofficially dubbed the Minutemen Headquarters, "I doubt there will ever be a time when the Commonwealth doesn't need us."

"Don't you ever get tired?" The thought of having to rebuild the Minutemen and save the entire Commonwealth just seemed so daunting.

"Of course I do, but I love helping people." Preston flashed me his boy scout smile.

"You're such a saint," I laughed. "Sounds like a terrible job. No vacation time. I bet you don't even have dental."

"I'm sure somebody would give me a toothbrush if I asked for one."
I wrinkled my nose and stuck out my tongue. "I don't know if I would trust any toothbrushes you find outside of their packaging."

We laughed, and then Sturges stuck his head into the room to see what was so funny. When we got into an in-depth discussion on dental hygiene in the wasteland, Jun walked in the room and was inevitably pulled into the debate. We all sat around the table, and at one point Sturges brought out some bourbon, which sadly didn’t come with ice. I’d always preferred it chilled. Sitting there, laughing at slurred jokes, I felt the warmth of camaraderie in my belly, although that could have been the alcohol. It reminded me of the neighborhood boys I used to play with when I was a kid. Now, it didn't matter if I was a girl or not. I smiled into my coffee cup of bourbon.

"I’ve noticed there's a lot more settlers here now," I said to keep the conversation flowing.

"Oh yeah, word is really starting to get around," Preston grimaced after a particularly large swallow of the strong alcohol. "We even got a caravan coming through."

Jun nodded. "Trashcan Carla practically lives here now. It's good to have some business."

"Trashcan Carla? She's seriously called that? Why?"

This time, it was Sturges who answered, smirking as if delivering the punchline to a joke. "Because she'll buy anything off of you, even trash. Her business ideology is 'one man's trash is another man's treasure,' after all."

"Everything has resale value, huh," I took a drink. Perhaps I should stop there. The world was getting a little too fuzzy.

Preston nodded, his eyes a bit unfocused too. "With all the junk we keep buying off of her to fix up stuff, I'd say she's doing pretty well for herself."

Jun let out an impressive yawn, and that signaled the end of the night. Everyone said their goodbyes and returned to their claimed houses. Mine was just across the street, and I stumbled into bed. I stayed up for a little longer, staring at the old mattress across from mine, but Hancock never came in.

An unforeseen and unfortunate consequence of the nuclear fallout was that now I rose with the sun, as did most people. Didn't mean I wouldn't lay in bed for a few more hours out of sheer stubbornness. So by the time I finally gave up, grimaced at the slight hangover headache from last night, the majority of people were already running about doing their business. I cracked open a can of purified water, feeling dehydrated after all of that booze. That Sturges could really drink.

I found Codsworth in the living room, still keeping things as tidy as he could. "Hey Codsworth, what time is it?"

"Oh, good morning, mum," the Mr. Handy exclaimed in his programmed to be chipper voice. "It is 10:13 in the morning. Would you like some breakfast?"
I grimaced. The thought of Sugar Bombs with my queasy stomach sounded like a recipe for disaster. "No thanks. I'm mainly thirsty."

"Oh, here you are, mum," his robotic arm handed me a small bottle of water. His built-in water purifier was a godsend in this wasteland.

I took it gratefully, downing half of it in one go. "Have you seen Hancock?"

"No, ma'am. I'm afraid he didn't come home last night. Would you like for me to go fetch him?"

"No, don't trouble yourself. I'm sure he'll turn up."

"Of course, mum. If there is anything you need at all, do feel free to ask. I am happy to serve."

Robot butlers were certainly something. I thanked him and stepped outside, blinking at the harsh sunlight. I needed to find a pair of sunglasses. Maybe this Trashcan Carla had one? I saw Preston, walking his rounds through town, and trotted up to him.

"Good morning, Preston."

"Good morning, Susie. You're up late."

"Drank a bit more than I should have last night. I don't suppose you've seen Hancock around?"

"No, actually, I--" He stopped suddenly, his face twisting into an uncomfortable expression.

I followed his gaze behind me to see Hancock step out of one of the less fixed up houses, exhaling a thin cloud of smoke, a red inhaler in hand. His clothes were a bit disheveled, as if he had gotten dressed while drunk, his flag belt hanging on his shoulder instead of tied properly around his waist. He certainly looked like he had had a good sleep. I was about to call out to him, spout some joke about his appearance, when someone else exited the house behind him, putting on a patched vest. I didn't know this woman, must be one of the newer settlers. She looked even more satisfied than Hancock. She ran a hand through her red hair, sauntered up to Hancock, placed a kiss on his neck, and took the inhaler from his hand in one swift movement, taking a squeeze from it herself.

"Susie, where are you--?"

"I just suddenly remembered that I needed to check with Marcy on how the garden is coming along." I waved at him from over my shoulder, power walking to the vegetable and fruit garden in the field behind the Jones' old house. All of a sudden, my hangover got ten times worse, and I decided to take a walk.

My feet led me to the vault, though I couldn't fathom why. I stared down at the elevator entrance, unmoving. This place was now my husband's grave. I couldn't bring myself to move the body and bury him. I really was the worst wife on the planet. I sat on the dirty metal platform, my back to the gear shaped hole in the ground. From up on this hill, I had a good view of Sanctuary Hills, and this far away, I could only hear the breeze rustling the bare branches of the trees.

For the first time, I wished Nate were here, alive. He always knew what to do. I wondered, if it had been him to step out of the vault, what would he have done? Would he have mourned my loss? Gone on a righteous quest to find his son, making unlikely friends along the way? He probably would have joined the Brotherhood of Steel, would've liked the discipline and routine. It was something familiar to him. He truly did seem to have enjoyed being in the military. Had he been as disappointed to have to get married too? A veteran was expected to start a family and integrate back into society. "I wish I had talked to you more." My voice sounded loud in the stillness, even though I
had only murmured. My younger self would have been disgusted with me, sitting here, needing that man again to lead my life. I went to college all on my own, supported myself. And yet, the minute my parents tell me to get married, I just gave it all up. "You've got to live your own life, pumpkin. I didn't raise a coward."

"You didn't raise me." I can't believe those were the last words I ever spoke to Papa. They had come to me before my wedding day, had tried to make me see sense, and I had been too ashamed of my weakness to listen, too ashamed to ever speak to them again. I was such a terrible granddaughter.

"So this is the vault, huh?" I nearly leapt out of my skin. I hadn't heard anyone come up behind me.

"Hancock? What are you doing here?"

The ghoul tilted his head in a manner that reminded me of Dogmeat. "Preston said you were looking for me." He was fully dressed now, flag tied around his waist.

"I wasn't really looking for you. Just wondered where you had been all night." I turned away from him. "It's not like we have to sleep in the same room or anything, I just kind of wanted a little heads up."

"My lady, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were jealous," he smirked down at me.

"You're right. You don't know any better." I didn't mean to snap at him, but it didn't feel nice being the butt of some joke.

He held up his hands in a surrendering position. "Yeesh, alright. You know, if you ever want to relax, I got a few chems that might do the trick if a tumble isn't your thing."

I shot him a withering glare.

"See, this is what I meant about the teasing," he sat down beside me, leaning back, propped up by his arms. "But I can see you've had a rough morning, so I'll play nice for now."

Damn it, he was being too care-free about all of this, and it was making me look like a loser. Instead of digging my grave deeper, I kept my mouth shut, stubbornly staring out at the horizon instead of at his smug mug. Unfortunately, I forgot how comfortable Hancock was with silence. Was it possible to have a staring contest with someone without even looking at them?

Eventually, Hancock was the one to break the silence, but his words left my small victory hollow. "You don't talk much about your husband."

This was not a conversation I wanted to have. "What's there to talk about? He's dead."

Hancock continued on, unfazed. "You still seem hung up on him, and yet you don't seem to miss him all that much either."

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My spine straightened. "What are you trying to imply?"

"I'm just saying, you aren't playing the part of the grieving widow very well."

Who did this walking raisin think he was? "My husband was a good man, and he would've been an excellent father. I never wanted him to get murdered like that."

"That sounds like something you would say about your neighbor, not the love of your life."

"You don't know anything about me, John Hancock."
"You're right on that one, doll. You are one safe I just can't crack. Cause even though you talk about your childhood, you don't mention a single thing about your late husband. I don't even know what the man's name was."

"If you must know, his name was Nate. Nate Quinn. And it's not like I tell you all of my dark secrets."

"But you do have some?" He smirked briefly, before sitting up properly. "So what is it, huh? You want me, Susie, I can tell. You liked my combat lesson, and you get jealous when I sleep with someone else, so what's holding you back? Do you feel guilty for moving on?"

I stood up, spluttering. "You're awful full of yourself. Not every woman wants you, Hancock."

He stood up too. "No, but you certainly do. I had my fingers on your wrist, I could feel your pulse, and, baby, it was going faster than a rabbit on jet. What's holding you back? Why do you keep stopping yourself from being happy?"

"I'm not stopping myself from anything. This conversation is over." I turned away, but he grabbed my arm.

"Why didn't you become a lawyer, Susie? You said you never got to practice. How did you end up in that vault, married and with a kid?"

"I don't know, ok? Just let me go." I pulled my arm, but he didn't release me. Damn, he was pretty strong. "Let me go, Hancock."

"Not until you give me a straight answer."

"Why are you doing this? Why do you even want to know?"

"Because you want me!" He raised his voice for the first time. "You want me, as a man, not as a ghoul. You don't shirk away from my touch. You look me in the eyes. And I want you too." He finally let my arm go, but I still couldn't move. He turned away from me like it pained him, black eyes glaring into the landscape. "When you almost died saving Kent...I realized something. The thought of you disappearing from my life..." He shook his head. "I told you before, I'm an instinctual kind of guy. And my instincts tell me that you're something to hold on to. I thought it was going to be easy; after all, you are clearly weak to my charm." Now he threw me that suave smirk of his. It was amazing the Commonwealth could contain his giant ego. "But every time we get close, you pull away, and it's frustrating. So I want to know what's holding you back." He turned to face me completely. "I want to know why you still wear that man's brand on your finger."

I covered the ring with my other hand, like it was a gruesome boil. I turned away from him, head lowered.

Hancock sighed, running a hand over his face. "Ha, look, if you don't wanna do this, fine. But don't run away from me. I never took you for a coward." The words hit harder than he'd ever realize. When I didn't answer, he turned and left.

That...that was not how I expected this talk to go. And Hancock was way too damn perceptive. Was that a ghoul power or something? He knew all the things I didn't want to acknowledge about myself. But he...he was right. I was a coward. Whenever I was faced with something too hard, I would just give up. I had run away to college to live my own life, and then my parents tell me to get married and I just went along with it.

But life is different now, the world is different now. Maybe you could be different now too. "I'm going
to be different," I repeated to myself.

I sat there, on that vault, hundreds of feet above my husband's corpse, until the sun began its descent and I couldn't ignore the growling in my stomach anymore.

As it turned out, the only thing we really needed for the power armor was just one part. Unfortunately, it was rare, not the kind of thing you just find lying around. Fortunately, Sturges knew where I might find one.

"I need a high-powered magnet, military grade," He told me, grabbing a screwdriver from the toolbox by his knees, as he set to screwing in some part on the back of the power armor leg. "You can find these in those giant sentry robots, you know, the big scary kind with all of the guns that shoots missiles?"

"Yeah, I know them." Scary was right. Even when you managed to destroy the thing, their nuclear cores would explode.

"Well, there's a robotics junkyard not too far from here. I'm sure they got one of those robots there, probably in pieces. All I need is that one part though, so it should be fine."

"What's one little robot?" Hancock laughed. "We got this."

"Actually..." I clutched the strap to Zeus nervously. "I was thinking it should just be me and Dogmeat on this one. It's not that far. I'll be back before the day is through." I smiled as brightly as I could.

Hancock didn't look pacified. "Look, Susie, if this is about what I said...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take my frustrations out on you. I was serious when I said we could keep traveling together."

Sturges was steadfastly not looking at us. "No, no, you were right. I just...need some time to think about it on my own."

"I...right. I'll just wait around here then."

My mind flashed to the memory of that redheaded woman, and I had to suppress the rush of jealousy. He only did that to test me. I had no claim to him. He's a free man.

He looked pointedly at my left hand, then walked away.
The sentry robot was in fact activated and fully functional. Luckily, it didn't attack me on sight. Although I doubted it would just let me take it apart. It didn't seem to mind me walking around so I searched the place, checking out the small concrete building in the yard. Through destiny or sheer luck, I found a holotape that let me control the thing. Simple enough command to deactivate it, and then I could dismantle it. In a little under 30 minutes, I had the magnet in my hand.

"Now the hard part," I sighed, sitting on a hollow protectron torso. "I'm finally alone, well, away from people that can speak." I nodded to Dogmeat, but he didn't seem offended. "Hancock made a good point. I've been holding back."

Dogmeat stopped panting to quirk his head to the side inquisitively.

"I can still feel the ghost of the old world haunting me. But they're all dead now, all of my neighbors, my parents, and even Nate. Hell, Shaun's not even here anymore."

I felt too restless, so I stood up and began to pace back and forth, Dogmeat's nose following my every movement.

"I always complained about living under my parent's yoke, ran away to college, but then no one would hire me as a serious lawyer, they all wanted me to be a secretary, and then Mom tells me to marry Nate and he's not a bad guy and he treats me nice and I just...I gave up."

The dog whined.

"I know, I know. I should have listened to Papa when he tried to talk some sense into me. But I was too prideful to admit I was wrong." I bent down to pick up a detached arm without any of it's plating, bending it experimentally at the joint. "It's too late to change the past. I can't let it haunt me anymore, Dogmeat. I...I could have a future here. A real one." I tossed the arm onto the heap of junk. "And I think I'd like a future with Hancock in it. He's opened my eyes to so many things, not afraid to give it to me straight."

I smiled fondly, thinking of all the memories we made together. My first meeting, I watched him stab a man right in front of me, and now he's teaching me to stab men just the same. I pulled out the combat knife from it's sheath on my thigh. Hanging out with Hancock had been bloody. Hell, we cut open a man's head together. But I was quickly learning that this new Commonwealth was bloody and dangerous, and yet, I've had more fun shooting raiders than I did at Mrs. Anderson's Tupperware party. I could make a real difference, actually save people's lives.

"Dogmeat, I think I've found my answer." I patted him roughly on the head. "Let's go home, boy. There's someone I gotta see."

This time, I actually went down into the vault. It was the first time I had gone back down there in the flesh since I first stepped out of it. The place was still a ghost town, completely devoid of all human life. I wondered distantly, what happened to the staff that ran the place. It was hard to feel angry at them when they were the reason I had survived up until now. I made my way through the tunnels, stepping over squished radroaches. I had been terrified, screaming every time one of those large bugs
jumped out at me. How little I knew back then...

The hall with all of the cryochambers was still cold, even though the systems had been shut off. The fog that had blanketed the floor when I first stepped out was long gone, revealing the many tubes and wires plugged into the walls. I walked past the unfrozen corpses of my neighbors in their metal coffins. I hadn't really known them, and while I mourned the loss of innocent life, I did not grieve. Finally, I stopped in front of the only open, preoccupied chamber. The stench made me gag, the blood on the upright bed crusted and brown. Nate's head lolled to the side, pale, and his lips still blue. The decaying process had begun, but he still looked as handsome as that day he told me to get the door.

"Hi, Nate," I said awkwardly. This was entirely too macabre, but I needed to get this off my chest. "I never loved you, and I didn't want to marry you, but you were a good guy, and if it hadn't been forced, we could have been good friends. I think that you wanted this marriage as much as I did. We were both forced into this role by society. You wanted to be a soldier, and I...I wanted to be a hero. To both the world and myself. I'm sorry I said yes. That I let us get trapped, but I'm not going to let you trap me anymore more, not even in death." I slid the gold band off of my finger and placed it on the ledge next to Nate's head, directly in view of his shut eyes. "This is goodbye, Nate. I'm going to live my own life now." Then I left.

When I returned to the surface, I took a deep breath. The air tasted fresh, and like dead leaves, but it was the greatest smell in the world. Funny how heavy one little ring could be. Dogmeat was waiting for me by the elevator, tail wagging happily when our eyes met. I scratched him behind the ears in reward.

We trucked down the hill back to Sanctuary, and to my surprise, Hancock was waiting by the bridge that crossed the creek that encircled the neighborhood. "Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but the junkyard is in the opposite direction."

I nearly tripped over a fallen branch in my surprise. "I already went there, got the magnet thingy." I patted my bag. "I just had to say goodbye first." I strategically pushed back a stray hair with my bare left hand.

Hancock, as perceptive as ever, didn't miss a thing. His eyes widened comically, and he took a few hesitant yet eager steps toward me. "Does that mean...?"

I nodded, blushing. God, I felt like some dumb teenager asking a guy out to prom. How did adults act in romances? "I'm not going to run away anymore."

And good golly, the way his face lit up. I wished I could somehow travel back in time to the beginning of this conversation just so I could say those words again. Now I could see why people kept going back to the Memory Den. No cocky smirk or sly grin, but an honest-to-god pure smile. He took the last few steps towards me, gently grabbed my left hand, practically cradled it in his own, then bent down to place a lipless kiss on my finger, exactly where a gold ring had once been. "My lady, it would be an honor to court you."

I groaned in agony, but didn't pull away. Not this time. "Are you ever going to stop making fun of me?"

"Honestly, I don't know if I physically can." He laughed when I pouted at him. "Hey, if you wanted some boring square, you should have flirted with Preston."

"Don't be mean," I chastised, but it had little effect when I was still smiling.
We didn't exactly return to Sanctuary holding hands like middle schoolers or anything, but many eyes flitted back and forth between the two of us like they were watching a tennis match. No one said anything, and I was grateful to leave it at that.

"Here's the part," I handed it to Sturges.

"Never had a doubt in my mind," the mechanic smiled at me, then popped the back open with a crank. He put the magnet in somewhere I couldn't see, and then closed the thing with a pat. "Welp, all done."

"That was quick."

"Well, all we needed was the magnet for everything to get working smoothly. Honestly, it was functional before, but I needed it for my special add-ons."

"What kinds of add-ons?"

"Well, I upgraded the shocks, brightened your headlight, you'll need that if you're heading into the Sea. Oh, and I installed an automatic medicine injector. As soon as your radiation levels get above 300 rads, it will automatically inject you with Rad-Away. There's a limited amount it can carry, so you'll want to bring extra with you."

"Oh wow, Sturges, that's amazing. Thank you."

He chuckled, twirling a combination wrench around his finger. "You won't be thanking me when you puke inside your power armor from all the Rad-Away pumping through ya."

I grimaced. That was not a nice mental image. God, I could already smell it.

"So?" Hancock leaned forward. "You gonna try her out or what?"

Gladly, I hopped inside the power armor. I got that same giddy rush like the first time back in Concord. Man, these things were better than any hot rodder. Through the lenses of the helmet, my vision was lined with all sorts of information and readings, even a compass. I flicked on the headlamp, and woah, was that bright. I felt like I was in one of those deep-sea diving suits. I guess that was appropriate, considering my destination.

"So, how's it feel?" Hancock looked a little more yellow than normal, thanks to the built in night-vision.

"I feel powerful, like I could take on a hundred deathclaws. Now I know why those Brotherhood guys are always wearing these."

"Good. Maybe now you'll be able to keep up." A sly grin. "We should go show Nicky."

Chapter End Notes

This was one of my favorite chapters to write. I love making Hancock lose his composure.
A Date Nowadays

Chapter Summary

The gang travels through the Glowing Sea, and Hancock has a special surprise in store for Susie.

Chapter Notes

Alright! First sex scene!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nick's yellow eyes were wide when we squeezed through the door to his agency in my hulking power armor. Honestly, we'd gotten more comments on my power armor than I would wearing a new dress at one of the many soirees I had been forced to attend pre-war.

"Hello there, Susie," he waved at me. "Who's your friend in the metal bucket?"

"Ah, Nick, I'm hurt that you don't recognize me." The back of the power armor opened up and out stepped Hancock, like he was the winner of a beauty pageant.

"It was the easiest way to sneak him past the guards," I shrugged in a what are you going to do kind of manner.

"You know, I could have just met you guys outside of the city."

"Where's the fun in that?" I grinned wickedly.

The synth relented. "So this big armor's gonna get you through the Glowing Sea?" He looked skeptical.

"We walked through a rad storm on the way here with no problems," Hancock smirked.

"The Glowing Sea is a bit stronger than a rad storm," but Nick relented. He seemed much too distracted with me once the mystery of the power armor was solved. I don't know why everyone always looked so surprised after seeing me after a while. People change.

"We figured we'd stay the night here, stock up on some supplies, and then we could all head out in the morning." I scratched my arm, looking to the side. "That is, if you still want to come along."

"Of course I still want to come," Nick hit me with his ace smile. "There's no way I'm leaving you two kiddos out there on your lonesome."

I smiled. Honestly, I felt relieved. Hancock and I had done well between ourselves so far, but we had a tendency to pick fights we weren't fully prepared for and to go through our supplies quickly.

"Thanks, Nick. I should probably go see Piper while I'm here. I'm sure she'd let me bunk up with her again." And I needed someone to take care of Dogmeat while I headed through the Sea. There's no
way he'd survive that much radiation, and there weren't any doggy hazard suits around. I checked.

"Miss Reporter, eh," Hancock said with a grin. "I haven't seen her in a while." He moved to follow me, but was stopped by a hand on his shoulder.

"Uh-uh, kid, you're staying here with me," Nick said in a stern tone that brokered no argument.

Not that Hancock wouldn't argue anyway. "I'm sure she can fit one more. I'm used to sleeping on the floor. Or is this some archaic social notion that we've got to separate the genders at night? I won't do anything they wouldn't want, promise."

"Did you forget that ghouls aren't allowed in Diamond City? Especially not the mayor of Goodneighbor." He looked over Hancock's shoulders with a smile. "You go on ahead, Susie. We'll see you in the morning."

"Okay..."

I left the power armor with Nick and headed to Publick Occurences. Piper welcomed me with open arms, and Nat welcomed Dogmeat with open arms. Good to see that little sisters were still the same. While Nat played with Dogmeat, Piper took me around all the shops in Diamond City Market, helping me to haggle down the prices. In return, I bought her a bowl of noodles from Takahashi.

"Takahashi here is my special informant," Piper told me with a conspiratorial gleam in her eye. "What's that Takahashi? Really? I've let her sleep in my house. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. That's it Blue, the web of lies is exposed. Takahashi here has told me everything. I bet your name isn't even Blue, is it?"

"Damn you, Takahashi," I played along. "You serve a cold bowl of noodles, my friend."

"Nani-o shimasuka."

We laughed, puffs of air blowing the steam from our noodles. When the mirth drifted off into a companionable silence, Piper turned to me on her bar stool and asked, "So what's traveling with Hancock like?"

I flushed. Did she know? Wait, know what, we haven't even done anything yet. Sure, Hancock had continued his flirty teasing jokes on the way here, but so far nothing had changed. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Blue, give me the inside scoop," she nudged me in the shoulder playfully. "No one's ever stuck around him this long. No one really knows him. Guy doesn't exactly have a lot of friends."

That didn't make sense. "Everyone outside of Diamond City seems to like him. He seems like the kind of guy with a lot of friends."

She shook her head, setting her fork down. Only nerds tried to eat Takahashi's noodles with chopsticks, or so I've been told. "Those aren't really friends. Not close friends."

"Well, what about Fahrenheit?"

"His bodyguard? She wasn't very interested in doing a lot of talking." I could imagine.

"Well, I mean, there's not really any secrets to spill."
"I'm not asking for secrets, just...what's the guy like? I tried to do an exposé on him once, turned out I had the wrong guy, but everyone I asked about him either hated the guy or wanted to marry him, so it was kind of hard to suss out his character." I could hear the ghost of Bobbi No-Nose spitting out similar words. "So what's he like when he's not surrounded by his groupies?"

*Still surrounded by his groupies,* I thought with a heated edge, remembering the redhead adjusting her vest. "I don't know. Slightly more murdery, I guess. We do kill an awful lot of raiders together."

"A service we're all grateful for, but surely there's more to it than that?"

"I don't know. He didn't really seem to change for me." I thought over our time together, from speaking with him in that bar to helping him deliver a sexbot. "He's incredibly sharp, like scary sharp. Honestly, I think it's all those Mentats he keeps eating. The guy can always figure me out, and that's a little frustrating, but he helps me to work through some things I needed to work through, like...like a masseuse digging their elbow in your back to work out a knot."

Piper chuckled wryly. "That's an image."

He'd helped me through the most important changes of my life. If it weren't for him, I'd probably still be stuck playing the cowering housewife, not letting myself be who I truly was. "He acts snarky and is always cracking jokes, but he really cares about people, really wants to help out the Commonwealth, especially the ghouls."

Piper was giving me a strange look. "You don't...have a crush on him, do you?"

I nearly choked on my noodles. "I--w-wha, why would you say a thing like that?"

"Blue..."

"Look, ok, we may have expressed a mutual attraction, but nothing's happened yet."

"You don't have to look so disappointed." She held up a hand to stop my sputtering protests. "All teasing aside, be careful, Susie. It's ok if this is just a fling, but don't fall in love with him. He's a ghoul. You're human. That's not something you can do long term."

Not without giving yourself a lot of radiation poisoning and hoping for the best. "Thanks for the advice, Piper. But honestly, I'm trying really hard not to think about the future or the past. I'm just living my life one day at a time." The noodles settled uncomfortably in my stomach.

Piper hit me with a bittersweet smile full of worry and understanding. She really was a good friend. "Alright. You want me to go find out who he's dated before? Find any of his dark and dirty secrets."

"Please don't go asking around about Hancock's sex life. Anything about his past, I'd rather hear from the man himself."

"Bah, you're no fun." But she shot me a toothy grin anyway.
Tap. Tap. Tap.

I turned over in bed with a grumble. Dammit, what was that noise? I was trying to sleep over here. 

Tap. Tap-tap. Tap.

Ugh. Maybe if I ignored it, it would go away.

Tap. Tap. Tap-tap-tap-tap.

Fine! With reluctance, I peeled open my eyes to look into the dim light of Piper's room. She slept beside me on the bed, snoring away like there wasn't a care in the world. Must be nice for her. I followed the sound to the dusty glass window by the stairs. Even with the streetlights, it was still dark outside. All I could make was a vague silhouette.

Fear shot through my heart, instantly waking me up. Someone was sitting right outside Piper's window, in view of our helpless sleeping faces. But they weren't moving, just tapping away on the window. I grabbed a mahogany baseball bat Piper left by her bedside and slowly crept forward, ready for anything. As I got closer the silhouette filled out into a figure, lean but of a manlier build. A dirty white surgical mask, and a hood that darkened everything in between. When I got closer, the mysterious figure motioned me closer with a gloved hand.

I kept expecting them to jump out and attack me, but even when I finally made it to the window, they barely moved. Slowly, the stranger lifted the hood back a bit and pulled down the mask to reveal their true face.

"Hancock?" I hissed out as quietly as I could. What was he thinking? I pulled open the window, which took a lot of strength considering how rusty the panes were. And what a god-awful screech. But when I looked over my shoulder, Piper's form under the blanket hadn't moved. "What are you doing here? Why are you dressed like that?"

He smiled at me, as mischievous as the young boys in my old neighborhood. "Well I couldn't exactly go wandering around with my ugly mug."

"Yeah, but why even risk it?" It felt delightfully naughty to be whispering through a window in the night. Technically, I wasn't really doing anything wrong, but the illusion was there.

"I wanted to talk with you, and honestly, it feels like I'm sticking it to McDonough sneaking around here. Come outside. It's a little awkward speaking through a window like this." He was right. My lower back was hurting from the awkward crouching position to reach the low window.

Luckily, I had slept in my clothes today, sans jacket and armor. Otherwise, Hancock was about to see more skin than entirely proper. With a giddy rush, I pulled open the window just enough to let me squeeze through. I could have just opened the upstairs door to the roofs, but I didn't want to risk waking up Piper. When I flopped down unceremoniously on the tin roof, I snickered. Hancock shushed me, but he was giggling under his breath too, and pulled me behind the second story of Publick Occurences. The buildings in Diamond City were strange in that much of their roofs were connected with that of the building next to them, like some long balcony. Guards were still patrolling the city at night, so we sat in the shadows, leaning up against the metal walls of Piper's building. Just on the other side of that wall, the reporter was sleeping, which seemed infinitely funny to me, because I couldn't seem to stop giggling, even though I knew we should keep as quiet as possible.

"Here, a present," Hancock pulled out a dark green bottle with an even darker liquid inside from his patched suit he wore. So odd to see him out of his red coat, but I could understand why. "I know
"You're not a fan of beer, so I brought this instead."

"I'm always up for a late night glass of red." He didn't bring any glasses, so I just popped open the cork and took a swig. Not like we hadn't shared a bottle before. A cheap burgundy, but it was palatable.

"Hey, save some for the rest of us." He took the bottle from me and took an even more generous swig than I did.

Suddenly, the distant sound of boots crunching on gravel silenced us. It grew in volume as it got closer, but then the source of the noise passed, decreasing as it traveled further away. Just a patrolling guard, but that could have been dangerous. We looked at each other, eyes owlishly wide and then broke out into a fit of stifled giggles.

"I feel like a kid again, sneaking out of my room in the middle of the night." When I grabbed the bottle for another drink, our hands brushed together. "And you're the bad boy that my mother always warned me about. Smooth-talking and giving me alcohol."

"Oh really?" Hancock's smirk was the only thing visible in the night light. "Bad boys like me are a dime a dozen. Must have been hard finding a good man."

I snorted. "Oh trust me, they find you. It's finding someone that you actually want that's the hard part."

"And have you? Found someone that you want?"

I leaned just a little bit to the right, so that my side was snuggled closely with his, nice and warm. "You know I have."

Through my peripheral vision, I could tell he was staring at me intensely. "I really want to kiss you right now. Can I?"

I blushed, but turned to face him fully. "I thought we agreed not to hold back anymore."

Needing no further encouragement, he put his hand at the juncture between my neck and the back of my skull and pulled my face towards his. Kissing a ghoul wasn't as unpleasant as I thought it would be. It felt a bit like kissing a piece of warm leather, his mouth not as soft as mine. He tasted like cigarettes and wine, not the best combination, but a flavor I found myself craving. It didn't last nearly long enough, and I found myself regretting the lack of tongue, but I was still breathing heavily when he pulled away. I'm sure if the lighting were better, he could see the intense blush glowing on my face like a sunburn.

"I haven't had nearly enough wine to feel this drunk," I breathed, all of my weight supported on my wobbling arms.

"So it's not just me?" he laughed.

I wanted another one, but we didn't have much time, and I had a few questions burning in my mind that I needed to get out before he could distract me so wonderfully again. "How'd you sneak away from Nick? Synths don't need to sleep, right?"

"You'd think that would make it harder," Hancock, leaned back against the wall. "Since he doesn't sleep, he spends his downtime working on cases. Nighttime's when he does more of his sneaky sleuthing. I don't know where he ran off to, but he's not in his building. Besides, if I really wanted to leave, he wouldn't hold me back."
"He seemed awfully insistent that you spend the night there, though."

"Ah, that was just so we could have a talk, mano-a-roboto."

"Oh really? What kind of talk?"

"A shovel talk. He found out something changed between us at first glance. 'Noticing things is what the job's all about,' he told me. Damn perceptive. I mean, it's not like we were trying to hide it." He paused, glancing at me. "We're not, right?"

"Of course not. Why would we? It's not like we're having an affair or anything."

"For some people, what you do in bed is not the same as what you do out of it. I'd understand if you'd want to keep this on the down low."

I quirked my head to the side, confused. I tried squinting through the darkness to find the answer on his face, but he revealed nothing. "I don't get it. Is this something about you being the mayor? I'm not exactly an exhibitionist, but I don't see any reason to hide. Your fans aren't going to get jealous and come after me, are they?"

He looked at me the same way he does Dogmeat when he rolls around in the grass like a lunatic. "It's never even occurred to you, has it? See, this is why we're together." He shook his head, but he was smiling.

"So what did Nick say?"

"Oh, the usual. If you break her heart, I'll come after you, that kind of thing. He seems weirdly attached to you. More than a private eye should be attached to their latest client."

I shrugged, but I felt touched all the same. "It's probably because I'm a helpless little vault-dweller."

Hancock snorted, taking a sip of wine. "Heh, you are anything but helpless. I've seen you blow a man's head clean off with a single shot."

"Yeah, that was pretty cool."

The conversation lulled into a comfortable silence. We sat there, looking up at the stars, snuggled together, and letting the company and the wine warm us. If I wasn't so afraid of falling back asleep, I probably wouldn't have said anything. "So, what's it like being back in Diamond City?"

"Not as exciting as I thought it'd be," he admitted, head low. "I thought if I came back here, there'd be some kind of...I dunno, closure or something. Honestly, I don't really feel anything much at all. Maybe a little pissed about the whole ghoul thing." A pause. "Ok, maybe a lot of pissed." He turned away from me. "I dunno. All I do is run. And here I am running back to Diamond City, and I just can't seem to feel anything about it."

I put my hand on his shoulder. I wish I could see his face, know what expressions he was making as he said those words. "What do you mean?"

"Most of my life, I've been running out on the good things I got. I skipped out on my family, my life in Diamond City. I even took up with you just to get out of Goodneighbor. Hell, running from myself is what made me into...into a damn ghoul."

Wait. "Are you saying that you did this to yourself?"
Finally, he turned to look at me, though not in the eyes, and now he was drawing his knees just a little bit closer. "I wasn't always this good looking. I found this drug, one that would turn me into a ghoul, and I took it. I knew what it was going to do, I just..." He turned to the side, gritting his teeth as if he were squaring himself up to turn to me and say, "I couldn't stand looking at the bastard in the mirror anymore. At the coward who couldn't stand up to my brother when he kicked the ghouls out of Diamond City, who couldn't stand up to Vic and his boys."

Woah, ok, this was quite the reveal. "Wait, your asshole brother is Mayor McDonough?"

"Hadn't I told you that before? No? Oh, well, yeah. My own brother. I mean, I would've killed him, but I don't think it would have changed anything." He scratched the back of his neck through the hood. "Wow, I'm really digging my grave here, ain't I?"

"So let me get this straight: your brother gets elected on a campaign to toss out the ghouls from Diamond City; you leave for Goodneighbor where some jerk is picking on the drifters and you take him out, then you become mayor and make Goodneighbor a refuge for ghouls, and then you even become a ghoul yourself, the same people who are treated like crap everywhere else, on purpose? And then you decide to help out a glorified stranger and leave Goodneighbor so that the power doesn't get to your head?"

"Yeah, I know, I've been running away from a lot of things--"

"You're amazing."

He stopped to hit me with an incredulous stare. "What?"

"You saw that the world was horrible, that life was a mess and then you did something about it. You could have just lived like everyone else in Diamond City, could have felt bad about the ghouls, just let it slide so that you could live a comfortable life, but you left. You could have just let Vic keep on bullying people, but you gathered a team and took him out. You could have just left Goodneighbor to fend for itself, but you took charge and made it a better place. You could have gone on living the comfortable life of a human, but you chose to live as a ghoul. You're amazing, Hancock."

Apparently, I stunned him speechless, so I continued. "I...I hated my life. Hated my parents, my husband, even... If anyone's a coward, it's me. When I graduated high school, I ran away to college. I tried to get away from my parents, but when life got too hard, I just gave up. I let them marry me to some guy I didn't love, become a housewife. I never once did anything to change my fate."

"That's not true. You were pressured into doing all of these things."

"No one put a gun to my head at the altar. I could have said no. I could have...I could have run away, lived life in a totally different society. Found some place that would accept a female lawyer, or open up my own practice." I shook my head. "Argh, I'm making things about me again. This always happens." I grabbed onto Hancock's shoulders to make him face me. "Look, the point I'm trying to make is that you're not a coward. In fact, you're the bravest person I know."

Even though he didn't have the skin for it, I could tell that Hancock was blushing, looking shyly to the side. "Coming from you, that means a lot."

And just because I could, I kissed him on the mouth.

The sun was beginning to rise by the time I crawled back in through the window. I slipped back into bed next to Piper as softly as I could. When I had gotten under the covers and comfortable, I heard a sleepy voice from next to me mumble, "You know, next time you can just use the door."
"There it is, the Glowing sea."

If I had thought the Commonwealth was a wasteland before, this was truly the definition of the word. The only reason I couldn't see to the other side was the green haze that permeated the air. This was where the bomb fell. This was ground zero.

"You should probably pop some Rad-X now," Hancock advised. "And I'd keep the big guns at the ready. I've heard of some pretty nasty Deathclaws in here."

That was not something I'd want to encounter. Hopefully, with the ground so flattened, I'd be able to see anything coming in time to get out of the way. The further we traveled, the more my geiger counter started doing cartwheels. Nick and Hancock strolled along just fine, but I was already feeling sick. I think Sturges' prediction might come true.

After too many radscorpions, glowing stingwings, and one unavoidable Deathclaw, we came across something I never thought I would see: a settlement. The people walked around in mere rags, living in metal shacks built from scrap. And there, in the town center, was the crater where the bomb fell. I would expect a place so drenched in radiation to be home to super mutants or ghouls, but somehow these people were just walking around with sickly, but unmutated skin.

"Umm, hi there," I greeted the person nearest to me.

"Praise be to Atom," the balding man exclaimed.

Ok, maybe the radiation affected their brains more than their skin. "Um, yeah, what you said. I'm looking for a guy named Virgil, do you think you can help me?"

"You should speak with Mother Isolde," the man pointed the way up the hill to one of the taller shacks.

I thanked him and followed his directions. Nick and Hancock were eyeing the place beside me.

"Well, they're friendly enough," Nick shrugged.

"They're human, and they're staying here on purpose," Hancock grumbled. "Something ain't right about that."

When we reached the shack, an older woman stopped us. "You approach Atom's holy ground. State your purpose or be divided in his sight."

What? "Holy ground? Atom? What are you talking about?"

"Atom reached out and touched this world, bringing his Glow to us. It remains to this day, a reminder of his promise. Infinite worlds through division." She turned to look at Hancock beside me. "You have rejected His Glow, forsaken one, but there is still time. You can change your ways, accept, and spread His teachings."
"Look, lady, I don't know you," Hancock growled.

Before this conversation could take a bad turn, I stepped in. "Excuse me, ma'am, we don't mean any offense. We're just looking for a man named Virgil. Once we know where to go, we'll be on our way."

She pointed me southwest, to a cave this man was supposedly living in. The woman had said that he appeared to want to be left alone, an understatement if all the turrets and protectrons guarding the small cave were anything to say. Although, I suppose if I was on run from the Institute, I would want some protection too. Strange, then, how they didn't attack on sight, though I suppose he wouldn't want to piss off that weird cult.

As it turns out Virgil was a supermutant, though a rather civilized and non-hostile one. The sight of the big green wall of muscle made me twitch for my gun, but he actually flinched away from me. Did this man not realize that he was still taller than me, even in the power armor?

"You're with Kellogg, aren't you? Come to take me back to the Institute or just kill me?"

"This guy is the poster child for paranoid," Hancock chuckled.

"No, we're not with the Institute," I tried to soothe him.

"Don't try to fool me. You've even got a synth with you."

Nick lifted his hat briefly in greeting. "The name's Nick Valentine, private eye. I'm no friend of the Institute."

"Hmm. That may be true. No Institute synth would be in such a state of disrepair. Must be one of the cast-offs."

Nick frowned. "I look a sight better than you, buddy."

After much coaxing, we managed to finally convince the super mutant we weren't here to harm him. A strange sentence. He told us of the Molecular Relay that the Institute used to teleport synths in and out of the Institute, where it resided underneath the old C.I.T. building. The catch, though, was that we'd have to kill a Courser to get the frequency off the chip in his head. We'd have to kill the most notorious hunters in the Commonwealth. Easy, right?

Finding a Courser turned out to be easier said than done. There was a reason no one knew what they looked like. Nick even tried camping out at Kellogg's old place, just in case, but nothing turned up. We followed Virgil's signal to find the Courser, but whenever we got too close, the signal went flat. For such tough guys, they sure were shy. Hancock even suggested listening to the Classical station that the relay signal piggybacked off of.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into a month. I almost gave up on finding a Courser, but I found
plenty of distractions in exploring the Commonwealth with Hancock. Such as our current distraction, Vault 81. Seeing this place, it made me wonder if this is what Vault 111 should have looked like, a thriving little underground village. My heart grew nostalgic at much of the pre-war stuff lying around in pretty good condition. Everyone wore those blue suits, and it felt a little odd that I wasn't wearing one now. Oh shit, was that a Mr. Coffee-a-tron 3000? And still in good condition? I hadn't had a coffee in who knows how long.

"They're letting ghouls in here now?" An older man with slicked back silver hair sitting at one of the many cafeteria tables said loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Oh. Yeah. I looked to Hancock, worried.

"They let you in, didn't they?" he retorted, quick on the draw.

I had forgotten that Hancock had lived many years facing this kind of bigotry. The words bounced off of him easily, like that old child's rhyme about rubber and glue. Still, it didn't mean he had to endure while I was here. I strolled up to the cafeteria table, slammed the butt of Zeus right next to the old man's plastic tray, leaning on it casually. In as deep and menacing a voice as I could muster, I growled out, "shut up and eat your damn sandwich, old man. Otherwise, you'll be eating lead."

He jumped in his seat, quickly grabbed his tray, sandwich falling apart, and scrambled out of the cafeteria. The hush that fell over the vault was deafening. Even the security guards in their helmets looked like they were sweating nervously, and suddenly had to walk their beat elsewhere.

Hancock laughed, breaking the spell that closed everyone's throats. "Kitty's got claws."

The collective sigh of relief was practically audible. Everyone continued with their lives, if a little nervous of the newcomer with a ratty dog and a dirty ghoul.

"Kitty's also got a Fat Man that she's not afraid to use."

Hancock put his hand on my back, right between the shoulder blades, rubbing soothing circles. "Calm down, beautiful. There's no point to destroying a perfectly good vault. We're just passing through, right? We'll be on our way and everyone will be all the happier for it."

"They have no right to be so rude to you." I was still shaking with anger, but it was subsiding with every completed circuit of his hand.

"But that doesn't warrant a knifing," he soothed, leading me away.

"That's rich, coming from you."

Despite how much I was growing to hate Vault 81, with everyone treating Hancock like he was going to go insane and eat all of their brains, when a kid got exposed to some mysterious, incurable disease, I couldn't just sit by and let him die.

"Hey, try not to get bit, ok?" Hancock told me after a shotgun blast ended a diseased molerat's lunge towards me. "I'll probably be fine, but we don't need you ending up like the kid, yeah?"

"It's ok. There's probably plenty of the cure lying around somewhere."

"And what if there isn't any?"

I stopped in my tracks, clutching my assault rifle close to my chest, fear a cold weight in my gut. I never answered him.
The next time a group of molerats jumped out at us, and one got so close that it grazed my shoulder. Luckily, it was the armored one, so nothing nicked my flesh. Dogmeat took it down, shaking it back and forth wildly.

"That's it," Hancock stomped over to me. "You're going back."

"What? It's fine. Didn't even draw blood."

"There's only going to be more the further in we go. And unlike you, I don't feel like taking that chance. The two of us can take it from here."

"What? Dogmeat can go but I can't? He's just as likely to get sick as me."

Hancock didn't look amused. "If it's escaped your notice, Dogmeat has gotten their blood all in his mouth. If he hasn't already contracted it by now, then he's not going to. Maybe it only works on humans and molerats. Either way, you're not going any further if I have to tie you up and take you back myself."

"I'm not some damsel that needs to be protected. I can handle myself."

Hancock growled, a sound that inappropriately tickled my stomach. "Dammit, this isn't because you're a woman, but because you're human. If you die here, I'll... You're not gonna die. I won't allow it." He took a threatening step forward. "So what's it going to be? Do I have to knock you out and take you back, or will you go quietly?"

Was it wrong for me to be kind of turned on by this? I mean, I was still kind of pissed, but angry Hancock was getting me hot under the collar. "Fine, I'll go. But you're not getting any of the reward they give us."

"But I'm doing all of the work."

"That's my price."

He paused. "Then it's a small price to pay."

Dr. Forsythe wasn't impressed when I came back alone, and it almost made me go back, Hancock be damned, but I wasn't going to let my pride get me killed. Hancock was right.

To everyone's surprise, Hancock returned with a Miss Nanny robot in tow. "Here you go."

He handed over a small syringe, not unlike a stimpak.

Dr. Forsythe took it eagerly. "Only one dose? Let's hope this works. There won't be any left to analyze." He dashed over to the bed where little Austin lay shivering. One of the guards must have alerted the Overseer, because she ran into the medical bay with Dr. Penske, worry lines etched in her face. The moments after Dr. Forsythe administered the medicine were tense. Austin stopped shivering, but he remained asleep.
Meanwhile, the robot introduced herself as Curie with a heavy French accent. I don't know why some American scientist would choose to give her such a heavy accent, which made some words hard to pick out. But as most robots in her line, she was chipper, and apparently, the creator of the cure.

"I am equipped with the most advanced medical tools and and sensors," she introduced herself. "My designation is Curie. Would you like a medical examination?"

I looked to Hancock. He just shrugged his shoulders. "She was the one who had made the cure, and I didn't see no reason to refuse her company."

"Um, yeah, sure, why not." Can't remember the last time I'd been to the doctor.

All three of her eyes looked me up and down, some invisible sensor searching my body. "Examination concluded. You are in relatively good health. There is some mild radiation poisoning and Vitamin E deficiency. Also, I have detected an addiction to hyper-fructose, such as the kind most commonly found in Sugar Bombs."

"Wait, what?" Beside me, Hancock was cackling gleefully and my cheeks heated up. "You can't get addicted to Sugar Bombs. They're food. They're sold to children."

"Actually, there were many studies performed by various different universities across the globe that suggested that hyper-fructose has addictive properties, the same as nicotine. It's also been known to stunt growth, and impair certain cognitive functions in children. There was a low-profile court case by the producer of Sugar Bombs, the Rocket Cereal Company, in which it was ruled that none of these findings could be published."

"Yeah, no kiddin'." No wonder they were so popular.

Beside me, Hancock was still laughing away. "I thought you ate those a lot. Turns out Miss High Horse is the addict and not me."

I pouted. "Are you telling me that you don't have a single addiction? There's no way."

"I keep a good supply of Addictol on me. Addiction is a nasty business."

"He's waking up!" The noise from the bedside drew our attention to a rising Austin. At that exact moment, his guardian Dr. Penske flew in, rushing to his side in a flurry of tears. Their reunion was heartwarming, like something out of a TV show.

The Overseer came over to us. "Thank you so much for saving this boy's life." To my approval, she looked directly at Hancock, instead of speaking to me, as most people did. "My people have treated you poorly, and for that I deeply apologize. We have literally been living under a rock," she quirked a smile at her own little joke, "and we're not used to the outside world, as much as I'm trying to open us up. Here, take this as a reward." She handed him a small pouch laden with bottle caps. "And you'll always have a room here, if you ever need somewhere to stay. You will always be welcome."

Hancock nodded in thanks, pocketing the money. I decided to let him. A gross feeling was gnawing at my chest. When the Overseer left, he turned to me with an inquisitive look. "What's the matter? All the horrible bigots are finally acknowledging me as a person. Racism is over. Shouldn't you be happy?" The sarcasm in his voice could cut through bread.

"I just hate that you were the one who had to go through a life-threatening quest for them to realize they were wrong." I crossed my arms. "It's like you had to prove you were worthy of being treated politely. I don't like it."
He tipped the corner of his hat up, a soft look on his face. Suddenly, my cheeks were wetted with a loving peck. I blushed, blinking owlishly. "What was that for?"

"For being yourself, beautiful."

"Wait, so let me get this straight, we just fought an entire tower full of super mutants to rescue a super mutant?" Hancock looked at the giant green pillar of muscle, unimpressed.

"This ghoul good fighter. Kill many brothers. Strong approve," the lumbering super mutant said in his deep growl.

"I dunno. I think he's kind of cute." I looked up at him from where I stood near his shoulder. Damn super mutants were tall. "All he wants is some milk. Not that I blame him. Any milk you find now is rotted cheese."

"Strong no want cheese. Strong want milk of human kindness."

"Ok, I'm not gonna be the one to explain metaphors to him."

Dogmeat punctuated that with a bark.

"Hey, look over there. Some sort of cabin." I pointed through the bare trees to a rundown shack with a caved-in roof. "Might be some useful loot."

"I dunno," Hancock squinted through the sun. We had drunk a lot last night with the boys in Sanctuary. David had turned out to be a lightweight. "Looks like a hovel."

"Come on, let's check it out." I dragged him along, ignoring his curses at the giant ball of fire in the sky. Upon closer inspection, it turned out to be some sort of ranger cabin, long ago abandoned. Hancock had been right about there being nothing in there. A broken shelf, burnt remains of some books. A wire framed bed, with a skeleton in a pretty pink dress, and a suitcase underneath. Someone had been staying here. If I had found this place when I first left the vault, I would have been so terrified of the skeleton that I would have run away instantly. Now, the skeleton was such commonplace decor, I felt nothing digging through the contents of its suitcase. There were a couple of clothes, mismatched and thrown in roughly instead of neatly folded. A photo, of a happy russet colored family of Indian or Middle Eastern descent, I really couldn't tell. A proud father with a prouder mustache, a gentle mother with long hair hidden underneath a brightly colored shawl, and a young teenage girl, black hair in a ponytail, and teeth crooked in her carefree smile. They looked vaguely familiar, and I realized that with the proximity of the cabin, these were probably one of my
neighbors in Sanctuary Hills, one of the ones that hadn't made it to the Vault. Judging from the size of the clothes, this must be the daughter, but why was she out here in this abandoned cabin?

Ah, there, underneath a once green cardigan, next to a package of bubblegum, an unlabeled orange holodisk. "Let's uncover this mystery, shall we?" I popped it into my pip-boy.

"October 22, 2077." God, she sounded so young. "I finally told them tonight, and it was bad. Real bad. Dad was shouting, telling me I should be ashamed, that I had to get out of the house. Mom just cried, and somehow that hurt worse than anything else. She didn't say a word, not even when I packed my things.

"I can't go to John-- he doesn't even know yet. Maybe he'll never know. If it weren't for the cabin I wouldn't have a place to sleep. Just need some time to think. Last time I was here, I was just a little girl playing clubhouse in this old cabin. Now I'm really scared. Will anything ever be right again?"

I sat there, kneeling on the ground, staring at the rifled through suitcase, pip-boy burning on my arm. This poor girl... Her story wasn't that rare, and while she didn't say exactly what happened, I could fill in the blanks. Her voice had wavered towards the end, though she sounded much braver at the beginning. And here I was, rifling through her things like some common burglar.

I didn't even realize that I had been crying until I felt Hancock's arms around mine from behind, rocking me back and forth soothingly. As soon as I noticed it, they became rib-wracking sobs. "She was all alone. When the bombs fell. All alone."

"I know," Hancock said into my ear. Squeezing me tighter.

"She died thinking her parents hated her. Hell, maybe they even did. I don't know which is worse." I used to run away a lot when I was younger, especially in middle school, but I always came crawling back in the end. This girl couldn't come back. Dogmeat lay his head on my knee, whimpering curiously. "I want to bury her."

"Ok."

There weren't any shovels nearby, so we broke apart the bed and used poles from the frame to do as much digging as we could. Honestly, Dogmeat did most of the work. We didn't get down to six feet, more like three, but it was better than leaving her in her childhood clubhouse. I ended up leaving her suitcase on top of her grave as a marker, with the holodisk still inside for anyone curious as to this girl's story.

Hancock lounged on a rather comfortable looking armchair in his office, reading a beat-up paperback of Frankenstein. I sat on a wooden bench opposite him, flipping through old Grognak the Barbarian Comics. I had accumulated quite the collection so far. Kent still had more issues than me. Dogmeat sat on the ground, panting in the day's abnormally high heat. Suddenly, the door opened to reveal none other than Detective Nick Valentine, in the synthetic flesh.

"Nick!" I leapt up to my feet with a smile and landed with my arms wrapped around his torso in a tight hug. Still always bewildered me how he could feel so cold. "Good to see you, Daddy-O."
"Daddy-O?" Hancock looked at me, bug-eyed. Then his facade turned mischievous. "Hey, Sunshine, why don't you come sit on Daddy's lap?" He patted his spread thighs.

"Ugh, Hancock, don't make it weird," I rolled my eyes.

"I'm making it weird?" He said, but I just ignored him, instead turning to Nick.

"What are you doing here? How long has it been since I've last seen you?"

"About a month. I take it there's been no luck on your end either?"

It took a little too long for me to remember what he was talking about. Oh yeah, the Courser. "No. Honestly, haven't seen many synths at all. It's like the Institute has suddenly stopped all activity topside."

"Maybe they're still wounded from losing Kellogg? He was their main agent in the Commonwealth."

"They were doing just fine before they hired him. Oh well."

Nick put his hand on my elbow to direct me towards the bench again so that I could sit. He sat down next to me. Hancock, stood up with a harumph to join in the conversation. Though there was no more room on the bench for him to sit. He knew better than to sit on my comics.

"Actually, I came here to ask for a favor," Nick began.

"Of course, Nick, anything."

"There's a part of 'Nick Valentine's' history that I've been wanting to put a bow in for a while. I've never really gotten the chance to tackle it head-on, but with you...I think I could do this."

"Do what?"

"Ever heard of Eddie Winter?"

"Yeah, I've heard of him. The most notorious crime boss in Boston. People like him were the reason I wanted to become a lawyer."

"Well, I --that is, the old Nick-- was on his case. But the crook bought out the FBI, got away. He knew the end was coming, so he sealed himself inside of a personal shelter located underneath the sub shop he used as headquarters. But that wasn't just it. The arrogant bastard participated in some kind of radiation drug experiment so that he could live forever."

Now Hancock was frowning. "That sounds awfully familiar."

Nick nodded. "He turned himself into a ghoul, 200 years before it became fashionable. Hell, he's probably the first one. And I'm convinced he's still locked inside that shelter, safe and sound. Ready to come out, and begin his evil reign all over again. I know where his shelter is. The problem is that it's locked with some ten digit code. I had been working on cracking it before I got my memories archived, and I realized that he left clues behind on holotapes the police had taken for evidence. I've still got one." He produced it from his coat pocket. "There are nine others, likely scattered amongst the police stations of the Commonwealth."

"So...you want me to go find these tapes for you?"

Nick looked a little sheepish, pocketing the holotape again. "I don't mean to be demanding. It's just that you two are traveling all over the Commonwealth anyway. I don't want you to drop everything
to go look for them. Finding a Courser is still top priority. Just, if you happen to come across any
police stations, just give the place a once over for me."

"It's no trouble at all, Nick." I held his hands in mine, the metal of his exposed one felt like ice. His
coolants must be working nicely, then.

"Yeah, Nicky, we'll find 'em for ya." Hancock patted him on the shoulder.

Nick smiled, golden eyes glowing brightly. "Thanks." He stood up, dusting nothing off of his coat.
"Well, guess I better head out then."

"What? But you just got here." I put my hands on my hips.

"Yeah, stay a while, Nicky." Hancock threw an arm around his shoulder. "You know Irma will be
pissed if she hears you were in town and you didn't drop by."

"Actually, I just came from the Memory Den."

"You didn't come to see the mayor first?" Hancock gasped theatrically. "That's it. You and I are
gonna head down to the Third Rail and chat like friends actually do."

"Oh, that sounds like fun. I'm coming with."

"Sorry, beautiful, but this chat's private," Hancock threw me an apologetic glance as he all but
dragged Nick out of the room.

I stood there in pouting silence, feeling an awful lot like I was standing in front of a treehouse fort
with a sign that said 'No Girls Allowed.' Being brushed off like that miffed me, so I decided to check
on Kent. After chewing the fat, he let slip of some drug ring he knew outside of town, and if that
didn't sound like a call for the Silver Shroud, then I don't know what did. Kent was being smarter
this time. No more radio. I briefly considered finding Hancock and asking him to be my Mister of
Mystery, but something petty in me halted that thought. Besides, his costume was so torn up from the
last fight, it was scrap now. I'd have to remake his costume again anyway. So I dressed up the Silver
Hound and headed out.

The drug ring didn't take that long. It was small time, low-grade raiders who decided they were
going to split off from their original gang to make some extra money. Ironically, they had set up shop
inside a Walgreen's Pharmacy. It took a while to comb the place for loot. There were a lot of drugs
here, and I couldn't just leave them lying around. I threw them all into a barrel fire, feeling a bit like I
was betraying Hancock somehow.

When I returned to Goodneighbor, we stopped in a broken office building to change back into
civilian's clothes, before opening the small door to the town. I barely took two steps in before a
familiar redhead popped up.

Fahrenheit stopped me with a hand on my arm, a familiar smirk on her face. "Hey there, Susie Q.
You want to go see Daisy."
"Do I now? And what for?"

"You'll see." She looked up at the setting sun. The orange rays complimented her rosy eyeshadow and freckled face nicely. "You best hurry up. Running out of daylight."

Even if the curiosity wasn't burning me up faster than a mini nuke, I probably would have gone anyway. Daisy's shop looked closed, lights off, and the curtains that acted as the front door were pulled closed. She didn't usually close up shop this early. Was she even in? The Neighborhood Watch standing near her shop greeted me with a tip of his hat. They had been unabashedly rude the first time I stepped into this town, but ever since my relationship with Hancock became common news, they treated me like I was the First Lady. Well, when they were sober.

"If you're looking for Daisy, she's inside," he supplied helpfully.

"Thanks...Hank, right?"

He blinked ghoulish dark eyes at me. "Yeah."

I waved him off, brushing the curtain to the side. Inside, Daisy's shop was dim, lit only by a couple of lanterns. It didn't look like she was on the first floor, so I traveled upstairs to her living quarters. Sure enough, the ghoul was standing in front of her bed, arranging some clothes around with intense focus. I knocked on the wooden doorway to get her attention.

"Oh, there you are, sugar," she pulled me closer, by the arm. "We don't have much time. You need to get dressed."

"Dressed?" I looked to the clothes she had been arranging. A black, button up blouse with a popped collar, the kind the "mean girls" in my old school would wear, the sort with their own special jackets, like some kind of girl gang. Beside it, a glittering mint green scarf, and beneath it a long felt skirt of the same color. I straightened out the ruffles and came to the realization that this was a poodle skirt, but instead of a poodle, Daisy had stitched in a german shepherd. "Is that...Dogmeat?"

She smiled at me. "You don't seem like a poodle kind of gal."

The thought was so nice, I didn't dare tell her that this outfit was meant for much younger women, teenagers, more precisely. I would have looked ridiculous walking around like this as an older woman. "What's all of this for, Daisy?"

"That's a surprise. Now, hurry up, get dressed." With a coy smile, she shuffled me about into changing clothes.

To my astonishment, the outfit fit perfectly. Daisy really had an eye for measurements. The best shoes she had to go with the outfit were some black pumps. To my chagrin, the skirt fell to the center of my calves, revealing just enough leg to remind me that I hadn't shaved in over 200 years. The hair on my head may be blonde, but the ones on my legs were noticeably darker.

"Do you have any stockings or pantyhose?"

She shot me a knowing look. "Sorry, honey. Those didn't really stand the test of time. You won't have to worry about your leg hair. Women shaving is an archaic concept now. Besides, Hancock won't care about that."

My face felt hot. "What does Hancock have to do with anything?" I decided that my neck scarf needed meticulous adjustment.
Daisy just smiled. "Now, let's fix that hair of yours."

She offered to let me borrow one of her many wigs, but I declined. No point in using someone else's hair if I had enough of my own. Instead, Daisy washed my hair in a basin with some water she had drawn earlier. It was cold, and likely irradiated, but her fingers on my scalp felt nice. This would be the closest to a spa day in this new world. She used an entire box of bobby pins and a combination between a hotplate and a desk fan to dry my hair. When she was done, the woman staring back at me in a cracked mirror had a striking resemblance to Marilyn Monroe.

"Oh, wow, Daisy," I gently touched the perfectly arranged curls. Without hairspray to set them, they would likely fall out by the end of the night, but this was still impressive.

"Just because I don't have hair anymore, doesn't mean I don't still know how to work it," she snorted, which sounded weird without a nose.

After a little makeup, my look was complete. I hadn't worn any in so long, I forgot how it felt. The confidence it gave you.

She peeked out her window to look at the dark sky, the last rays of sun already passed. "You better get moving. And don't worry about Dogmeat, he can stay with me."

"Wait, Dogmeat can't come? Where am I going?"

For the first time, the entrance to the Third Rail was quiet. Usually the dull sounds of Magnolia's jazz would drift up the stairs past the metal gates. Ham was still there though, as sharp dressed as ever.

"Lookin' nice there, Susie," he greeted with what could only be described as a serious smile.

"Thanks, Ham. Do you know what's going on?"

"Oh yes. I'm just here to make sure you two aren't disturbed. If you'll proceed into the bar." He bowed graciously, gesturing past the gate. He was being much more courteous today too. What was going on?

I proceeded down the steps with caution, but it seemed wearing heels was just like riding a bike: you never really forgot how. The clack of heel on concrete echoed loudly in the quiet subway tunnel. The lights were still on though. I found that the bar was completely empty: no Magnolia, not even Whitechapel Charlie. The only person in the bar was a man in a greaser jacket leaning against a jukebox that had been installed next to the stage. The man was looking down, his face obscured by a familiar tricornered hat. "Hancock?"

He flicked his gaze up, jocular smirk opened to deliver some clever line before it dropped at the sight of me. "Well damn, if you aren't the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Yeah, I was definitely blushing now. "You ol' charmer," I giggled. There wasn't a woman alive who could resist this man's charms, me included. I crossed the rest of the bar to reach him. "What's all this,
"Hancock?"

"Isn't it obvious?" He tipped his hat up. "This is a date."

It's a good thing I wasn't drinking anything, because I would have spit it out in a rather ungracious manner. "Is this what's considered a date now?"

Hancock's smile dropped a bit. "Well, not exactly. You're not from this time, so I thought I'd try to do things you'd recognize... Nick's the only one with a good memory of that time, so I asked for some pointers..." Ah, so that's what the boys only talk was. It was refreshing to see Hancock a little unsure of himself. Made him seem more human.

"Well, this is a great date, if I was still in high school."

He spat something vicious under his breath. Probably something rude about our favorite synth detective.

I laughed good-naturedly. "It's still a good date, so far. But I have to ask, what's with the get up." I nodded to him, eyes crawling up those tight-fitting jeans and leather jacket. "Not that I'm complaining."

That bolstered him enough to see his familiar smirk on his face. "Well, you told me once that I was a bad boy, so I thought I'd dress the part. I was thinking of getting one of those pompadour wigs, but nothing's more badass than this hat."

I chuckled. "I have to agree. So then...the jukebox? I don't remember seeing that here before."

"That's because it's my own personal jukebox. Most of the ones you find are broken, but I managed to fix this one." For some reason, in case of a nuclear apocalypse, all of the Juke 'n' Jives reset to factory mode, which only played one classical song. This time, though, Hancock leaned up against the machine casually and pounded the side with his fist. It burst to life, belting out a familiar tune.

You ain't nothin' but a hound dog, crying all the time.

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped out of my throat. The song matched my skirt quite nicely.

Hancock held out his hand. "Would my lady care for a dance?"

That night, we danced like a couple of teens at a sock hop. We did the jitterbug, the twist, the mashed potato. Neither of us could dance very well, but since no one was watching, we laughed it off. Around the second song, I ended up kicking off my shoes, and Hancock set his hat down on the bar. There must be some kind of silly gas in the air because I couldn't stop laughing. My cheeks hurt from all of the smiling. At one point, Hancock had picked me up by the waist and twirled us around so fast that we collapsed onto the ground in a tangle of limbs, still guffawing like two madmen. We hadn't even drunk anything yet.

"Not that I'm not digging this position, but maybe we should take a break and grab a drink," Hancock chuckled from underneath me.

If my cheeks weren't already rosy from the rouge and the exercise, I'm sure I would blush some more. Quickly, I leapt off of him, and lent a hand to upright him. We went to the bar, behind it this time, to make our own drinks since Charlie had been banished to who knows where. It felt a little exciting to be on the other side, like we were doing something naughty, even though Hancock owned the entire bar and everything in it. He made me a rum and Nuka-Cola, and himself a vodka in mutfruit juice. I welcomed the chance to sit and catch my breath, though if Hancock kept smiling at
me like that, I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to.

When our breathing evened, I snuck a peek at the back of Hancock's black leather jacket. I hadn't gotten a chance to see the back of it, and it had a large logo of a crazed cat's head in front of a mushroom cloud. "Who are the Atom Cats?"

He glanced over his shoulder, as if he could see it himself. "Some power armor gang I met down by Warwick Homestead. They kept trying to act like I wasn't cool enough to join, but all I did was fix a pump and fight off some Gunners that were trying to kill me too, and then they induct me into their gang, as if I had been begging to do it from the beginning." He shrugged. "I got this cool jacket and some power armor out of the deal, so I went along with it. I'll have to take you down there on poetry night. It's hilarious."

"Wait, you've got a suit of power armor? Why haven't we been using that?"

"I set it up in storage, you know, just in case. Honestly, I forgot all about it until this moment." He chuckled easily.

I wondered if Sturges knew about these guys? They kind of seemed right up his alley, being power armor aficionados.

After a beat, Hancock asked me, "so what's a date like for adults in your time?"

I took a drink of my rum and cola as Frankie and the Four Seasons belted out their love song to Sherry just a few steps away. "Go to a bar, see a flick, have dinner, maybe a drive to some scenic route, I think."

"You think? Haven't you ever been on a date before?"

Now that my heart rate had cooled, I couldn't blame my red cheeks on dancing. "Well, not exactly."

Hancock had no right to look that surprised. "But you're married. Were married."

"It was kind of arranged, so there was no need to woo each other." I refused to look at him, a sour taste in my mouth. "And before that, I wasn't interested in men." Terrified was more like it. Falling in love seemed like the end of the world to me, perhaps everyone could sense my standoffish nature, and so I never received any offers. Turns out, falling in love hadn't been necessary.

"But surely you've had sex before. I mean, you have a kid."

"Of course I have," I snapped. Then felt bad for taking my temper out on him. He was just being curious, no offense meant. "I had a friend at college, Joey Fierro; he wasn't interested in marriage or getting anyone pregnant. He was very careful, and I trusted him." No chance of either of us falling in love. "I just wanted the experience. And maybe it was a little stab at my parents, you know, breaking tradition and all that."

"That sounds about as fun as my first time," Hancock snorted. "I was human then, around sixteen or so? There was this chem pusher named Alex, a 6 out of 10 but with a pretty decent rack, nearly old enough to be my mother. To a hormonal teenager though, she was a sex goddess. Conveniently, I lost my virginity and learned about jet all at the same time. Of course, that's not counting all the times I had jacked her younger brother off."

"Hancock!"

He laughed at my face. "Don't act all scandalized on me now, Sunshine. Funny how mutual
masturbation with a boy closer to my age is what shocked you more than vaginal sex with an older woman and a chem dealer to boot."

I don't think I would ever get used to the...transparent nature of certain acts in this new world. "I am not nearly drunk enough to be having this conversation."

"I think I can help with that," Hancock joked as he poured me another drink. "Other than your delicate sensibilities being ruffled, how is tonight going?"

My gentle smile was warmer than the liquor in my belly. "I think even if I had had dates before, they wouldn't compare to tonight."

He straightened his back, chest puffed out subtly. "Now who's the charmer?"

Then, something drew my attention back to the music pumping out of the jukebox. Something about this piano melody brought out a sense of deja vu.

Unforgettable...

My breath stopped. I looked to Hancock, and he hit me with a knowing look. "This is my real present to you. I've never heard this song outside of this jukebox, and seeing how much you said you liked Nat King Cole..." He shrugged his shoulders.

I couldn't stop looking at him like he had just plucked the sun out of the sky. I had said that once, in passing, a long time ago. For him to have remembered all this time... "Can we dance?"

The look he gave me was like melted chocolate. "Of course."

I pulled him off the stool and right in front of the stage. With little coaxing, he put his hand on my waist and grabbed my hand with the other.

Unforgettable...though near or far.

He held me close as we swayed back and forth. I clutched onto his leather shoulder tightly, suddenly filled with enough energy to power an atomic bomb, but it was only held together by my skin.

Like a song of love that clings to me.
How the thought of you does things to me.

"Consider me completely romanced," I joked breathily, my voice lowering to just above a murmur.

"Same here."

I clasped his hand tighter and he squeezed back.

Never before has someone been more...

For a reason beyond me, I wanted to cry, though I held it in. Hancock's black eyes were glistening like the night sky, though this close I could see past the dark film to the irises beneath jumping back and forth across my face. He too, began to speak in a soft voice, almost like a whisper. "I've made a lot of poor decisions in my life, things I'm not proud of. But choosing to stick with you? That was the best one I've ever made. It's like..." He paused, to look away from me for a moment. I didn't blame him. Now that I wasn't being sucked into his eyes like a sailor lost in a whirlpool, the breath I didn't know I had been missing suddenly came back. "It's like I found a piece of myself I never realized I was missing. Which happens sometimes, when you're a ghoul."
I chuckled, though I really hoped that was just a joke. I would like for him to keep all of his parts, thank you.

"I've been going over it in my head for a while, and I just can't seem to figure out what I did to deserve you. Karma's gotta be a load of bull. And even now, all I want is to keep you all to myself." His mottled hand pushed a stray blonde hair out of my eyes, caressing my face as it slowly traveled down my cheek.

_Unforgettable, in every way.
And forever more, that's how you'll stay._

We stopped dancing, though the room still felt like it was swaying to me. I took my hand off his shoulder to put it gently over the one on my cheek. "I've always been a coward, afraid of love. But with you, I feel brave. And I think maybe now I know why there are so many love songs." This wasn't what I wanted to say. I wanted to laud him, tell him how wonderful he was, but how could I describe this feeling? "It's funny how it took the world ending for mine to start, but I would drop all of those bombs myself if it would lead me back to you. It took 200 years for me to meet the most important person in my life."

_That's why, darling, it's incredible._

"Why are you crying? Shit, what did I do?"

I laughed. "No, it's not bad. They're happy tears. I'm happy. Sorry, I can't make them stop." Even as he wiped the tears off with both of his hands, they were replaced by fresh hot ones. I really couldn't help it, like a radioactive leak. All that energy had to go somewhere.

_That someone so unforgettable, thinks that I am unforgettable too._

"In that case..." He peppered my cheeks with lipless kisses, drinking up my tears like a man in a desert. The sensation tickled so much that I couldn't stop giggling and slapping his shoulder. Then he kissed me on the mouth, and it tickled in an entirely different way.

That night, we did something I dared to call making love. I spent too much of the time crying, which was dumb considering it was the best feeling in the world, but from the look on Hancock's face, I think he would be crying too if he had the ability. He made good on his promise to tease me in bed, fingers and mouth mapping my entire body, as if he was trying to commit every plane and curve to tactile memory with an emphasis on the ridges between my legs. That had been something I'd never experienced before.

"W-what are you doing?" I had asked, face so hot it had to have been glowing in the dark of Hancock's bedroom.

"A good job, apparently," he smirked at me, licking his chops, from between my --oh god-- hairy legs. Daisy had been right about him not caring, in fact, the man had rubbed his cheek across them a few times like a loving cat. Called them soft.

"When are we going to get to the sex part?"

"What the fuck do you think we've been doing until now?"

"I don't know. No one's ever been so...handsy as you."

He looked confused, a rather comical face, though it was hard to see in the dark. Then something
seemed to dawn on him, and he growled, actually growled, and the vibrations tickled me low in my stomach. "Damn, men back then didn't know how to treat you right." He gave me a long lick which caused me to squeal in a rather unsexy manner and smack my knees against his ears. He didn't even flinch. "A goddess like you... She needs to be worshipped."

Apparently, I had missed out on a lot of things. Sex with Nate had been quick and nice, but nothing like this nuclear explosion. What I had thought had been an orgasm had been a hand grenade compared to the nuke that Hancock gave me. Twice. Or maybe it had something to do with being a ghoul? In the dark, I couldn't see clearly, but I could feel that the damage on his face was nothing like the damage to the rest of his body. Even his penis had the gnarled skin, (it reminded me of those condoms you would see at the pharmacy, the kind labeled "ribbed for her pleasure" on the box) though luckily it was still there. With the way he always joked about missing body parts, I had feared. He hadn't been lying about missing that toe, though. Unforeseen, but not surprising had been to learn that some of his nerves had fried, leaving parts of his skin unfeeling. On the other hand, some parts had been frayed, leaving them hypersensitive. It was fun to search out which parts were the sensitive ones and which weren't. His neck was a favorite spot of mine. I spent most of the time clinging to it like a leech. And luckily enough for him though, the underside of his cock was another. He came the moment he entered me.

I couldn't help laughing at him. "That was a little quick, don'tcha think?"

Most guys would have started trying to patch up their ego, he only gave me a wicked grin. "Trust me, doll, I more than make up for it in stamina." Sure enough, he was still raring to go. Many times.

By the time we finished, the waning light of the setting moon peaked through the dusty window, and despite how my body ached, I couldn't seem to fall asleep. I lay next to Hancock, sweat cooling on my skin, fingers drifting over the hills and valleys of Hancock's chest. His hat was propped lopsided on his head, just a shift away from falling off. Next time, I'd see if he would wear the jacket too. I licked my lips at the thought.

"Not gonna sleep?" his voice sounded even more hoarse than usual. I needed to get a recorder so I could make a holotape.

"My body wants to, trust me, but my mind can't seem to shut-off. What about you?"

"Ghouls don't really need a lot of sleep." The arm that I was resting my head on flexed, so that his hand could rub my shoulder. "Goes with the stamina, ya know?"

"Now I know why everybody hates ghouls. They're just jealous."

He chuckled, the vibrations tickling the pads of my fingers. "See? That's what I've been saying this whole time."

I stretched a bit, as much as I could cuddled up next to him. It felt good on my tired muscles. If I didn't want to be sore, I should probably stretch out. Reluctantly, I sat up, reaching over him, flushing at the feeling of my bare chest dragging across his, to turn on the lantern. A hand grasped my wrist, as quick as a snake.

"You don't wanna do that."

"I need to go to the bathroom, and I'll trip over my own feet in this dark."

I couldn't make out his face easily, but he didn't seem angry, just, anxious maybe? Slowly, he released my arm, as though it pained him. "It would be funny if it was midnight right now," he
mumbled, though I had no idea what he was on about.

With a flick of my wrist, the lantern sparked to life, it's warm glow brighter in the dark than it was during daylight. Now I could see what it was Hancock had been trying to hide from me. What I felt in the dark was much less attractive in the light. The skin below the neck followed the same mottled and dehydrated look as his face, and some parts where the skin actually looked burnt, blackened. I felt ashamed of myself for thinking he wasn't that far-off from the corpse some bigots called him. It wasn't a pretty sight, but I tried hard not to show it on my face. I failed.

"I'll understand if you don't want to do this again," he didn't look at me, instead his steely gaze went to some spot in the dark a few inches past my shoulder. "No hard feelings. We can still travel together. Some people like to use a blindfold."

How many times had this scenario played out before him? A passionate night in the dark and heartbreak in the light? I wanted to throw up from how angry I was. Maybe I would take Piper up on her offer to find all of his past exploits, so I could beat them up for hurting him in this way. "Frankly, I'm a little offended. I didn't think you were the type to hit it and quit it."

He bared his teeth at me. "I don't want to let a good thing go, but if it disgusts you to be with me, then I'd rather we just end it here, instead of you giving me the cold shoulder later."

I hit him with an even harder glare. "Damn, women nowadays don't know how to treat you right. Well, I'm not ready to end this. And that was the best damn sex I've ever had in my entire life, and if you start withholding from me now, I'm going to sic Dogmeat on you. He loves jerky."

Hancock burst out laughing, to his own surprise if his face was anything to go by, his entire torso shaking me up and down. "I knew there was a reason I loved you."

That word sent a thrill through my heart, and now I wasn't sure if I would ever get to sleep ever again. I smiled stupidly into his leathery skin. Despite all of our heartfelt confessions this night (last night?), neither one of us had used that word. With that out of the way, I crawled out of bed, my muscles burning pleasantly at the stretch. I felt a little sheepish at standing naked in front of him, which was stupid considering what we had just done, and that he was naked under the sheets too, but still. I took a step towards the door, before a thought hit me, and I turned around.

"Hey, Hancock, you don't really mean what you said, right? About no hard feelings? If we had broke up right here, you wouldn't feel anything?"

He shifted to face me fully, though he didn't sit up. "I would have done my best to make you think so."

Chapter End Notes

Hyper-fructose is something I made up, also the science behind it. (Although sugar has been proven to have addictive qualities.) Also, Unforgettable by NKC is my most favorite song ever.
The Railroad

Chapter Summary

The gang invest the help of the Railroad in order to track down their Courser, and things don't exactly go as planned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

When I returned, a terrible thought struck me suddenly like a wayward baseball to the cranky old man's glass window. "We forgot to use a condom. Oh god, do people even use condoms anymore?"

What would a half-ghoul child even look like? Would the baby be fully human, since ghouls are not born? But didn't ghoulification change their DNA?

Hancock was smoking a cigarette now, his hat on the bedside table, looking at me with a face so done, I could stick a fork in it. "You're not going to get pregnant. The radiation makes me sterile and also kills any disease I would unwittingly be carrying. As for condoms, no not really. Population is kind of low to start with, so..."

Oh. Alright then.

"Also, you probably got a little bit of radiation poisoning."

"Seriously?"

"The joys of fucking a ghoul."

I didn't feel sick, so it mustn't be that bad. I crawled back under the covers and latched my body onto his like a leech. With the sweat cooled on my skin, it got chilly. "You sure do go through those things like it's going out of style. Aren't you worried about running out?"

"Nah, I can always just go pick some up with Daisy. Or Rufus, he usually has a carton on hand."

I frowned at him. Was he making fun of me? "No one's making more, right? Not much grows now, and no one's told me about any mutated tobacco plant. That means there's a limited amount, from before the war. 200 years of chain smokers, the Commonwealth's gotta be running low."

The cigarette fell from his lips and landed on his chest. I worried that it might burn his skin, but he didn't even flinch. "...Shit, I never thought of that. Fuck. They're just always lying around everywhere, ya know? But you got a good point, damn." He replaced the fallen cig back in his mouth. "This whole living forever thing is starting to sound pretty lame."
"You two look...different," Nick eyed us both.

Fahrenheit snorted, having none of the tact that the detective used. "Yeah, like you both just ate an entire brahmin and then took the world's greatest shit."

The synth looked at her with thinly veiled disgust. "Not how I'd put it, but still apt."

I felt proud that my cheeks remained pale and colorless. "A good night's sleep is all." Fahrenheit started snickering, and I followed her gaze to Hancock beside me with the most shit-eatingest grin and waggling non-eyebrows. "Shut it!" I slapped his red-coated shoulder.

"Anyway," Nick continued awkwardly, "I had an idea on what to do about our Courser problem."

"Oh, do tell."

"We should try finding the Railroad. If anyone knows anything about fighting Coursers, it would be them."

"How do we do that? The whole point about this organization is that they work in secret, right?"

Nick nodded. "I was always told if you want to find them, to follow Freedom's Trail."

Freedom's Trail, as it turned out, was a red line on the pavement spanning across Boston. Had this always been here, and I just never noticed? Every so often, we would encounter a manhole cover with clues, though I didn't know what for. 7A? 4L? Not to mention the trail seemed to lead right past the most dangerous spots in the ruins, not sure if that was done purposefully, to throw off any ne'er-do-wells. If so, then that's pretty clever of them.

As we traveled through though, we passed a three story building, separated from the rest of the Commonwealth by an ornate iron fence, and the once beautiful garden now a barren pile of dirt. Once, this place had been the envy of the Boston elite, but now looked like something out of a horror film.

"Hey, wait a minute, guys, I know this place."

Nick and Hancock paused in their dutiful following of the red line to look up at the white bricked building I was staring at. "'The Algonquin Club'?" Hancock read off the brass sign on the fence.

"A private social club for the elite of Boston," I explained. "A place where rich people can throw their money around to see who has the most green. I never went, but my parents frequented here often." They had been so proud to be accepted, considering their shameful background. Father was blueblood, but Mother came from poor farmers. I took a moment's hesitation before I pulled open the gate. "Come on, I want to check it out."

Nick looked back over his shoulder to the red line, then back to this looming building. "I suppose the Railroad can wait."
The gate may have been unlocked, but the front door was not. Luckily, I had gotten to know my way around a bobby pin, and this simple lock was no problem for me. The inside of the building was in just as much disrepair as the outside. The power had gone out, so I had to use the flashlight function on my pip-boy just to see.

The grand lobby was not so grand anymore. The chandelier hung haphazardly from the ceiling, much of the no doubt pure crystal pieces missing and so covered in dust, that it no longer glistened and glittered as it should. Some of the end tables were in good shape, holding empty ceramic vases and over there a liquor cabinet with a crystal decanter next to an overturned coat rack. Otherwise, the marble floors were covered in dust and detritus. Looking up, you could see the balconies of the upper two floors, parts where the wooden railings had broken, and what even looked like the arm of some corpse hanging limply over the edge of the third floor, though it was difficult to tell.

"This must have been quite the upscale joint in the day," Nick commented, peering through the dusty air.

Hancock paused in his search around. "Did you guys hear that?"

Dogmeat growled.

Before I could ask him what, my question was answered by a monstrous gurgling noise, like someone who had lost their tongue trying to scream. I had a split second to grab my combat knife from it's pouch on my leg and Kellogg's pistol from my hip when the lobby began to swarm with ferals. They poured in from everywhere: two open doorways to my right and left, down the main stairway, one even leapt off the third floor balcony to climb down the chandelier. I caught the one falling off the chandelier in the throat with my knife, flinging it off in one smooth movement, then using that momentum to bash an approaching feral in the rotted face with the butt of my pistol. While it staggered back, I shot it twice in the head. To my right, I could hear Hancock's shotgun blasting away like it was the Fourth of July, and Nick to my left was picking off the monsters coming down the stairway with his 10 mm pistol. Dogmeat fought off any ferals that came too close before I could get them with my knife.

As soon as the flood came, it ended. All along the floor and falling down the stairs were corpses, unmoving and leaking radiation. I popped a Rad-X just to be safe.

"Well, that was exciting," I grinned wildly, adrenaline still pumping through my body.

"Remind me not to go to any of your parties," Nick deadpanned. "There might still be some more further in."

"If the noise didn't get their attention," Hancock snorted before crouching down to help with the looting. A handful of the ferals were naked, and thus had nothing on them, but some still had tattered rags of old thousand dollar suits and even more expensive dresses.

I kicked one over, to look at the lapel pin of an american flag, faded with age. This one must have been a politician. No one else wore those things. The one next to it, arm blown off, had a pearl necklace still hanging from its dehydrated neck. Those were most likely real pearls. "I wonder if one of these are my parents." The thought came out of the blue and seemed to bypass my brain to go straight for my mouth. My two companions hit me with twin blank stares. I hurried to explain. "I mean, they frequented this place a lot, liked to be seen. I don't know where they were when the bombs fell, maybe they were here." A chuckle escaped my lungs. "You know, I used to have dreams like this."

Nick said, "You used to dream about shooting the zombified corpses of your parents?"
I shrugged. "Puberty was a bitch and so was my mother."

"I can relate," Hancock retorted. I knew who he was thinking of.

After looting all of the corpses in the lobby, we traveled through the clubhouse, picking up any useful loot. "Oh, those cigars are in pretty good condition." There was at least one cabinet of liquor in every room, it felt like. Was this an elite club or a speakeasy? We walked through meeting rooms, galleries, studies and offices. The first floor was completely cleared, all of the ferals there had run into the lobby. Similarly, the second floor was empty, except for two particularly tough ferals that had been in a broom closet. Wonder how they had ended up there.

The third floor looked to be comprised almost entirely with some kind of ballroom, tables with maroon tablecloths and gold candelabras missing most of their candles. There were beautiful porcelain plates on every table, with burnt cards filling them up. A stage had a podium and an empty display easel, and a crimson banner hanging on the wall behind with lettering long faded to illegibility. There must have been some sort of event happening the day of the explosion. The moment we stepped into the ballroom, the place came to "life" with ferals. Why did they lay completely still like that up until something walked by?

This time, I was more prepared, and had already begun picking off the ones further away with Zeus, while the boys handled those closest to us. Even when one so soaked in radiation it glowed showed up from two swinging double doors, the feral died before it could even get close enough to spit on me.

"To the living go the spoils," Hancock singsonged while rifling through some pockets. He let out a low whistle when he found a pack of cigarettes in pretty good condition.

I shared his sentiment, eagerly searching through the radioactive corpse bits for anything salvageable. A couple of hundred dollar bills in pre-war money (useless now), a stick of gum, a golden pocket watch, a gold-plated flip lighter. "What's this?" One corpse I found was in relatively good condition for a feral, its fur coat still hanging off of bony shoulders covered in a tattered blue dress. In the pocket of the coat, I found an orange holotape. I flipped it over, a feeling too close to dread rising up in my gut.

Nick, who was looking over my shoulder, noted with keen yellow eyes, "It has your name on it." Sure enough, there, in elegant scrawl, To Susan.

Hancock came over with a curious glance. "Maybe it's another Susan? That was a pretty common name back then, right?"

I hoped he was right. "Only one way to find out." I pushed the holotape into my pip-boy and waited for it to begin playing.

"Hello Susan, it's your mother."

I gasped, slapping a hand over my mouth in horror. I knew that voice. I'd know it anywhere.

"I hope you are listening to this. I know you've been avoiding all of our calls. That's quite rude, but I think I understand why now. I... God, I can't do this."

Then, a deep baritone voice of a man spoke. Father. "Keep going. You were doing good."

"I need another drink. It's too much."

"You can't, you've taken your medicine already. You know they don't mix well."
"I don't fucking care, Daniel. Give me the damn vodka I paid for or--" 

The white noise of static. I wondered, briefly, if that had been all of it, before the tape continued. My mother's voice came back, sounding slurried and sluggish, like trying to hear through a tin can on a string. "Now look here, Susan. I fucking gave birth to you, so you have no right to treat me like this. Your father and I have done everything in our power to give you a good life, one that's better than mine. We've sacrificed so much for you."

Well, if I was such a burden then why did you have me?

"Your grandmother lived through the Second Depression, had to make it through hard times. She didn't want me to live like that, so she raised me to appreciate a life without luxuries. Well, I want a fucking life of luxury, so I married your father. I didn't want you to have to live like your grandparents, working on that goddamn farm, so I've done everything I can to enter you into high society, marry a man with a good family. Of course, none of the blue bloods would take a collegiate. No one likes a woman who is too smart for her own good." There was a clink, and then the sound of liquid being poured and an audible gulp. "And I thought I had done well by you, that you were just being a stubborn kid who didn't know any better, a trait you inherited from me, I'm afraid. But when you had Shaun...

"I thought that nurse was right, that it was just hormones. After all, what woman in their right mind could not feel that love for her own child? But even after you left the hospital, you didn't want to hold him. You looked so uncomfortable. I realized that you truly didn't love Shaun, that you didn't feel that swell of joy I felt when I first looked upon your little face. We've...I've made you truly unhappy, haven't I? Nate's a good man, he'll take care of you, doesn't hit the bottle too hard. But you shouldn't have had to have Shaun. This is hard for your mother to say, but...I'm sorry. I tried to do right by you, I really did. I guess that's just selfish thinking on my part."

Silence, the click of static, then, "Susan, this is your father. I'm not going to get all mushy like your mother does. She's a sad drunk. Your mother is just getting a little maudlin because she's dying. We found a cancer in her liver. Surprise. Don't worry, we caught it in time, and the doctor's removed it. Luckily, we have the means to be able to afford that kind of surgery, a thing you never truly appreciated.

"No, your mother became addicted to Med-X, from when she was undergoing treatment. Now she's drinking like she's trying to kill whatever was in her liver, and between that and the drugs, I don't think she'll live long. She's refused all treatment, and taking her to a rehab center is risky. You remember what happened to the Burnes' when word got out that their son was an addict. Haven't seen them at the country club since. So we need to get our story straight. When your mother eventually drinks herself to death, we need to tell everyone that she had cancer. It's not a complete lie. Tomorrow, I'm going to start pulling her from events, to keep up the appearance that she's sick. I understand you don't get out much, so likely you can't tell anyone anyway, but just to cover all of our bases. I'm sure somebody will pay you their respects. The Quinn family is very polite like that. I expect to see you at her funeral. Winthrop, out."

We stood there in silence, waiting for another click of static, another voice to speak, but my pip-boy popped open, the incriminating holotape waiting to be ejected. I stared at it dumbly, feeling so many things all at once that they all canceled each other out. Numbly, I removed the holotape, placing it in my pants pocket. Hancock looked like he wanted to say something, his mouth opening to start a sentence, then closing before any breath could even leave his lungs. It gave him the effect of looking like a fish out of water. Finally, he seemed to decide what he was going to say, because he put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "Susie..."
All of a sudden, it became too much. I felt crowded, pressured. I needed air, silence. "I need to be alone right now." I brushed off his hand and practically dashed out of the ballroom.

I found myself on the roof, in a garden so dead it should be a cemetery. The air outside was crisp and refreshing compared to the staleness indoors. I took a deep lungful, holding it in for as long as I could before it escaped out of me like a balloon. My legs were shaking, so I found a stone bench and sat down. The sun still hung high in the sky, baring down on an already burnt land as if it meant to burn it a second time, but the breeze cooled any sweat on my brow. I looked out across the horizon, at the tall skyscrapers, at the distant hills, and even the faint green haze of the Glowing Sea way far off. I don't know how long I sat there before a familiar trench coat invaded my periphery.

Nick sat next to me on the stone bench, not saying anything, just staring at the horizon too. I don't know what he wanted me to say. Did he want me to explain myself? Explain my parents? He already saw that horrible memory. God, Nick had seen the worst sides of me. Surprising that I wasn't crying, really. It's dumb. None of this should be that shocking. I already knew what my parents were like, and they were already dead, so hearing about the drugs and the cancer shouldn't even be sad.

_She had apologized. If she was going to be so damn sorry, then why did I have to suffer in the first place?_ I wanted to punch something real bad.

"I had a fiancee once, you know. Well, 'Nick' did. I have all these memories of her."

I looked at the synth. What was he talking about?

He continued on, not looking at me, as if we were just two old pals having a chat in a park. "She was a beautiful woman, long blonde hair like spun gold, these big baby blues, and a good heart. You remind me a lot of her."

"Where are you going with this?"

Nick held his hand up. Ah, so no interruptions then. "I guess that's the reason I feel so protective over you. Hancock was right when he said I treat you different from my other clients. Sometimes I wonder if maybe these feelings are Nick's and not mine. It's hard, having someone else's entire life crammed into your skull, but at the same time, without him, I would just be an empty shell."

"Do you really think like that? Think of yourself as separate from Nick?"

"Yes and no. I am Nick, he's my entire personality, but at the same time, I'm just some toy soldier come to life."

"That sounds a bit like the Nutcracker, actually."

Nick chuckled. "I don't plan on dancing ballet anytime soon." Then he turned somber. "That's why I asked you to help me find Eddie Winter so I can kill him. If this ghost of the past is gone, then maybe I can figure out how to live my own life."

I tilted my head. "Isn't that what you have been doing all along? Human Nick is dead. Every decision you've made since you woke up has been yours and yours alone." Nick was looking at me like I had turned into a super mutant. "You made the agency, made all of these friends. The old Nick has no memories of Diamond City. Just because you have someone else's memories, I don't see why that means you aren't yourself."

He patted me lightly on the shoulder with a smile. "You're a good kid, Susie."

The smile must have been contagious. I wanted to tell him that I wish he had been my father, that if I had known this Nick in my previous life, I wouldn't have made such stupid decisions. Instead, I
He grimaced. "You're never going to stop calling me that, are you?"

I shook my head. After a moment, I asked, "So why did you tell me all of this?" Honestly, I had been expecting some kind of uncomfortable talk filled with platitudes.

"Sometimes it helps to focus on someone else's pain instead of your own."

"Oh." I guess it worked. The tightness in my chest had evaporated, and for a while, I had completely forgotten about the holotape. "So what happened to her? Your fiancee."

"Eddie Winters killed her."

Now things made a lot of sense. With a huff, I stood up, Nick following suit. I turned, to head back to the roof access door, only to find Hancock standing awkwardly in the doorway, hand on top of Dogmeat's head, but no longer scratching it. "Everything good?" Nervous black eyes flitted between the two of us.

"Yeah." For now. "Come on, let's go find the Railroad."

"The famous synth detective and the mayor of Goodneighbor at my front door. These are some high-profile friends you've brought with you, stranger. Now tell me: who are you?" The woman was dressed as most people in the Commonwealth were, mismatched clothes and a grim countenance of justified paranoia. She was flanked by a dark skinned woman aiming a minigun (an ironic name considering its hefty weight) who reminded me of Fahrenheit, and a thin unassuming man in a flat cap and scarf who looked like he'd fly away in a strong wind.

"Isn't it polite to introduce yourself first?"

"Not when you come knocking on my door unannounced. But... Nick and Mayor Hancock may not be members of the Railroad, but they're not our enemies either." She looked directly at Hancock when she said this next bit. "The Railroad is aware and grateful for your turning a blind eye." Then she turned her penetrating gaze on me. "I'm Desdemona, the leader of the Railroad."

Just then, a man in a plain white tee and sunglasses walked in from the hole in the wall behind Desdemona. He had a smirk that matched the pompadour on his head. "There was a party, and I didn't get an invite?"

Desdemona looked at him over her shoulder. "Ah, Deacon, where've you been? I need intel. Who is she?"

"You haven't heard of the famous Silver Shroud and her Silver Hound?"

Dogmeat barked proudly. I patted him on the head nervously. Hancock sent me a look that said I told you so.

"Piper even wrote an article about her: 'The Woman Out of Time.' She's done a lot of good for the
Minutemen, helping settlements and clearing out raider camps. Not to mention she's the one who offed Kellogg. Susan Quinn."

Such high praise, I blanched. I hadn't exactly been trying to keep a low profile, but it was still unsettling to hear this guy list off all I've done since I woke up in the cryovault.

"So you're vouching for her?" Desdemona quirked up a skeptical eyebrow.

"You bet. This is a woman we want on our side, trust me."

She turned back to me. "All right, Ms. Quinn, I think we can trust you. Now why have you worked so hard to arrange this meeting?"

I couldn't stop myself from quipping, "It wasn't that hard to guess the password was 'railroad.'"

She smirked in admittance. "The crypt was full of feral ghouls."

Yeah, that had been fun. All those tight corners and narrow hallways with their hidden alcoves. I had the ghost pain of a recently healed bite to prove it. "We've come for your help, actually. We need to kill a Courser."

The woman holding the minigun lowered it slightly with an ill-hidden snort. "Yeah, good luck with that one, buddy."

Desdemona looked equally hopeful. "The Courser is the Institute's head hunters, much stronger than Kellogg. They're experts in both stealth and combat. Even if you manage to find one, killing it is a whole other Deathclaw. Why would you want to go on this suicide mission?"

"Because I need to get into the Institute."

"Lady, you're either insane or incredibly brave," the thin man scoffed.

For the first time since the meeting began, Hancock spoke, and of course it was to tease me. "I find the two are not mutually exclusive."

Desdemona was smiling now. I could hear the gears in her head turning. "I do believe we have ourselves a symbiotic partnership. You're going to be the first outsider to ever see the Railroad headquarters. I trust I do not need to impress upon you the urgent secrecy of its location?"

I nodded, following her into the hole in the wall. The Railroad HQ was built into the old crypt underneath the Old North Church. They had set up shop around skeletons and sarcophagi. I even found a mattress inside of an opened one. Quite the gothic setting. In the center was a round dias on which lay a map, some candles for light, and beer bottles. I guess they liked to get smashed during their debriefings. Desdemona introduced the heavy gunner as Glory and the wispy man as Drummer Boy. Everyone seemed to have some kind of code name. I doubt that Desdemona and Deacon were their real names. We explained our case over lukewarm bottles of Nuka-cola and beer.

"Teleportation, huh? That explains a lot." Desdemona took a drag from her cigarette.

"Hey Dez," Deacon spoke up. "I think I might actually have a plan."

"You say that like you don't always come up with ingenious ideas." She gestured for him to continue.

He leaned on the stone table. "Searching for a Courser outright is difficult, because they only come
to the surface for as long as is needed to complete their mission. So instead, we go after what they're hunting."

I could see the light go off above her head like in a cartoon. "Runaway synths. You're suggesting we use one as bait, put them in danger."

"Not anymore than they already would have been. One of the newer packages. We maybe go down one of the less safe routes, and then we ambush the guy."

She frowned. "I don't know, Deacon. These runaways, they're putting their entire lives in our hands. We need to take that responsibility seriously."

"We are, and they will be more protected on this trip than they would normally."

She hummed in thought. "All right, we'll do it." Then she looked up at me. "If we're going to work together, we're going to need to work out some sort of deal."

"You mean we don't have one already? I kill a Courser and you have one less problem off your backs?"

"We're also going to help you analyze the chip and build the necessary transporter. If we're going to do all of this, I'm going to need you to be my eyes and ears in the Institute. No one's ever been inside before and come back out. Any information you could get me would be invaluable."

I heard what all of us weren't saying: *if I come back.* I was trying not to think that far ahead. "You've got a deal."

She nodded. "Good. Now, if you're going to be working with us, you'll all need codenames. Best to keep such celebrities secret, you understand."

Ooh, now this really felt like those spy novels. "Do we get to pick?"

She shrugged. "Sure."

"This is everyone's favorite part," Deacon grinned.

Hmmm, what to be. "Hancock, I think you should be Equalizer."

"Really? I was thinking Ultrajet Nuke'em."

"That's a terrible name. Way too long."

"I don't care about codenames. Just call me Nick."

"Oh come on, Nick. You're no fun. How about Tin Man?"

"Really? That's the best you could come up with?"

"I think it fits. You know, with the heart and all."

"What about you?"

I tapped my chin a bit in thought. A name came to me, it was in poor taste but I found the joke infinitely hilarious. "I'll be Hera." I gave Zeus on my back a little affectionate pat, before looking down at Dogmeat. "Which means you'll have to be Cerberus."
"Those are some interesting names, but they'll do." Desdemona tapped the map. "Now, let's get to business..."

It all went wrong. We "lost" the synth, a young woman, old enough to marry but young enough to look fragile. She ran inside the Greentech building, but then Gunners showed up, and then it became a three-way fight between the Gunners, the Railroad and the invisible Courser, an army all on his own. Someone had activated the building's security protocols, and now Protectrons and turrets were shooting at everyone. The building was chaos. We fought through to the top floor, where the girl had gotten captured by the Gunners, no clue what they wanted her for, probably only because she was wanted by others. Deacon told me he and the Railroad agents would hold off the rest of the Gunners, yelled it really, over the sound of gunfire. We were tired but ready for a fight.

That had only been five minutes ago. How could it go from that, to Nick lying on the ground, his leg a mess of wires and screws, a mess no stimpak could fix; to Dogmeat limping on a bloody stump with a pitiful whine; to Hancock, oh god, Hancock, who had just the other night held me so close, called me beautiful, lying in a pool of his own blood, fingers twitching, mouth still open to call out "Stealth Boy! Bastard's using a Stealth Boy!" I could see him digging for a stimpak, past the black leather shoulder of the Courser. The very same Courser from Kellogg's memories.

His face remained neutral the entire time, even as the invisibility fell off of him like a cloak, and he rammed his fist into my gut. I fell to my knees, hacking and clutching my stomach even as my mind screamed at me to grab my knife, any weapon to defend myself. I couldn't move, ever since the sword dropped by one of the Gunners was picked up and rammed straight through Hancock's back and out his front. Only seeing him move to reach for a stimpak knocked me into motion.

I whipped out the .44 pistol with just enough time to take aim from my position on the ground before it was kicked painfully out of my hand by a black boot. In retaliation, I received a swift kick to the face that knocked me on my back. The Courser stood over me, blank faced. He pulled out his laser pistol, for the first time, bastard hadn't even used his own weapon, and shot my foot. The pain was so great I cried out, tears falling from my eyes even as I tried to bend forward to clutch at the burnt hole. I was pushed back down by a dirty boot on my chest, sinking down on my ribs as the Courser leaned his weight on me to look at my face.

"You're not ready yet. You need more conviction." He spoke as if he were reading a manual. And then he left.

The relief when he finally stepped off of me was so intense that I thought my body might collapse in on itself. Instead, I bucked up enough to crawl over to Hancock, even as all of my nerve endings were on fire. I had run out of stimpaks before I'd even made it into this room. I considered Med-X, briefly, but the sound of my father's voice stopped that thought.

Hancock, on the other hand, was no longer moving, hand still over an unused stimpak. The fear tugged me forward, despite the pain that held me back. "Hancock, oh god, no, not now, not now." My trembling hands fumbled with the syringe before I firmly grasped it. "Not now, dammit!" I turned his shoulder enough to expose that little bit of chest under his ruffle collar, and then slammed the syringe in. It was probably too close to the heart, and not gentle, but I'd be damned if I let this man die.
While the stimpak worked its magic, I clutched onto him like I used to clutch onto my grandfather's pant leg when I thought a monster was in my closet. "Hancock, don't leave me. Please, don't leave me."

Waking up to thinly veiled arguments was not new to me: the strain in the voices as they tried to keep from shouting, the heavy stench of frustration and anger. The taste of animosity was pleasantly absent though. This was just stress, not true hatred.

"Rise and shine, sleeping beauty."

My eyes obeyed, flitting open instantly. The sight of Hancock smiling over me, haloed by the light of a lantern behind him, I wondered minutely if I had died and gone to heaven. The painful tremors in my body told me otherwise. I knew this feeling. The ghost of pain that stimpaks couldn't cure. "Hancock, you're alive."

"No thanks to you," he chuckled. "You kept holding on to me so tight, they had to wait until you passed out from the pain to see to my wounds. The stimpak helped, though."

I smiled up at him. He petted my forehead sweetly, brushing hair out of my eyes. The roughness of his skin felt nice. I moved to grab his hand, to kiss it, but pain shot up my leg with the movement.

Hancock's keen eyes locked onto the hiss that escaped my mouth. "Still feeling the aftershocks? You used our last stimpak on me, so you were only healed not too long ago. I got something for the pain."

He held up a familiar syringe with glowing purple liquid inside.

I cringed as if he had slapped me, shaking my head furiously.

Hancock frowned. "Seriously? You won't become addicted from just this one use."

Still I refused emphatically.

He sighed, setting the syringe down on a surgical tray by my bedside. "You'd rather be in pain, than even use just the once? You did before." His eyes told me that he knew why, but he still smiled fondly. "Stubborn ass."

"Takes one to know one," I croaked, my throat had a familiar soreness to it. Must have cried the whole time, then.

"Hey, you like my ass."

"True."

Our moment was punctuated by a particularly loud yell coming from beyond the doorway. That sounded like Deacon.

Hancock must have caught my confused expression, because he explained, "We're in a Railroad safehouse. It was the closest place with medical supplies." He flicked his gaze to the door briefly before looking back to me. "Desdemona blames Deacon. We lost the synth, and the Courser kicked
our asses. We took out the Gunners, though."

"It's not his fault. It's mine. I failed to kill the Courser."

"I think we're remembering a different fight. I remember there being four of us, counting the dog, against one synth."

"Oh right. Where's Dogmeat? Nick? Is he...?"

Hancock waved away my worries before I could voice them. "They're both fine. Tinker Tom managed to fix Nick up, and all Dogmeat needed was a good stimpak. I swear, that dog has got to be mutated or something. He's one tough mutt."

I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. "Good."

The argument outside had died down. Hopefully that would be the end of it. I dreaded having to face Desdemona. Hancock may say that she blamed Deacon, but I was the outsider, barging in and endangering her organization.

I looked up at the ghoul, my ghoul, and tried to sit up, even though my body felt like it was recovering from electrocution. "What do we do now? I doubt this trick will work again."

"For now," Hancock pushed me back down with a single finger, "you rest. And then, when you're better, we're going to have some awesome 'you almost died' sex. Then we'll figure it out from there."

"You know, you're not actually a member of the Railroad. You don't have to do this." Deacon was now wearing a dirty fleece jacket with a threadbare scarf and a flat cap on his now bald head. Still those sunglasses though. The man was apparently a master of disguise. ("You just change clothes and a wig, and suddenly people don't recognize you?" "Worked on you, didn't it?") How long had this man been tracking me? Every settler, every drifter, every Diamond city resident was suddenly suspect. It left a feeling like ants under my skin. Was this how people felt about the Institute?

"The mission was a failure because of me. You guys lost a synth."

"The mission, if you remember, was my idea."

"Still, I failed to execute it properly."

Hancock held up a hand to stop Deacon, the other one wrapped around my neck in an affable gesture. Ever since that night --our date-- he had gotten a lot more tactile in displaying his affection. Nothing untoward, but it still left my heart racing. "You should stop there, my man. She'll just keep going in an infinite loop of guilt."

"It's a shame you didn't bring Nick with you though," Deacon sighed wistfully. "It would have been funny to see the old man's face when we waltz into Bunker Hill with a gen 2 synth."

I didn't know who this old man was. I didn't know a lot about what we were doing, a necessity that
came along with these missions as Deacon told me. "Strategic ignorance is what's saved our butts so far."

We had followed the clues left by the dead drop and were now walking through Bunker Hill, a small trading hub built around the old memorial, now full of holes. The place was well fortified though, I'd give them that. Hancock didn't seem to care for the place though. "They pay raiders instead of just shooting them. Where's the sport in that?"

The "old man" turned out to be Old Man Stockton, a normal merchant by day, but a synth smuggler by night. He smiled at us cordially, "Excuse me, do you have a geiger counter?"

"Mine is in the shop," Deacon replied.

Stockton explained his problem, a "package" had been in his possession for too long, made things dangerous and he needed to ship it along, but the meeting point had become a resting stop for raiders. So we needed to clear the place out, make it safe for the new agent to pick up the package and take it to a safe house. "I'm to do my delivery tonight, so if you could clear the place before dawn..."

"Consider it done," I nodded. Killing raiders was old hat for me by now.

He smiled, and then the conversation was over.

We stepped off to convene. "There's still a little time before sunset," Deacon noted, looking at the short shadows. "This is a trading hub, so why not stock up on some supplies while we're here. I got something I need to check on, so how about we meet up outside the gates by sunset?"

"Sure."

Deacon waved off, and then it was just me, Hancock, and Dogmeat. "Deacon's got a point. I'm running low on Mentats."

I made a face that he just laughed at.

"Someone around here's gotta sell chems, after that, we can get a drink. I thought I saw a bar earlier."

"Of course there's a bar," I rolled my eyes at him. "It's not civilization without a watering hole."

"Ain't that the damn truth." His eyes roamed the caravans, spotting one that must have looked particularly shady or something. "I'll be back in a jiff." He patted my shoulder and then strolled away.

Hancock had gotten a little more tactful about his chem usage lately. When we first met, he liked to shove it in my face, unashamed. But now, he didn't bring it up much, or spoke in code phrase. Funny enough, it didn't bother me much anymore. One time, I had found him so high, he didn't even recognize me when I walked into the room, but he had been so happy, giggling. Everything left him gasping in wonder.

"You have light pouring out of your head." He touched my hair reverently, fingertips just barely grazing the strands. "Like sunshine waterfalls. Damn, you are so beautiful."

I blushed, pulling his hands from my head. "How much did you take, Hancock?"

"It's almost more than I can take," he whispered. I wasn't sure if he was referring to whatever hallucinations he was having about my hair or the chems. "It's so amazing, I feel like it's burning me up inside, but it don't hurt, ya know? You're so warm. You're full of radiation and...and...just kapow!"
"Ya know?"

I smiled wryly. "You're the one with radiation damage here."

He looked down at his hands, newly released from my fingers, as if he had never seen them before in his life. "Woah, man. Corpsey. Copsey. Copy. What am I?"

"You're a ghoul, Hancock."

"You're right. I am. When did that happen?"

"I dunno. Sometime before you met me."

He looked up at me, eyes impossibly wide. "What if I was always a ghoul? Ya know, on the inside, and I had to burn the outside to let it out? Burn my human suit."

"I..." I didn't know what to say to that. He grabbed my hands this time, smiling at me with a dopey smile. "You burn me up, Sunshine."

Honestly, he was a sweet, snuggly little teddy bear when he got high. I heard that different chems made you do different things. I noticed that he never took Psycho or Buffout, generally sticking to Jet and Mentats. People acted differently when they were drunk too. I still didn't care for drugs, didn't want to think about the hypocrisy of it all when I drank, didn't think about my mom when I looked into a glass of vodka. Hancock didn't act like an addict, didn't twitch, and I doubted he would ever turn his back on a friend just for another high. He acted like a man who enjoyed the finer pleasures in life. So no, I didn't mind his chem habit as much as I probably should.

While waiting on Hancock, I gazed around the covered market with a lazy interest. I startled when it rested on a ghoul dressed in combat armor and a leather cap, real mercenary type. You didn't see many ghouls living next to humans outside of Goodneighbor. I couldn't contain my curiosity, so I walked up to him. When he turned red-rimmed eyes to me, I realised I didn't know what to say.

"You looking for a job?" He asked me in a raspy voice.

What the hell, let's play along. "Yeah."

"Can you handle yourself in a fight?"

I tried hard not to think about naked wires and a bloody hand reaching for a stimpak. "Yeah, I can."

"You said that with confidence, but not boasting. My boss is in need of some strong arms to do a little work. Always looking to hire more."

"Oh? Sounds dangerous, if you're always running out of new guns."

He smiled. "Quick-witted. Good. It'll keep you alive. I can't get into the details of the job here, so if you're interested, head up to Cabot house and ask for Jack. That's my employer. Oh, and I'm Edward Deegan, by the way." He shook my hand, firm but not squeezing it in some kind of competition.

"Susan Quinn. Nice to meet you. I'm doing business right now, but I'll show up later."

"Understood." He nodded, and then waved goodbye before walking off.

I hadn't exactly started that conversation expecting a job, but hey, money is money. A heavy weight leaning against my side and a red-clad arm over my shoulder alerted me to Hancock's return. "I leave you for two seconds, and I already find you chatting up some guy. You know, I'm starting to think
you have a type."

I flushed. "It's not like that. He offered me a job."

"That dirty old man."

"Not like that! A job where I shoot things."

He laughed at my face, pinching my nose in between his thumb and forefinger. "Damn, you are so much fun to tease. Come on, let's go grab a drink." He pulled off his weight, pausing momentarily as an idea came to him. "Here, I got some more stimpaks. Can never have enough, you know."

The small victory celebration at Railroad HQ was dented by Nick's petulant frown. He didn't appreciate being ordered to stay put, but I still couldn't get the sight of him lying in pieces on the floor like a broken toy out of my head. He pulled me aside while the Railroad agents allowed themselves a small drink. They did this after every successful mission, I was told. If you didn't take time to celebrate the good things, it would only ever seem like a losing battle.

Nick, however, frowned, his tie loose and askew. "You should have taken me along with you."

"It was a covert mission, too many people would have garnered unwanted attention. Besides, we took care of everything, no problem."

"What's the point of dragging me here then? I told you, I'm completely fixed, good as new. I don't need time to heal like a human."

Stray wires, a small screw, a loose bolt, metal limbs bent at wrong angles. "Sometimes, I want to protect you too."

He smiled at me, soft and fond, a look I had seen before on Papa's face when I was being endearingly unreasonable. "Just take me with you next time."

"There's not going to be a next time, actually. I've paid the Railroad back, synth for synth."

"What about the Courser? Are you not going to try again?"

I frowned, turning away. "I don't know if we could so easily lure another one with the same trick. And even if we could... We were slaughtered, Nick. I don't think we're ready yet."

"Ok, then what are we going to do?"

"I am going to look into a new job I got. You're going to go back to Diamond City."

That went over about as well as I could imagine. "Like hell I am. You're not going to just brush me off so easily, Susan Quinn. I'm not some wind-up toy that you can just pick up and discard whenever you feel like it."
Lying on the ground, like a broken toy. No never, like that. "Nick, that's not fair. This isn't even related to my case."

"I thought I made it very clear that I wasn't sticking around you because of my job."

I paused, heart lifting with a swell of love for this robotic man at the same time that my stomach fell to the ground, weighed by guilt. "Nick..."

"This is a new job, right? Well, you still have the old one I gave you."

"That's sneaky. You said I could take as long as I needed."

"Yeah, and you said we were friends."

He was really playing dirty. "Fine, we'll go find the Winter tapes, and you can come with."

"Thank you."

Pouting, I left P.A.M.'s room, to return to the festivities, only to find Hancock leaning against the wall, not even trying to hide the fact that he had been eavesdropping.

"So I take it our plans have changed?"

"He wasn't playing fair."

"I understand how he feels, not wanting to be abandoned by you."

"I wasn't abandoning him," I snapped.

"You're not going to protect him by keeping him away from you like that. You can't save him from the Commonwealth."

"This Winter guy sounds like a real asshole," Hancock said as I popped the holotape out of my pip-boy. Each one had been a message to different people, incriminating evidence for sure, but it didn't escape my notice that he mentioned a number in passing in each one.

"He's a crime boss. What'd you expect?"

We were standing in the Evidence Room, once locked, looting a lot of confiscated ammunition (to my glee) and drugs (to Hancock's glee), listening to the Winters holotape as we worked. Curiously, I found another holotape in here. I popped it into my pip-boy. It was always interesting to learn of all these things that had happened before the war.

"Detective Valentine. Nick. Listen... I'm sorry."

We all stopped dead in our tracks, and looked at Nick. The synth was completely still, but he didn't look surprised. Yellow eyes focused on my pip-boy.
"You've got every right to be upset, but you need to believe me when I tell you I had no idea. Operation Winter's End was my baby. I believed in it. I still believe in it. They kept us all in the dark, me included. I got briefed this afternoon, and they laid it all out. The whole thing. Winter's deal with the DA. His agreement to bring down the other families. His idea to record the holotapes and incriminate all known associates. And them needing a legitimate op, and a real task force, to make it all look like Winter was the focus. It was the plan all along, Nick. There's nothing we can do. Winter was a stoolie for the feds. He reported directly to the BADTFL. All on the books. For his cooperation, Winter will be granted total immunity. It's over.

"Effective immediately, Operation Winter's End is to cease all investigations and operations. The task force is hereby disbanded. We played our part, pal. Not the part we thought, but hey. It happens."

So that's what happened with Eddie Winter. I had thought that the investigation was interrupted by the bombs, but it turns out that it had all been some con. Nick Valentine had struggled, had lost, all for a sham.

"Nick, listen to me. Everything that's happened. With Winter. With... Jenny. It's more than any one man should have to handle. You need help. Boston PD has been working with the eggheads at C.I.T. Some new program they have to deal with trauma. Scanning brainwaves or some such. I'll get you the info. You're going. That's an order."

The tape ended, popping up from my pip-boy, the sound loud in the heavy silence. So that's how a normal detective came to be a synth in the future. This was too personal. I should have stopped the tape the minute I heard his name. "Nick..."

"It's alright." He knew what I was trying to apologize for. "This was nothing you guys didn't already know."

Still...

Hancock put a brotherly hand on Nick's shoulder. "Just think about how good it will feel when you finally get to kill that bastard."

"Oh Hancock. You always know just what to say."

"So," I changed the topic. "We've been all over the Commonwealth looking for these tapes. How many do we have left?"

"We've still got one more."

Hancock scratched his chin. "Really? I thought we had been in every police station on the East Coast."

I felt sick. "No, there's one we haven't been to. One I was hoping we wouldn't need to go to."

Hancock looked right at me, frowning. "Oh? We're going to need this then."

"Hancock, no! Put the mini nuke down!"
"You've got some nerve, coming back here, and this time with a synth," Paladin Danse would have growled if it was allowed in protocol. As it was, his tone, while disapproving, was still formal, as his face couldn't contain his disgust. "A freak and an Institute spy. The Commonwealth will rue the day you woke up from your frozen slumber."

"And yet, people still like me more." It was a good thing all of the soldiers around the base stood with their guns ready, or I might have done something stupid like punch Danse in the face. I can't believe I ever thought he was anything like Nate. He wouldn't have been such a colossal asshole.

"Give me one good reason why my men shouldn't gun you down," Danse threatened, eyes steely. I wasn't affected in the least. "Ugh, you're too emotional. Let me talk to Scribe Haylen."

"I'm the officer in charge of this outfit, and if you're going to--"

"Sorry, I'm late!" Speak of the devil. The young scribe was jogging past armored soldiers, smile on her face. "No one told me what the commotion was about."

"Scribe," Danse regarded her coldly. "I have the situation under control, return to your--"

"No, you don't. You're just going to start a fight, like last time." She put her hands on her hips. "Hi, Susie. Good to see you."

"Is it?" I asked without malice. She didn't seem as friendly as last time.

"Look, I know our paths have gone different ways, but we're not enemies here. Fighting helps no one."

"I'm glad I can talk to someone reasonable." Danse sputtered, but I ignored him. "Look, we didn't come here to start trouble with the Brotherhood. We're looking for a holotape, pre-war. We believe it's inside this building. That's all we want. We don't even have to go inside the building, if you could bring it out for us."

"You can come inside, but just you," she looked at Nick warily. "Oh, and Dogmeat too, of course."

"You hear that, Nick?" Hancock said too loudly to the synth detective beside him. "We're lower than dogs in their eyes."

I shot him a glare. Not helping, Hancock.

He shrugged back, uncaring.

"You two stay here. I'll take Dogmeat inside, find the tape and get out." I turned to Nick. "I'm trusting you to keep him in line. I'd hate to come back to a bunch of dead soldiers."

Danse looked like he wanted to disagree with that prediction, but wisely remained quiet.

"Will do, Susie." He nodded.

I stepped up to Haylen, feeling the distance between me and my companions keenly.

Dogmeat trotted up to the scribe to affectionately receive pets and squealing. "Oh, Dogmeat, how are you, boy? You're still so cute." Seems I was beneath the dog too.
The Brotherhood soldiers eyed me warily, but allowed me to pass, escorted by their paladin who was escorted by a mere scribe. I'd never stop wondering over how much sway Haylen had over Danse. Those two had to be an item. He acted so whipped around her. We passed through the lobby and she led us to a small office to the left of the entrance. It was empty except for a dusty desk and broken shelves with mostly burnt books and folders.

"You two can wait here," Haylen said to both of our surprise. "I'll go check inventory for this holotape. You two play nice until I get back." Before either of us could protest, she closed the door with an audible click of the lock sliding into place. I noted that Dogmeat was on her side of the door. The woman was craftier than I gave her credit for. Was this all some sort of ploy to spend some alone time with my dog?

"What's the point of allowing me inside if I'm just going to be locked up here?" I folded my arms across my chest.

Paladin Danse looked just as pleased with this outcome as I was. "I do believe this is Scribe Haylen's ploy to get us to 'make up' or something to that effect. She's a bleeding heart, like that."

I snorted, sitting on top of the desk instead of properly in the wooden chair just because I knew it would tick him off. "I don't know what talking's going to change. Your organization wants to kill all of my friends." For a terrifying moment, I wondered if I had been locked in here so that they could execute Hancock and Nick, but I didn't hear any laserfire through the broken windows.

"And yet twice now I have let you bring that abomination to my compound unharmed. And now a synth."

"Good for you. Do you want a fucking medal?"

"There's no need for that kind of language, civilian."

"Stop calling me that. I have a name."

"Mrs. Quinn."

"Don't call me that, either. Just call me Susie. Not Susan. Sounds too much like my mother."

Danse sighed, as if put upon. "You are very demanding."

"All I ask is that you treat me like a human being and stop trying to kill my boyfriend." I realized my slip too late.

Danse's eyes widened comically, while his face remained blank. "You actually engaged in intercourse with that corpse?"

"Careful, Danse, you almost sound jealous."

"I am not jealous of that freak."

"I meant of me."

Danse couldn't look any more disgusted. "I can't believe the same woman who had nightmares about ferals could sleep with one."

"He's not feral, dammit, and what the hell are you talking about? What nightmares?"

He froze, like he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He cleared his throat, looking at
the filing cabinet past my shoulder. "When we first met, er, and you slept the night here, you had a fit in your sleep. You talked, a lot. You kept screaming about the ferals and crying, I had Scribe Haylen sedate you."

No wonder I had slept so well. "Why is this the first I'm hearing of it?"

"Would you have appreciated the information? When you came here, you looked like you were about to break." I remembered the embarrassingly weepy display I had made with shame. He sighed, shifting in his power armor so that it clanked loudly. "Look, Susie, I hold no ill will towards you. I disapprove of your choice of company, and I wish that I had pushed you to join the Brotherhood more, and then maybe you wouldn't have fallen down the wrong path, but I have no desire to pick these fights with you." Wow, how amazingly condescending. "Let me give you a word of advice: leave the ghoul. It can only end in suffering."

"I never was very good at listening to other people's advice."

To my utter relief, Hancock and Nick were still standing outside the compound when I returned. Dogmeat trailed behind me, tail stuck between his legs. The traitor knew what he had done, running off to the first pair of pretty eyes and dexterous hands, leaving me all alone with the annoying soldier.

"So, how'd it go?" Nick asked.

I held up a small orange holotape with a bitter grin. "We should have brought the mini nuke."

"That bad, huh?"

I glanced over my shoulder, Danse was still there, on the steps, watching us. Before I even had time to question what I was doing, I grabbed a fistful of red frock coat and pulled Hancock in for a steamy kiss. Lots of tongue. When I eventually released him, he stood next to me, panting.

"Baby, you keep on like that and the Brotherhood's gonna have a real show on their hands."

I briefly considered it, but I think Danse got my point.

"Well, that's one way to get the coolant pumping," Nick said awkwardly.

With a blush, I realized that I had forgotten about him when I pulled that stunt. Now I felt embarrassed, and I wanted to hide my face in Hancock's chest, but I couldn't show weakness in front of those guys after pulling a stunt like that. "Come on, let's go." I started walking, before I even realized that I had no idea where Eddie Winter's hideout was. I turned to Nick. "Which direction?"

He pointed in the opposite direction of which I had been walking. "Oh. Right."

None of us truly relaxed until Cambridge was a blip on the horizon. Despite my conversation with Paladin Danse, I knew it was risky to bring those two there, but they wouldn't let me go alone. The sun had set, and the stress from dealing with the Brotherhood was starting to take its toll. My feet grew sluggish and my eyes heavy, even as I gazed up at the stars. So many of them, I don't know if I'd ever get used to that sight.

"Hey, it's getting late, we should set up camp," Hancock suggested.
Nick turned back to him with an annoyed frown. "What? Now? But we're almost there."

"Don't worry, Winter will still be there in the morning. If he hasn't left his hiding hole yet, he's not going to now. And you and I may not need sleep, but some of us are looking a bit peaky."

All sets of eyes were now on me. "Don't worry about me. I can keep going. Not the first time I've pulled an all-nighter." At Hancock's perverted grin, I clarified, "as a college student cramming for exams."

"We could all use the rest," Hancock continued. "Besides, I'm feeling peckish. What do we got that ain't cram?"

Nick relented, and we built a fire outside of an abandoned house. The second story roof had caved in, but the first floor was still fine. We had a dinner of pork 'n' beans, cooked right in the can. After that, Hancock let me take the couch, the lone piece of furniture that had survived. He sat on the floor, leaning against the couch, so that his head rested on my stomach. Nick had gone off into one of the other rooms to brood, most likely. I don't know what he did while others slept. Now that I was horizontal, I did feel quite tired.

"You're too good to me, Hancock," I mumbled, but in the quiet of the night, I knew he heard me.

"I like to take care of pretty things."

I chuckled sleepily. "Charmer." I hmmed for a moment, Hancock's lips quirking at the vibration. "You know, I bet you would have made a great dad."

I couldn't see from my angle, but I could tell he was pulling a face. "Dear god, can you imagine? Me? In charge of some kid?"

"That's what I had thought." Still do, honestly.

There was a moment of silence, before Hancock spoke, choosing his words carefully. "Hey, Susie, if we get...I mean, when we get your son back, what will you do?"

The question caused my heart to shrivel in terror.

"Look, I know how you felt about having a kid. I heard the tape, and no judgement here. I feel ya. But do you ever wonder if, maybe in the future, you might want to raise a kid?"

He didn't know how tough that question was. "I...I don't know. I can't just leave Shaun alone. I might not have been there for his younger years, but he's still just a kid."

"That doesn't matter. What he wants, doesn't matter. Let's just pretend he was never yours. He's just some kid that got kidnapped. What would you do?"

I knew the correct answer, the one I should say. Instead, I said, "I'd probably foist him off on someone else. I don't... I don't think I'll ever want kids. It's probably me just subconsciously rebelling against my parents still, but...I decided that I was going to start over now. Live my life the way I want to, no holding back." Burn away my human suit. "I can't keep letting the old world drag me down." A pause. "Why do you ask? Do you...want kids?" Hancock couldn't sire children, biologically, but adoption was always an option, especially in this terrible world.

He snorted. "Hell no. You can't bring chems around kids, and I'm not giving up chems." A joke to hide the real reason, the weakness he saw inside himself. I could guess, and so I let him have his laugh.
Silence fell upon us again, longer this time. So long, that I almost fell asleep before Hancock spoke once more, lifting my eyes with his words. "You know, if we figure out how to turn you ghoul, we could do this thing long term."

"He's a ghoul. You're human. That's not something you can do long term."

"Hancock--"

He put a finger to my lips. "Just something to think about."

Chapter End Notes

The Algonquin Club actually exists. It's on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston.

For the purposes of storyline, one of the holotapes is inside Cambridge police station.
The Devil's Tongue

Chapter Summary

The secret of Cabot House is revealed, and the truth just might break Hancock and Susie apart.

Chapter Notes

Last chapter of Act 1. And look, more sex! This time towards the beginning of the chapter instead of the end. Hurray!

Eddie Winter made a pretty ugly ghoul, although he still had a full head of hair. Maybe it was because he went through an experiment instead of the natural way? Didn't seem fair. At our sudden entrance, the man leapt out of his chair, ready for anything, or so he thought.

"Who the fuck are you guys? How'd you get in here?" He paused, the nasty little cogs of his brain turning. "Wait a minute, don't tell me. You cracked my code? Only took, what, 200 years?" He laughed.

This guy sure liked to hear himself talk, didn't he? "You're Eddie Winter, right?"

"Obviously. Who's askin'? You know, you're pretty easy on the eyes. Beautiful doll like you needs to be dressed up in the finest rocks. It's awful lonely in this bunker."

A possessive arm around my shoulder and Hancock rested his chin on my other shoulder, speaking in that delicious growl that tickled my spine. "She's spoken for, bub."

No, Susie, it would be inappropriate to make out with him right now.

Eddie didn't look as offended as Hancock wanted him to be. "Hey, you look just like me. Did you go through Hodge's experiment too?"

"Not exactly. Tell me more about this experiment."

"I don't have to tell you nothin', pal. So how about you goons get the fuck outta my bunker?"

Nick stepped forward. "I'm not going anywhere until I get what I came for."

"And what's that, huh? And who are you? Or what are you? Some kind of robot? Is that what it looks like out there? A world ruled by robot overlords? I knew it."

"The name's Valentine. Nick Valentine. Remember me?"

"Sorry, pal, but you ain't Nick Valentine. You're just some kind of...machine."
"You killed my fiancee, Jennifer Lands. There are some crimes even you can't get away with, Winter." I had never seen Nick look so pissed, so full of righteous fury. Really put a whole new meaning on the phrase "grinds my gears."

"Your fiancee? You mean Nick Valentine's fiancee. Sweet girl. Shame what happened to her." He didn't look like it was a shame at all. "But hey, you know, the real Valentine should have backed off when he had the chance. So what gives, Robo guy? Why do you even care about some girl that got whacked 200 hundred years ago? Christ, you're not even alive."

"That makes two of us," Nick grit out before he shot Eddie Winter twice in the head. He slumped to the ground, dead.

"Hey," Hancock protested halfheartedly. "I was going to interrogate him."

"About what? The experiment? You heard him, he wasn't going to spill. Besides, all of that happened 200 years ago. I doubt there's anything useful left."

"I dunno. Could have found out something interesting."

"Why?" Nick tilted his head in the same way Dogmeat does when he doesn't understand. "You don't think it's related to the drug that turned you into a ghoul, do you?"

"There can't be that many radiation experiments that turn people into ghouls."
Nick hmmed, or maybe that was just the sound of his inner machinery. "Feel free to look around the place for any clues. There's still something I've got to do." He looked at me. "I wouldn't mind the company if you want to tag along."

I looked back to Hancock. "Go," he waved me off. "I wanna look around the place. I'll catch up."

With a nod and a last look at the ghoul, I followed Nick outside, passing the corpses of the raiders we had fought to get through Andrew Station. We stopped outside of an old diner. He knelt on the ground, hand on a patch of broken concrete. "In this spot, 200 years ago, one of Eddie's boys put a bullet in Jenny Lands' back. Now Eddie's as dead as Jenny and Nick. And I...I'm at a loss." He stood up, staring out over the river. "Winter was the last proof outside of some long lost Institute archive that I'm just a mechanical copy of some cop from a bygone era. I'm not sure how to feel."

I could relate. I was still processing that holotape from my mother's corpse. The same corpse I shot down. "It's a good thing, though, isn't it? You can put the past behind you. Move forward."

"If only it were that easy."

"You're telling me." I chuckled lightly, Nick joining in.

"Some part of me had been holding back, I think. I mean, I waited a hundred years before I finally had the gumption to track him down. Meeting you is what gave me that final push."

"Me?" I had never inspired anyone to do anything.

He nodded, smiling. "You came out into this horrible world like a newborn baby. I thought I had to protect you, shelter you, but when I wasn't looking, somehow you grew up. Even when I saw your struggles, the past haunting you like an evil poltergeist, you got tough, took charge of your life. If you don't like something, then you change it. It's a quality in you that I've always admired."

Was he really describing me? This sounded like some kind of Wonder Woman, not the scared widow who couldn't even love her own son.
"Of course, I was too afraid to tackle it on my own, so I asked for your help. I guess I just wanted someone to witness."

"Hey," I put my hand on his arm. "There's nothing wrong with wanting companionship. We're your friends, Nick. I'll always be there for you when you need me. Just like you have for me."

He smiled warmly. "Didn't anyone tell you not to make promises you can't keep?" He shook his head. "Having you with me, traveling with you, it's made me realize something. Taking down Winter, it wasn't about Jenny or Nick, or even you or me. It was about justice, about doing what's right." I could swear his eyes glowed just a little brighter. "All the good we've done, that's ours and ours alone. Even if that's the only thing in this world that I can ever claim as mine, not Nick's, not the Institute's, but mine, then I can die happy."

I've never seen him speak with such passion before. How could anyone looking at him right now and not think he's human? "You're right, Nick. You're damn right." I couldn't resist squeezing him in a tight hug. "Is it weird if I feel proud of you right now?"

"I know the feeling." His metal hand patted my head paternally.

"Ah, man. I almost missed the good part!" Suddenly, both Nick and I were enveloped in long ghoul arms. I could hear Dogmeat barking happily around us, but crushed as I was between two taller chests, I couldn't see where he was. "Man, this is so good. We should do group hugs more often."

Nick laughed, lips moving against Hancock's bald temple. "You're going soft, Hancock."

"Hey, nothing wrong with a little softness."

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We stopped by Diamond City to drop Nick off. As much as he wanted to continue traveling with me, mercenary work wasn't his cup of tea. This time, he didn't fight it.

"Go do some good. Go do some justice."

"Yeah, we'll just be over here raking in the caps."

Of course, this time, Hancock couldn't come inside with us. He took it in stride, waved off and said he'd be waiting at Goodneighbor. I still felt like I was abandoning him. We should start keeping a stash of power armor nearby for when I want to sneak him in.

Seeing Piper though had been an upside. We sat at Takahashi's, chatting over a hot bowl of noodles and a cold Nuka-cola. I updated her on my life so far, skipping over the more morose bits.

"Ah, you're holding out on me, Blue." She gave me her sly reporter grin. "A little birdie told me that you are fraternizing with the mayor of Goodneighbor."

My face glowed brighter than the neon sign above my head. "Who told you that?"

Piper shook her finger. "Uh-uh. I never reveal my sources."

"It was Fahrenheit, wasn't it? God, I regret you two ever getting together."
"It's a match made in heaven. She knows everything that happens in Goodneighbor, and I have to perform sexual favors in return. Everybody wins."

I tried really hard not to think about Piper and any sexual favors she might have done. How did that even work between two women-- Agh! I needed some Abraxo for my brain.

"In all seriousness though, you do seem happy. Are you happy, Blue?"

I smiled. "Yeah, I am."

And then she had to ruin the moment by adding, "Turns out, all you needed was to get laid."

"Piper!"

When I pushed Hancock onto his back on the rickety mattress, I thought he might fight it. He always liked to tease me, to watch me writhe and squirm, knowing that only he could make me feel this way. Instead, when I told him I wanted to try something different, his eyes sparked not with challenge, but with excitement. I had grabbed his hat and placed it on my head, needing that small boost of courage that it magically seemed to give you. I had always been the passive partner in bed, but Hancock deserved more than that. "I want to make you feel good too."

"Mmm, babe, you always make me feel good." He held onto my hips pushing me down to grind our clothed pelvises together.

I slapped his hands away, even as I moaned at the feeling. "Even when I'm covered in raider blood and blasting a man's head off?"

"Especially then." If that rumble in his throat was anything to go by, then he definitely liked that image.

So that's how I ended up bouncing on his lap, completely naked except for the hat, while Hancock was fully clothed, lying on the mattress and making the most delicious expressions. Every time he tried to lean up or touch me, grab my hips to make me go faster or change the angle, I'd push him back down.

"This is payback for all those times I held you on the edge, isn't it?" His face was contorted in frustration, but his grin was manic.

"What are you talking about? This is a reward. I'm doing all the work up here." And boy, was it a lot of work. My abs were clenching, and the muscles in my thighs were spasming, but this primal lust kept me going.

"Feels like a punishment to me," his tongue darted out to lick nonexistent lips. I loved that tongue. It was rough, like a cat's tongue, and felt really nice on my...well. "Oh, baby girl, have I been a bad boy?"

I couldn't help laughing, having to pause in my motions momentarily. "You kinky bastard. Stop making me laugh. This is hard enough as it is."
"I could always help." He demonstrated by gripping my hips tight, lifting them up just to slam them back down. It tore a cry from my throat. Oh god, it went so much deeper than I ever did and the angle was just right.

I tried to admonish him for helping, I wanted to do this on my own, but all that came out of my mouth was a string of unintelligible syllables that didn't form any words in the English language. I had to lean down on his chest, suddenly feeling too weak.

"I don't think I'll ever get over how beautiful you are. Damn. What did I ever do to deserve someone like you?"

I lifted my head from where it was resting on the white ruffles of his collar. "I ask myself that same question everyday." We kissed, a sloppy wet mess.

It occurred to me then, that this was the third time in a row we had sex with him mostly clothed. There was just something about that coat and hat that drove me wild, but I remembered our conversation from the first time. He might construe this the wrong way. And which is the right way?

So I pushed open his shirt, parted his coat and vest so that they fell to the side. I slid my hands over the gravelly surface of his chest. "You're so handsome. The sexiest man I've ever seen."

"Tell me something I don't know."

Cocky bastard. I leant down dragged my tongue in the valley between his pecs, a spot I knew to be particularly sensitive. His moan was so deep, I could feel it through where we were connected. With renewed vigor, I went back to bouncing in his lap. In the end, I got him to cum twice, but after that, he couldn't lay down idly anymore, and then it was my turn to lay helpless on the bed.

Cabot House was just north of Goodneighbor, and nestled in a neat little square for the exorbitantly wealthy. The place was guarded with Sentry Bots, and if that wasn't a sign to say "rob me" then I don't know what was. Luckily, the bots were not programmed to shoot on sight.

"The pay's gotta be good, just look at this place." Hancock whistled, eyeing the three story mansion, still pristine compared to the other broken houses.

I pressed the button on the intercom, only to receive a grumpy "go away."

"How rude." I tried again.

"I said go away."

"I'm looking for Jack Cabot."

"Oh, it's you. Come on in."

I heard a loud click, and then I opened the front door. If I had thought the outside of the place was nice, the inside was unbelievable. Everything was so pristine and clean, as if the war had never touched this place. Was the house made out of some magical bricks?

Hancock looked impressed too. "Real fancy digs. I better go wipe my boots before I come in."
It wasn't the most opulent manor I've been in before. The place was more remarkable for its cleanliness than anything. There were no pretentious paintings or sculptures, no gold-plated chandeliers, simply a nice home with lots of nice things. And standing in the middle of the foyer, waiting, was Edward Deegan, looking extremely out of place in his combat gear standing amongst all the finery.

"I see you brought a friend. The pay will stay the same. I'm only hiring you."

"We can work out the details later."

Deegan frowned, but let it drop. "Come on. Let's go meet the boss."

He led us to the living room, with its high ceiling and comfy looking sofas. The first thing I noticed upon entering the space was the larger-than-life size portrait of a distinguished older gentleman welcoming me with a calculating stare. He must be the master of the house, or maybe the founder of the family. Behind him stood the wife, a proud arch to her nose and her hair expertly styled like a silver crown on her head. Their clothes looked like something from the 19th century. So must be some important great grandparents or something.

This room, however, had a little bit more of the modernist flare. The chandeliers were rather minimalist and geometric, and on the wall a sunburst clock that had been all the rage 200 years ago. This house must be something inherited. I could see evidence of the fashion changing through the decades. The second story was accessible via a thin set of stairs tucked away by the wall, and I could see the top of an open doorway, though the railings blocked my view of the inside of the room.

"Jack," Deegan called to the upstairs balcony. "New guy's here to see you."

"One moment," the higher toned voice drifted over the balcony and down into the living room. "I just have to--" A flash of light and a sparking noise like someone touched two live wires together.

Deegan looked at us with a put-upon sigh. This must not be a new occurrence. "He'll be right with us."

"No, problem," Hancock waved it off, slinking into an armchair like he owned the place. Of course, everywhere Hancock went he acted like he owned the place.

"Damn. Clearly I need to adjust the mixture..." This Jack Cabot guy had the nasally whine of a nerd, the kind of kid that had pocket protectors and carried extra lunch money just to pay off the bullies. They were the kind of kids that ended up becoming your boss and would always hold your youthful blunders over your head, well into your 50's. When he finally left what must have been his laboratory and met me face to face, his appearance only solidified my impression. He wore a white lab coat with coke-bottle spectacles and the pencil mustache that put him as the brilliant scientist heir to a wealthy fortune. Definitely the kind of guy to hire a bodyguard.

"Welcome to Cabot House. I'm Jack Cabot." He held out a hand for me to shake, and I took it politely.

"I'm Susan Quinn, and my friend back there is John Hancock." Hancock gave a little two finger salute in greeting.

"Ah, the infamous Mayor of Goodneighbor, I have heard of you. Edward finds it tiresome, but I always like to know my employees personally before I hire them. Please, take a seat." He gestured to the couch beside Hancock's armchair. I sat on the left-hand side, closest to Hancock. It felt a little less lonely that way. "Have a drink. Edward, the good bourbon, eh?"
This guy certainly knew how to be hospitable. This all seemed a little too much effort for a simple mercenary job. I settled into the plush cushion, and waited for the other shoe to drop.

Jack took the seat opposite from me. "Alright, now, before we begin, there is one question I must ask."

Deegan, who was pulling out a crystal decanter and pouring the amber liquid into a snifter, looked over at us warily. "Jack..."

"Don't interrupt! The question is this: do you believe there is other intelligent life in the universe?"

I certainly didn't expect the shoe to drop quite like that. "You mean aliens?" I'd never really thought of them outside of the realm of comic books, but... "Yeah, I guess. Why not?"

Beside me, Hancock snorted, and I shushed him with a glare.

"If by 'alien' you mean a non-human precursor to the commonly understood founding cultures -- Sumer, Egypt, Assyria. My father excavated a city in the Rub'al Khali in Arabia which he dated to more than 4,000 years before the rise of any known human civilization." When he spoke, his cheeks flushed and his eyes glittered. I could tell this man was not pulling my leg, that he was truly passionate about this subject. I didn't really know much about ancient history, but this guy was clearly an expert. "The structures were...strange. Clearly not constructed for or by humans. I've spent my life trying to decipher what he uncovered."

"Jack," Deegan interrupted, handing us each a glass of bourbon. "Can I tell her what we need her to do?"

Jack flushed, scratching the back of his neck with an embarrassed chuckle. "I'm sorry, Edward. I just get a little carried away sometimes."

"Oh no, I didn't mind at all," I waved my hands in front of me. "It was fascinating, really. I don't know much about history, but that sounds world-changing."

"Indeed it is." Jack stood up, looking to Edward. "You're going to send her after the missing shipment?"

Deegan nodded.

"Very well then. I'll leave you to it. It was very nice to meet you Ms. Quinn, Mr. Hancock. Welcome to the family." He nodded in goodbye to both of us before he returned upstairs to his lab.

When the doors closed behind him, Deegan remained standing behind the sofa.

Hancock smirked at the other ghoul from where he reclined on the chair. "He's cute when he gets all worked up like that, isn't he?"

"Yeah, he is," Deegan sighed, before he seemed to realize what he was saying and began to cough loudly. "Anyway, congratulations on getting hired. It's best to keep an open mind on this job. Jack may be eccentric, but he's definitely not crazy." He took his own swig of the bourbon, and I could tell from his face that he also found it to be pleasantly smooth. "The job I have for you is simple. Jack owns a...facility...north of the city. There's an important package that went missing between there and here. I need you to track it down and bring it back to me."

"Sounds simple enough, what's the package?"
"It's a metal case with vials of serum. Don't worry about what it is. Jack needs it for his research. That's all you need to know. You should start at Parsons State Insane Asylum. Don't let the name spook you. It's just a secure building that we're using. The courier made it there just fine, but we think he got ambushed on the way back."

That wasn't suspicious at all, but I didn't blame them for withholding some information from a complete stranger. "No offense, but why haven't you gone to look for it?"

"None taken. I need to stay here. I'm Jack's personal bodyguard, and I can't spare any men to go after it. We got hit by raiders a couple weeks back, so I'm kind of low on guns right now. Talk to Maria at Parsons. She's in charge of the security there."

"Alright, we'll be back before you know it." I stood up, and Hancock did too, but not before downing the rest of his glass.

Deegan snorted. "I highly doubt that, but I like your enthusiasm."

With a wave, we were out the door. I checked my pip-boy, and it seemed that Parsons was about 13 miles from here, so it would be a good long walk. Man, I really missed cars. On the plus side, my calves looked amazing.

A chuckle beside me drew my attention to a ghoul who was all too pleased with himself. "What?"

"Those two are totally banging," Hancock answered.

"What? But they're both men!"

He gave me a very unimpressed stare.

"Sorry, I'm still not used to that...being a thing. You really think they are...romantically involved?"

"If they aren't yet, that Deegan guy certainly wants to. I don't blame him. Jack's as bushy-tailed and wide-eyed as you are. I always wanted a pet squirrel. It's too bad they're so damn delicious."

"Please try not to eat me."

Hancock licked his chops noisily. "No promises."

On the way, we stopped by the Slog, a tarberry farm run entirely by ghouls. Everyone was smiling and happy, more sunny than their Goodneighbor counterparts. Hancock was greeted with open arms.

"Heya, Wiseman, how's my favorite buddy doin'?" He held his arms wide open for a hug, which he received, but not without a couple of powerful slaps to the back which knocked the breath out of him.

"Better than you, Mayor," Wiseman cracked, and I wondered briefly if his name wasn't meant as a joke. "Still slummin' it in Goodneighbor?"

"Actually, I've been traveling around lately. What about you? Still 'slogging' it in the pool?"

"You bet your wrinkly ass I am." He finally seemed to notice me and stepped back. "Who's your friend here?"

Now it was my turn to get a side hug. I was used to Hancock throwing his weight on me by now. "This is Susan Quinn, woman extraordinaire. Before you start getting any funny ideas, I already called dibs."
Wiseman snorted, but held out his hand. I shook it with a smile. "Nice to meet you. The name's Wiseman. I run this place."

"Pleasure. What is this place?"

"This is the Slog. I founded this place when Mayor McDonough kicked all the ghouls out of Diamond City. Those that didn't want to go to Goodneighbor, I led here and we started the only tarberry bog in the Commonwealth."

"That's an interesting name. How'd you come up with it?"

"I didn't. The caravan workers did. It had been raining for hours that day, and one of the traders pulls up, and says he's never had to slog through so much mud in his life. I asked him if it was worth it, and he said, for the best tarberries in the whole Commonwealth, it was definitely worth it. Working here's like a slog through the mud. It's tough going, and you'll get dirty, but at the end of the day, it's worth it.

"But what if this place could be more than just a refuge for ghouls who aren't accepted anywhere else? What if it could be an example of what we can do when we put our minds to something and work together? We want this to be a place that everyone looks forward to visiting, with smiling faces, good bargains, and great produce. Maybe we can make people take a second look, you know? Maybe then they'd see we're not monsters."

I couldn't help it. My eyes began to water, and I clasped Wiseman's burned hands in my smooth ones. "I swear I will help you achieve your dream," I croaked.

Beside me, Hancock chuckled under his breath. "I knew she'd get like this," he murmured.

"You're like Hancock's good twin. If there's anything I can do to help you, Wiseman, please don't hesitate to ask."

"Actually," Wiseman looked down at his trapped fingers apprehensively, "there is."

The super mutant camp wasn't too far away. I didn't like fighting them very much, as they didn't go down in a single headshot like humans or ferals. Their thick-corded muscles were practically armor all in themselves. Not to mention one of them was carrying a fucking rocket launcher. That had been fun to dodge. Luckily, Dogmeat worked as a great distraction, while I picked them off from behind cover.

When we had killed them all and were reaping the spoils, Hancock said to me, "You sure do know how to make a man feel jealous."

"What do you mean?" I asked tucking away a plasma rifle. That'd come in handy later for sure.

"I think you have a thing for ghouls. First Kent, then that Deegan guy, and now Wiseman. Starting to think I need to buy a leash."

"Oh please. Kent's my friend, Deegan is, as you say, interested in men, and I just met Wiseman."
"And yet here you are running over the Commonwealth for them."

"Do you have something you need me to do?"

"Well, not exactly..." He looked away. "...Or not yet, I guess. I will when you're ready."

What the hell was that supposed to mean?

When we returned to the Slog, Wiseman was overjoyed at our success. He offered us a place to stay for the night, which I refused. There was still plenty of daylight, and I felt bad about getting sidetracked on the job. I did however, accept the glass of fresh tarberry juice and the chance to relax for a bit. The other residents of the Slog were just as friendly as their leader. They allowed me to explore the place, as small as it was, and no one even blinked an eye when I soaked my feet in the pool they were growing the tarberries in. After all, there were plenty of workers in fishermen's gear checking on the fruit's progress. Hancock had gone off to talk to some more friends of his here. It seemed he knew everyone, though from what Wiseman told me, it seemed like the two of them had led the ghouls out of Diamond City like a hairless Moses.

One ghoul, however, didn't seem to be a farmer. I found him in a small sun room that was so dirty that not much sun got through. He was tinkering with one of those Giddy-Up Buttercup toys. A strange hobby for a grown man. In fact, the man was so engrossed in his work, that he didn't even flinch when I walked into his little makeshift workshop.

"Umm...hello?"

The man dropped his wrench and flicked around to his feet.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to startle you. I was just...looking around."

"No, no, it's not your fault. I got caught up in my work again. Deirdre says I become deaf to the world when I get in the zone. Cute dog you have there. Is he friendly?"

"Oh yeah, he's a big ol' sweetie. You can go ahead and pet him if you want." He looked like he really wanted to.

He knelt down in front of Dogmeat and held his hand out for him to sniff. When his tongue started lolling, the man scratched the dog's fluffy chest, instead of patting his head. Dogmeat seemed to like it, if his tail was anything to go by. He stood up, smiling broadly. "I'm Arlen Glass. It's nice to meet you."

"Susan Quinn. What are you working on?"

He looked back over his shoulder at the pile of parts. "I'm trying to restore this old Giddy-Up Buttercup. It's one of the newer models. Problem is, I'm missing a few parts. They're very specific to this machine, don't exist anywhere else."

"Do you know where any are? Maybe I could go retrieve them for you." I ignored the smug voice in my head that sounded a lot like Hancock.

"Oh, I couldn't ask someone I just met to go do something so dangerous. I had tried to get it on my own once before, and the factory where the parts are made is overrun by super mutants now."

"What is it with you ghouls and your super mutant problems? Don't worry. They'll be no problem. In fact, I just cleaned out a super mutant camp for Wiseman earlier this day."
Arlen looked at me with wide eyes. "Oh wow. Are you some kind of mercenary?"

I smiled. "Just a busybody with good aim and a lot of guns. I really don't mind doing this for you. I'm always traveling all over the place, maybe I'll come across it."

"There's no need to rush or make it your top priority. I don't mind waiting. Golly, you're already doing me a huge favor."

I waved off his thanks. "We Commonwealthers gotta look out for each other, right?"

His smile could power a hundred Giddy-Up Buttercups. "Right."

I left him before I ended up doing something else for the guy. Maybe Hancock was right. Maybe I did have a soft spot for ghouls. I should get a book or something to write all these promises down. I decided to head into the old pool house the workers were using as a kind of dormitory. They had a really comfy looking couch in the common area with my name on it. I was just about to turn through the doorway when I heard a sultry, raspy voice call Hancock's name. I don't know what made me stop, but I found myself frozen against the wall, just in front of the empty doorway, out of sight, but within earshot.

"Hey ya, Hancock, been a long time."

"Hey there, Holly."

"You back for another...tour of the town?" Was that some kind of code everyone used?

"Sorry, I ain't a tourin' ghoul anymore. The one I got ain't the type you go wandering on."

"Boo. What a sad day for the Commonwealth. See ya later, then."

I didn't have time to think of how obvious my positioning was before Hancock strolled out of the building, just inches from my nose. Of course, he noticed me when I leapt back, hands held up like he was the copper called to the scene of my attempted robbery.

"It's not what it looks like. I wasn't eavesdropping. There just didn't seem to be a good time to come in, uh." I put my hands down, feeling like an idiot. "Um, you didn't have to say that, you know. It's not like we promised ourselves to each other or anything."

I didn't expect to be hit with such a cold stare. Did he really not like my eavesdropping that much? "So you would have been totally cool with me taking her up on her offer?"

"Well, no, honestly." But if it was between that and losing Hancock... I would have let it eat me up away inside just to be with him.

"I never once thought of this as an open relationship. Don't tell me you did? Have you been seeing other people on the side?" He grabbed my arm, suddenly looking manic. "Tell me who, and I'll kill 'em. I'll gut every single bastard that's ever touched you."

"What? No, of course not!" That grip was tight. I should be terrified, angry at him treating me like a thing he owns, but he had that dangerous growl in his voice, the kind that made my heart race.

He relaxed and let me go. "Good, because I don't like to share."

Now it was my turn to grab him. "Neither do I."

He smirked, and then tilted my chin up with one finger to give me a kiss like he was searing a brand
Hancock looked so dashing in the tuxedo, the plump white rose sitting in his breast pocket as if it had bloomed from there. I had white rose buds in my hair, and I found that appropriate. He in full bloom, and me still a bud. I didn’t care much for the symbolism when he was putting a ring on my finger. He kissed me and the sparks that traveled from my lips to my toes were visible, tiny fireworks in purple and gold sparking along my skin, like the spark of synapses. In fact, all of my veins were glowing like circuits. I could feel my mother's animosity like a raging inferno, and I glanced over Hancock’s shoulder to see her there dressed for a funeral, looking as pale as a corpse and holding a martini glass that held, instead of an olive on a toothpick, a syringe leaking purple fluid into the clear alcohol. She began yelling at me, spouting profanities and disapproval.

Instead, I showed her my middle finger, nay, the entire world. All the while, my lips never left Hancock’s. Suddenly, my mother fell to the ground, blood spurting from her forehead from a single gunshot wound. She was dead.

Somehow, I found myself kneeling before her, her head sliced open so that her pale pink brain was exposed, and throbbing like a beating heart. Hancock was kneeling beside me, blood and brain fluid staining the pants of his tux. He turned to me, wonder in his eyes. "We're going to need a sharper ice cream scoop," he said as he held up the metal scoop with dull edges.

I was naked and running through the vault. I had to hide, but every cryochamber I passed didn’t have a door for some reason. It was awkward running with my hands covering my breasts and the pubic hair between my legs, and I was keenly aware of my exposed backside. I could hear voices following me, and I just wanted to hide, find some clothes, anything to cover myself. Finally I came to a cryochamber with a door, but I couldn’t open it because Shaun was in my arms, crying so loudly. Shush, little baby, they'll hear you and they'll come. I tried to arrange him so that I had an arm free, but he kept reaching for my breasts and biting my nipple so hard it bled. "Stop it, stop it," I cried, but he was hungry, and he was going to eat me whole. Then Kellogg walked up to me and took the evil baby from my arms. "Oh thank you, thank you," I blessed him, tears streaming down my cheeks like a pilgrim’s face. Then Hancock was beside me, pushing me into the cryochamber, but he didn’t close the door. Even as I could feel all warmth leaving me, my bones turning to ice, the door stayed open. Then Hancock leaned to Kellogg, whispered something, pointing to me. Kellogg nodded, pointed a pistol at my head and fired. I didn’t die though, oh no. It was much worse. I looked down at my hands, the flesh peeling away, no, burning away to reveal tight, wrinkled skin. The smell of burnt flesh was everywhere, in my nose, in my mouth, in my lungs. Trembling, I touched my face, and felt the skin cave away. I touched my nose and it turned to dust.

Hancock looked upon me with disgust, teeth bared, and hand over his nostrils to block out my stench. "Oh god, it's gone feral." And without any control of my body, I leapt from the cryochamber, tackling him to the ground, and sunk my teeth into the space where his neck connected with his shoulder, rearing back, a piece of his flesh hanging from my mouth as I released a mighty inhuman screech.

"Susie, wake up. Wake up."

I startled awake, instantly aware of my surroundings and especially of Hancock leaning over me in
just his ruffled shirt and pants, arm on my shoulder to shake me lightly. "What happened?" I felt alert, too alert for the darkness that cloaked the room.

"You were having a nightmare. Crying out and everything."

"Oh." For some reason, I couldn't get my heart to slow down. "Where are we?"

"We're back at the Slog, remember? We got the case with the serum, and now we're headed back to Deegan."

"Oh, right." I remembered now, talking with the security captain with the personality of a porcupine, fighting crazy strong raiders, finding the metal case with only one vial of serum left.

Hancock still didn't look at ease. "Hey, are you alright? Do you...wanna talk about it?"

"I don't remember my dream," I lied. "Honestly, I just want to go back to sleep."

He still looked worried, but he smiled at me regardless. "Want me to sleep with you?"

"No, the bed's too narrow. Seriously, I'm fine now. Go back to bed. Sorry for waking you."

"Don't apologize. I don't sleep much, remember? I'll let you get back to sleep, ok?" He leant down to kiss my forehead, and I don't know why, but I thought for sure he was reaching down to tear the flesh from my shoulder with his teeth. I flinched. Hard.

He pulled back schooling his features into a blank mask, but not quick enough to hide the flash of hurt from me. He went back to his bed before I could apologize, and my forehead felt achingly cold.

Upon entering Cabot House, instead of receiving a triumphant welcome, we walked into a family argument. Jack Cabot stood in the living room, insufferably arguing with an older woman, silver hair coiled like any housewife's.

"She's not missing, mother," Jack huffed, rolling his eyes so theatrically even I could see it from the entryway.

"Do you know where she is?" the old woman countered.

"No, but that doesn't mean..."

Deegan, who I hadn't noticed standing off in the corner, watching silently, noticed my arrival. "So, did you find out what happened to the courier?" He seemed completely unaffected by the fight happening in front of him.

"He was ambushed by raiders. I took care of them."

Deegan took a drag of the cigarette between his fingers. "Hmm. I don't like raiders operating so close to Parsons. I hope this isn't the start of something serious. What about the serum? Did you find any?"

Hancock handed him the metal case. "There was only one left by the time we got there," I explained.
Deegan took the case and opened it to check on its contents. "Figures. Oh well, at least you got some of it back." Behind him, the argument was getting louder. "Oh hell, I guess it's time you met Wilhelmina. Jack's not going to be happy about it. Come on."

Deegan stepped in, seamlessly ending the argument between the two. "Don't worry, Mrs. Cabot. I'll send someone to find her."

"Oh thank you, Edward, dear." Mrs. Cabot graced him with a gentle smile, before it snapped to a frown and she said to Jack, "Why can't you be as devoted as Edward?"

"She does this every time!" Jack threw his hands in the air in defeat. "You shouldn't indulge her, Edward. It just makes her impossible to deal with next time."

"Just doing my job."

Jack sighed, and then left along with Wilhelmina so that Deegan was left to deal with the exposition. He didn't look too thrilled about it either. "Emogene is Jack's sister. She's a little...flighty. Every so often, she runs off, usually with a new boyfriend. Then I send someone to bring her home."

"I take it I'm to be that someone?"

"Got it in one. I don't know where she's run off to this time, but it shouldn't be too hard to find out. She's been spending a lot of time in that jazz club in Goodneighbor." He looked at Hancock. "I'm guessing you know the place."

"Buddy, I own the place."

"Then you should have no problem asking around there."

"And what if she doesn't want to come home?" I wasn't about to force a woman to go to a home she didn't want to go to. I had a feeling I could relate to this Emogene.

"Well, obviously, as a member of the family you can't just knock her over the head and drag her home by her heels. Usually by the time I send someone after her, she's gotten bored with the whole thing and is ready to come home. You'll think of something, I'm sure." And just like that, I was dismissed.

If this was the kind of home she lived in, no wonder she kept running away. Jack appeared to be the head of the household, and his sister was only an annoyance in his and Deegan's eyes. If the girl wanted to go clubbing, I say let her. But the mother...she seemed truly worried for Emogene.

"Come on, let's go check for clues," I motioned Hancock to follow me.

The Third Rail was really in an upswing that night. All the couches and chairs were full as people relaxed and listened to Magnolia's hypnotic voice. Even MacCready had come out of his den to listen and mingle, and the merc-for-hire generally kept to himself. It occurred to me then, that I hadn't been back in this place since that night with Hancock. Sadly, the jukebox was noticeably missing. Guess there was no point for it with live entertainment.
"Hey, Charlie," I slinked up to the bar with a honeyed smile.

"Oi, what you want now?" Whitechaple Charlie sounded just as pleased to see me now as he always was. "Bringin' in that mutt all the time. If you weren't Hancock's bird..."

"Ah, come on, Chuck," Hancock leaned against the bar. "That how you talk to all the ladies? Not very polite."

"This here is no lady," Charlie bobbed in the equivalent of a robot huff. "Still hasn't paid her tab."

"I told you, Chuck, all her drinks are on me."

"And she told me not to do that."

Hancock looked at me. I shrugged. "I'm not looking for a sugar daddy."

I regretted my choice of words instantly. "Does that mean daddy won't get no sugar?"

I rolled my eyes, electing to ignore him. "Look, we're just looking for Emogene Cabot. Heard she visits here?"

"Name rings a bell. I'd try asking Magnolia. She's always making friends with everybody. Ah, and you're in luck. Looks like she just finished her song."

Sure enough, the music had ended and Magnolia was stepping off the stage for a break. She noticed seven eyes on her and so headed our way.

"Magnolia, I need to ask you something."

"That's just like you, sugar, always jumping to the point of things."

I flushed. "Sorry, didn't mean to be rude."

Magnolia laughed gently, shaking her head. "I wasn't chastising you, dear. I like a woman who's quick on the draw. What can I do you for?"

"I'm looking for Emogene Cabot. Do you know her?"

"Emogene? Yeah, I know her. She used to come in here most nights. Said she didn't care much for my music. Too slow. Nice girl, though."

"Do you know where she is? She's missing."

"I'm glad somebody's looking out for her. She seems like a body that needs looking after. Last I heard, she had run off with some preacher fellow. Real slick. Always going on about salvation and changing your life. I bet you'll find your girl with him."

"Alright. Do you know where I can find this guy?"

Magnolia shrugged lazily. "Sorry, dear, but I never paid him no mind. Try asking Ham."

"Thanks, Magnolia."

"A girl's happy to please." She waved us off with a heavy-lidded smile. I never could tell if she was trying to be sultry, or if all that singing just made her sleepy.
We went upstairs to where Ham guarded the door. He was sitting on a metal fold-out chair, submachine gun resting on his lap, cigarette dangling unlit from his mouth. When he noticed Hancock and I, he jumped to his feet. Hancock just waved off his stiff spine. He didn't care if you wanted to sit on the job. I let him pet Dogmeat, something that always brought a small smile to his normally stoic features.

"Hey, Ham, we're looking for some preacher guy that Emogene Cabot was hanging off of."

"Brother Thomas? Yeah, I remember him. Had to throw him out because he was bothering everyone with his 'better life' bullshit and shovin' fliers in their faces." He pulled a crinkled piece of paper from his back pocket. "I kept one of them, in case he didn't pay his bar tab. Here you go."

The flier would have won no awards in a graphic design contest, but it certainly had the information we needed. We thanked Ham, and headed to Charles View Amphitheatre.

"You want me to give you all of my stuff?" This guy had to be kidding me.

"Hey, we earned those material possessions," Hancock said from where he stood behind my chair.

Brother Thomas seemed unfazed by our skepticism. "That's old world thinking. You need to let go of your attachment to this world in order to start new."

I sniffed theatrically. "What's that smell? Smells like a load of bullshit."

Brother Thomas' smile dropped instantly. "If you don't want to join our little community, neighbor, then you are free to leave."

"Actually, I just came here looking for Emogene Cabot."

The smile on his face was so strained I thought his mustache was going to fall right off. "I'm afraid she's indisposed right now. She won't be seeing any visitors."

I didn't like the sound of that. "Won't or can't?"

"We're just going through a rough patch in our relationship right now. She won't be coming out until she cools off."

"You locked her up! What kind of beast are you?" I wonder if he hit her too. No way I was going to just let this thug walk away from this.

Brother Thomas had the gall to look affronted. "I'm the beast? She's crazy strong. It took five of us just to get her in that room. There's no way I'm going to just let her out."

"And what did you do to make her so violent?"

"We had a little disagreement about joining my organization."

"Listen, pal, you and I are about to have a much bigger disagreement." I whipped out Kellogg's pistol, pointed it right between his eyes. "Either you let me see her, or I'm going to hand you all of
my 'material possessions' one bullet at a time."

The Brother paled, eyes unable to look away from the barrel of my gun. "Wow. Ok. I'll just go unlock the door, alright?" He moved slowly, as if he had just locked eyes with a jungle cat. When he unlocked the door, he practically dashed out of the office. Whatever, let him run. I holstered my pistol.

Hancock put his hand on my shoulder to pull my ear close to his lips and whisper, "If we didn't have a job to do, I would take you right now, right on that desk."

I flicked my head around, covering my now red ear. "Hancock!"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I can't help how hot it makes me when you threaten people like that."

A delicate cough drew our attention to an older looking woman standing in the bedroom with an unimpressed stare. "If you two want, I can just leave and let you use this room."

I punched Hancock in the shoulders before he could even open his mouth to make whatever stupid remark I knew he was going to make. "That won't be necessary, thank you. Emogene Cabot, I presume?"

"Jack sent you, didn't he?" She rolled her eyes, hands on her hips. "That loser can't keep his nose where it belongs."

"Umm, no offense, but I thought you would be younger."

"Wow, you're quite the charmer, ain't you? For your information, I'm Jack's younger sister. Once I get some more of that serum, I'll be back to my old self."

Wait...what?

Hancock said what I was thinking. "So that serum reverses aging?"

Emogene looked at us like we were toddlers in a high school class. "No, it stops it. I started taking it when I was 32, so normally, that's what I look like. You'll see once I get my treatment." She took a step towards the door before stopping to turn at us. "Oh, and you can tell Mother I'll be on my way to the house soon. I need a drink first." Then she left, as if she hadn't been some poor woman locked in a room by her evil boyfriend. As if we were the nuisances.

"This family is weird."

"You said it, sister."

Somehow, Emogene had arrived home before we did. When we walked into the living room, she was getting quite the lecture from her mother, though if her glazed eyes were any indication, it was going in one ear and out the other. No wonder she wanted that drink first. And, as she predicted, the woman looked younger, her hair turned from silver to a vibrant blonde. So the effects of the serum were real.
I couldn’t see anyone else in the room, and they didn’t look to be stopping any time soon, so I explored the rest of the house. I hadn’t ever seen anything outside of the living room and entry hall.

Jack’s laboratory was certainly not something a normal civilian would have. Computers stacked tall, with flashing lights and too many buttons. It was all very impressive but outside of my realm of knowledge so I passed through the room with little interest. The hallway outside was lined with all sorts of ancient artifacts, all in glass cases. I assumed these were Jack’s father’s, treasures from various archaeological digs. I wondered where his father was. Maybe he had died before Jack created this miracle serum. Past that were the bedrooms, doors wide open. I suppose there was no need to lock them from your family, but it still seemed strange to have all the doors hanging open like that.

The bedrooms, like the rest of the house, were clean and nicely furnished, but not extravagant. Each one had a terminal, and that, if anything, showed how rich this family truly was. Those things were pricey. As nice as the rooms were, they were...blank, impersonal, for having people living in them for who knows how long. I could barely tell which room belonged to who.

"These people have some nice beds," Hancock awed, testing the springs on the queen sized mattress. "Must be nice to be rich and immortal."

I shrugged, looking at a copy of a *Tesla Science* magazine, still in pretty good condition.

"Oh god, you guys aren’t going to do it on my bed, are you?"

We both jumped to attention, caught red-handed. In the doorway stood Emogene, looking much more aware of her surroundings and not nearly as pissed as she should be.

"If you're wanting to take some stuff, go ahead. I really couldn't care less."

"We're not here to steal anything. We were just looking for Deegan or Jack."

She didn’t look convinced. "In my bedroom? Right. They went out about an hour ago, headed for Parsons, most likely."

She went into her room, walked right past us as if we weren’t even there, and pulled open her wardrobe to gaze listlessly at her clothes. It felt like a dismissal, but my mind was burning with questions.

"Emogene, how old are you, actually?"

She didn’t glance away from her wardrobe. Just pulled out a cream colored blouse with a floral pattern. "I dunno, around 400 or something. I’ve lost count. Look, if you have any questions, ask my brother."

*But you’re here right now...* I could see when I wasn’t wanted, and to be fair, we had long overstayed our welcome.

Mrs. Cabot offered to let us stay until Jack and Deegan returned, but I turned them down. Honestly, I’d rather just return to Goodneighbor for the night and come back in the morning.
Hancock had a pretty nice bed for a citizen of Goodneighbor, but it was a flimsy sheet compared to Emogene Cabot's fluffy cloud of a bed. I sat on it now, aware of its lack of support, as Hancock positively ravished my neck. He was really going to town, nipping, biting, sucking on any piece of flesh he could reach. I tilted my head obediently to give him access, but otherwise didn't move.

After I don't know how long, he stopped, pulling back to look me in the eyes. "Hey, Sunshine, what's the matter? You don't seem all that into it."

"Sorry, Hancock, I've just got a lot on my mind tonight."

"That's alright." He kissed my cheek and fixed the collar of my shirt, buttoning my blouse back up. "Want to share with the class?"

I nibbled on my bottom lip, debating on whether or not we should have this talk. "I was just wondering, you know, what if we don't find a way to turn me into a ghoul? What if our only option is to go skinny-dipping through a vat of nuclear waste and hope for the best?"

"That drug I found couldn't have been the only one. And there must be some remnants of that experiment Eddie Winter went through. We'll find a way."

"What if...what if we found a way to change you back into a human? Would you do that...to be with me?"

Hancock dropped his hands from where they had been fiddling with my clothes. He stood up, straightened his back, and his face was carefully blank. "I'm proud to be a ghoul. I don't regret my decision. I thought it didn't bother you."

I bristled. "Why am I the only one who has to change?"

"Because I'd rather not watch you die."

"But if we're both human--"

"We don't need to have this conversation right now. We're tired. I'll let you rest. I've got some business I need to take care of."

"Yeah. Right."

He didn't exactly storm out of the room, but the sound of the door closing echoed in my brain long after he left. I lay down on the thin, uncomfortable mattress and pulled the threadbare blanket over my legs. I fell asleep, trying hard not to think about how Hancock was most likely shooting up in another room.

I arrived at Cabot House with only Dogmeat at a reasonable hour of the morning. This time, when I entered the house, Deegan and Jack were present. Mrs. Cabot had certainly warmed up to me ever since I brought her daughter home. She sat me down at the dinner table to feed me breakfast with a nice warm cup of tea. I hadn't had tea in so long. Where had they been hiding this?
"No mayor in tow?" Deegan asked casually.

"Not today," I smiled back.

"I think we need to spend some time apart. We've practically been joined at the hip ever since I decided to travel with you. I think that's what last night was about. If it's just to pick up payment, there's no need for both of us to go, right?"

I tried very hard not to think of this as a punishment.

"Well, here's your payment, and a little something extra for getting it done so fast. I honestly hadn't expected you two to find her until today."

"All we did was ask around the Third Rail, like you said. Does she usually make it harder?"

"Maybe. Or maybe everyone before you were just buffoons. After all, they're not still here to work the job."

"That sounds ominous."

"Not really. They were just moved to guarding Parsons."

"So, were you employed with the Cabot's before you turned into a ghoul, or did you get hired after?"

Deegan dropped his cigarette into an ashtray with a sigh. "Emogene told you."

"Even if she hadn't, I think the sudden difference in her appearance would have tipped me off. That's a hell of a wrinkle cream."

"Well, I suppose you've proven your loyalty to the family by now, and Wilhelmina has taken a shine to you, so I guess you have a right to know. Come on, let's go talk to Jack. He can explain it better."

And explain Jack did. It all made sense, in a bizarre sci-fi sort of way. Some mysterious alien artifact that imbued their father with powers, but turned him to madness in the process. And then having to imprison him in the Insane Asylum to keep him from taking over the world or whatever evil scheme he had planned. That the serum was derived from Mr. Cabot's blood.

"I've spent my entire life since that day to find a way to fix my father," Jack concluded sadly. "I'm sure the continued immortality was an unwanted side-benefit."

Jack frowned at my implications. "The immortality has allowed me to continue my research with the help of newer technology with each decade. Believe me, my father's well-being is at the forefront of my mind. I just haven't found a way to remove the crown without killing him. I had hoped that one day, the technology would arise to complete this impossible task, but the unfortunate bombing has set back my research immeasurably."

"So how come, when the bombs fell, you didn't give Deegan the serum?"

"I tried, but it had the opposite effect on him. I don't know if that was because of the sheer radiation poisoning he had endured, or if he didn't have similar enough DNA to the source, like my family does. In the end, it all turned out for the best. Edward is still with us today. Mother was most pleased about that."

"And what about you? Were you pleased that Deegan remained with you, even as a ghoul?"
Deegan looked decidedly uncomfortable. "I don't think that question is entirely appropriate."

Jack frowned, and continued anyway. "Edward is still Edward, no matter what he looks like on the outside. He has proven to be fiercely loyal to this family, even when our other hires decided to try and rob us in the fallout. I would rather he be a ghoul and by my side than dead and still have smooth skin."

Deegan wore an uncharacteristically sappy look on his face. I could see now, what Hancock was talking about. Either Jack had an amazing poker face, or he was completely oblivious to his bodyguard's feelings. I had my money on the latter.

The lovelorn looks tasted a little bitter on my tongue today, so I bid myself farewell to go look for Emogene. To my surprise, I found her in Jack's lab, typing away at his terminal. She flinched when I approached, but relaxed when she saw it was only me. "Where's your boyfriend?"

"We're not joined at the hip, you know. What are you doing?" I asked, unaccusing.

"Messing with Jack. Payback for sending someone after me."

"Messing with how?"

She paused, eying me warily, as if to decide whether or not to trust me. Whatever her reasoning, she shrugged and answered, "When he first got this terminal, he accidentally spelt his last name with a zero instead of an 'o,' and it's been driving him up the wall ever since. Now I'm gonna turn all the 'a's into fours."

I laughed. "That's amazing."

She blinked at me. "Not really. I'm just tweaking a single file. Jack's just an idiot."

"I don't really know much about computers, probably even less than Jack. I was referring more to your passive-aggressive play, though. It's small enough that it can barely be called a prank, but annoying enough to piss the hell out of him. I don't have any siblings, so I had tried to do this kind of thing with my mother. Let me tell you, it doesn't work when the other person can ground you whenever they feel like."

Emogene snorted, but the corners of her mouth tugged up despite herself. "Jack certainly tries. He's been trying to act like my dad for a century now. It's getting old."

"God, I can imagine." I leaned up against one of the computers. My shoulder hit a switch and it started making loud beeping noise, which startled me into jumping back. "Oops."

Emogene laughed, a real laugh. "Don't worry. You didn't do any harm. But just to be safe, let's get out of here." She grabbed my arm, leading me out of the lab and down the stairs into the living room, when we had entered the entryway, Mrs. Cabot appeared, worried lines in her face.

"Emogene, dear, where are you going?"

"Just going for a walk, Mother. Don't worry, I have an escort." She held up my arm that she still held in her surprisingly strong grip.

"Don't worry, Mrs. Cabot. I'll make sure she comes home safe." I gave her my winning smile.

Mrs. Cabot touched her chin delicately, eyebrows knitted. "Alright, if you're with her. Don't go too far and be back before sundown."
"Yes, Mother." The eye roll was overtly audible. She practically dragged me outside and past the sentry bots. It wasn't until the house was no longer visible that she released me. "Jesus, you'd think I was 14 instead of 400-something. Even without the serum, I was still an adult." She looked back at me. "As if a little thing like you could protect me. I'm probably three times stronger than you."

I tried not to be offended, remembering what Jack said about the serum giving them supernatural abilities. "You know, with the serum, you guys could have been superheroes. A family of masked crime-fighters."

She didn't outright laugh in my face. "What? Wear spandex and stalk the streets at night?"

"I don't think the spandex is a requirement."

Still, she looked unimpressed. "You read too many comic books." She paused for a second, before she continued walking. I have no idea where she was leading us, but so far, we hadn't encountered any dangers. "Is that what you would have done? If you had the serum?"

I've already done it, I thought, remembering my Silver Shroud costume. "I certainly wouldn't have stuck around here. I think I would have taken this as my chance to go see the world." Leave my parents.

Emogene didn't look at me. "Then you're more deserving of it than we are. All we've done is hide away."

We crossed a bridge, but now Emogene had turned right, following the water. Where was she taking us? "You mean to tell me that you've never left Boston? Not even when the bombs fell?"

"Oh, no, I did. Went exploring. Turns out, the apocalypse gets boring real quick. Everything's the same, except now people are more willing to kill you, I guess." She looked out at the murky ocean water. "Or, well, I think people were always wanting to kill us, but now they can. Unfortunately, Jack's too good at keeping us safe."

We turned back towards the city, moving down a street, lined by tall apartment buildings, and to my surprise, at the end of the road was a giant three-masted wooden ship, like the antique kind you saw in motion pictures about the colonial era and pirates, with giant rocket thrusters on the back and a large satellite dish at the forward bow, crashed into the top of a Weatherby Savings & Loan bank. Honestly, I was surprised at how surprised I was. Everything had become so bizarre in this new world, seeing a giant rocket ship, in the most literal of terms, sitting atop a building wasn't any stranger than a giant killer monster lizard.

"What is that?"

She gave me a confused look before looking around the area, as if there was nothing out of the ordinary to note. Then her mouth opened in a silent "oh," and she glanced at the ship. "That's our destination: the USS Constitution."

"How did it get up there?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. From what I can gather, there was a problem with the take off. The crew don't talk much about that. They're more focused on getting it airworthy again."

"Not even mentioning that this thing can fly, but it still has a crew?" We passed by some small settlement, a group of scavengers nestled inside an empty building, huddled around a fire. They didn't pay us any attention, so I didn't either.
"Oh, yeah. All robots." We reached the pile of rubble that led inside the wrecked bank, but instead of climbing inside, Emogene turned to a small lifeboat that had been lowered to the ground by an automatic pulley system. We stepped inside, and she pressed the button to raise us to the top of the ship. "They press ganged me into the crew, wanted me to go find some parts to fix their ship up. It's too much of a bother, so I just keep telling them that I'm working on it. They let me come and go as I please, so I kind of treat this place as my secret hiding spot." The boat reached the top and we stepped out onto the deck. She looked back at me with a coy smile. "Now it's not so much of a secret."

"I won't tell. Scout's honor." I held up a three finger salute. I think that was the boy scout hand sign.

The ship was captained by a large sentry bot with a cute little blue admiral's hat on top of his head named Captain Ironsides. I marveled at how it stayed upon his head despite the strong breeze this high up. The wonders of modern technology. Maybe it was magnets? The captain greeted her cordially, and then continued it's patrol of the deck, trailing steam. I guess she was right about the robots basically leaving her alone. They didn't even seem to care that she had brought a stranger on board.

Emogene led me to the bow of the ship, past the satellite, where she sat on the bowsprit, legs dangling over the edge. I marveled at her completely fearless nonchalance. It was a long drop. I opted to just stand beside her, hands on the rigging. The view was amazing, however. We could see past the bay and into the glittering horizon of the ocean, past the skyscrapers and to distant hillsides.

"Hell of a view, ain't it?" She smiled up at me, feet kicking back and forth. "I'm sure the top of one of those skyscrapers would be better, but their overrun with raiders or super mutants, or hell, both. Too much of a hassle." Her smile dropped. "You know, it may seem kind of weird, but I think the war was the most exciting thing to ever happen to me. Even the world ending didn't affect us, we just shrugged it off like we do everything else. But it's still better than barely attending social gatherings and then having to fake my death every so often. Now I try to find excitement in men. Hoo boy, are they a huge letdown."

"I think I understand what you mean. I mean, not about the faking your death thing, but about the apocalypse. I've never been myself more."

A smile, a real smile that reached her eyes. "And they wanted to shove us into the kitchen and out of sight."

The following silence was companionable, contemplative. The kind you felt more comfortable not interrupting, but after a while, I did. "What's it like? Living forever."

"Boring as hell. And freeing, in some ways. It separates you from people, from humans. We could never really trust anyone, never let them too close. Of course, now that there's ghouls running around, it's not as big of a shock, but every friend I've made is dead." She looked up at me. "You'll die too at some point. Sooner, now, with more dangers. All I have left is my family. Maybe that's why I just can't leave..." She shook her head. "There were some days I hated all of them so much I thought I might just kill us all. That I'd just set dad free, so that there'd be no more serum. Hell, he'd probably come kill us, no need to wait."

"Is he really so far gone?"

She nodded. "I go to see him sometimes, I don't know why. I always leave sadder than before. No matter how many times I go, it always hits me like a new revelation that he's actually gone." Then, she turned back forward and continued on with a complete non sequitur. "The longest I've gone off the serum is a month. I tried, but it's hard when you can feel yourself aging every day, when you
know you can fix it. I don't know if anyone could resist eternal youth and beauty. I don't know why I don't just shoot myself, or take poison..."

Her words tugged painfully at my heart. This woman was so jaded, so depressed. I've never heard of a ghoul as sad as she was.

"Just...what is the point of all of this? I feel like a dying star, spiraling towards my inevitable conclusion." She heaved a 400 year old sigh. "I don't think it can get here fast enough."

The next day, I wanted to go back to talk to Emogene again (a feeling not unlike fear pulled me back), and to my surprise Hancock wanted to come with.

"I'm glad you made a friend. I was wanting to talk to Deegan actually. This whole business of their family's opens up a lot of questions."

"So you're coming with?"

He paused staring at me with an unfathomable look for an uncomfortably long time. Then he smiled, pulled me into a one-armed hug and kissed the top of my hair. "We're good, Sunshine. We just needed a cool down. I'm not leaving ya."

I buried my face into his chest. Was I that obvious?

After that, the trip felt fun, and my feet felt light. Hancock kept smiling at my perkiness, knowing the reason for my sudden burst of energy. My good mood dropped the moment we entered Cabot House. I could tell something was wrong the moment I pushed open the door, the tension in the air as palpable as a wave of radiation. We found the family in the living room, huddled around a small ham radio.

"Edward, what's going on there?" Jack was speaking loudly, as if over a strong wind, or maybe it was over the static coming from the speakers.

"We're under attack. They're inside the building."

"Inside? Can you keep them out of the basement?"

Beside him, Mrs. Cabot fretted. "Oh god, it's happening."

"I'm trying, Jack. I've never seen raiders that... For God's sake, Sammy, the doorway! Right there! Sorry. Things are a little busy around here right now."

"Listen, if they're inside the building you have to go to the office and shut down the elevator. We can't risk them getting to Lorenzo." Lorenzo Cabot. The crazy father.

"Got it. Office. Elevator. You better round up whoever you can and get over--" Suddenly, Edward's voice was cut off with static.

"Hello? Edward? Come in, Edward!" Jack was fiddling with the knobs, trying to find the right frequency to find Edward but to no avail. He sounded significantly less calm now. In a fit of
frustration, he smashed his fist down on the shortwave radio, crushing it to my surprise. Oh yeah, the serum gave them super strength or whatever.

Mrs. Cabot wrung her hands. "Oh god, what's happened to him? Is he alright?"

"I don't know," Jack snapped. Finally, he seemed to notice our presence. "Oh, it's you two. Good. Come with me. We need to see what happened to Edward." He ran upstairs to his lab to return with a laser pistol. I'd never seen Jack look this way before. This was no pencil-pushing nerd; this was a man prepared to kill.

"I always knew it would end this way," Mrs. Cabot wailed. "I never should have let you lock Lorenzo up in that place."

"That isn't helping, Mother," Jack growled. "And as I recall, using the serum was your idea, not mine. But I don't want to argue with you. Right now, Edward needs my help."

"What's going on?" Hancock asked.

Jack seemed to have more patience for this than his mother's complaining. "Raiders have attacked Parsons. Edward's there right now, trying to handle the situation. They've held off raiders easily enough before... I fear that these may be the same raiders from your mission. If they took some of the undiluted serum, then they are going to be much stronger than what you're used to dealing with. That would explain how they could get past Edward's men."

"Well, this should be fun then."

Jack didn't look like he was having fun. "Come on, follow me. We have to go check on Edward and stop those raiders. At no point can they be allowed to reach Lorenzo."

Again, I lamented the lack of any vehicles, hell even a bicycle. Jack led us at nothing short of a light jog. I could tell he wanted to sprint all the way there, but in the interest of us normal people still being strong enough to fight when we got there, he slowed himself down. As such, when we arrived at Parsons, the sounds of battle reached us even outside. None of Jack's men were present, only a few raiders set to guard their backs. We busted in, guns a-blazing. There was no time for stealth.

When we reached the office littered with dead raiders, Jack ran forward and fell to his knees. "Edward!" he cried, and sure enough, I realized what I had once thought to be a raider corpse was actually Edward Deegan, clutching on to his stomach with a crimson hand. "Edward, are you badly hurt?"

Deegan had the gall to laugh at the tears streaming down Jack's face. "Yes, Jack, I'm badly hurt. I sent the elevator down to the basement and shut it down just like you asked. Took a couple of the raiders on my way down." He nodded towards the bodies. "When I couldn't get back up, they left me here. I don't remember how long ago."

"Good man," Jack smiled.

I knelt down in front of Deegan and dug through my pack. "Here, that wound looks pretty bad. This might help." I administered a stimpak, the soft hiss of the automatic plunger loud in the silence.

"Thanks," Deegan bit as the pain of the stimpaks rapid healing hit him. "I'll live, but I don't think I'll be in much condition to help you guys."

"Don't worry, Edward. We'll take it from here." Jack paused a moment, hand on Deegan's rough cheek before he tore himself away. He went to the desk and began to type through the terminal there,
eyes locked onto the black screen. "With the elevator down, we'll have to go through the abandoned part of the building. Looks like the Abremalin field is still functioning, although several of the security doors in the basement have already been breached." He frowned. "They seem determined to reach Lorenzo. We better hurry."

With a last goodbye to Deegan, who promised twice that as soon as he could walk, he'd head to safety. The abandoned section of the asylum held more raiders as they too figured out the back way to the basement. We moved quickly, not stopping to loot any of the bodies along the way, which Hancock was morose about, though he understood the need for our pace. Jack couldn't stress enough how dangerous his father was. After what felt like way too long, we reached the maintenance elevator that would take us to Lorenzo's cell in the basement.

We reached a section that had clearly been built more recently than the rest of the basement. The room was filled with all sorts of lab equipment and computers that performed functions I would never understand. All along the wall directly across from us were windows made of safety glass, and through them I could see a metal room within which stood an older gentleman in a black suit with the most ridiculous headpiece on. That must be the mysterious "crown." In the space between the cell and the view room that we now occupied, a couple of raiders were fiddling with the machines that lined the walls out there.

"Those idiots!" Jack cursed, running to a terminal. "They're trying to take down the Abremalin field. That's the only thing keeping Lorenzo from breaking out."

I ran to the security door that would lead out, but it didn't budge an inch. "It's locked."

"Dammit."

Lorenzo noticed our arrival and walked to the window of his cell facing us. "Hello, Jack." His voice was patient, dreamy even, without the least bit of malice inside. "It's been a long time since I've had the pleasure of a personal visit. My powers have grown, Jack. The artifact still has so much to teach me. Once I am free, I will be happy to teach you, too."

"This guy's a class A nut job," Hancock muttered under his breath.

Jack looked up from the terminal with malaise. "You know I can't let you out until I can remove the artifact." He didn't sound like he was trying hard to convince. He paused, eyes bulging with some mix between rage and horror.

"That's right," Lorenzo purred. "You have to shut down the containment field in order to open the security doors."

Jack continued typing as if he had never heard him. "I'll stay here and work on opening the doors, one-by-one. You guys need to get in there and stop them."

The security door slid open, to reveal another one behind it a few paces down. We had to wait for a second for the next door to open, and so on, as we made our way through the hall that wrapped around the room. All the while, we could see through the window to the raiders working furiously to shut down the Abremalin field.

"Hurry it up," Hancock yelled, though I don't know what he thought that would accomplish. He was probably just feeling as antsy as I was, sitting here with nothing to shoot.

Finally, the last door flew open and we barged into the room. Unfortunately, we were just a second too late and the Abremalin field fell.
"Ah, yes, I can feel my powers returning," Lorenzo sighed.

The two raiders attacked, and they had definitely sampled most of the undiluted serum, because they were much tougher than everyone else we fought on the way here. I'd go so far to say that they were the toughest humans I'd ever faced. A bullet to the head did little but enrage them. One with a mohawk leapt at me, blood trailing down between his eyes. He tackled me to the ground, spit flying in my face. I could see that the bullet hadn't even pierced his skull, it remained embedded in his forehead. Hancock called out to me, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw him struggling with his own suped up bad guy. Mohawk guy held a tire iron that he was trying very hard to smash into my face, though I used Zeus to block his attack. Gee whiz, this guy was strong. So I did the only thing I could think of: I kneed him right in the groin.

Luckily, that was still a weak spot, serum or no. The man howled in pain as he fell off of me. He didn't even have time to get to his knees before Dogmeat leapt on him, teeth tearing into the exposed flesh of his neck. He roared, smashing his arm into the dog's ribs and sending him flying and crashing into a filing cabinet. "Dogmeat!"

With righteous fury, I whipped out my newly acquired plasma rifle and gunned the man down, holding down the trigger for continuous fire. The plasma had a greater effect than the bullets and he fell down, dead as a doornail. I turned to find Hancock unloading a buckshot into the other raiders head, his boot on the man's neck to keep him still. He twitched once, twice, then remained completely still. Blood splatter had stained his pants and even all the way up to his white collar.

"You okay?" I asked, hoping none of that blood was his.

"Good. You?"

"Good."

We looked over to the window where we could see Jack still furiously typing away at the terminal. "There's still one more chance..." His voice was grainy through the speakers. "It'll take a moment for him to fully regain his powers. We can stop him."

"Don't listen to my son," Lorenzo was at the window closest to me, his glassy eyes focused on mine. "He's the crazy one. Look at what he's done to me, his own father. I have committed no crime. Why must I be imprisoned?"

That's true... Jack never said what was so horrible about his father, just that he was crazy. Why should he be locked in a room for all eternity just because his mentality changed?

"I built a failsafe into the containment grid," Jack continued. "Switch the four Abremalin generators to manual override, and I can flood his cell with a lethal dose of zeta radiation."

"You're going to kill him?" I asked, startled. "But he's your father! What happened to trying to save him?"

"He's grown too powerful. My technology can no longer contain him. I have to accept the fact that I can't save him. It's better that he die than to unleash him upon the world."

"No, please," Lorenzo's tone suddenly changed, turning fearful. "Don't let him kill me. He's trapped me here for ages, using my blood to lengthen his life, like a parasite." He placed his hands on the glass. "Do the right thing. Open the door. Let me out."

"You ain't foolin' anyone, buddy," Hancock rolled his eyes, strolling over to one of the machines. "Just flip this switch, right?" He pushed the large metal handle, and the machine flicked to life. That
was one down.

I didn't move, staring at the man behind the window. He smiled at me gently, head leaning against the glass between his hands. "You have seen what Jack's clever little serum does, seen what the undiluted version can do. What he took from me by force, I will bestow upon you gladly. Let me out, and I will give you a 'life time' supply. Just imagine: young and beautiful and powerful for eternity. All I ask, is that you walk up those stairs and press that button."

I followed his gaze, like a moth led by the light of a lantern. Next to the door of his cell was a bright red button, just aching to be pressed. Distantly, I heard the click of another generator.

"He's lying," Jack yelled. "If he's free, he'll only kill us all."

"Yes, that's right. Just a few more steps, hold out your hand."

Behind me, I heard the unmistakable cocking of a shotgun. I blinked, hand poised to press the button, and slowly, I turned around to find Hancock at the bottom of the steps, shotgun pointed directly at me. "Hancock?"

"Step away from that door, Susan."

I swallowed a lump in my throat. "I never thought you would turn a gun on me."

"And I never thought you would let a madman run loose just so you could keep your looks." I had never seen that look on his face before. So cold. As cold as the cryochamber.

My hand dropped and I turned fully to face him. "Don't you see, Hancock? This is our ticket to being together forever. There's no need to go searching for some mysterious ghoul drug that may or may not still exist when the answer is right here all along."

"Do you honestly believe the shit coming out of your mouth?" He closed his eyes as if he suddenly suffered from a Charley horse, head turned to the side, before he opened them. "What happened to you?"

"Nothing's happened to me." A horrible feeling that resembled guilt all too much was rising in my stomach. I had done nothing wrong, so why was Hancock acting like the wounded party. "I don't understand why I have to change for you. I never thought I would be that kind of girl, but I've changed so much since I woke up, and all of it is because of you." I grew angry. If I was angry, that meant I was justified, right? "You're the one that convinced me to be a killer. I just know you'd rather do chems, even though they are vile disgusting things. You're always acting so superior, like I'm not good enough. And I don't think anyone would ever be good enough for you. Why do I have to become a ghoul?"

"I thought you were fine with being a ghoul. You always told me you were proud of my decision to turn. Was that a lie? Is that how you've really felt all along? Are you even capable of love?"

I could feel a knife stab me right through my heart, but when I looked down, my chest was completely whole. My voice was choked. "John..."

The barrel of his shotgun slowly lowered. He looked like he was going to cry, even though I knew that to be impossible. "This person in front of me...I feel like I don't know her. Bring back the woman I fell in love with. Please."

The knife twisted. I felt like I was choking on rising blood and bile, but when I coughed, nothing came out. Instead, I walked down the stairs past Hancock, and flipped the final two switches, tasting
Jack unleashed the zeta radiation, and I expected some flashy light show, but instead, Lorenzo Cabot slowly fell to the ground, as if from a heart attack. Jack was saying something over the intercom, but I couldn't hear him over the sound of rushing water in my ears.

I looked at Hancock, avoiding his eyes. "Extended eye contact with a ghoul ain't for the faint of heart."

"We're two people with commitment problems trying to commit to each other. I don't think it was ever going to work out." Before I could chicken out, I walked past the open security doors, up the elevator, and out of Hancock's life.

END OF ACT 1

Chapter End Notes

Threw in a little Jackward, because I ship it.

I always loved Emogene's character. She has so many layers. Looking at her actions, you'd think she was just some narcissistic floozy, running around with a bunch of different guys, but then you learn how she's a computer genius, hacked into RobCo's system for kicks, hung out with Robert House, and killed a man to protect her family. I found her journal to be the most interesting out of all the family, even over Indiana Jones the Dad.

So yeah, there's Act 1. Sorry to end it on such a bad note, but hoo boy, does it get worse for Susie from here. Heartbreak is the least of her problems. Anywho, I'm working on Act 2 right now, and should hopefully get that up soon. Thanks for reading so far!
In the Courthouse of Judge Zeller

Chapter Summary

Heartbreak is not nice to Susie.

Chapter Notes

And here begins Act 2!! Finally got this monster finished. Sorry about the long wait, guys. I had a big move and adult jobs to do. Anyway, please enjoy the next installment. I'm uploading as much of this as I can before I have to go to work and then I upload the rest of it tonight, because I'm impatient and can't wait.

WARNING: There is going to be some pretty graphic torture, violence, threats of rape (though it never actually happens), serious claustrophobia, and nyctophobia (fear of the dark), so if any of this squicks you out, just skip the passages in between the asterisks (*).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ACT 2

The Dugout Inn reminded me of those old family owned pubs you used to see in Boston all the time. The kind that always had an Irish name, with Polish staff, and German customers. They always had low lighting, passable beer, and a slew of people who liked to pretend that everyone in the bar was their friend and that the man behind the bar with the dirty rag would listen to all of your troubles. A wall of shelves behind the bar held as many knick knacks and memorabilia as it did bottles of booze. Of course, that's what I thought when I had walked into that place sober, now the bar was an impressionist painting of blurry faces and seesawing emotions. And behind the bar, a man listened to my troubles.

"I mean, this is the one place I could go to that I knew for sure he can't be, and when I get here, feeling weak and raw, do you wanna know where Piper runs off to? To her girlfriend in Goodneighbor, the last place on earth I can ever go. What kind of person abandons her friend in need to get laid?"

"I do not think she knew," Vadim answered. How did he have a Russian accent? America has been destroyed for centuries. Did he come here from the USSR? How? Did the Soviet Union even exist anymore?

"I kissed a girl once. In college. We were both pretty drunk, and I was really horny. She let me touch
her boob, which felt different from mine. I don't know why that surprised me so much, I mean, she's a different person, of course her boobs would feel different too. You know what I mean? You've felt a boob, right?"

"Yes, I have felt a boob."

"We didn't really know what to do after that, so I just went home. That's what I should do, you know. Have lots of unattached sex. No emotions, no commitments. Just fuck a lot of people. I don't know if I could sleep with a girl. I think I should avoid ghouls. I mean, sex with ghouls is amazing. Have you ever had sex with a ghoul? It might be different with women, though. Damn, if that wasn't the best sex I've ever had. If that bastard ruined sex with humans for me, I'm going to kill him."

"That sounds like a bad idea."

"Oh, I've killed loads of people. Even my parents. Well, they were already dead at the time, so I guess I double killed them. Kind of redundant, since they were going to die anyway." I took too large of a swig of my vodka. "Here's to you, Mom. You got any Med-X? We can mix that in. Make it a real tribute."

"That's an even worse idea. Here, have some food. You need something other than booze in your stomach."

He handed me a small plate with chunks of meat on skewers.

"What is this?"

"Iguana bits."

"You know, ever since I woke up here, I've not once seen a single fucking iguana." Not like they were exactly local wildlife either.

"That because they are all in bits."

I laughed as if that had been the most hilarious joke told in the world. Nay, like it had been the first joke ever told, and I was discovering laughter anew. "I guess you could say people loved them to bits. Ha!"

"I think you've had too much."

That's not what he was saying when I first walked in. When I told him that beer was piss, asked for the good stuff, he told me he liked a woman who could appreciate a good vodka, had been impressed that I could drink it straight. Well, I had learned from the best. "It's all his fault, you know, that I'm like this. He changed me. I had been a scared little girl. When I killed a woman with my bare hands, do you know what he told me? He told me 'she had to die'. That it was me or her. I had to kill her, put her down like a fucking rabid dog. No offense, Dogmeat."

The dog just cocked his head to the side from where he sat by my stool. Such a good boy. Such a cutie. Shame I had to trash all of his hats because of where they'd come from.

I turned back to Vadim. "What kind of manipulative bastard says that to a woman when she's bawling her eyes out? Chivalry really is dead." I knocked back the last of my drink. My hand searched blindly for the bottle, but I couldn't find it. Strange, I thought it had been right there just a minute ago. "Turns out, he had just been molding me all along. Making me into someone who could accept all of his faults cause he couldn't well find them out here. That's what I get for thinking I could fall in love. I was just never the settling down type. But this is good. Yeah. Can you imagine how
much worse it would have been if I had actually turned myself into a ghoul for him?"

"I can't say that I can."

Suddenly, I was crying into my empty glass. "Where do I go now, Vadim? How do I face this world alone? I can feel Goodneighbor. I can feel it burning on my back, my heart pointing to it like a compass. What if I run into him again? If I see him, I'll break, I just know I will. I'll break, and I'll go crawling back to him, because it's all I know. I tried to be independent, but it's so hard, Vadim, it's so hard to stand up with no one supporting you." My head fell into my folded arms on the counter top.

"Ah, Nick, you are here. Good."

"Thanks for sending someone to come fetch me, Vadim. I'll take this one off your hands. And put her drinks on my tab. I'll pay you tomorrow."

"Take all time you need, Nick."

Somehow, I was outside, a cold weight gently guiding me through the fuzzy tilting world. It reminded me of that one carnival ride that always made me puke, but I kept going back on. I looked up, surprised to see warm yellow eyes looking down at me in worry.

"What if he's right, Nick? What if I'm incapable of love?"

The grip on my shoulders tightened. "The next time I see that bastard I'm going to string him up by his toes."

"That might be hard. He's missing one."

Then those cold metal hands were pushing me down into a cool bed, lifting a quilt up and over my body, tucking it up to my chin. Now that I was horizontal, I felt bone tired. Already my eyes were drooping. "Thanks, Daddy," I mumbled before closing my eyes for the last time that night.

After my drunken crash, I was too ashamed to hang around Diamond City any longer. In the end, I never did get to see Piper. The only thing I could think to do was to head back to Sanctuary. Even Diamond City was too close to Goodneighbor. It was unlikely that Hancock would travel this far up. This was my town, my Goodneighbor. He'd be avoiding this place too.

Preston greeted me at the gate. "Welcome back, Susie." It didn't feel like coming home, not quite. I don't know if I'd ever get that feeling again, but it felt like a haven against the world outside.

"Hey, Preston. How have things been?"

"Really good, actually. Sanctuary is still growing. I've gotten word of the newest settlements you've recruited, so the Minutemen are growing too. I didn't think it would be possible, but I think we'll get back to our old splendor, thanks to you."

I shook my head. "Not me, Preston, it's you. You're the one who wouldn't give up even when you were the last man standing. When the world turned its back on itself, you were the lone guardian
who stood up to defend the innocent."

Preston smiled shyly, looking down so that I could only see the top of his leather hat. "You make me sound like some sort of hero."

"That's because you are. You should come with me to all of these settlements some time. You'll see."

"I think I'd like that. I feel like I'm abandoning the people of Sanctuary, but I also want to get out there and do something."

"Then it's settled. Next time I leave, you're coming with me. We'll go do some Minutemen business."

"I've actually got some ideas on that, but they can wait until you've had some rest." He paused for a moment, looking unsure. "I noticed you came back alone. What happened to your friend?"

I wonder if it would ever stop feeling like a swift punch to the gut whenever somebody mentioned him. "We've decided to part ways for now."

"I see. What about your quest to find your son?"

"I've been stonewalled. I'll explain later."

"You're right, you're right. You've had a long journey. I should let you rest."

I left him at his guard post with a smile before heading to my old home. Codsworth was still there, and a terribly morbid side of me wondered if he would always be there long after I died, still cleaning that skeleton of a house.

"Welcome back home, mum. I see the pooch is still with you."

"Codsworth, he's hardly a dirty animal. And it's the apocalypse. I don't think I can fault you for any tracked in mud."

"Mum, as a butler, I am shamed by your words."

"Gives a whole new meaning to 'cleaning up' the Commonwealth, huh?"

"Excuse me, Mrs. Quinn, are you ill? You are looking a bit under the weather, as they say. I never really understood that expression. Isn't everything under the weather?"

"No, Codsworth, I'm fine. I just need a lie down is all. I've been on my feet all day."

"Of course! Your dogs must be barking. Heh."

Whoever programmed him with all of these puns and jokes must have been damned proud of themselves. I went into my room, walls boarded up and the only decoration a small painting of a kitten I once found. I flopped down on the single mattress. It felt lumpy. The kitten didn't care, just played with its ball of yarn.

"You sure you want to do it here? The walls are pretty thin. Practically nonexistent in some places."

"Yes, so you'll have to keep quiet."

"Hahaha. Oh, Sunshine..."
"So, Curie, how are you liking your new pad?"

The robot bounced happily in the air. "Oh, it is just wonderful, Madame. I will be able to perform all sorts of experiments here. Thank you very much for building it for me." There had been one house that was so damaged, we just completely scrapped the thing. It was an empty lot for a long time, before I decided to build it into as high-tech a lab as I could make.

"If there's ever any sort of gizmo or machine you need, don't be afraid to ask. I'm always happy to support medical science."

"I am so glad to hear that, Madame. Monsieur Codsworth has been most generous in escorting me out of town to find materials. He's even transferred to me some of his combat data, so that I may better protect myself."

"Has he now?" I'd have to give him the shovel talk. Although, what were the proper courting procedures between robots? It's not like he could knock her up or anything. Wait, could they even have sex? "Oh, trust me, this robot puts a whole new meaning on 'Mr. Handy.'" I stopped just short of punching myself in the gut. I had to stop doing this to myself. "I'm glad to see you two are making friends."

"Oh yes. He is such a helper. Everyone here has been so nice to me, but... Well, some people have been asking me to produce addictive chems. They claim it is for medical reasons, but I found no medical problems in their bodies."

I frowned. "You tell them that this is a place of healing, not shooting up."

"Do you really think now is the time to get up on your high horse?"

"I have pre-installed protocols when prescribing drugs. Do not worry." Curie bobbed in the air cheerily. "Oh, my scanners are sensing unusually high levels of cortisol in your system. Are you feeling alright, Madame?"

"I'm fine. Just peachy." Maybe if I say it enough, it'll come true.

David's business was thriving now. He was the only established trader in town, so he had a monopoly, and Trashcan Carla delivered more stock often enough that there had been no need for someone else to set up shop. Of course, I had set a limit on how high he could rake up the prices. "If you raise them any higher, people are just going to go directly to Carla."

"This hardly seems American," he grumbled at me.

"I don't know if you noticed, but America doesn't really exist anymore."
"You're right. In America, I wouldn't have been bossed around like some second-class citizen."

"And don't let David guilt you into doing stuff for him."

"What are you talking about? All you do is complain about how terribly Vault-Tec treated you."

He didn't have a comeback for that. "This sounds like socialism. Like communism."

I wanted to throw my hands up in the air and just give up, let him raise his prices until he lost all of his business. But since he had a near monopoly on the town, he was a lifeline for many of the people here. I couldn't let them suffer just to prove a point. "Well, I'm the Mayor of this town, and if you don't like it, then you can move your shop somewhere else."

"Some mayor you are. You're barely ever here."

"Look, I'm still mayor, whether I'm in...whether I'm here or not, alright? When the next election comes up, you can kick me out of office then." I probably would, too. I had been unanimously voted "leader and mayor" of Sanctuary after I rescued the original settlers at Concord. At the time, it made sense: I was the only one who had actually lived here, and taking down a Deathclaw nearly single-handedly had earned everyone's respect. But I really just didn't care anymore.

I didn't stay in Sanctuary for very long. I thought I would enjoy the rest, but instead, I just felt antsy. Why the hell should I have to hide from him? I asked myself. He's the one who should run and hide. He ever turns a gun on me again, I'll use every trick he's ever taught me to make him regret it. So I decided the best way to go about smothering him out of my thoughts was to focus on someone else. Preston had big plans for the Minutemen, so I decided to help him out.

"Right now, we're just a promise," he explained to me over the map in our little headquarters. "A promise that when things go south, there will be someone there to help. I intend to make it into a fact."

The Castle was their old headquarters in Fort Independence, but had been taken over by "sea monsters" under the command of General McGann. Ever since, the Minutemen had gone on the decline until the only one left was Preston Garvey. So long as he was alive, the Minutemen still lived. You had to give the man credit for his tenacity. He was as steadfast as a rock.

So we traveled down southeast to meet with a handful of other Minutemen to take back the castle. I was glad I had decided to bring my power armor. The old fort truly was overrun by mirelurks in all stages from egg to the giant queen. I spent most of the time screaming inside my armor, launching rocket after rocket at the giant monster. It had been terrifying, and the acid she spit out had melted off most of the protective plating on my armor, but in the end, the Minutemen won with only one loss. The Castle hadn't really been reclaimed though until we powered up the large radio tower to broadcast Radio Freedom to the entire Commonwealth. Only then did Preston allow us to celebrate.

We sat inside the old dining quarters of the fort under the dim lighting of a solitary light bulb. We didn't have the parts to build enough generators to light up the entire place. There was so much that needed to be done before the place would be up and running, but the hardest part was over. The
cleanup was going to be a bitch though.

"Hey boys, looks like it's going to be mirelurk chowder for the next few days," a Minuteman by the name of Will announced, ladling the chunky greyish colored slop into cracked ceramic bowls. A chorus of groans was his answer.

"We could at least make them into little cakes. With ketchup! I've still got that old ketchup bottle. It's still good."

"I don't think it matters what form they take. I'm already sick of them."

"How many omelettes do you think one egg could make?"

Preston and I laughed around our ales, the only drinks we could scavenge. They tasted like sewer water, but it was better than nothing. After everyone had eaten, he stood up, banging the ladle on the side of the empty pot to get everyone's attention.

"Today is a big victory for the Minutemen. We've taken back our headquarters, and now we're in a better position to help the Commonwealth, which can only attract more people to our cause. This is the start of something great. But before we can go any further, we need to elect a leader." He paused, either for dramatic effect or to give it time to sink in. "I nominate Susan Quinn to be general." All eyes turned to me.

Hold the phone. "Why me?"

"You have helped out the Minutemen more than anyone else. Without you, we wouldn't have any settlements under our banner. Hell, I'd probably be dead."

"I can't be leader." I'm too flighty. "I can't make the Minutemen my number one priority. I have other commitments. All those reasons make me a great recruitment officer, not a leader. Besides, I'm not the one that just delivered a rousing speech. I say it should be you, Preston."

Everyone's gaze swiveled to the other end of the table. Now it was Preston's turn to look startled. "I can't be the leader. I couldn't even save one town, let alone six."

Now everyone looked back to me. I shook my head. "The Minutemen aren't about one super hero coming to save the day; they're about everyone helping out each other. We need someone stalwart and strong, someone we can depend on. You don't have to be a good fighter, you just have to be willing to make the hard decisions. And Preston, no one is more committed to this cause than you. So long as you're alive, the Minutemen live on. That sounds like the kind of guy I'd want to follow."

Preston flushed under all of the attention, though it was hard to tell under his darker skin. "I guess we'll just have to put it to a vote. All in favor of Susie becoming general?"

No one raised their hand.

"All in favor of Preston?" I smiled, raising my hand.

Everyone else at the table raised their hand. Will even raised two hands.

"Congratulations, General Garvey."

He looked about to cry. I hoped he didn't. That wouldn't bode well for his career. "Thanks, everyone. I promise I won't let you down."
"Not a promise, General. A fact."

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" Preston looked sharp in the general's uniform we found. I kind of missed his old colonial duster, but the outfit gave him more credibility.

"I don't need an escort," I rolled my eyes. Sometimes Preston was too chivalrous. "I have traveled on my own before." Yes, and I had ended up cowering in a Red Rocket station all night. Beside me, Dogmeat barked, pawing at my leg. "Oh, you're right. I'll have Dogmeat with me. See? Not alone."

"The Commonwealth is dangerous, even for an entire caravan of armed guards. I'd feel much better if you brought someone with you." We held a staring contest in which I won. He turned his head with a sigh. "But I suppose I can't force you to do anything. Maybe I'll meet you back at Sanctuary. I still need to grab my stuff before I'm fully moved in to the Castle."


"Bye."

I almost considered swimming to get to County Crossing from the Castle, but I had never been that great of a swimmer, even without carrying a bunch of weapons, and it was quite the distance. In the end, I had to walk the long way around on land. My pathway took me much too close to Goodneighbor. I could feel its neon lights burning me as I hugged the shore. All too large of a part of me wanted to go back, to fly through the city gates, just to look at him. How would he act upon seeing me? Would he smile and let bygones be bygones? Would he kick me out of his town? Was his heart open to forgiveness? And then there were the friends I had made: Daisy, Kent, hell, even Fahrenheit. Hancock had been right: I did think of this place as home. And it broke my heart that I could never return there.

In the end, I made it past, and found myself by Cabot House. It was just before the northern bridge, and I had been too afraid of meeting Hancock to go back, but surely it was clear now?

Mind made up, I knocked on the door, strangely surprised when it opened. Deegan stood there, cigarette clenched between two fingers. He gestured for me to come inside. "You're really late for picking up your payment."

"Payment?" I blinked owlishly.

"Yeah, you helped rescue Parsons and put an end to Lorenzo all under the orders of your boss. I'm pretty sure that deserves some sort of reward." Oh yeah. I had completely forgotten that this had been a paying job. "Have a seat. I'll grab you a drink."
I sat down on the sofa, gazing around at the living room. The large portrait of the silver haired couple now held more significance. The austere eyes of Lorenzo and Wilhelmina Cabot gazed down at me. The rest of the house looked just as I had left it, but somehow I thought it should be as changed by that last job as I was.

Deegan came back with a glass of brandy and a bag of caps. "There's enough in there for both of you guys. Though...Jack told me about what happened down there in Lorenzo's cell." My cheeks burned. I really didn't want to talk about this. "He didn't show up to collect his reward either, and really, it had been you that I hired, so I guess it's up to you whether or not you want to hand the caps over."

Honestly, I didn't really care who got them, but some tiny spiteful part of myself wanted to keep them all. Just as my own little personal revenge. That tiny part was very persuasive. "So, where is everybody? Seems kind of quiet."

"Jack's back at Parsons right now, trying to figure out how to safely destroy the artifact. I thought with his father dead...with all of this over, that he would do something else with his life, but no, he's still doing all of his damn research." Deegan shrugged in a what can you do kind of fashion. "I guess that's just who he is. He's probably going to die in his lab, still holding a test tube."

"Yeah, that does sound like him. What about the others?"

"Wilhelmina has locked herself in her room. She was pretty upset when Emogene left."

"Wait. Emogene left?"

"Oh, right. She left a letter for you, actually." He stood up, went over to a cabinet and pulled out a clean white envelope.

I took it greedily, opening it up so fast I actually tore a little bit of the letter itself.

To Susan Quinn,

You weren't here when I finally decided to leave, so I'm penning all of this down in a letter. I've entrusted Edward to giving it to you. He's always been reliable, so I have no fears.

I'm leaving Cabot House. For good this time. I've already said my goodbyes to my family, so this is my goodbye to you. With Father dead now, we have no more serum, and so my days are numbered. Already I can feel myself growing older, and it's terrifying. But I've never felt more free. Either way, I'm going to die, going to reach my final conclusion. I don't want that conclusion to be staying at the house and wallowing in regret like Mother. I've decided to take your advice. I'm going out to see the world. America was destroyed, but who knows what happened to the other countries? I'd like to think that if they still existed, they would come help us, but you never know.

I've found this Chinese nuclear submarine in the harbor. It's captained by some guy named Zao, turned ghoul, but the rest of his crew went feral. He's agreed to take me with him back to China if I repair his reactor. That'll get me on the other continent at least. I don't have much time left to explore the world. If I ever find some way to get back here, I'll be sure to let you know about my findings.

So I guess, all I have left to say is thanks. We only really had that one talk, but it was nice. It feels good that someone out there knows my side of things. I think, if I had known you back before the Great War, we could have been friends. But I'm sick of thinking about the past. So...goodbye, I guess.
I held the letter in my hands, staring at it long after I was done reading. Curious how attached I felt to this girl that I had just met, really. I searched my feelings: sadness at our departure, a bit of regret for not being able to say goodbye in person, and pride at her taking control of her own life. I hoped she found a better life in China. "Thank you for giving me this."

"She's a strong girl." I knew what he meant. It was a "you're welcome" and a "thank you" all in one.

"What about you? Won't you be out of a job now that there's nothing to guard?"

"It was never about the job for me. I'll stay by Jack's side, just like I always have."

"But now..." He will die. Long before Deegan ever did. The sad smile he gave me said he knew this. "I've heard of ways to achieve ghoulification. You two could still be together."

Deegan shook his head, taking a drag of his cigarette before he said, "Nah, I wouldn't wish that life on him. He's already lived 400 years. He deserves some rest."

"But what about you?"

He released the smoke through his lips, staring at the light caught in it. "I doubt I'll be long after. It's because of Jack that I have survived this long. Seems only fitting that it should end because of him too." He paused, looking at me. "Don't make that face. I'm happy, really. We're all finally free. The ghosts have been put to rest."

"It's not that. This is just some really strong brandy." I quickly swallowed the last of it.

He didn't look like he bought it, but he didn't call me out. "As part of your severance pay, I'm going to give you a little tip. Do whatever it is you want and fuck the consequences. Even those that live forever don't have all the time in the world."

I ended up leaving Cabot House without ever seeing Wilhelmina or Jack. I was never more than acquaintances with them, so I didn't think it would be considered rude. The letter I kept tucked away in my bag, already a prized possession. I passed the USS Constitution, and considered helping the robots in their quest to propel their ship into the harbor. Emogene would probably appreciate that. Maybe I could do that after I helped this last settlement.

"It's really quiet now," I said casually to Dogmeat.

He huffed in reply.

"I'm not blaming you, boy. Just used to someone talking back is all." I turned on the radio in my pip-boy, a thing I hadn't done in a long time.

*Flash. Bam. Alakazam. Out of an--*

"Let's try the classical station for a change."
County Crossing was comprised of only three settlers working a small mutfruit farm, with only a shack and a roofless house for shelter. I had almost passed it up, thinking it just another part of the ruins. The settlers were beleaguered and squirrelly, but desperate enough for help to accept my claim of being a Minuteman. A man who's skin was the same dull brown as the dirt they were working appeared to be the de facto leader of their little group. He's the one who came to me with their woes.

"The Brotherhood have been pressing us for crops, in return for their 'protection,'" he snarled the last word out. "But the only ones we need protecting from are them. Please, they are taking all of our commercial crops. We have nothing left to sell."

"I'll go talk to them. But you must understand, the Minutemen are still small. If they won't budge, we can't go to war with them over you."

He nodded, wiping the sweat off his forehead and into the thin strands of his black hair. "I understand. We don't want any fightin'. We just want to be left alone."

These poor farmers had the unfortunate luck of existing too close to where the Brotherhood had set up shop. Sad thing was they had lived here for years before the Brotherhood of Steel flew in on their airship to claim the Commonwealth as their own. Protection no one had asked for. With the revival of the Minutemen, I couldn't help comparing the Brotherhood to the British soldiers back in colonial times. Or maybe the Institute was the British Monarchy, and the Brotherhood was the Continental Army? From what I remembered of college-level history class, the Americans had stolen from their compatriots just as much as the Red Coats had done.

Their airship was just visible in the distance, where it had set up shop over the Boston Airport with the falling of the sun into a purple evening silhouetting the blimp. Might as well get them while they were tired. Less likely to keep arguing with me. I had my work cut out for me, convincing a far superior army to just give up their free lunch.

The closer we got, the better condition the buildings were in. East Boston, this close to the airport, had been a packed city, and something about the dark shadows of the broken windows looking upon me like the hidden eyes of a predator unnerved me. The occasional breeze howled through the narrow alleyways, kicking up stray trash and pages of an old newspaper. It felt as if the entire town were holding its breath. I flipped Zeus from over my shoulder and held it at the ready. I knew this feeling. I'd had it before in a Super Duper Mart.

The sounds came first. Those horrible, tongueless shrieks. In the dark, it was impossible to tell where they came from; it sounded like everywhere. Then they leapt in from all angles. Dogmeat barked out a warning, and I was firing. But with each one down, two more took its place. My arms trembled. Fighting them in the dark was always so much worse, and there were just too many of them. "Make a run for the airport!" I dashed forward, dodging powerful swipes and gnashing teeth. I could hear the click of Dogmeat's claws on the pavement telling me that he was following. The Brotherhood may be assholes, but they were at least good for killing ferals. If I could just reach the airport...

Out of an alley, more feral ghouls crawled out of the shadow, blocking the pathway to the airport. I had a split second to realize that there was no way to outmaneuver these monsters. To my left, shining like a lighthouse, a building trussed up in lights with a fortified fence out front beckoned me like the Holy Grail to King Arthur. Ferals didn't set up lights. People did, I had just enough time to read the painted Traders Welcome next to the door before I was bursting in. I paused only long enough for Dogmeat to pass before I slammed the metal doors shut and threw the lock. The door shook under the weight of pounding, decaying fists, but held. If their muscles were so atrophied, then how were they so strong?

After a while, the terrifying noises and banging stopped, but I didn't dare go outside. It looked like I
was going to be spending the night in here. Finally, I took a moment to examine my surroundings. It looked like I had entered the remnants of some kind of school. The place was still decorated for Halloween: wall decals of grinning pumpkins, faded now, and a banner that read Happy Halloween in whimsical font. The distant glow of a candle or a lantern lit up the dust in the air, obstructing my vision. The entryway was dark, though, and completely empty of anything but rubble. What was this place? Did people live here or...? It looked friendly, inviting, like Bunker Hill. Maybe it was a trading hub just like that? Or maybe a Brotherhood outpost. "Hello?" I called out in a small voice.

No one answered.

"Maybe it's been abandoned?"

Dogmeat didn't look convinced.

Well, there was only one way to find out. I ventured forward, the only way I could go as all other pathways were blocked with rubble. Dogmeat followed, occasionally bringing his nose to the ground to inhale an interesting scent. The silence had my teeth on edge. This suspense was much worse than the one I had felt prior to the ferals. The sensation of being watched was so palpable I could almost taste it. We crept through the ruins of the principal's office, passing by desks and broken shelves. I carefully stepped over a fallen coat rack, the crunch of broken glass under my boot like daggers of ice trailing down my back.

There. A noise, like the scuff of a shoe or the shuffling of junk. Dogmeat sniffed the air and growled. I aimed my gun towards a supply closet. I spotted the green glow, and then my fingers twitched over the trigger in fear. With a gross splatter, a glowing radroach lay dead against the wall.

"Oh. Just a bug."

But Dogmeat was still growling. Only, he wasn't facing the supply closet, but he was pointed towards me. I didn't even get the chance to take the breath to ask him what was wrong before he pounced. I leapt out of the way crashing to the floor. From behind, I heard a cry of pain that was not my own. I scrambled to my feet to find Dogmeat tearing into the arm of a raider, machete on the floor by his hand. I had just enough time to praise him in my head before we were set upon on all sides.

We fought hard. I only got the chance to fire one shot. It hit a man in his hip, an unlucky shot due to my being surprised. Then I had to fight close combat with my knife. The first guy to reach me fell to his knees in a spray of blood, and I used the momentum to punch an incoming woman in the face. My knuckles stung, but the tip of my knife grazed her cheek, so I'm sure she hurt more. Another guy came at me with some kind of knife-sized buzz saw that roared loudly. No doubt it could slice through my limbs like butter. I knocked the man's wrist to the side, the buzz saw passing harmlessly past my ear. "It's all about redirecting that energy." With his arm knocked open wide, I rammed my knife into his exposed belly and gutted him. His blood felt hot. I heard the loud repeat of a gun before I felt the sting in my arm. The bullet had just grazed me, but the wound was bleeding a lot and burned even more. I looked up to find the culprit, only to see him being mauled by Dogmeat. Good boy.

I had been too distracted by the gunman's painful death to block the swing of a bat. It hit my arm with a resounding crack, and I yelped in pain even as I was knocked off my feet. This time, I didn't give my attackers any time to start their next assault. Ignoring the sway of my vision, I rebounded, digging my knife into their side and pulling up, blood and guts spilling out. I hooked my foot under the ankles of his companion, knocking her on her ass. This gave me just long enough to deliver a swift kick to her head, and then the killing blow with my knife. My arm protested the movement but I bit through it. I didn't have the time to be in pain. Even as I killed one raider, another was beginning
their attack against me.

In the end, I took down eight of them on my own (no idea how many Dogmeat killed), before a blow to the back of my head knocked me unconscious.

I'll be seeing you
In all the old familiar places.

The sound was a little grainy, but the soothing croon of Billie Holiday welcomed me to the waking world. The music was like a lazy afternoon nap in the sun, and if it weren't for the pounding of my head and the stiffness of my muscles, I might just consider going back to sleep.

That this heart of mine embraces
All day and through.

Reluctantly I opened my eyes, and wished that I never had. I found myself in a hap hazardly built cell, walls patched together with different boards of wood and metal sheeting, with a chain link fence gate as the door. Now I knew why my body felt so stiff. The cell was too small for me to completely stretch out, not to mention an empty bucket shared my small space, and I had slept on the hard concrete floor. I'd be aching all day. As I struggled to sit up, my arm protested in pain, and I looked down to see my bullet wound bandaged. I found the source of the music: a small wood paneled radio on a desk next to a terminal. I couldn't decipher what frequency through the dust of the dull backlight.

"Ah, good, you're awake." The most unassuming man walked into my view, smile reaching the crinkles at the edges of his tired brown eyes. He wore a dusty black trench coat with a dirty white scarf wrapped around his neck such that both ends were hanging in front on his chest. Underneath I could see a red and yellow plaid flannel shirt and ripped jeans. He pulled a chair from the desk and expertly flicked it around so that he could sit facing me. "We were afraid you'd sleep forever. That'd be such a waste."

"Who are you? Where am I?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled handsomely. "Ah, I do so love this part. It's exciting, don't you think? A new beginning. So many possibilities, and you, my dear, offer many possibilities." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. The limp dull brown of his hair (most of it in his mutton chops) and the beginning signs of age on his face made him look like one of those grandfatherly faces you would see on jars of barbeque sauce. "I am Judge Zeller, and welcome to my Courthouse." Ah, the coat and scarf did kind of look like judge robes.

"This is a school."

He held up a finger. "Was a school, my dear. Was. Like many things in the Commonwealth it has been repurposed, just as you will. It's made a pretty good base of operations. Now I know what you're thinking: Judge? Jury? What is that? Long ago, Judges once ruled this land with an iron fist. They had a close council called their Jury, who would execute their plans and do their bidding. They decided the law of the land, sentenced people to die on a whim and came up with all kinds of new
 Raider. He's a raider. My mind must still be foggy from sleep, or from the blow to the head, because just now did I remember the events leading up to my capture. Dogmeat? Where was Dogmeat? My heart clenched in fear.

The Judge leaned back, his face lighting up. "Ah, I thought you were being awful calm considering your situation. You do have a rather nasty bump on the back of your head. A sight better than the men you killed, I'd say." He said the words without malice, almost with a hint of pride in them.

"What do you plan to do with me? Why bandage my wounds?" I scrambled to my feet, suddenly feeling the need to be ready to fight, even though I was trapped.

"I told you before, I plan on repurposing you. It'd all be for nought if your wound got infected and you died. The stimpak should have healed the worst of your injuries. Here, let me explain further." He turned to the desk behind him, opened one of the drawers and pulled out a torn sheaf of paper. He held it up for me to see. It was hard to read, because it looked like someone had painted the words with an ugly reddish brown pigment.

With my blood I do swear my life to the Judge and his Jury until the end, upon pain of torture and death.
-Flippy

My stomach dropped. That wasn't paint. It was blood.

"This is just an example contract, you see, although all the words are the same. You will sign one of these, and will forever be under my employ until the day I decide your life ends. In essence, you are signing over yourself to me." He dug around in the desk again to pull out a blank sheet. "This one is for you. I have a knife here for you to prick your thumb." He pulled a slim switchblade out of his coat pocket, flipping it open easily. The click it created made me flinch. "The entirety must be written in your blood, I'm afraid. Not much of a blood contract without blood."

I couldn't help backing further into my cage. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"Everyone has a breaking point. Either you sign it now, or later. Much, much later."

Despite the sting of fear, I shook my head. "I'm not signing your stupid blood pact."

The grin that split his face looked like it had been stolen from the devil. "I was hoping you'd say that."

But I'll be seeing you.

*

Judge Zeller didn't make frequent visits after that. Mostly the Jury executed his torture plans. The Jury comprised of his inner most circle, his first recruits, as I was to understand. Those that had lived the longest and proven their unwavering loyalty. Where the Judge was the soft-talking, trustworthy
type of image, the Jury were complete wack jobs. Their outfits ranged from military armor to BDSM dominatrix (which didn't seem like it would offer much protection, with all of the skin peeking through the black leather), and their personalities varied even more.

I had learned to fear visits from Smiley. She liked to pull teeth and kept necklaces and bracelets lined with all of the teeth she had pulled over the years so that she jingled when she walked. Maybe it was to make up for the fact that she had no teeth of her own, just bloodied gums. My canine teeth had made a lovely pair of earrings.

Then there was Fats, an aptly named man who wore dresses and ladies shoes and talked in a higher pitch than was necessary. He would starve me for days and then laugh as I gobbled up and then succinctly vomited the moldy food he left me.

Little Bitch had a temper as volatile as uranium rods and muscles so bulging they almost seemed fake. His torture had seemed the scariest at first: he'd ask you what his name was and then beat the living shit out of you for calling him a bitch, but if you didn't answer correctly he'd only beat you even more. After a while though, it became predictable. Knowing that at the end of the day, you would be healed so that you wouldn't die made it more bearable. Then it became funny to watch how pissed off he would get when you called him a little bitch, even when he shot up with psycho.

Mama had yet to do anything but talk to me on the occasion. I had been shocked to find an elderly woman hobbling along in army fatigues and full combat armor carrying a carbine, but wearing a magenta flowered hat. Like most old people, she bore a constant frown and groused at everyone, but no one ever back-talked Mama. In fact, most of the raiders I'd seen pass by my small window gave her a wide berth. She scared the hell out of me. She had told me that all of the Jury's favorite tortures had been what broke them so long ago. I spent most nights laying awake to wonder what had happened to her to earn the name "Mama."

Some time ago, I had accepted that Dogmeat must be dead. The pup was loyal to a fault, and there's no use for a dog that bites you. There was no way they would have kept him alive in a cage somewhere. Some part of me counted that as a blessing. Most of the time, I blocked it all out, disappearing inside my head. That pissed them off the most but it was the only thing keeping me sane, floating above the waters of pain. I wondered what everyone was doing. Had Emogene reached China yet? Was she bored out of her mind inside of a sub with only one other person for company? Maybe the two of them would fall in love, I'd imagine. He'd teach her some Chinese, and she'd help him with his English. She would be forthright with her previous immortality, would regret that they couldn't spend that eternity together. Zao would promise to love her for all the rest of her days, and to cherish her in his heart ever after.

Jack Cabot and Edward Deegan, feeling the press of time, would finally confront those feelings between them. Jack would spend the rest of his days researching a way to elongate his life, but Deegan would absolutely refuse to let him turn himself into a ghoul. It'd cause fights between them, but they would always make up in the end. Deegan would be with Jack on his deathbed as a wrinkled old man, he'd hold his hand as his life passed away. Then he would take the poison Jack had made for him some time ago, kept safe and secret for this day. It would be painless. He'd fall asleep beside Jack and then never wake up.

Preston would lead the Minutemen far beyond their previous glory. All across the Commonwealth people would look to them for hope and protection, glad to join their cause. Sometimes, the bad guys would win, but they were always there to pick up the pieces and put them back together again. He'd go down in history as the best general the Minutemen ever had.

Nick would become the new Diamond City landmark, just like Takahashi. He'd live on for centuries,
the unsung hero, helping folks who come knocking on his door, shoulders sagging under the weight of their woes. He'd go to Piper's funeral, remembering Fahrenheit's funeral not so long ago. He'd watch Nat grow up, just like her sister and yet so different all at the same time. Watch her have children, and then watch their children. Always a family friend.

Hancock... He would forget about me. It would take him a minute when Kent would talk about me. Kent would remember. He'd always remember. Happy to relive the time he fought crime with his childhood hero. But to Hancock, I would have just been some disappointment he dated once that turned out just like all the others. He'd be mayor of Goodneighbor for a while, unable to trust anyone else to run the place the right way, before he'd meet that special someone, that person willing to make the commitment, willing to turn into a ghoul. Then they'd go off on their own adventures, leaving Goodneighbor in capable hands.

"Hey, wake up." One of my cell guards rattled the door so that it jangled horribly. They were working on sleep deprivation right now, and god, if it wasn't working. Not to mention the fact that they had taken my clothes. My shyness dried up real quick. Now I was just cold. The worst part about it had been when my period started. My keepers didn't bother to clean up the mess, so I was left to lay in my own blood, lower back aching from the cramps.

I grumbled something close to a "fuck off" and rubbed my tongue over the swollen gum where my tooth used to be. I knew that worrying it wasn't helping any, but I couldn't stop. It had become a nervous tic. The sound of approaching footsteps made me stop, and I sat up on shaking arms.

Ah, this was going to be a special visit. The Judge himself stood before me, his signature "gavel" (the same gavel that had smashed my hands, only to heal them with a stimpak, and then smash them again before the bones could fully heal) slung behind his neck on his shoulders, hands dangling over the top so that he looked like he had been thrown in the stocks. He strolled along like a thoroughbred horse breeder observing his stables. Following him, matching step for step, was Little Bitch.

"You're looking lovely today, my dear," Judge Zeller greeted cordially, grandfatherly smile warming his eyes. "A little thin. That's good. How are you feeling today?"

I didn't answer. Speaking hurt lately. I had screamed my throat raw.

The Judge shook his head as if I had answered. "That's too bad. I was hoping we had reached an agreement by now. It seems we are still in negotiations."

"Maybe I should rape her," Little Bitch suggested all too eagerly. "Split her wide open on my huge cock."

The Judge snorted. "Oh please, Little Bitch. We all know your penis isn't any bigger than your pinky."

Instead of flushing red with rage, Little Bitch actually turned his head to the side and blushed like a southern belle at the debutante ball. What the fuck was this guy? "I could still get her knocked up, though. That could be something we could use. Like with Mama."

"It's an interesting suggestion, but I don't want to wait that long. Mama was a special case. No, no, we need to try a new tactic with this one. Rape will only turn her into a sex doll, and I'm not interested in one of those. I want a sword."

"We don't need her," Little Bitch scoffed. "Let's just smash her head open."

"No, I want her. She and that mutt took down 11 of our men before we captured her. And not all of
them were newer recruits. She may not look the part, but this woman is a seasoned weapon, possibly of legendary caliber. We'll break her. I always get what I want." He set his sledgehammer down on the desk, and to my surprise, pulled out my bag, along with all of my weapons. I nearly cried at the sight of Zeus, but I was so dehydrated, I didn't have any liquid left to spill. He dug through my things, pulling out each item and setting them carefully on the desk after a close examination.

"A letter, but it seems this Emogene is long gone. Pity. A couple of snacks, a now rotten ear of corn. And what's this? A holotape."

My heart skipped a beat. No. Oh no.

"It's convenient that she has a pip-boy. I don't have any kind of holotape player around. Here, Little Bitch, play it for me."

"Hello, Susan. It's your mother."

A pained whine trickled out of my throat. It hurt.

"Ah, Mama's girl, I see. Let's play this a couple of times then. It should comfort you to hear the sound of her voice."

By the third loop, Judge Zeller grew bored of this obvious pain, and he stashed all of my things back into my bag to be taken away to some unknown storage. He left it at that for the day, probably to give himself some more time to come up with ideas than to give me a break. Thanks to the sleeping ban, I now spent yet another night wide awake. When I began to pass out from sheer exhaustion, they moved me to an open room, where they strapped me to a table to feed me some drug intravenously that kept me awake. Where did they get that kind of thing?

By this point, the hallucinations had begun. They were auditory at first, the sound of insect legs skittering across a wood floor, the scratch of nails on chalkboard turning into the screech of tires and then into a scream. The shadows boiled, filled with thousands of tiny little eyes all trained on me. I heard Dogmeat's howl, his silvery blue ghost bounding past me, chasing after some invisible thing. They came and went, so that soon I couldn't tell what was reality and what was my mind turning against itself. Thanks to the drug, there was no need for guards, and so I was left all alone.

That night, at least, I assume it was night --the room was completely windowless-- I heard ferals. They were just outside of my room, clawing at the door, sneaking in the shadows. I screamed, despite how raw my throat felt. I didn't care about the very real possibility of me choking on my own blood, or that anyone who heard my screams would not be my friend. Ferals were no friends of the raiders, and they would come kill them, just to save themselves. But no matter how much I screamed, even when it was punctuated with wet coughs, the ferals kept up their howling, their clawing, their gnashing. I couldn't see them, but I just knew they were there. I was strapped to this table, completely defenseless. I wet myself, a sensation that was not new to me, and the smell filled my nostrils, but still I could think of nothing but the creatures that wanted to eat me.

Somehow, I screamed myself into darkness.
I awoke on a sleeping bag, still naked, but the most comfortable I had been in ages. My body ached so deeply that even trying to turn onto my side caused unstoppable tremors. The heaviness of my limbs told me I had slept for an amazingly long time, and yet I still felt dead tired. My head seemed to have become a helium balloon, light and missing some unknown pressure, before I realized that someone had been petting my hair in a loving manner. When I fully managed to turn over in my bed, I found Judge Zeller kneeling on the floor beside me, hitting me with a million watt smile. I'd never seen him look so happy. He lifted my unresisting hand to bestow a dry kiss upon my knuckles.

"You did so good, my dear, so brave. I just need one more thing from you. Do you think you can walk?"

I barely had the energy to shake my head no, but he was already lifting me up with strong limbs. My legs trembled underneath me like a newborn foal, and the minute he let my full weight rest upon them, I collapsed.

For some reason, he shushed me like I were a wailing infant, even though I hadn't made any noise. He picked me back up, slung one arm over his shoulder to help me walk. "I know it's hard, my dear, but I promise you'll get to lay back down soon. Just muster up that admirable strength of yours and follow me."

Not like I have a choice. The man practically dragged me through the broken hallways of his Courthouse, the path winding and long to take a safe route down and down. He ended up leading me to some kind of basement. We were up on a dirt ledge, the majority of the room dug much, much deeper. Directly in front of us was a metal walkway leading to a short industrial elevator. Curiously, it held a large green trunk. All of that, I ignored in favor of the noise that hit me like a howling wind. The cacophony down there was a blanket of horrifyingly familiar deathly squawking.

No, no, oh god, no. I made distressed whines, struggling further into the Judge's hold, but only to get away from that ledge that I knew led to certain death.

My weak struggles were like a breath of air against my captor. He held me easily, but firmly. Now there was a reason to shush me. "I told you this day would come. Everyone always breaks."

"Why?" It was all I could get out, but he seemed to understand what I meant.

He forced me to face the ledge, to the freight elevator that would inevitably lead me down to my worst nightmare. He spoke directly into my ear, words inappropriately soothing and gentle. "You know how powerless you feel right now? How inhuman? I felt like that once, too. Now, I'm the one with all of the power, and I'll never feel that way again." Then he pushed me forward, over the walkway.

I struggled, God as my witness, I spent every last ounce of my strength fighting that man, but I was too weak, too tired. I could see, over the walkway and through the metal grating the absolute sea of feral ghouls, each clambering on top of the other to get to me. He maneuvered me into the trunk. It
was large, but I had to curl up into a ball to fit.

"Please," I croaked, somehow finding the tears to spill wastefully across my face. My dry, chapped lips soaked them up thirstily.

The Judge smiled, such a kind smile. "How does Ghoulie sound as a name? No matter, I'll come up with something soon." He pushed the lid down, the click of a padlock ominously loud over the screams of the ferals.

Then my stomach jumped into my throat as I could feel the elevator descend, and the shrieks of the ferals rose higher. I knew when I had reached the ground because my entire world shook with thunderous crashes and earthquakes. I could only hope that the trunk would be stronger than them.

The ferals had been so terrifying, that I didn't think about the total darkness or the fact that I couldn't move from my position. I had a little bit of wiggle room, but somehow that made it worse. It wasn't enough, it was never enough, and then the need to move, just fucking move, overrode even my terror of the ferals clawing at the lid of my trunk. I even began to wish that they would break it open just so I could move. I screamed and screamed, rocking the trunk as much as the ferals did.
I don't know how long I stayed in there. It could have been hours, it could have been days. It felt like I had always been in this darkness, this absolute stillness. Like I didn't have a body at all, and that's why I couldn't move. "Hancock, Nick, somebody, save me, please..."
I imagined what it would be like when I got out, when I was finally born into the world, emerging from my trunk like a chick from its egg. In my fantasies, Hancock was there, decked out in blood red coat, tricorner hat pointed at me, always at me. He held out a hand, and I took it and he lifted me up and up. John, John, John. It became my prayer, my mantra. I was a monk, speaking the name of God.

How could I have missed the feeling of being lifted up? The ferals were endless in their energy and fervor. My trunk was constantly shaking about so that when it was lifted and grew still, my insides were still shaking, so nothing seemed to be amiss. But then Zeus hurled his lightning bolt and it struck me in the eyes so that all I could see was blinding white.

"How's my precious little songbird doing?" Zeus cooed at me. "You sung so beautifully before, but now you've grown quiet. Did you damage your pretty throat? Here you go, drink up."

Mana, ichor of the gods, poured down from the light and into my throat. I cried from the sheer relief I felt. I didn't know anything could feel this good.

Another voice, one more crass chortled, "Look at this dumb bitch. Bet she'd suck my cock just for something to drink."

"Please, she wouldn't be able to find the tiny thing. Now, is that better, my dear? Can you speak?"

I opened my mouth and pushed out air, but all that came out was a dry rasp.

"A little more, then."
After two more gulps, my throat became tangible enough to make noises into the shapes of words. "I'll...sign..." My vision was starting to come back, small blurs of color polluting the pure white.

"I know you will."

I never felt more betrayed than when the lid closed down on me a second time.

*Something changed in the notes of the storm. It was small, hardly noticeable at first, but this constant storm was all I ever heard, and I knew it would be background noise in my head for the rest of my days. Then it became bigger, louder. A different storm clashing with my own. Wailing winds, the crack of lightning. Then the earthquakes stopped. The world righted itself, though I didn't know which way was right. The other storm was growing powerful, beating my storm.*

And then, as suddenly as it started, silence. Complete and utter silence. That had never happened before. Not even when God had visited. A sick feeling like hope rose in my throat. Hancock! He'd come to rescue me! Soon, the lid would open, heavenly light would pour in, and there'd be Hancock, hand held out to me with a smile and a "Hey, Sunshine." I began sobbing when I felt the shift in gravity that told me I was being raised up, and then a large clack!

*I'm so sorry,* I wanted to shout, loud enough for him to hear over the blood rushing in my ears. *It's all my fault. You were right, you were always right. But I do love you, I do, I do. I was just afraid you wouldn't love me too.* A white line stretched across my view. One dimension. My horizon line. Then the white sun began to rise, oh so slowly. Two dimensions. Then my world was completely encompassed in white, and I took my first breath into this three-dimensional world. I took another breath, and then another. The light faded away, the shell fell off, and I looked upon my rescuer.

"Danse?"
For any of you who skipped over the torture scene, all you need to know is that she had been locked in a trunk in a pit of ferals.

I always thought Preston should get to be the Minutemen General. I know it's kind of Bethesda's thing to make you the leader of all of the factions, but he deserved that promotion, okay?

I changed the character of Judge Zeller a bit. I thought he was too stereotypical raider for someone who picked such an interesting name (especially considering female SS was a lawyer.) Also, all of his "Jury" are complete originals. So, what does that say about my mind that the only OCs aside from the SS so far are psychotic raiders, I don't know.
Godmeat

Chapter Summary

We finally get Dogmeat's origin story.

Chapter Notes

Hilariously enough, I met a dog named Judge today.

WARNING: There is going to be mentions of animal abuse in this chapter. None of it happens "on screen", but just a warning.

Something cold was pressing against my right hand. It was pleasant, like a cool glass of lemonade on a hot summer's day, or a gentle breeze after laboring outside in the sun. Strange then to find myself not on my grandparent's porch, but glancing up at a clinical white ceiling. The lighting was dim, only a single lamp on a cabinet on the other side of the room, but I could tell I was in some kind of medical bay. I tried to sit up, but a twinge in my arm alerted me to the IV. The thought was not rational, but I was positive that I was back at the Courthouse, small plastic tube filtering in the drug that would keep me awake.

Making distressed keens, I ripped the IV out of my arm, cringing at the horrible pain. I struggled to get up but the blankets around me were constricting me, and I couldn't move, I couldn't move. I fought, shouting, and then suddenly hands were pushing me down, immobilizing me further, and it was the Judge, pushing me down into that small trunk, and my efforts increased, I was screaming at the top of my lungs, and it was amazing I could hear the pained cry of "Ow! Damn dog!" and then the hands were gone and I was free to launch myself off of the bed.

Unfortunately, the medical bed was lifted a bit higher than normal beds, so the fall hurt. But it didn't matter, because I could move all of my limbs, stretch my arms out and kick my feet around. The panic subsided, allowing me to better observe my surroundings. The first thing I noticed was a familiar furry face padding up to me, tongue lolling out.

"Dogmeat!" I cried, throwing my arms around his fluffy neck. God, my voice sounded terrible, like scratch paper. Felt like it too. "You're alive!"

"I should damn well say he is, stupid mutt." Behind Dogmeat, a bald, older man was shaking his hand, as if the pain were something he could fling off. "Look, lady, I wasn't trying to hurt you. You shouldn't rip out an IV like that."

I held Dogmeat tighter. Where was I? What was going on?

The man, seemed to take note of my wary look, and so he let his anger melt off. "I'm Knight-Captain Cade, the medical officer on board the Prydwen, the headquarters of the Brotherhood of Steel. You were rescued by a small company of soldiers led by Paladin Danse, who I've been informed you've
"met before?"

I nodded.

"Good, then he can deal with you. I'll go fetch him." He paused at the doorway, turning back to me. "I specialize in healing wounds of the body, not of the mind. I'm afraid you'll have to find help elsewhere for that." Then he left.

The time alone was nice. A chance to breathe. So I had been rescued, just by Danse instead. I remembered now, the light of my new world shining down on me, causing my eyes to water. And then there was Danse, light behind him like a halo, the first thing I saw after my rebirth. I was to be repurposed, remade, broken down into my bare essence and then built back up again. The Judge was supposed to tell me what my new purpose was, but now he was presumably dead. Would Danse tell me? Would he make me into a soldier for the Brotherhood of Steel? I would be fine with that. Surrounded by compatriots, a strong, clear purpose in mind.

I was still sitting there, on the floor, wearing paper thin gray pajamas, hugging Dogmeat who sat there dutifully, when Paladin Danse arrived. He was wearing an orange flight suit. So strange to see him out of his power armor. He looked more like an average guy in his jumpsuit and less like some sort of cyborg. His face, usually stoic, was now a kaleidoscope of emotions, mainly pity. I imagine I must look pretty pathetic, but still I didn't stand or release Dogmeat.

"I'm glad to see you're awake." He spoke softly, as if to a wild animal. "If you are calm enough now, I would like it if you would allow Knight-Captain Cade to perform a check-up, and then I will debrief you on the situation."

Same old Danse, still speaking like a police report. I nodded.

Knight-Captain Cade emerged from behind Danse's taller form. He made slow movements, warily asking me to sit up on the bed again. He had nothing to fear. The panic was gone. The medic poked and prodded over my body, shining a flashlight into my eyes, which hurt, and asking me a multitude of questions. I answered them in as few syllables as possible, taking stock of my body along with him. Sensitivity to light, which should go away after a while, slight muscle atrophy, sporadic nerve pain in the legs and back, loss of feeling in the left hand, tissue damage to the throat, a scar on the jaw, missing two teeth, scar on the right knee and left hip; dehydration, malnutrition from starvation, underweight. The stomach had likely shrunk, so keeping food down for a while was going to be difficult. The hair on my left temple had been shaved to make way for the stitches.

Knight-Captain Cade prescribed lots of rest, plenty of water, and only eating liquid or soft foods for a while, until I could regain my strength. "Oh, and I'm prescribing you a low dosage of Med-X while you're in physical therapy, to help with the muscle pain. Don't abuse it, cause I won't be getting you any more." He handed me a small syringe of purple liquid before leaving. So I ended up sitting on the bed, Dogmeat's chin resting on my knee, one hand mindlessly scratching the top of his head (I had to keep looking at it to make sure that I was still scratching where I was supposed to. I couldn't feel his coarse fur, even as I saw my fingers sink into the black hairs) while the other was on my head, feeling over the stubble where my hair once was. The other side of my head still had my long hair. I must look like Fahrenheit now. I'd have to get it cut.

Paladin Danse pulled up an aluminum chair to my bedside, so that when he sat down, I was actually taller than him. I don't know if he planned that, but it made me feel a little bit stronger. "What happened?" I asked.

"Approximately ten days ago, Dogmeat showed up at the airport, barking like crazy. The guards there wouldn't let him in, even began shooting at him to get him to leave, but he kept returning. It
wasn't until the next day when Scribe Haylen was down at ground level to discuss inventory with one of our Proctors that she recognized him. She sensed that something must be wrong, so she told the guards to back down and let the dog go where he wants." He looked down at the dog, a proud smile on his face. "He's a very smart and loyal creature. He led her to the school where the raiders were camped at. She returned to grab me and a handful of soldiers and we staged a rescue, following your dog's lead."

I paid more attention to scratch Dogmeat's head instead of my own. Such a good boy. "You'll be happy to know that we killed everyone in that building, including the pit of ferals you had been submerged in."

That did make me feel happy. The Judge and his Jury would never come after me or anyone else ever again.

"I took you back to the Prydwen, where you could receive proper medical attention. You've been in a medically induced coma for the past three days. The Knight-Captain said it would be best to make sure your body got the rest it badly needed."

Drugs to keep me awake and then drugs to keep me asleep. I almost laughed. Instead, I asked "Why?"

He looked at me as if I had suddenly started speaking in Chinese. "You underwent intense physical and psychological--"

I shook my head. No, why did you rescue me? But it had hurt too much just to say that one word.

"Why...help you?"

I nodded.

"You must think I'm some kind of monster. Despite whatever disagreements we may have had, you are still a person, a human being. It's humanity's nature to help out their fellow man."

What a surprisingly optimistic view for a man who's part of an organization that doesn't trust humanity to handle technology. I think some of my sass must have shown on my face, because then Danse was hitting me with a reprimanding stare.

"Look, I..." He turned his gaze away, scratching the back of his neck. "We don't have any psychiatrists to help you with the obvious trauma you underwent. But you're not the first soldier to go through hell in the line of duty. We have our brothers and sisters to support us. If...whenever you're ready to talk about what happened to you, I will always be willing to listen. But I understand if you'd prefer Haylen."

I shook my head with a small smile, hoping to convey both my thanks and complete unwillingness to talk about it.

"Understood. I'll leave you alone then." He stood up, but my hand shot out to grab him. He was standing out of my reach so my arm just hung uselessly in the air. "You want me to stay? Alright, then." He sat back down.

I put my arm down, feeling stupid. I had heard that the first thing a newborn chick sees becomes its mother.
Most of my days were spent sipping soup and sleeping in bed. Dogmeat never once left my side, and I showed my gratitude by feeding him some of my food and giving him plenty of pets. Danse and Haylen stopped by often. They mainly chatted at me, and I would reply in nods and shakes of my head. The Knight-Captain had claimed my throat to be completely healed, but still I didn't speak. I refused to open my mouth. I had looked in a mirror once, saw this corpse staring back at me, face gaunt and body weak, teeth missing. I hated that woman.

By the time I was upgraded to solid foods and had gained enough weight, I was put through physical therapy. That had been the most frustrating thing. My limbs were all so weak that walking was a new challenge, and my arms struggled to hold my weight on the parallel bars. Everyone must crawl before they can walk.

It was during one of these therapy sessions that I finally met the leader of the Brotherhood of Steel, Elder Maxson. From what I had been told, he was actually much younger than he appeared, younger than me, in fact. The beard and scars made him seem like a seasoned veteran worthy of leading an army. I disliked him on sight. He looked at people like they were tools, just like the Judge. Even now, as he fixed me with a hard stare, I could feel him sizing me up and picking out my uses.

The initiate helping me with my therapy snapped to attention. Elder Maxson put him at ease with a wave of his hand. He didn't even glance at him. "I apologize for not greeting you earlier, citizen, but it was impressed upon me the need to give you time to rest."

I continued doing my exercises, ignoring him. Just as I predicted, it pissed him off.

"You have been granted a unique privilege, coming aboard the Prydwen as an outsider. Paladin Danse went against protocol, but it was to save the life of a friend, which is both understandable and commendable."

I stretched my legs, leaning forward on one bent knee. My thighs shook with the effort, but I didn't need to use the bars to support myself. Guess I was getting better.

"So tell me, Susan Quinn--" ah, so he does know my name "--why the Brotherhood should continue to expend valuable time and resources on your recovery and housing your pet. What are you going to give back to us?"

So much for helping out your fellow man. How could Danse idolize this guy so much?

"I was warned of your muteness, though I hear there is nothing physically impeding your speech. I understand the psychological trauma a soldier can endure under enemy attention. I sympathize, honestly, but we're not a charity. If you wish to pay us back, to support a noble cause, then you can join our order. If not, we'll be happy to escort you anywhere in the Commonwealth."

When still I didn't answer, he left in a huff. The initiate looked properly scared, eyes wide and lips thin. I turned to Dogmeat, who had been laying on the ground, happily dozing. Guess it's time to leave, huh, Dogmeat?
The bathrooms on the Prydwen had a small mirror cabinet, just above the sink. Normally, I would avoid it, eyes focused on washing my hands. But today, I forced myself to look. The woman staring back was human, no longer a corpse come to life. She was much too skinny, but the short hair and scars made her look tough, not someone to be trifled with. I didn't like this woman. She didn't feel like me. I was not tough. I was scared. I breathed in fear, felt it pumping through my veins, and breathed out terror. Not for the last time, I ran my fingers across my head. My haircut had been done by myself, and my ineptitude showed. The left side was shaved close and the right side a bit longer, making it slightly uneven. As much as I hated my hair before, I wanted it back. Ok, let's try a smile. Ugh, no, don't do that. The missing teeth were obvious. I looked a mess.

"I just couldn't stand looking at the bastard I saw in the mirror anymore."

I flushed, turning my face away, covering my mouth like it was a hideous pimple. I should never smile, never open my mouth too wide. I splashed water on my face to cool it off. "Alright, Susie," I whispered to myself with the minimal movement of my lips, and then I leaned heavily on the metal sink. "What's your next plan of action going to be? No one's going to hold your leash." I forced myself to look into the mirror. I held the woman's hard gaze. "Who do you want to be?"

The answer was instant. I want to be the woman Hancock fell in love with, my doppelganger said.

"Who was she?"

Someone strong. Someone brave enough to fall in love.

"That's not right. She was afraid, but she pushed through anyway. Took a chance on him."

Bravery is not the lack of fear, but action despite the fear.

"Then how do I become brave?"

Face your fear. Conquer it. I'll never feel that way again.'

"Judge was afraid of people owning him, using him, and that's why he did it to others, just like how the Jury did to others what was done to them. The Golden Rule."

So what will you do? Throw people in a pit of feral ghouls?

I shook my head. That wasn't it. "The Judge never conquered his fear. It decided every action of his life."

Then what will you do?

"I need to feel strong again. Powerful."

The squeak of the door opening alerted me to the arrival of one of the senior scribes. She stared at me uncomfortably. "Were you talking to yourself? Wait, I thought you were mute--"
It felt good to have Zeus back in my arms. Just holding him already made me feel stronger. He may not be very useful for close range combat, but I had racked up a lot of kills on this bad boy. Shame that my outfit had been damaged beyond repair. I missed that convenient combat knife sheath pocket built into the pants. I'd have to acquire some supplies though. Even Danse couldn't get them to give up the stimpaks and canned food I had been carrying.

"Are you leaving us, Susie?" Speak of the devil.

I glanced over my shoulder, Danse was standing in front of me, in his power armor, sans helmet. "Yes, eventually, but not yet. I'm not sure where to go next." I stood up and smirked at him. "Don't tell me you'll be lonely, soldier boy."

He took my teasing in stride. "I was hoping that once you had gotten a chance to see how we work, you'd be interested in joining. I know Haylen was hoping you'd be a scribe like her, but I think you would make an excellent knight."

Now my smile was a bit sad. "I could do well here, but it's not what I want. I'm sorry, Danse. I'll find some way to repay you and Haylen, I swear it."

"The Brotherhood could use--"

"Not the Brotherhood. You two. I understand that you went against procedure to rescue me. Maxson doesn't seem too thrilled about it."

Danse frowned, looking ashamed. "Of course not. Rules are put in place for a reason, and I broke them. While I do not regret rescuing you, Elder Maxson must think of the good of the whole Brotherhood."

"And I'm sure he's doing a great job of that. The fact of the matter is, it was you and Haylen that rescued me, so it is you two that I owe my life to. Just... if you ever need anything, anything at all, I'll grant it. Well, within reason, of course. I'm not going to eat the hearts of orphan children, or anything like that."

Danse reeled back in appellation. "That's disgusting, of course not."

"And that's why I'm willing to give you this favor."

"So...what will you do? Are you going to go find your... friend? Where was he when you got captured?"

Instead, I said, "What's the scariest place in the Commonwealth?"

He allowed the non sequitur, used to me evading his questions. "I'm not afraid of anything the wasteland can conjure. I'll take on an entire cave full of Deathclaws if it's for the good of the Brotherhood."

I rolled my eyes. "Calm down there, Captain America. You're not running for Elder. I'm sure there's some place that's spooked you before? Anywhere that you didn't dare to tread?"

"I suppose the Institute."

I rolled my eyes. "Anywhere that I can actually get to?"

"Well," he tried to tap his chin before he realized that he was still in power armor. "There is this one
place in Salem. There was nothing wrong with it, really, but I just got this bad feeling. As a soldier, you learn to listen to your instincts. It was just a patrol, so we left."

I flipped my pack on my shoulder and slipped Zeus over the other. "Alright. Take me there."

"Right now?"

"Well, I was planning to say goodbye to Haylen first, but yeah. I believe I've overstayed my welcome."

Flying in a vertibird was one of those memories I knew I'd never forget. The lack of doors on the side had terrified me at first, hardly seemed safe, but when we were strapped in, the ride was surprisingly smooth. I forgot all about my fears when I was hit with that view. I could see the entire Commonwealth, from Glowing Sea to Sanctuary. From up high, the damage was less obvious. Diamond City glowed like the jewel it was, and the skyscrapers made their names literal. All too soon, the vertibird was descending next to some kind of meat cannery.

"This is as close as we can get to the Museum of Witchcraft," Danse yelled over the din of the vertibird's spinning blades. "There's all sorts of dangers around it, so be careful."

Haylen jumped up from her seat. "Oh, and here, take this." She shoved a small medic's bag into my arms.

"Wait, what is this?"

"Just take it," Haylen practically shoved me out of the vehicle.

"You're just trying to wrack up more favors, aren't you?" Dogmeat leapt out of the vertibird after me.

Haylen just smiled and waved goodbye.

I could hear the vertibird revving up to begin takeoff. "Oh, wait, I forgot. You guys need to stop leaning on County Crossing. If you keep bullying them, they'll turn to raiders just to make you uphold your end of the deal. Just pay them for the food, alright?"

The vertibird slowly lifted up, and Danse shouted down at me. "I'll talk to Proctor Teagan." And then they were too far off to hear at all.

When the vertibird disappeared from the dusky sky completely, I turned to look at the museum. I had never been to Salem before. The place was nothing but a tourist trap for people to gawk at the mass slaughter of "witches" hundreds of years ago. Makes you want to laugh when you learn that the property of the accused went up for auction. Yeah, real scared of witches.

The building looked more like a church than a museum. It would be an appropriate location for one if that were true. I tried the front door, but it was locked, and the jingle of chains told me that a mere bobby pin wouldn't be able to open it. There must be another way in. I walked around the building, and honestly, I would have missed it if I hadn't tripped over a dismembered corpse. I felt like I should be terrified, tripping over a dead body at night, but I felt only mild curiosity. Maybe so long as the corpse didn't move or wasn't ghoulified, I was okay? The wounds were curious though. It looked like this person (a woman, I realized when I flipped the torso with my boot) had been maulled by
some terrible beast. A Yao Guai, perhaps. Those things were nasty.

Conveniently, the corpse had a holotape on it. I listened to it, in the silent of the night. The voice of a young woman somewhere around my age broke through the stillness, a Gunner private, I learned. She had a humor about her I could hear underneath the military discipline. It seemed they were transporting some kind of case for Wellingham, the condescending robot back in Diamond City. A strange client for Gunners.

"Major. Major! What found us?" Silence.

"Well, that can't be good," I joked hollowly with Dogmeat.

He sniffed around the corpse, making a kind of wary whining noise, ears pulled back.

"Yeah, me too." I looked towards the building, and under the glow of my pip-boy, found the basement entrance. "Looks like our way in." I pulled open the metal hatch, the rusty squeak painfully loud in the quiet of the night.

The glow from my pip-boy seemed especially bright in the dusty blackness of the basement. Crates and barrels illuminated green, the shine of a metal shelf with all manner of junk on it. I held my breath, an irrational fear that the glow of my pip-boy would lure whatever monster had killed that Gunner to me. *Who knows how long that corpse had been there? Whatever killed her is probably long gone by now.*

*But what if it isn't?*

My finger shook over the button to turn off the flashlight. The floorboards above were sparse and cracked in some places, a faint light from some other room trickling down. It wouldn't be complete darkness. I'll be fine.

When Dogmeat's wet nose touched my hand, I startled, looking down at him. His eyes reflected back the light so that it appeared they glowed green, like radiation. Somehow, that gave me the strength to put enough pressure on the little black plastic circle. My breath disappeared along with the light. I latched onto the scruff of Dogmeat's neck. He didn't make any noise. I hoped I wasn't hurting him, but he let me hold onto him for as long as it took my mind to adjust to the darkness. There was light, as small and faint as it was, but it was as bright as the sun compared to the absolute darkness of the trunk.

*See? You're fine. You can do this.*

"Action despite fear," I whispered to myself. Talking any louder than I was breathing seemed dangerous. Reluctantly, I removed my claws from Dogmeat's fur, and he licked my hand in response. The sensation was both gross and comforting. *I'm here with you,* his tongue seemed to say. I appreciated the thought, even as I wiped my hand on my pants.

We crept forward together, the sounds of Dogmeat's panting and the crunch of my boots on the dirty basement floor sounding like gunfire. I had barely taken more than three steps into the basement when the floorboards above me shook and an inhuman growling breath huffed from above us. I froze, not even daring to breath, feeling the dust fall from whatever monster was taking large steps directly above me. When I could no longer sense it, I continued my crawl, heart pounding so loud the monster had to hear.

Was that...? Oh god! An arm. An arm just fell from a hole in the floor above us, blood dripping down onto the floor like a streamer, crunching noises pervading the air. I clutched onto the wall as
much as I could needing something solid to orient myself. The arm that was still hanging from the hole disappeared, the body attached to it dragged off. Something was definitely up there, and it was eating people.

What the hell am I doing? There's nothing for me here. Just leave.

"I can't," I whispered with no breath behind it. No one said this was going to be easy. I'm not a victim. I don't want to be that lady in the mirror.

I can do this. I can do this. *Just don't scream, and it won't find you.* I proceeded forward through a hole in the wall, the quaking footsteps above me continuing ahead, almost like it was leading me somewhere. With the way the floorboards groaned under the monster's weight, I was honestly surprised it hadn't fallen through yet. I passed by a rusted boiler, following the footsteps like a trail of dusty breadcrumbs. They lead me past a broken door and through some kind of break room with a TV and billiard table and everything. Shame the break room was in the basement, but it was still pretty nice. The wall had a big hole like a gaping wound and past that was only darkness. A pause. No footsteps, only the sound of my breath. Did it leave? Was it waiting for me?

I stepped through the hole. The narrow hallway ended in a stairwell bathed in a soft light, the only illumination in the room. It was still enough for me to see the entire limp body fall from the ceiling on another dead body. I slapped my hand over my mouth to stifle the involuntary scream. Was it taunting me? Was it leading me through the basement, up the stairs, showing me a little of what I would have in store? The stairs loomed just ahead, bright and inviting. Up there, into that light, the monster lay in wait. I could stay here, in the dark. The dark was safe, the storm couldn't get inside.

This time, my hand was muffling my sobs, as I crouched on the ground, crying. This was so scary, and it was dumb, because it shouldn't be scary. I have taken down a Deathclaw, fought entire camps of raiders, and killed the most notoriously dangerous human in the Commonwealth before I even knew close combat. But still, the thought of taking those stairs, of going up into that light... I dropped my head into my knees.

I wanted Hancock. I never thought I would be that girl who couldn't do anything without a man, but the girl that Hancock loved, that could rely on him and be relied on in turn, I wanted to be her. That was my best self, I was happy. I felt strong. And I ruined it all, because I was scared. Scared of needing him, and then, when I found that I couldn't live without him, he'd dump me, and I would only be half of a person.

*And look how well you're doing now.*

"I don't want to be like those girls." Those girls you'd see who would wreck their lives just because a man dumped them. Those girls who would marry the perfect man, rich, handsome, only to watch him twist and turn into a monster before their eyes. Those girls who were chained to these monsters, and could only find freedom in drink. Those girls who would raise their daughter with fear, fear that she would become one of those girls, and end up becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This was too much. I was feeling too much. My right hand twinged with remembered pain, and my tongue was worrying the gums of the newly made gap in my teeth. When I removed my head from my knees, I realized that I was curled up in a ball, on my side, the perfect size to fit into a little green trunk. I sat up, stretched my legs out just to make sure that I could. I could hear them, just beyond the edge of my hearing, somewhere in the dark, a storm of reanimated corpses shaking my entire world.

I needed...I needed something, something to focus on, a distraction. I pulled the small medic's bag that Haylen had thrown at me last minute and began to rifle through it frantically. Maybe there was something in here that could help, a stick of gum or something. My hand stilled. The lack of light
made it difficult to see, but even in the dark, I would know those syringes, know the violet liquid inside. I looked to my left hand, unable to feel the rough canvas material of the pouch. A self-fulfilling prophecy.

The prick of the needle was washed out by the wave of numbness, like a cold shower that didn’t make you shiver. The relief was almost as strong as the numbness and I wanted to cry, but a heavy woolen blanket dampened the feeling before it could swell. I was still scared, could still imagine the different ways I would die, but my heartbeat remained steady, calm. I stood up, not feeling the movement of my limbs but seeing that they obeyed my orders. With a deep breath, I climbed the stairs.

To my amazement, the monster was not lying in wait for me. I entered some kind of backstage area, lit by a solitary lantern. Who lit this lantern? I passed a mannequin which had turned my head in curiosity. That was some strong Med-X. Suddenly seeing the shadow of a person? That was scary as hell, but I didn't jump. Instead I walked through the only door available, the bright light of one of the displays nearly blinding me. The mannequins were all facing a single mannequin tied to a post, presumably to be burned. Did they actually burn the mannequins? Or were there just fans in the ground pointing up to wave about red and yellow streamers? Much of the display had eroded over time, and even some of the mannequins were missing clothes, likely scavenged. I walked closer to it, nearly falling through the floor when my foot stepped over a broken floorboard. It was just on the edge of a hole, covered in blood. The same hole the body had fallen through. The monster had been here. Where was it now?

Maybe it really was leading me to the stairs so we could meet face-to-face. If it even has one.

I rounded the corner. Much of the walls were destroyed, as if a truck had driven through, smashing everything. I could see another display, brightly lit, mannequins poised, and another further down. The monster was strangely absent, considering it had made quite the job of taunting me. I stuck to the shadows, crawling along what walls remained standing, circumventing the displays. Walking into that light just seemed like announcing my location to the monster. Here I am. Come eat me. No, I'd like to sneak around, thank you. Dogmeat bent low to the ground, nose in the air. He smelt something. It was definitely here.

He pointed towards a wall with a hole just ahead of me, ears back, and hackles raised, though he hadn't made any noise yet. Smart dog. I nodded to him, to show that I understood, and carefully made my way to the right, where much of the floor was missing. When I got close, the monster shifted, sniffing, and began to move, heavy footfalls shaking the entire floor. For a terrible moment, I feared the monster could sniff us too, but the footsteps went behind the wall I was pressed up against and past me. I dared to sneak a peek, keeping as close to the peeling wallpaper as I could. I caught only a glimpse of white scales and a tail before it disappeared into another room.

Deathclaw. Holy shit, it was a Deathclaw.

I had only ever killed one with a machine gun from atop a building in power armor. And it had been much smaller. A baby, I now realized. In the close quarters of the museum, a swipe from those huge claws would span an entire room. I’d be dead in seconds. With the way now clear, I snuck as quickly and as quietly as I could into the hallway that the Deathclaw once occupied. What I expected to find, I had no idea, but something compelled me to search the rooms. One door I found wide open.

The body parts that were just enough to piece back together into a complete human were to be expected. Honestly, with as many dead bodies as the Deathclaw kept throwing at me, the shock value had waned. What was surprising was the shattered eggshells strewn about the room. These came from very large eggs. Deathclaw eggs. The story was starting to piece itself together, but the
holotape I found on the body only filled in the details. Nice of these Gunner folks to record their last moments full of exposition. I wonder if it was customary for them to record their missions?

It looks like the Gunners had been hired to steal a Deathclaw egg for Wellingham, and the mother had tracked them down. Well, there was no way in hell I was going to complete the Gunner's job for them, no matter how many caps were involved. Wellingham had refused me service once, because I didn't look like the right type of clientele. His personality wasn't exclusive to just robots; I knew plenty of people back in my parent's circle who acted the same. He could go suck on a Mirelurk egg for all I care. But the Gunner had brought up a good point. Maybe if they just returned the egg, all would be forgiven.

That would mean walking into a Deathclaw nest. Which would be full of Deathclaws. Which I couldn't kill, because then what would be the whole point? Any Deathclaw I had ever encountered had attacked me on sight. I had thought them monsters, evil creatures bent on destruction, but an egg was the symbol of construction, birth. They're just animals. I realized, which shouldn't have been a realization at all. They're just defending their territory and trying to survive like the rest of us. Could I really fault these creatures for living? Deathclaws were deadly, but they held less malicious intent than any fellow human I may cross. "Look, sister, it's a dog eat dog world."

Decided, I walked over to the large metal case, and opened it to find the egg in pristine condition. Hopefully the incubation hadn't been harmed by its travel. The egg felt heavy in my hands, the weight of a life in it. It sagged in my bag on my back, swaddled in boxes of ammo and bottlecaps. Through a hole in the wall, I could see into the main area where the brightly lit displays were. No Deathclaw. Only silence. I doubt she had left the building, but this just might be my only chance to escape undetected. I snuck my way further through the area where a large set of double doors lay in wait. We passed through them, and somehow, it seemed like the danger had passed with those doors shut closed behind us.

We stood in the darkened foyer of the museum, a visitor's terminal glowing green by a door swathed in chains. Had the Gunners set those chains up to keep out the Deathclaw? Well, it certainly hadn't worked. Taking the chains down had been like lighting off fireworks. There's no way the Deathclaw hadn't heard that, unless she was deaf. But this was the only way out. There was no way I could chance sneaking back down to the basement again. No use for stealth anymore, I bust through the doors and out into the crisp night air.

The stars twinkled in the sky, and the light of the moon shined bright down on the earth, so that visibility was actually pretty good considering it was...past midnight, as my pip-boy said. I turned to Dogmeat, standing obediently at my side. "Do you think you could track the nest?" I held my open backpack to him.

He nodded his head, sniffed at the egg, before taking off. If this dog could track Kellogg halfway across the Commonwealth just based on his cigars, then he could find a Deathclaw nest in the next region over. Lynn Woods was a bit of a hike, but not that far. Our way had been slowed down by a couple of mirelurks drifting up from the beachside. They were easy-pickings. Good thing I could still take them down at least. Dogmeat led me past Parsons, an empty graveyard now. The memories it dredged up scoured my brain.

"Are you even capable of love?"

Too fresh, too much. Tears welled up at the corners of my eyes, but I didn't have enough time to dwell if I didn't want to lose sight of Dogmeat. The feelings were coming back slowly, but with full force. The Med-X must be wearing off. I considered stopping to take another dose, just to feel that sweet nothing again, but just stopping to think about it already caused me to lose track of my dog.
Oh wait, there he was, behind a tree. I rushed after him.

The further away we traveled from Parsons, the looser the grip those feelings had. When Dogmeat barked at me to signal that our destination was in sight, I could breathe evenly. We stood in a small canyon, two cliffs boxing me on both sides. There was a large pile of bones and sticks and fur, and snuggled inside was a single egg, just like the one I was carrying. To the side was an open carcass of a brahmin, merely bones with bits of skin still hanging off, and bodies of humans, not yet eaten. The nest. A large roar drew my attention up to the largest Deathclaw I had ever seen, sliding down the side of the cliff like it was nothing. I couldn't help the surprised "Eep!" that escaped me, but I was frozen in place. The Deathclaw fixed its beady, glowing eyes on me, waiting.

The whole time, I didn't breathe, couldn't, as if the demon watching me had cast a curse that stole it away. I stepped closer to the nest, but it only flicked its tail. Slowly, I took off my pack, opened it up, and pulled the Deathclaw egg out like it was the Holy Grail. The Deathclaw's nostrils flared, and its forked tongue shot out to taste the air, but I wasn't instantly mauled. Ok, so far so good. My hands shaking, I placed the egg on the nest, my eyes never once leaving the gaze of the creature. I couldn't even blink. The Deathclaw took a single stride forward, releasing me from the spell to leap back with a gasp. It began throwing dirt on the nest, covering the eggs. Now that I could breathe, I was heaving, oxygen rushing to my brain to make me a little dizzy.

The second roar behind me nearly made me wet my pants. I pivoted on my foot, just in time to see the Deathclaw with the white scales from the museum sliding down the opposite cliff. Her red eyes flickered to me. Albino, I realized. How rare. She walked past me, went up to the larger Deathclaw to lick at the air next to its cheek affectionately. She looked down at the nest, and then back to me. That's when it hit me. She had arrived too soon after I did. She couldn't have been that far behind me, close enough to charge and kill, if she wanted to. Surely she could smell that I had the egg on me?

She was leading me. The egg was in a case, too small for huge Deathclaw hands to open, and her fight with the Gunners had already smashed all her other eggs. She must have been too afraid to try and smash the case open. This was the last one. And she had been trapped inside that building, couldn't get through the chain door. She had been waiting for me, or maybe one of the other Gunners to come by and retrieve the egg for her. I looked over to her, with renewed fear and respect. These creatures were much smarter than anyone thought. Most likely, if I had taken the egg and started to head towards Diamond City, she would have killed me then. But I had headed back towards her nest, so there was no need to kill me.

"You're welcome," I told her, voice quivering. "And I'm sorry." That you lost your other babies, for thinking I had to kill you to feel strong again, for thinking any creature that didn't act the way I wanted it to was a monster.

She walked over to me, tongue poking out, just centimeters away from my face. I stood completely still, and beside me, Dogmeat sat casually, as if a giant death lizard wasn't standing right in front of us. Then she leant down, placing her chin on top of my head, a rumble in her throat buzzing against my hair. Then she lifted her head and walked back to her nest. Was that the Deathclaw equivalent of a pet?

I walked away safely, with new and entirely unexpected friends. Maybe, I don't have to take a life in order to gain control of my own. Wouldn't that be just the same as the Judge?

"She had to die."

"They were just trying to survive."
The Brotherhood clothes I was given were nice, had a lot of pockets. I had ripped off the insignia. Didn't want anyone getting any ideas. I didn't bother with the headgear. Made me look too much like Haylen, in my opinion.

We had been ambushed by raiders in our wanderings. The fight had been terrifying at the time, but the aftermath had left me feeling triumphant. Not to mention, their stuff was nice. I had found a blue bandana, and tied it around my face so that anything below my eyes was covered. It felt more comfortable that way.

My plan had ended in Salem. I wasn't sure where exactly to go next. Hancock... I still wasn't ready to see him. Didn't feel like a real person quite yet. So when we had just been moseying around, and Dogmeat's head suddenly shot up, and he darted towards somewhere, I ran after him. At first, I was sure it was just another radstag. He loved to chase those things. But when he stopped in front of a ruined concrete building, I knew something else was on his mind.

The building wasn't much, rather plain. Above its narrow doorway was the faded lettering "Boston Animal Shelter." I shuddered to think what must have happened to all of those strays stuck in their kennels when the bombs fell. When I tried the door, it ushered me in happily. The inside was an absolute wreck, like a tornado had bowled through. Crinkled papers and junk littered the floor, a door that I could see led to the kennels was barely hanging on its hinges, and any furniture that wasn't the bolted down front desk was toppled. The cheerful light blue paint on the walls was chipping and faded, the logo of a little green dog next to a yellow cat in similar disrepair. Dogmeat didn't stop to stare at the unclean lobby area, he continued past to the kennels.

The cages ranged in sizes, from small enough for a bird or rodent to big enough for a lion. All of them were empty though, thank god. I don't know what it would have done to me to see an animal carcass in a cage like that. Anyway, Dogmeat didn't linger long in the kennels. He pushed past the row of cages, turned a corner and then went through a doorway whose door was lying some feet away. We turned down a narrow concrete hallway.

The change was instant. This hallway looked more like it belonged in an industrial plant. No paint, pipes running along the floors and ceiling. A single, nonworking light in the center. Maybe this led to the basement? Instead it lead to some kind of office area, full of paperwork that would never be filed and a couple of desks with broken terminals on them. Dogmeat bypassed most of what I considered lootable to go to a side room with a little kitchenette and a refrigerator. This must be the break room, then. He waltzed right up to a counter and pointed at a half drunk cup of coffee.

For a minute, I was confused, thinking he meant for me to drink it. Past experience had told me what a horrible idea that would be, but as I got closer, I noticed the keycard right beside it. I picked it up, noting the animal shelter logo. Why would an animal shelter have that kind of security? And not before their kennels?

The pooch didn't give me much time to contemplate this before he was off again. We passed the desks and then through another long, narrow hallway. I observed the cameras on the ceiling. Then we came to what was obviously a security gate, the kind you saw at the airport where they wanted to
scan all of your things with x-rays and give you a pat down. Trying to fly out of the country was insane. Even worse to get back in. Luckily, the security door was already broken open, like it had been trampled by a charging Yao Guai. Past that was a single elevator door, light still on. Must have its own separate generator or something. There was no button to call it, only a card reader. I didn't need the hint to swipe my newly acquired keycard. Sure enough, the doors slid open with a cheerful ding! and we stepped inside.

The elevator shook unnervingly so during its descent, the lights flickering. Most of the elevators did this now, if they even worked in the first place. I don't know what I expected at the bottom, some kind of janitor's area, the generator room, or what, but a full-blown science lab was not it. The area was large and that clinical white that only doctors can achieve. Along the left wall were cells with viewing windows, just large enough for a human to exist in comfortably. The only way out through sliding doors. All of them were broken open. That couldn't be good.

To my right were more cells, but also a couple of doors that led to more rooms, and directly ahead were a set of stairs that would take me to an even lower level. A part of me knew why there would be a science lab underneath an animal shelter, but I refused to listen to it. Especially when Dogmeat began growling, the sign of an incoming fight. I whipped out Zeus, ready for anything.

With a ferocious growl, a great green beast leapt out of one of the open cells, charging toward me with its hideous face. I fired twice, and it fell to the ground, unmoving. The noise alerted more, and I had to take down three more before it was safe to explore. Dogmeat stopped leading me, so whatever it is he had wanted, it was in this lab. I walked over to the green thing that had attacked us. It was one of those super mutant hounds you would see sometimes led by their once human counterparts. They weren't usually underground, and not without their bipedal compatriots. And yet, no super mutants came.

With the way cleared, I walked downstairs. The lower level had giant tubes of transparent orange liquid bubbling about inside. The walls were lined with giant computers, lights still flashing, and rolls of magnetic tape still slowly turning. In fact, the entire laboratory appeared to have full power. It must be on its own separate nuclear generator. We passed by some sort of medical ward, although it looked more like a surgeon's observation room, metal table lit ominously by a single overhead light. I doubted that it was a place of healing.

Past that, I found an office, furnished with a bookshelf stocked full of thick scientific and medical books that made me go cross-eyed just reading their titles. An American flag hung on the wall, staring directly at shiny award plaques and degrees. The owner of this office was a real egghead. Other than that, there wasn't much in the way of personal effects. The desk was neat, a clipboard with diagrams and writings full of so much technical jargon, it might as well have been in a separate language, a pencil laid on top at an angle, an empty glass of Nuka-Cola sitting next to a glowing terminal. The screen showed only Today I', an incomplete text document. I sat down in the cushy office chair, and backed out of that directory all the way to the main menu.

Welcome to Robco Industries (TM) Termlink

Welcome, Jamal. Please select an entry:
[05/01/75]
[06/12/75]
[01/15/76]
[02/25/76]
[03/03/76]
[04/01/76]
[08/05/76]
So this was some guy named Jamal's journal. Most people didn't keep their personal journals at work, but maybe it was an activity log? But Dogmeat led me here for a reason, and finding mutant hounds in a place that looked like it hadn't been accessed since the bombs fell was suspicious. Curious, I clicked on the first entry.

05/01/75

It's my first big project working for CIT. I'm the Head of Research, basically the guy actually doing all of the science, while Jeffery has to talk with the big wigs about financing and "results." That's all those fellas up top ever care about. They don't see the implications a supposed "failure" might have. Many of science's greatest advances were the results of failures.

But I digress. I've decided to start an activity journal to mark our progress as I see it. Jeff likes to spin things. We've been tasked with creating "super soldiers" which is incredibly vague and something out of a comic book, but the U.S. military wants what it wants. We've been given a mutated strain of FEV, known already to produce most of the results they're looking for. We just need to fix all the problems. Like we've been given a program full of bugs, and they want us to fix it. I'd rather just create a new program, but this is my chance to make a name for myself.

CIT? The Institute? This lab must have been apart of the college before the war, though it was frightening to know that the government was using university scientists to create genetic weapons. Although, if the FEV was involved, then that would explain all of the mutant hounds. I continued to read.

06/12/75

I'm going to punch Jeff in his ugly little face. "I don't care that you're black," like it's some big accomplishment to like a black person. I know what they're all saying. That I was only put in charge for statistics, to make the university look diverse. That's bullshit. It's because I've got two PhD's in BioScience and Engineering and another in Biology and I graduated Valedictorian. It's because I'm smarter than any of these phonies.

And now Jeff says that the board is having second thoughts about putting me in charge just because it's been over a month? If it had been Whitey McPaleface in charge you know damn well they wouldn't be riding his ass like a rodeo. I'm not going to let them pressure me. Science happens when it happens. We can't speed up the experiments.

01/15/76

Glinda upstairs says we're out of dogs. Not even a damn cat. Everyone adopts for the Christmas
season, so there’s no strays. Yet. We’re running out of test subjects. Running under an animal shelter was a good front, gave us a wide variety of subjects, but the flow is so sporadic. Sometimes we’ll have too many, and then others not enough. We have to let some of the animals be adopted, or people might get suspicious.

So far, every subject has died under this latest strain. They’re not even mutating like the virus does to humans. They are just dying. We started with animals first because they are more easily attainable and more humane to experiment on than humans. I’ve heard of some places out west using the internment camps, but that’s a very limited number. Unless they start getting even crazier with this Red scare. These Americans find Communists behind every door.

02/25/76

We finally did it. The subjects are stabilizing. Before, most of them wouldn’t last the week, but now they are successfully mutating, and not a single one has died yet. This news couldn’t have come a moment too soon. Jeff says the board was thinking of scrapping this whole project and starting over with a completely different team. They’re going to come to the lab tomorrow to view the subjects in person. We’re going to set up a little demonstration of their capabilities so far: superior strength, increased sensitivity in the olfactory system, rapid regenerative properties.

03/03/76

There’s been a bit of a snag. The subjects exude all of the properties that the military wants: super strength, immunity to disease and radiation, the whole nine yards. Except for their cognitive processes seem to have degenerated as a result. These things are dumb as hell. Completely untrainable. We’ve lost two behavioral experts trying. They may be dumb, but they’re quick as lightning and stronger than a grizzly bear. Not to mention those fangs are pretty big. As they are now, they’re more of a liability than a weapon.

04/01/76

Apparently no one here can take a joke. I thought we had gotten to know each other pretty well over the course of the year. Amir had been a pretty swell guy, and Roscoe usually laughed at my witticisms. So when I decided to play "How Much is That Doggie in the Window" on the loudspeakers, my mail suddenly flooded with complaints. It was "inappropriate" and "in bad taste." Now these guys get a conscience? Roscoe laughed though.

08/05/76

Mom always told me that I would never find love as I am, that I could never be happy. But she was wrong. She was so wrong. I’m so happy and Roscoe is perfect. We have to keep it a secret, of course.

12/29/76

I fucked up. I just wanted it to be a present, but the others are getting suspicious. They just think we’re really good friends, for now. Roscoe wants us to cool it. He’s scared.
02/15/77

Turns out Roscoe was just another coward. I've had to deal with shit all my life just for how I looked, what's one more thing? He said we had to end it. That it was going nowhere. Shit, I was in love with that man. I had wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. The worst part of it all is that now I've lost my best friend too.

It's for the best though. We've been ignoring the project, and Jeff says the board is on edge. Things are getting pretty hot from what I can tell. They want this weaponized soon. So I'm going to spend some of my nights here, get some extra work in.

04/30/77

One subject, K9-V5 has survived the virus with no deformities whatsoever. There were no physical defects like all the others, it still has all the desired attributes, with god-like regenerative powers. I'm thinking of going down that avenue next in testing. And from what I can tell so far, none of the mental declines have occurred. In fact, the K9-V5 has only gotten smarter, almost to human-level. This is a huge success!

Only one problem. All attempts to replicate it have failed. I don't know if it's the breed, or something in its DNA, or if there were environmental factors. We've been very careful to reduce any outside variables. The board is ecstatic, but if this can't be replicated, then it's completely useless.

06/21/77

K9-V5 appears to be immortal. Any wound eventually heals with time: broken bones, burns, lesions, all the way down to minor contusions. I have yet to try anything mortally damaging, like chopping off its head or removing organs. I'm afraid I might actually kill him before finding out what is the X-factor that worked.

07/15/77

I've decided to pick a name for K9-V5. They warn you not to, you'll get too attached and your objective focus becomes clouded, but after everything I've put this stray through, I feel he deserves a name. I decided to go with Dezik. The others don't like it, too Russian, too Communist.

07/28/77

Jeff denied my request for funding to build a collar that could translate Dezik's thoughts into English. Said we need to focus on repeating these results. Not make man's best friend. What an asshole.

09/30/77

I believe I have underestimated Dezik's intelligence all this time. We got the MRS results back, and I'm floored. The amount of brain activity... This dog is by far the smartest creature on Earth. I have already been able to tell that he could understand our language, not just the tone of voice, but the words we were saying, and I had thought we could find a way to communicate verbally together (although that sub-project had been turned down) but now I'm wondering if he hasn't been playing with me all along. He's passed every single intelligence test I've put him through. Honestly, I believe
that if his vocal chords didn't limit his phonetic sounds, he just might start talking to me.

And for some reason, he is only producing these results in front of me. I've captured footage of these results, but the minute I show them to someone else in person, he acts like a normal dog. What is his angle?

10/16/77

Dezik scares me. I know how foolish it sounds, but I think he has precognitive abilities. He got loose, and instead of trying to escape or making a run for the elevator, he goes to my office, digs through my desk to find an old photo of Roscoe that I still had. He just sat there, holding it gently in his mouth. We tranquilized him and put him back in his cell, but I think it was unnecessary. I think he would have come willingly.

Thing is, the next day, Roscoe died in a car accident. There's no way he could have known that was going to happen. It's true that dogs can sometimes sense disease in humans, but their impending accidental death? How could he have known?

10/22/77

I think I've created a god, or a superior being with god-like powers. Every test I give him, he passes with flying colors. He easily could have escaped this place, opposable thumbs or no. He is totally obedient, but I know that he has complete understanding of his situation. Why hasn't he killed us all yet? Does he not want revenge? Divine retribution? All he does is sit in his cell and look straight at me with those black eyes. I gave him the lethal injection, tried to put him down. But he just slept it off.

The others say I'm crazy, that I've lost my mind because of Roscoe's death (the death of a "good friend", they say), but I know that this goes far beyond super strength and being able to do a couple more neat tricks. I'm glad we couldn't replicate this. Wouldn't that be terrifying.

I'm going to do it tomorrow. I'm going to try to kill him. We've yet to see if he'll grow back missing body parts or if they can be reattached. If he doesn't come back from this, then it's probably for the best.

My hands sat poised over the keyboard, unable to move. This...this was a lot to process, and I wasn't sure which part was more shocking: that my best friend was apparently some kind of super dog, that he was tortured, or that he had consciously led me here to find all of this out. The chair swiveled, slowly facing me towards the dog sitting innocently on the floor, watching me with bright eyes. Dogmeat was always pretty smart, for a dog.

"So Dezik, huh? Didn't like the name?"

Dogmeat made a face, shaking his head.

I laughed, eyes burning. "I wish he had gotten the chance to make that collar. I have so many questions. Is everything here true? Are you really immortal?"

He nodded his head.

"Was he right...at the end? Are you a god?"
The face he made was priceless. I couldn't help laughing a second time, this time a tear did escape. "I think he was about to start worshipping you at the end. He didn't actually...do all the things he said he was going to do, did he?"

He shook his head this time, padding over to the computer screen and pointing to the last journal entry. I noticed at the date.

"The bombs fell before he could. I... It sounds horrible, but I'm glad they did. Weirdly intelligent dog or not, you didn't deserve that.” I wondered why I didn't see any skeletons or corpses lying around. Most places had at least one or two. Then I remembered all the mutant hounds that had still been down here. Most likely they were eaten.

That earned me a tail-wagging lick to the hand.

"Why did you bring me here? Why now?"

He sniffed at my left hand, tail wagging happily.

I didn't get it, at first. But if this had taught me anything, it's that Dogmeat did everything with a purpose. The left hand was not as easy to reach as the right, was that significant? "Are you...are you trying to say that you understand?"

He licked my left hand.

Now I really did cry. Using my free hand to pet him, trying to pour all of my love into that action. I hoped he understood how much he means to me. "Why me, Dogmeat?" I don't know why I started whispering all of a sudden. "Why did you choose me?"

He sat back on his haunches, head cocked curiously to the side in thought. Then he grabbed the pencil off of the desk with his mouth. At first, I thought he was going to write on the clipboard, but instead he went to the terminal, using the pencil to peck away at the keyboard.

u change comonwelth

He dropped the pencil, staring at me expectantly.

"I can't change anything," I tried to explain to him. "How could someone like me change the Commonwealth? I'm just one little person."

He only sat there, point made.

Chapter End Notes

And here we get Dogmeat's origin story. He can't die (literally, it's in the programming. He doesn't even have any dying animation), so I felt this was the only logical solution.

"crunching noises pervading the air" Sweeney Todd reference.

I had a lot of problems with the Devil's Due quest, though I thought it was fun.

1. How in the hell did that Deathclaw fit inside that building if the front doors were chained? There's no way it could have fit through the basement. Does this mean that the
Gunners chained the door shut after she got inside? Why?

2. You find the Deathclaw egg just sitting there in that room. From the holotape you find on the sergeant, you know she killed him and thus had been in the same vicinity as the egg. It wasn't even in a case or anything. If she can track them all the way from Lynn Woods, surely she should be able to get her egg from the same room she was in. And who knows how long she's been in there. You don't hear any fighting or screaming, so the Gunners are long dead. That means she just sat there, not grabbing her egg, waiting for you to show up to possibly whisk it away into omelette land.

3. The fact that you can sneak past the Deathclaw. I know that's just game mechanics, but surely Deathclaws have a good sense of smell. Not as good as dogs, sure, but most reptiles have a better sense of smell than humans.

So this was my solution to all of that. Plus, I just really wanted her to become friends with a Deathclaw.

It was so hard for me not to type Salem Museum of Witchcraft and Wizardry this whole time.

Dezik: first dog in space, flew on Soviet Rocket.
Unforgettable

Chapter Summary

Susie heads back to Goodneighbor and reunites with some old friends.

Chapter Notes

This is my favorite chapter. The scene at the end was the one that started it all, the inspiration for this entire behemoth. I spent the majority of writing it screaming and crying.

The entrance to Goodneighbor could be easily missed, even with the neon sign pointing the way. A small, single door in a fence comprised of junk. Seemed more like the gateway to a single building instead of a whole town. Even on this side, I could hear the murmur of city life over the fence. Compared to Diamond City, you felt a bit underwhelmed, which was probably the point. Hancock was all about equality, and it showed in his city planning.

"You'd think they'd have guards posted outside or something," I told Dogmeat. "Seems like it'd be too late if an enemy gets inside the town."

He stopped his panting, tongue sneaking back inside his mouth.

"I know, I know, quit stalling." I felt the blue bandana over my nose, made sure it was snug, took a deep breath, and opened the door to Goodneighbor for the first time in weeks. To my surprise, it looked just the same as I always remembered it. Drifters drifting, the neighborhood watch watching, and crows pecking at garbage littering the paved roads. My hands shook at my sides. The ghoul standing next to the door in his suit and hat looked at me suspiciously. Hank, my mind supplied.

"You jonesin'? Fred Allen over at the Hotel Rexford can hook you up." He nodded his head in the general direction of the hotel.

"I'm fine, thank you."

His eyes widened at my manners, clearly not expecting it. I know we didn't really know each other all that much, but it's not like I'd ever been anything but polite to the guy. Not wanting to test my nerves on him, I made my way to Daisy's Discounts. It's usually the first stop people go to, and now was no different.

The curtains were pulled back, and Daisy stood behind the counter, lazily wiping the deformed wooden finishing with a dirty rag, more to keep herself busy in the downtime than to actually clean anything. Her brown wig was still pulled in that familiar bun, and her beige suit still a little too small on her. I told her once that she really needed longer sleeves, but the lady would just shrug her shoulders. Living in a radioactive wasteland, who had the time to care about short sleeves?

When I stepped up to the counter, her black eyes lit up. "Welcome to Daisy's Discounts. You buyin' }
or sellin’?"

I froze. Was she joking or...? Her face held no recognition or affection. With a start, I realized that the blue bandana was still covering the majority of my face. No wonder Hank was being weird. Carefully, I undid the knot at the back of my skull, fingers tickled by the short hairs there. I clutched the piece of cloth in front of my chest, careful not to open my mouth and hyper aware of Daisy's eyes trailing along the scars along my jaw.

She looked from my face, to the wrung bandana in my hand, then back to my face. "...Are you selling that?"

I had felt this way once before, not too long ago, when Little Bitch had gotten so angry he choked me into unconsciousness. So with my throat constricted and eyes burning, I tied the bandana back around my face, blurted out a quick "sorry" and then bolted out of there. Dogmeat, who had been sitting outside her shop, followed me. I slipped down an alleyway, just to be away from all of these familiar faces for a while. Distantly, I realized that this was the alleyway that would take you to Bobbi's old place. What ever happened to her? Did she find a better life outside of Goodneighbor?

"She forgot me, Dogmeat." My voice sounded hoarse and unused. Really, I should have expected this. Haylen and Danse would always comment on how different I looked. Not just the haircut, but my eyes. No wonder Daisy didn't recognize me. "Guess I didn't heal enough, huh?" My teeth began to ache, my tongue nudging the vacant gums. Wiping my eyes, I bucked up and headed down the old familiar pathway to the Hotel Rexford. Hank had given me a good tip.

"Ah, man, someone new!" Fred said the words with cheer, even as they rubbed salt in my fresh wound. "You need some Jet, man? Home brewed. Reasonable prices."

"How much Med-X do you have?"

After doing business with the chipper dealer, I rented a room from a grumpy Clair and sat on the uncomfortable mattress. I could feel the liquid pumping through my veins, chilling me until I was as numb as a hypothermia victim. I fell back on the mattress, feeling my body relax and air enter my lungs. Sweet relief.

Dogmeat still sat in the open doorway, whining piteously.

"Don't give me that look. It's medicine. 'S got 'med' in the name and everything." I turned over, my limbs feeling pleasantly heavy. "I'm not strong enough yet. When I'm back to my old self, I'll stop, ok? Not all of us can be super dogs."

He didn't say anything, of course he didn't, but I could still feel the disapproval coming off of him in waves. It didn't matter. The Med-X numbed everything, and now I could think. So Daisy didn't recognize me. If I had stayed long enough to explain who I was she probably would, but I had been expecting hurt to begin with, so I ended up running off. Really, I should go back and explain myself, but the thought of seeing those blank eyes... Even under Med-X that made me want to hurl.

_I should just go find Hancock and get this over with._ But if I met Hancock now and he were to have those some blank eyes, it would break me all over again.

"I knew there was a reason I loved you." I had to believe that. But baby steps first. Kent would be my next stop, then. But I don't want him to have the same reaction as Daisy, so what would be the best way to get him to recognize me without having to open my mouth?
Never before had I felt so embarrassed wearing my Silver Shroud costume. Granted, back then, I really only wore it at night and the thrill of the hunt distracted me from any wondering eyes. But in broad daylight, everyone I passed was giving me puzzled looks. Feeling the silver scarf across my face gave me a small amount of comfort.

The Memory Den never was booming, one might say. A steady stream of clients came in and out throughout the day, but never more than one or two at a time. The red lounge sofa in the center of the room was thankfully empty at this time. Irma's got to get up at some point, I suppose. The only other two occupants of the room were in their lounge chairs, living in the past. I quickly turned to the first room on the right. I heard his voice long before I entered the room, so animated it could practically run off on its own. I entered the open doorway quietly, welcomed by his back in that some old suit, hunched over the ham radio at his desk.

"Now up for more Silver Shroud News. I'm looking for actors for my new radio play. All levels of talent and range of voices are needed. I can't actually pay you guys, as this station doesn't make any money, but true fans won't need caps. So if you're interested, come see Kent Connolly over at the Memory Den." He flipped a switch, turning around. I didn't have enough time to prepare what I was going to say before he noticed me lurking in his doorway, and his chair toppled over when he leapt to his feet. "Silver Shroud! Susie! You're back."

I nodded, not yet finding my voice. Kent didn't seem to really mind because he was ushering me in frantically, shutting the door behind me, only to receive a bark.

"And the Silver Hound too!" Dogmeat rushed in before Kent could close the door on him, sitting by his bed, scratching the silver scarf tied around his neck. "What's going on? Where have you guys been? Why are you covering your face like that?"

I threw my hands into my coat pockets. "My secret identity was exposed. It is no longer safe for me to walk around as Susan Quinn. For now, I must be the Silver Shroud 24 hours a day." I don't know where the lie came from, but I was already kicking myself for it. I love the Silver Shroud too, but I didn't want to wear the costume all day. "I came to the only person I could trust, my friend Rhett Reinhart."

"Susie, where have you been?" I couldn't believe Kent didn't want to play along with my Silver Shroud act. He was always down for that. "No one's seen you or Dogmeat in weeks. When Hancock returned alone, he wouldn't say anything. Some people are saying he offed you, others that you double-crossed him and then he offed you. I think it was just a misunderstanding or that you just decided to part ways for a while."

"Funny enough, all of them are right."

Kent didn't seem to think it was funny. "Nick Valentine came into town over a week ago, looking for you. He had a pretty bad argument with Hancock down in the Third Rail. I wasn't there, so I don't know what about, but he socked Hancock right in the face, and not with his good hand either."

As much as I was in the wrong and Hancock didn't deserve it, my heart swelled with love for Nick, and then shame that Hancock was the one I thought of first. Nick had always had my back, even helped me through that horrible drunken crash. I should go put his fears at ease. "I think I may know what that's about. I'll go to Diamond City next."
"If you're here to see Hancock, he's out with Fahrenheit doing business or something. Otherwise, you wouldn't have been able to take more than three steps into Goodneighbor before she came down and tried to kill you. She's on team 'you double-crossed Hancock' and her fury is fiery. She's been very scary lately, more so than normal."

I swallowed nervously. I'd seen her in action, seen what bullets from her minigun could do. "She's a good friend."

Kent looked at me like he might think I had mental damage. "Susie, really, what's happened to you? Why won't you show me your face?"

I shook my head. It was stupid, I knew. It's not like I was hideously scarred. Fahrenheit had a nasty burn on the side of her face that she displayed proudly, and these ghouls didn't bother trying to hide their looks, but I didn't want him to see me like this. I was this kid's hero, he looked up to me. I didn't want to tarnish that image. "You're a good friend too, Kent. The best, really." I grabbed his hand, feeling its rough texture, the bones underneath. It felt like home. It hit me then, how long it's been since I ever had a friendly touch like this. Not including Dogmeat, of course.

If his skin wasn't so damaged, I'm sure Kent would be blushing right now. "Susie, I...what's this?"

"Sorry, I just needed to feel the warmth of a friend. I'll stop if it's making you uncomfortable."

"I can do you one better." And then he pulled me into a hug. I flinched at first, but then his body was warm and full of so much friendship, I nearly cried. If it weren't for the Med-X, I probably would have. Instead, I hugged him tight, tight enough that his warmth might just seep into me, and I could feel like a person again.

After much too long, I finally pulled back, adjusting my scarf, embarrassed. "Sorry."

He shook his head. "You looked like you could use it."

He was right. "So you took my advice, huh? Made new Silver Shroud material?"

Kent's entire countenance lit up. "Oh yeah! I'm no artist, so there's no way I could do more comics, not to mention, I don't know where I would get the materials, so I'm doing a radio play. You should be the voice of the Silver Shroud! You're already him."

"I think my voice is just a little too feminine."

"Well, you see, I was thinking this could be an alternate universe where all of the genders are flipped, or there was an accident with gamma waves or something." That sounded like faulty science. "I thought it would make it more interesting. I was even going to add in the Silver Hound, and I would do some of the minor voices too. I don't trust myself with a big role. I wanted Hancock to play the Mister of Mystery, but he turned me down. I understand being mayor keeps him busy."

Actually, I think quite the opposite. He never seemed that worried about performing his mayoral duties. "I'm not the most reliable person to play as the main character. I usually run off on some quest at a moment's whim. I don't want you to have to delay recording just for me."

Kent shook his head. "You're the only person aside from me who knows the comics well enough. Besides, you've already played the role in real life. And I don't mind waiting for you. It'd be best to stagger these anyway, so that I don't burn out creatively. Please, Susie, you're the only one who can do this."

I didn't have to look into his big puppy eyes to know I would give in. "I can't say no to that face."
Alright, I'll do it. But when you end up changing the main character's voice in the middle of the series because the actor wasn't reliable, don't come crying to me."

Kent grabbed my hand again and shook it vigorously. "Oh, thank you, thank you. You're a real pal. Just swell."

I laughed sheepishly, extracting my hand. "Look, I'm going to head to Diamond City. I really should let Nick know I'm alive. Could you do the same for me here? Tell everyone that I'm alive and fine? Especially Hancock. I'm sure he was worried too, once Nick came barging through." He couldn't hate me that much, right?

Diamond City still teemed with life, even as the sun set. Most shops were closing up for the night, except for Diamond City Surplus, which was open 24/7, manned by the Mr. Handy in the sleeping hours. Piper's house was right by the entrance, and I considered it, but I had kept Nick waiting long enough. The neon red heart welcomed me into his agency.

Ellie Perkins sat at her desk, shuffling papers around with her usual bored expression. The woman was not easily impressed by her world. She barely glanced up at me, then pulled out a notepad. "Valentine Detective Agency, how can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the detective himself."

"Of course you are. Do you have a case for him?"

"Actually, he already has my case. I'm here for a personal visit."

Ellie knitted her brows at that. "I'm sorry, ma'am, who are you?"

I opened my mouth to tell her outright, when a deeper voice answered for me. "Susie?" I whipped around to find Nick, newly emerged from the hallway behind me. His yellow eyes were running all over me.

"I...yes, how did you know?"

"My biometric scanners remember your DNA, not to mention that Dogmeat is kind of a giveaway." He didn't roll his eyes, but instead pulled me into a cold embrace. "I'm so glad you're safe."

Perhaps it was that the chems had worn off, or that I was remembering the last time we had seen each other, but that broke me. I could feel him leading me to his bedroom while I cried, setting me down on the bed, wrapping a blanket around my shoulders even though I wasn't cold. My face felt hot, actually. I burst, like an overflowing dam, and told him everything, skipping over the gorier details at the Courthouse, leaving it simply as "I was tortured." He put his arm around me, rubbing soothing circles into my back. At some point, he handed me a mug of tea with a dash of whiskey in it. Ellie must have made it, because Nick never left my side. The tea was comforting and the liquor inside it soothing, so at the end of my gross rambling, I felt tired, and just a little bit lighter. Before I had even realized what I was doing, I had untied my bandana to wipe at my eyes.
"Is that why you hide your face?" He nodded to the scar on my chin.

I flushed and instantly covered everything below the nose. My words were muffled behind my hands. "Among other things."

Nick's eyes were so full of pity, and I don't know why that got such a bad rap, because a shameful part of me was basking in the attention. "There's no need to. It's not that bad, really. You're still a looker." He said that last bit with a smile that struck me in the heart with memories of Papa.

"I don't like it," I told him, turning away. "I know it's shallow, but I don't like the way I look now."

"If you're really that upset, you could always go under the knife."

"From who? The only doctor I know of horribly murdered someone and then took his own life."

"I heard his assistant took over the practice."

"Even so, I still don't want to. I know it sounds paradoxical, but I don't want to change the way I look."

"Then it's not your looks that you hate, but the way it makes you feel. The way you think others will think of you."

I pulled the blanket over my head, hiding my entire body in guilty darkness. "You're a pretty good detective, you know that?"

"The best damn one in the Commonwealth." I could hear his laugh, and it pushed down the sick feeling in my gut. "Did I ever tell you about how I started the agency?"

"I told them I was rigged to explode and started going 'beep, beep, beep.' Hardest part of that rescue was to keep from laughing as they climbed over themselves to get away."

I certainly failed at not laughing. My sides were hurting from my heaving breaths, tears in my eyes. "Oh my god, that's priceless. You need to write all these stories down. Start a pulp novel series. Make a little extra money on the side."

"I don't do this job for the money. But I do make some pretty good stories, huh?"

"You should get Ellie to write all these down. She could use the money, at least."

"That's true. I don't pay her enough." He stood up, metal joints creaking. He should probably get those oiled. "Well, I think it's time you headed off to sleep. It's pretty late."

I smiled coyly at him. "Is that what this was? A bedtime story? Are you going to tuck me in, Daddy?"

The face Nick made was comically disgusted, and I couldn't help laughing a second time. "You know, that joke is getting old," he grumbled.
"I like old jokes. The best ones are the ones people keep bringing back up."

Nick looked very much like he would disagree. "You're a grown woman, so I'm not going to treat you like a toddler. You can tuck yourself in."

I chuckled, but lay down on the bed anyway. "Why do you even have a bed if you don't sleep?"

"I like to lay down sometimes. Now get some rest. I'll be downstairs if you need anything."

"Goodnight, Nick."

"Goodnight, Susie."

I had woken up to a Mirelurk omelette and an angry Piper. She handed the plate to me and demanded that I eat and listen to her lecture. It was pretty long-winded and had many tangents, and all through it, I sat obediently and ate my omelette. It wasn't that great. It had a bit of a fishy undertone that you could never get rid of. And eating with a bandana covering my mouth was a little awkward, but I refused to take it off.

"Do you know how much of an insult to us it was when a detective and a reporter couldn't find their friend? And frankly, I'm offended that I wasn't the first person you went to see when you came back. I thought we were besties. And Nick won't tell me anything--"

It could use more cheese. Maybe that would help to mask the fish scent? And some green peppers for a nice crunch, although I knew that wasn't possible now. The worst thing about the apocalypse turned out to be the limited culinary variety.

"--The least you could have done was sent a letter or something. The couriers around here are reliable, I would have gotten it. Eventually. And what's with the new look, huh? You tryin' to look like some low-grade raider? Why are you laughing?"

I set my fork down. There would be no finishing this omelette. "I missed you, Piper."

For a moment her stern mien faltered, but only for a moment. "Don't try to kiss up. I'm still mad at you. And Hancock too. Bastard wouldn't tell us anything, just that you two 'went your separate ways.' I had to find out about the breakup from Nick."

I snapped, "Well, you weren't there, alright? You had run off with your girlfriend."

Now the reporter looked meek, cheeks flushed with shame. "I'm sorry, Blue. I didn't know you needed me--"

"Then you have no right to be angry that you didn't know."

Nick, who had been standing back a ways to let us catch up, strode forward and placed a synthetic hand on Piper's shoulder. "Let her be, Piper. She's been through a lot more than just a bad break up."

"Like what?" She looked back and forth between us. Sometimes I admired Piper's inquisitive mind,
loved her for it, but now was not one of those times.

"That's for her to tell you on her own time. Just cut her some slack."

Her righteous anger deflated, leaving her only a worried friend. "I am glad you're back, Blue. And as much as I want to know what happened, I'll let you tell me when you're ready."

I smiled in gratitude, before realizing that Piper couldn't see it under my bandana.

"So what are you going to do now?"

"I'm going to see Hancock. He wasn't in Goodneighbor when I went there yesterday, but I'm going to wait for him until he is."

"You're not...you're not going to get back together with him, are you? I don't know what caused you two to fight in the first place, but he left you to whatever demise happened to you. It's like the bastard doesn't even care."

My heart clenched. I sincerely hoped that was not the case. "What happened was my fault. Hancock is the innocent party here. I hurt him. And I'm going to do everything I can to win him back."

Neither of them looked convinced. I fiddled with the tin fork in my hand. "I wouldn't mind the company in Goodneighbor. I could use the support."

Nick scratched his grey cheek nervously. "I'm not sure that's the best idea. I'm not exactly welcome back there after I punched Hancock."

Piper's eyes bugged out of her head. "Holy shit, Nick, you punched the mayor of Goodneighbor? And survived?"

"Why are you so surprised, Piper?" I asked her. "Didn't Fahrenheit tell you?"

She looked away. "We haven't really been talking lately. Fahrenheit wants to beat you to a pulp for supposedly 'hurting' Hancock, and as your friend I disagreed with that."

"Oh no, Piper. Don't ruin your relationship over mine. Fahrenheit's right to be angry at me. I did hurt him."

"Really? Because you're the one who looks like a Deathclaw decided to give you a hug, while he's been sitting on his throne, high as a kite."

"He doesn't actually have a throne, you know," Nick said.

"Whatever. Nick can't come, but there's no bounty on my head. I'll be there to help you give him what for." Piper stood there, hands on her hips. What did I ever do to deserve such a great friend?

"Are you sure? Fahrenheit will probably be there."

"If he gets to have a bodyguard, then so should you."

I'm pretty sure Fahrenheit would win in a fight, but I was grateful regardless. "Thanks, Pipe. You're the best bestie a girl could ask for."

"You're damn straight."
Kent had been right. The two of us took about three steps into Goodneighbor when Fahrenheit showed up, flanked by two Neighborhood Watchmen. And like I expected, she had her minigun at the ready. "You thought you were so clever, coming in to Goodneighbor in disguise while I was gone. But your little buddy Kent's been spilling the beans, telling everyone you were here."

Even though I was scared, I couldn't resist saying, "That's because I told him to."

Fahrenheit blinked owlishly, then regained herself, anger still burning bright. "You have a lot of guts coming here, Susan Quinn. I told you what I would do to you if you ever hurt him. Are you ready to eat your own entrails?" She looked to my side. "Piper. You should get out of the way. This has nothing to do with you."

"Then it has nothing to do with you, either," she spat back.

Fahrenheit growled. "I'm not going to shoot you, Piper, so get out of the way."

Piper had her own pistol out. "If you get to protect your friend, then so do I."

Fahrenheit looked conflicted, mouth scrunched up, and just a bit of admiration twinkling in her eyes. I had to defuse the situation. I knew she would be pissed, but this didn't need to end in bloodshed. Someone else jumped in before I could.

"Woah there, pistol-packin' mama." Strutting up in his trademark red coat, Hancock looked as confident and sexy as ever. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of him. How many times had I imagined that smirk of his? I really didn't do it justice. One thing my imagination didn't have was a noticeable gash on the side of his face, quickly healing into a scar. "I love a good cat fight, but my streets are bloody enough as it is."

To everyone's surprise, Fahrenheit disobeyed. "Shut up, Hancock. I told you I was going to gut her open, and I am. She broke your heart--"

"Hang on there, buddy. My heart is in perfect shape. As sweet as the gesture is, I don't need you defending my honor." Then his eyes fell on me, and my breathe froze in my lungs. "Susie, is that you?" My eyes soaked him in hungrily, catching every twitch of his face, the upturn of the muscles where his eyebrows should be, the widening of his black eyes. I could see the surprise, a bit of relief, and to my never ending guilt, pain. Then it was all gone, hidden away behind a bright smile. "Wow, I haven't seen you in so long. I like the new look, makes you look like a survivor, not someone to mess with. I kind of miss the old outfit though. It hugged your curves better."

My breath returned, but it burned on the way down to my lungs. He was flirting the same way he did when we first met, with no heat behind it. Maybe I stole all of it, because it felt like my entire body was burning beneath my skin. Looks like Fahrenheit would get her revenge after all.

He laughed. "Don't look at me that way, guys. It's no big deal. We parted in mutual agreement, right, Susie? There's no hard feelings."

Good thing the majority of my face was covered. Wish I had sunglasses on though. "Yeah. No hard feelings."

"See? We're all friends here." He threw an arm around Fahrenheit's shoulders and the envy was so sudden I almost took a step back from the ferocity of it.
Fahrenheit's face was carefully blank, but there was a sad downward tilt to her lips. The gun was lowered, and the Watchmen behind her followed suit. "You're the boss."

"I am, ain't I? Let's all head down to the Third Rail for a round of drinks on me, for old time's sake."

"It's barely noon," Piper protested.

"Hey, it's eight o'clock somewhere, right?"

Piper sent me a worried glance, but relented when I agreed numbly. We followed the mayor into the Third Rail, not many people were in the bar since Magnolia didn't sing during the daytime, but a couple of dedicated drunks were sipping their beverages lazily. I saw MacCready the mercenary, eating a lunch of bread and soup at the bar. He brightened upon spotting the new comers. "Hancock. Why is it that every time I see you, you're being trailed by a group of hot babes?"

Hancock shrugged. "What can I say? Ladies love the hat." He gestured for MacCready to follow us to a group of sofa chairs sitting around a low coffee table. "Hey, Chuck, a round of beers for my friends here." He glanced at me, briefly. "And one whiskey on the rocks."

The Mr. Handy bobbed in compliance, setting off to complete the order. Meanwhile, we all sat down, Piper and I on one sofa, Fahrenheit and Hancock on the other, and then MacCready on a faded green armchair, bowl of soup in his hands. "The dog isn't a girl too, is it?" That earned him a strongly negative bark. "Guess that answers that." He looked around at all of us, stopping at Piper. "So, Piper, when are we going to have that one-on-one interview?" The eyebrow wiggle was completely unnecessary.

"Never in a million years."

"You always know what to say to make a guy feel special." Then he glanced at me. "Who's the new guy?"

I was going to have to get used to that. "It's me. Susan Quinn."

"Oh yeah. Hancock's old--" He stopped himself before he could completely make an ass of himself. "We met a couple of times before, right? Sorry I didn't recognize you. Though it's kind of hard with your face all covered up like that."

"I'd be surprised if you did. Excuse me, I need to use the restroom." I stood up, making a beeline for the bathrooms by the entrance, ignoring MacCready's "Was it something I said?"

The Third Rail, like the Hotel Rexford, was one of the few places with functioning plumbing. Unfortunately, I was not here for that. I sat on the broken toilet seat, pants still on, digging through the many pouches my uniform offered. My fingers fumbled on the buttons of one of the pockets, and I sighed in relief when I pulled the syringe out that I had hoped was still there. I uncapped the lid, rolled up a sleeve, flinching at the pinch of the needle. I was never a nurse, but luckily, chems were designed to be used by idiots. The cold spread from the injection point, quieting my nerves and blanketing the storm inside me with snow, soft and unfeeling. Alright, I could do this.

I returned to my seat, smiling before I realized that no one could see it. A glass of amber liquid clinging to white ice awaited me. Oh right. Probably best not to mix my poisons.

"So, Susie," Hancock said once I had gotten comfortable. "What's new with you? What's happened since I last saw you?"

I shrugged. "Nothing much. I've been helping the Minutemen."
"Oh yeah, I heard about that," Piper spoke up. "They retook their old base, the Castle, I believe it was called."

"Yeah, it had been overtaken by Mirelurks. It was a hell of a fight. They had this giant queen that could spit acid at you. I spent the entire time screaming in my power armor."

"You fought a Mirelurk Queen and lived?" MacCready's eyebrows were up in his hat. "Holy shit, woman."

"Is that what happened with the..." Hancock motioned to all of me. God, Med-X was amazing. "Oh, yeah, I got injured pretty bad. The docs had to shave my hair to do the stitches. I didn't like how uneven it looked, so I chopped off the other side too. No offense, Fahrenheit."

"Offense taken," She snapped back. "That what happened with the rest of your face?"

"Fahrenheit!" Piper admonished.

Hancock turned to his couch partner. "Just because I said you couldn't punch her with your fists doesn't mean you have to with your words." Then he turned to me with a congenial smile. "Sorry, Susie. She's going to be a bit grumpy for a while."

"Yeah, so am I," Piper glared at her, the other returning with just as hot of a stare.

"I am sensing a lot of hostility," MacCready laughed uncomfortably. Poor guy was just trying to enjoy his soup.

Hancock ignored them, hitting me with a curious look as he took a swig of his beer. "What's wrong, Susie? You've barely touched your drink."

"Even I think it's a bit early," I replied on the beat.

Hancock just hummed ponderously, hand dipping into his coat pocket to pop a Mentat in his mouth. The movement was so nostalgic, I felt it even through the haze of Med-X. Good to know he still can't figure me out. "What about you, Hancock? How's life been?"

"It's been good, actually. Goodneighbor's become a safer place to live in, thanks to you of course," he nodded to me. "Business has been booming, and I haven't been near Diamond City in a while, so my mood's significantly improved."

Was that...? He wasn't referencing me, was he? "That's good. I'm glad. You deserve to be happy."

He looked surprised. That hurt more than anything. What did he think of me? What I wouldn't give to know his thoughts right now.

MacCready stood up, holding his congealing bowl of soup. "Thanks for inviting me, but, uh, it sounds like you two really need to work something out. So I'm just gonna..." He made a vague gesture, and then left.

Piper stood up, eyes glinting. "He's right. Fahrenheit, come with me." She crossed the expanse between our seats to grab Fahrenheit's arm.

"What? No. I'm not leaving them alone."

"You and I got something we need to talk about too." And then despite having half her muscle mass,
she dragged the taller woman off.

Leaving me, Dogmeat, and an awkward looking Hancock. For an achingly long time, we just sat there in silence, not knowing what to say to each other. I had had a whole speech planned out in my head, I had imagined this meeting so many times, but never did it end up like this. There had been a lot more tears in my head. By the time I finally gathered the guts to say something, my ice had already melted.

"Hancock--"

"I understand that our last discussion was not held in the best place to have," he interrupted me. "Things got a little heated. I'm sorry for the things I said."

Surprised, I sat there, flabbergasted for a bit, before quickly stuttering, "N-No, no, I'm sorry. I said some awful things. I didn't mean any of them, I just wanted to hurt you."

And you succeeded, his eyes told me, but his mouth said, "Yeah, I did the same. So let's just put all of that behind us." And then he delivered the killing blow, a stab in the gut, unexpected, just like he did to that one thug when I first met him, "Even though we didn't work out as a couple, I'd like to stay friends. We make a good team." Then he held his hand out to me. I don't think I've ever shaken his hand before.

"Right, right. Friends." And I shook it, the Med-X blocking the screams in my head.

"I'm glad we could work that out." As if we had just closed a business deal. Then he stood up, swallowing the last of his beer. "It was good to catch up, but it seems like this party is over. Hit me up if you ever go on a raider-killing spree. I could use the practice." And then he waved me off in a little salute, strolling towards the exit like he hadn't just dropped a bomb on me.

I watched his back, feeling like I would see him for the last time, even though he had just promised to travel with me if I asked. Honestly, if it hadn't been for the Med-X, I probably wouldn't have spoken at all. I just felt that if I didn't get him to turn around and look at me, I'd lose him forever. "John..." I sounded wrecked, pathetic.

He paused, almost to the stairs. Then he turned his head, and only his head. "I prefer my friends to call me Hancock. Only Hancock." And then he left the bar.

At the last minute, I decided to finish all of that whiskey in one gulp. It burned on the way down, and that's why my eyes were watering. Yup, just the liquor. I left, lingering long enough to hear Charlie's "Well, that was painful to watch."

"Smile, though your heart is aching. Smile, even though it's -hic- breaking." I took another swig of my drink.

Magnolia stood uncomfortably next to the stage, staring up at me with awkward glances, just like everyone else in the bar that night. If the woman was going to agree to my request for a karaoke night, then she should shut up and let me sing.

"That's the time, you must...keep on trying. Smile, what's the use of crying?" Wait, shit, I did that out of order. Fuck where was I? It was hard to do this without any music in the background.
"Sugar, where's your little reporter friend?" Magnolia lightly grabbed my arm to try and coax me off stage, but I shook off her hold.

"I sent her to make up with her girlfriend," I whispered to her, hand over the mic. "Now leave me alone, I'm trying to sing." Although my lyrics were a little muffled by my kerchief. "When there are clouds, in the sky...you'll get by -- hey! I don't interrupt you when you're singing."

"Step off the stage, you daft tit!" Charlie barked at me, to a chorus of agreements.

"Well, if you guys had the song on tape, it would sound better." But I allowed Magnolia to lead me off the stage and to one of the chairs in the back.

"Just sit here for a moment, sugar," Magnolia patted my hands gently, taking the bottle of beer from my hand. "And I think you should stick to water for the rest of the night."

"Tastes terrible anyway," I agreed. Then I looked over to the bar, and shouted, "You Brits call it getting pissed; is that why your beer tastes like it?"

"I'll have Ham throw you out on your arse," the robot threatened.

"You can't. I bribed him with Dogmeat." I accepted the glass of dirty water from Magnolia. It may be irradiated, but it was still better than that swill. The singer went back up on her stage to the cheers of the audience. I don't know if she was that great of a singer, or if they were all that glad to have me offstage.

Magnolia had just finished her first verse when someone sat in the detached car seat next to mine. "Man, that was a depressing song," MacCready greeted me. "You're a sad drunk, aren't you?"

"Funny, considering I got drunk in the first place to stop that." I took another sip of water.

"Wow, you're really committed," he leaned down to try and look under my kerchief where my glass of water was hiding. "What are you hiding under there? You can't be that ugly."

I dropped my hand instantly, smoothing the cloth back in place. "None of your business."

"Fair 'nough." He showed me his palms for a half of a second before they flopped back down into his lap. "So why did you two breakup?"

"I don't think you understand what 'none of your business' means."

"You look like you really need to talk it out, and since Piper is failing in her friend duties, I figured I'd step in."

"She's not failing. I forced her to go make up with Fahrenheit. It would only make me feel worse if their relationship was ruined by proxy. No use in all of us being sad."

"Make up or make out?" MacCready chortled to himself. "Still, she sent me here in her stead. You should be grateful. I could be spying on them right now. I really wanted to know if Fahrenheit is the tender lover I suspect her to be."

"That's a crime, you know."

"I don't see any written law anywhere."

"It's basic decency."
"We're in Goodneighbor. There's nothing decent about this place."

I couldn't resist a chuckle. That was for damn sure.

"Ah, there we go. I knew I could get you to laugh."

"Are you hitting on me?"

He laughed. "God, no. You're a hot mess, emphasis on the mess."

"You're a shitty replacement."

He shrugged. "That's what I told her. But she figures all you need is a shoulder to cry on, and I have
two of those. So, pour your heart out to old MacCready here."

"You're practically a stranger."

"Maybe that's what you need. After all, you have plenty of friends, and yet you didn't go to any of them."

Well, the one I wanted to talk to the most was in Diamond City, but perhaps it was for the best that I
didn't. He's seen enough of me at my worst. "Alright. What should I talk about?"

He shrugged leaning back in his chair easily. "This is your show, lady. What are you trying to forget
by killing your liver?"

"I should think that was fairly obvious."

MacCready graced me with an awkward smile. "Our illustrious mayor. It's no secret that the two of
you used to be an item, though no one knows what trouble happened in paradise. Just that one day
he returned without you."

I really wanted a drink, or even better, some Med-X, but there was too much alcohol in my system
for that now. I flexed the fingers of my left hand, seeing, but not feeling the movement. Strange how
the muscles kept working when the nerves gave out. "It's my fault. I got scared, and so I hurt him in
the worst way I knew how, however subconsciously I did."

"What did you do?"

I grasped my fingers with my right hand, squeezing them hard, but not feeling a thing. "He wanted
me to become a ghoul, so that we could be together forever. Hell, I was afraid to get married, but
that...that was so much more." I turned my head. I wanted so badly to curl up into a ball, occupy as
little space as I could. My tongue ran over the exposed gums between my teeth. It felt like I was
betraying Hancock's secrets, telling MacCready all of this. "I rejected his offer on the grounds of not
wanting to be a ghoul."

"I doubt you said it in so nice of terms. If you were scared of being alive forever, you could have just
told him. I'm sure he would have understood."

"That wasn't it though." My smile turned acidic. "I was afraid of becoming ugly. I spent all that time
telling him that I loved him for turning into a ghoul, that I didn't find him repulsive, and then the
minute it was my turn, I shied away. He exposed his heart to me, and I turned away in disgust." He
was right about me. I really was that shallow. I deserved everything that happened to me. "How
could you forgive someone for that?"
"So then you want his forgiveness?"

"See, that's the worst part of it all. I don't deserve his forgiveness, and yet I want more."

MacCready's eyes lit up. "You want to get back together."

I nodded.

"Seems to me like you've given this a lot of thought."

"I...had a lot of time to meditate."

"Have you apologized to him? Explained yourself?"

"I tried, but he just steamrolled me, kept saying how glad he was that we were friends." Kind of hard to talk to the guy when every other line was a stab to the gut. My wounds were still bleeding.

MacCready sat silent for a while, a thoughtful finger on his chin. "It seems to me like if you were serious about getting back together, then you would explain yourself to him. How is he supposed to forgive you if he doesn't understand why you fu--messed up in the first place?"

"He's made it very clear he just wants to be friends. He doesn't even seem that broken up over it."

"Forgiveness is better than nothing, right?"

I didn't answer, because at that moment, I heard a feminine voice say, "Oh, Hancock, what happened to your face?" I looked away from MacCready to see the man himself, just walking into the bar, smiling at a ghoul with a bob cut.

His finger traced the scar idly. "A father's love," he cryptically said.

"You haven't been in town lately, have you?" A pale skinned man asked the ghoul, and then they devolved into a conversation. I didn't stick around long enough to hear it.

"I have to go. He can't see me like this."

MacCready nodded in understanding. "He's blocking the only exit though. You can hide out in my room, and I'll come get you when the coast is clear."

"I thought you weren't trying to seduce me, MacCready?"

"Not interested, remember? Sad drunks make for lousy bed partners." Then he shooed me off down the hallway that led to his rented room. The whole time, it felt like Hancock was burning a hole in my back.

Speaking with Hancock was easier said than done. I couldn't talk to him without needing Med-X just to get through, and I didn't want to be numbed when I apologized so that my feelings could reach him. Piper sat with me in my rented hotel bedroom, not really helping.

"I mean, the angry sex is exciting and all, but I don't want our relationship to be based on that. But
it's a step in the right direction."

"I'm glad you had a good night."

She smiled. "So, how'd MacCready do?"

"Awful at first, but I opened up to him eventually."

"Yeah, he's not the smoothest of talkers, but I hear he's a pretty decent lay."

I did a double take. "Wait, I thought you sent him to me for someone to talk to?"

"Is that all you did?" Piper snorted. "In my experience, the best remedy for a broken heart is rebound sex."

"See, I thought so at first, but the minute I sobered up, I realized what a terrible idea that was."

"Aw, come on. He's a nice guy, and he won't take it personally."

"Is this just to get him off your back?"

"Of course not, Blue. I'm still your friend, as much as I don't seem to be fitting the bill lately." She put her arm around me in a side hug. "I mean, I'm glad you made me talk with Fahrenheit. I want us to get back together, but I hate leaving you alone when I came here to support you."

"I'm the one that convinced you to go."

She pinched my shoulder. "I know. You and that damn silver tongue of yours. You're very convincing."

Perhaps too convincing. "Look, the last thing I need to be doing is sleeping with someone."

"I think it's more dangerous to talk to them."

Ain't that the truth. "I appreciate the thought."

Piper released me with a huff. "Well, I'm out of ideas. Outside of getting drunk and getting laid, I don't know what to do other than to let time do its healing."

"MacCready had some good advice for me actually. I'm glad you sent him to me."

"Good advice? From him?" She looked skeptical. "Sheesh, you were drunk. Well, if you two want to be buddies, that's ok, just...Blue, be careful."

I smiled at her. "Aren't I always?"

In the end, I bumped into MacCready in Kill or Be Killed. The mercenary was examining a rifle, turning it every which way. KL-E-0 waited patiently. The assaultron still put me on edge, not used to seeing one not glowing red in impending doom.

"That's a pretty nice rifle, but the grip isn't right for the length of that barrel," I told him. "Your
He greeted me with a smile. "I was thinking the same thing, but it's got a pretty nice scope. I figured I could fix the grip myself. That's really the only thing wrong with it."

KL-E-0, unoffended by my critique of her wares, suggested some mods she had in stock. MacCready handed over the caps and walked away with a new rifle and the mods to fix it, after a bit of haggling of course. The robot was kind enough to let us use her workbench to modify his newest weapon.

"I'm surprised you know so much about guns."

"Do I not seem the type?" I asked, handing him a screwdriver. I figured now especially I would look the type.

"No, it's not that. Just nice to meet another gun nut."

"My grandfather taught me all he knew about guns. He wanted me to be able to take care of Zeus."

"Zeus?"

I showed him the sniper rifle I kept strapped to my back. He whistled in appreciation, holding it reverently, which I appreciated. Its namesake was a god after all. "I got him on my sixteenth. I've tweaked him a bit since then, made it my own. He's my pride and joy."

"I can tell. You've taken very good care of it--uh, him." He handed the gun back. "Where'd you come up with that name, anyway?"

I returned Zeus onto my back. "You've never heard of Zeus? The Greek god of all gods? He hurls lightning bolts and sleeps with practically everything he sees?"

MacCready laughed. "Now I know you have to be lying. What's a 'Greek' anyways?"

"Greek, meaning from Greece. It's a country across the ocean."

"Never heard of it, but then again, I doubt anyone has. Sounds like it should be the name for a laser rifle instead."

I took the old wooden grip he handed to me, placing it out of the way. "Well, laser rifles weren't invented yet. Or at least I didn't know about them."

"Yet?"

Oh, right. Then I had to explain to him my whole back story. To my surprise, he believed me. Most people thought I was joshing. He took a minute to process it, but he nodded like it was perfectly reasonable.

"You know, I was mayor of a town once."

"...That was kind of random."

He shook his head. "Not really. You've told me so much of your dirty secrets, I felt it was only fair." He picked the screwdriver back up. "It was this little place in the Capitol Wasteland called Little Lamplight."

"Sounds little."
MacCready laughed, skin crinkling at the edges of his eyes. "Everything about it was little, including the people. You see, I was only 10 when I was first elected mayor. Little Lamplight is a city comprised only of children. The minute you turn 16," he clicked his tongue, "you're outta there. They send you off to Big Town."

"Big Town. Seriously?"

"Yup. Place was a shi--dump. It was constantly under attack."

"Ok, now I know you're pulling my leg. Little Lamplight and Big Town?"

"What can you expect? They were named by kids."

I laughed. It felt good, shook my whole torso.

The laugh died when Hancock walked into the shop. "Oh, hey, MacCready... and Susie. When did you two get so chummy?"

"Hi there, Hancock. This woman really knows her guns. She's been helping me with some modding."

"Is that so?" He looked between the two of us.

I felt like I had been caught cheating, which made no sense. We were just hanging out, nothing to be guilty over, but still I found it hard to look him in the eye.

"Don't worry about paying this month's rent, MacCready. I know times are tough for you. I'm sure you'll find a job soon. You're a great shot. Worth every single cap."

"Thanks, Hancock." MacCready smiled easily, even though Hancock was frowning.

The ghoul turned and left. He didn't even talk to KL-E-0. What did he come in for?

"That was weird."

MacCready laughed. "This is good news."

"What do you mean?" He seemed surprisingly chipper, considering the awkward atmosphere before.

He shot me a look that told me I was being an idiot. "Susie, he was jealous."

"What? How? He was being perfectly civil."

"Trust me. From a man's perspective, that was a whole lot of peacocking."

*Don't say that. I'll hope.*

His grin turned wicked. "This might be fun. To see the normally cool Hancock all flustered."

"If you're suggesting what I think you are..."

"Nah, nah, nothing like that. I just might tease him a little. But that's beside the point. You should go talk to him. You just might have a chance."

"You think so?" I couldn't keep from smiling. "You're right. I'm gonna go catch up to him. Finally tell him everything. See you later, MacCready."
I bounced off, practically skipping down the streets, looking out for any red. I ended up finding him by one of the old warehouses, but he was not alone. A beautiful woman in a purple sequined dress was pressed up against him, her delicate hands trailing along his jaw. Her skin was unblemished, and she looked surprisingly clean for someone hanging out on the filthy street. Her auburn hair was long and lusciously curled.

"I'm so glad you're back on the market, Hancock. Tell you what, tonight will be free of charge."

His lips pulled back in a grin, and his hands made their way to her waist. I didn't stick around long enough to watch them kiss. I was going to kick MacCready in the shins the next time I saw him.

"So, have you talked to Hancock about the radio play yet?"

"No, Kent, I haven't. If it hasn't struck your notice, we're not exactly the best of friends lately."

"Really? He's always telling everybody about how great a friend you are-- Ok, I'll shut up now."

At least my death glares were functional. Never realized how hard it was to communicate my emotions to people when half my face was covered.

"It's just...you two had such great chemistry. I can't imagine anyone else being your counterpart."

Ok, maybe not so functional. "Are you being this obtuse on purpose? Oh, don't give me that kicked puppy look. He doesn't want to be the Mister of Mystery anymore. He was never really into it to begin with. And you've just got to deal with it, ok?"

Kent hung his head, looking sheepish. "I just hoped that...you know, this radio play could bring you two back together. Like old times." He turned back towards his desk, picking up the script sadly. "I guess I should've learned by now that you can't recreate the past."

My ire cooled. Poor kid looked so pathetic. "That's rich coming from someone living in the Memory Den." There was no heat to my words.

His lips tugged into a small smile. "Being a ghoul, it's easy to forget that the world changes when you don't."

MacCready and I laughed boisterously in our seats in the Third Rail. Magnolia was taking a break, drinking water to soothe her throat, and being the unfortunate audience of our thrilling tale.

"They had no idea where the bullets kept coming from. They must have thought there were ten snipers, but there were only two who just kept moving around." He wiped a tear from his eye.

"That wasn't as cool as you making that head shot through a hole in a wall, from, what, 500 yards away?" I slapped him on the back. "That was legendary. They were running around like chickens with their heads cut off, trying to figure out how their buddy died of a bullet wound from inside a
windowless room."

"You'd think the Gunners would build more secure fortifications."

"Fort? Please, that was a shack."

We shared another laugh, drunk off of a successful job. We didn't have a scratch on us, able to pick off all of the targets from a ridge. What made them think it would be a good idea to build their base inside a little valley like that?

"Ah, there you are." Suddenly I found my neck in the embrace of none other than Piper. "You two have become fast friends, I see." She released me, so I could swivel around in my bar stool to face her.

"Just talking," I teased.

Piper didn't laugh. "Look, Blue, I've got a lead on a story out in Covenant... I came here to support you, but it seems you found that somewhere else."

"Piper--"

She held up a hand. "No, it's fine. I'm glad you have, and I've even made up with my girlfriend. I feel a bit like I'm abandoning you, and maybe a little jealous," she shot a smirk at the mercenary, "but I can't hang around here forever. If you ask me to stay, I will."

I shook my head. "No, you go on ahead, Pipes. You've been a great friend, hell, you pulled a gun on your girlfriend for me."

"Well, we were hardly dating at that point, but praise taken." She looked over my shoulder to glare at MacCready. "If I find out she's cried under your care, you're going to be in big trouble, mister."

He snorted. "What are you going to do? Write a slanderous article about me?"

"I'm going to have Fahrenheit pay a visit."

He paled.

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. "I doubt she'd do anything for me now."

Piper turned to me with a coy grin. "You underestimate the power of my sexual favors." She laughed at our disgusted faces. She gave me one last tight hug and then left.

"Ah, I miss her already," MacCready sighed.

I nodded in agreement. "Piper's a good sort."

"You're certainly loved, aren't you?" He smiled into his beer.

I flushed. "A thing I forget all too often, I'm afraid."

"It's hard to know when you're happy until it's already gone." The words were so much like ones I had heard in Kellogg's mind, it shocked me. I hadn't thought about Kellogg in forever. I suppose it helped when my clothes didn't remind me of him. "In the interest of keeping my belly lead free, I really think you should go talk to Hancock."

How was that not supposed to make me cry? "You were wrong about him. He's moved on already.
There's no point in opening old wounds.

"Sometimes you got to open a wound to get the bullet out. If you don't talk it out, you'll only come to regret it. Trust me."

"What if it only makes it worse? What if he ends up not wanting to even be friends at the end?"

"That's just a gamble you have to take." He set the brown necked bottle on the counter with a click. "Why don't you try going to the Memory Den? Maybe if you sort through some old memories, you'll see why this is all worth it."

I frowned. I hadn't ever had a good experience with the memory loungers. This sounded like a terrible idea, but the allure of a time when Hancock smiled at me and called me Sunshine was too powerful to resist. I left Charlie a handful of caps for my drink and left the bar.

The sun had set enough so that the sky was a dark purple, stars beginning to shine now that the sun's rays were dying. Goodneighbor was a lot like New York City in that it never slept. Sure, you'd see some drifters sleeping outside on mattresses and sleeping bags, but there were still plenty more walking around, and always the Neighborhood Watch. The neon red glow of the Memory Den's sign welcomed me in.

 Somehow, this felt like the first time I had walked in the building, despite all the countless times I went inside to visit Kent. Maybe it was because I felt a little nervous. Irma was lounging in her chair in that same red feathered dress she always wore. I didn't blame her. If I found an outfit that looked that good on me, I'd wear it everyday too.

She smiled sweetly at me. "Hi there, dear. I had a feeling you'd come to visit me soon."

"You did?"

"Everyone with a broken heart comes here to lick their wounds. It can be healing for some, addictive to others."

I remembered her warning the first time I had come here. "Are you going to refuse me?"

She shook her head. "No, sweetie. That would be rather hypocritical of me. After all, I use this place often to look at memories of my deceased husband."

"Oh. My condolences."

"Thanks, but I'm fine. The Memory Den has helped me to cope. I hope it can do the same for you. You can find Dr. Amari downstairs."

I was getting a little sick of the whole town knowing my personal business, but just this once, I'd let it go. I went downstairs, unwittingly dredging up memories of the last time I had walked these steps. I really didn't have any good memories of this place. These thoughts were banished by the sound of Dr. Amari humming a tune while she worked, fiddling with some sort of mechanism, her back to me. My foot stopped on the last step. I recognized that melody.

"Unforgettable," the doctor sung under her breath like she wasn't even thinking about it. "In every way..."

I couldn't breathe.

"And forevermore, that's how you'll stay..."
Before I knew it, I was flipping her around with an insistent hand on her shoulder. She yelped, startled by my sudden intrusion into her personal space. "Where did you hear that song?" I demanded.

"What? Susan? What are you--?"

"Tell me!"

"I don't know! It's just been stuck in my head. Must have been from someone's memories." She wouldn't meet my eyes.

I didn't have to sit in a lounger to remember this particular memory. "Hey, Hancock, you don't really mean what you said, right? About no hard feelings? If we had broke up right here, you wouldn't feel anything?" "I would have done my best to make you think so."

"Where is he?"

Sweat beaded on her brow. She knew who I was talking about. "You won't like it."

"I don't give a damn. Tell me."

"He's in one of the private rooms. Second on the left, if I recall."

I didn't stay long enough to thank her. I dashed up the stairs, two at a time. I had a moment of hesitation to wonder if she meant left from the front of the building or left from the stairs, before I decided to just pick one. I ignored Irma's questioning call and threw open the door to the second room on my left.

The inside was a haze of cigarette smoke and Jet fumes. Hancock was lounging on a large round velvet couch, an arm around a well-endowed woman on his left who was kissing his neck, and the other around a male ghoul whose hand was pushing open his white shirt. His red coat lay on the back of a chair, along with his flag belt, boots underneath them neatly. The three of them startled at the sight of me, standing in the doorway, eyes crazed.

"I still love you," I blurted. Shit, that wasn't what I wanted to start off with. "I mean, I'm sorry about what I said, what I did. I was scared. Stupid, I know, but I decided to make you break it off with me before you could, which makes no sense, but..." My body was filled with wild energy, and I couldn't seem to get my speech straight.

The two strangers looked at each other awkwardly. "I think we should go," said the ghoul. The woman nodded in agreement. They quickly squeezed past me. Hancock didn't make a move to stop them, just kept looking at me with his black eyes.

"Susie..." His words were slurred. Good. He was always more honest when he was high.

I closed the door behind me, and strode up to his knees where they bent over the edge of the sofa. "No, don't interrupt me or I'll lose focus." I ripped my bandana off my face. I couldn't do this if I was still hiding a part of myself from him. "I've always been afraid of commitment. I meant that part. What you asked from me was more than marriage, and I know you only meant for me to start thinking about it, but then you kept looking for clues for the drug that turned you, and I felt like I had to make a decision now, and the pressure got to me. But that wasn't it, really. You were right, Hancock, like you always are. Right about all of it. I was afraid of losing my looks. Because some part of me thought that when I was no longer beautiful you wouldn't love me."

Then he looked at me, really looked at me, and I saw the same expression on his face as when I had
broke his heart back at Parsons. "Susie, how could you think that?"

"You were always telling me how beautiful I was, which normally is nice to hear, but I couldn't shake the thought that if you saw me any less than perfect, you'd leave me, and if you left me after that, it would break me, Hancock." My voice cracked. The crying was inevitable. "And now look at me. It happened anyway."

He straightened his back, sitting up properly. His lips pulled back in a snarl, baring his teeth. "Dammit, Susie, why are you doing this to me?"

I jumped back at the growl to his voice. "W-What do you mean?"

"You break my heart, no, you fucking trample it like a stampede of brahmin, and then you come in here, all teary eyed and fragile like some doe-eyed damsel in an old world flick and tell me you love me. Do you enjoy watching me suffer?"

"No, of course not, Hancock--"

"I tried to give you an easy out." He leant forward, his unbuttoned shirt billowing open to reveal the spot where his heart lay beneath. "You said it yourself, we're not good for each other."

"I lied. We're perfect for each other."

He leapt to his feet, pushing me back with the sheer force of his presence, until my back hit the wall. His hands shot out and latched onto my elbows, holding me in place. I let out a sob of relief. How good it felt to have his hands on me again. "I could give in so easily. So much of me wants to just pull you into my arms and wipe your tears away. You have to know what you do to me, because otherwise that would just make you an oblivious idiot which is worse." He shook my arms gently, juxtaposed by the fiery passion in his eyes. For someone who was high, his gaze was surprisingly clear. "Is that what you were doing with MacCready? Hanging all over him because you knew what it would do to me?"

I had the gall to snort. "I wasn't hanging all over him. We're friends." I bit my lip to stop from smiling. MacCready was right. Now I knew what he meant about teasing Hancock. Gone were the empty smiles and cold looks. Hancock was a wreck, clothes disheveled, hat laying on the floor somewhere. And I did this to him.

"Look at you smiling! You do know!" He pointed an accusing finger at my nose. "Is that why you've been hiding your face all this time? To make me so damn curious I couldn't think of anything else? What happened to your teeth?"

I slapped a hand over my mouth, no longer smiling. "Nothing. Nevermind that."

He simmered down, a worried hand coming to my cheek. "Susie..."

I shook off his hand. He stepped back like he had been burned. "I love you, John. Try and tell me you don't love me too."

He looked at me, so raw and beautiful. How did we ever fool ourselves into thinking we weren't madly in love with one another? "But I can't trust you. You hurt me real bad. How can I ever trust you with my heart again?"

I sacrificed covering my mouth to hold his hands in mine. "How can I win it back? Tell me how we can be together again."
He shook his head, pulling his hands from mine. "I don't think that's a good idea. Our love is too radioactive. We'll burn up."

"If I learned anything, it's that radiation can do amazing things. You're a living example." Relenting, I took a couple of steps backwards. "I'll earn you back, Hancock." I stepped back again. Unwilling to turn away from him, but knowing that this conversation was coming to its natural end.

When my hand, touched the door knob, Hancock spoke, voice like an abrasion. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because, I think you're unforgettable too." And then I left, his black plasma gaze burned into my mind's eye.
Chapter Summary

Susie must win Hancock back a la Never Been Kissed. Surprise, it was a romcom the whole time.

Chapter Notes

For any of you wondering, yes, this chapter title is based on a Johnny Cash song.

Here's where we earn that explicit rating. ;)

The wonderful BadLuckAlice drew me some absolutely wonderful fanart of Hancock getting decked by Nick from the previous chapter.  
https://badluckalice.tumblr.com/post/165038971969/a-fanart-i-made-for-this-fic-which-i-highly

Everyone go check it out!

Fahrenheit stood in Hancock's office, smoking a glowing cigarette and talking to a couple of men in patchwork suits. Sometimes I wondered if she was more his secretary than his bodyguard. By the time I entered the room, she was already dismissing them.

"You got a lot of guts showing your face to me." But she still hadn't whipped out a gun.
Improvement.

"I understand why you're so angry at me, and I'm glad, really, that Hancock has such a great friend looking out for him."

She bit down on her cigarette, but before she could bite it cleanly in two, she took the stick and threw it into a nearby ashtray already littered with old cigarettes long gone cool. "I can't believe the fucking words coming out of your stupid mouth. 'I'm glad you're his friend,' yeah, well, his friend had to watch him cry his heart out over you, watch him nearly kill himself with chems just to run away from the thought of you." Some of my smile must have shown in my eyes, because she snorted in disgust. "And look at you, that makes you happy, you twisted bitch."

"If he's that wrecked over me then it means I still have a chance. Fahrenheit, I need your help to win him back."

She laughed. "Did they take out parts of your brain when they did those stitches? Why the fuck would I do that?"

"Tell me, honestly, when we were together, have you ever seen Hancock happier?"

She didn't say anything, but it wasn't a negative either.
"We're meant to be together. I know that now. If he was honest-to-god over me, I'd just leave him alone, but... Look, I made a mistake, and this is me making up for it. I've already apologized to him, now I need to put my money where my mouth is. Help me win him back, Fahrenheit. Help me make him happy again."

She was silent for a moment, lips pulled back in a snarl. Then she let out a growl. "Damn you and your silver tongue. You better not make me regret this, or I will kill you, regardless of what that does to Hancock."

"If I did this again, I would want you to kill me anyway. All I need is some advice. How can I get him back?"

"I'm not going to have all the answers, Short Stack. You said you apologized to him. What did he say?"

"That he loved me," my heart skipped, "but he couldn't trust me anymore. But how do I earn back his trust?"

"Well, what caused you to lose it in the first place?" She pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shaking another stick out.

"I rejected his offer to turn ghoul for shallow reasons."

"And in doing so you rejected Hancock himself. Being a ghoul is his whole identity. He's not like the others. He chose this life, is proud of it."

"...So I need to prove I'm fine with being a ghoul? But we have no idea where to find that drug...it would take too long."

"You could always walk into the Glowing Sea naked."

I shot her a glare. "That's more likely to kill me. Hell, the drug isn't even a 100% chance, probably."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Then show that you as a human is proud to be in a relationship with a ghoul. If you can prove to him that your fine with the burnt bits, he just might forgive you."

"But how?"

"Hancock tells me you're smart, got a paper that says so and everything. You figure it out for your damn self. If you can't even do that, then I won't accept you two." She wouldn't say anymore on the subject so I left.

MacCready was more forthcoming with his wisdom. "You've gotta make a big grand gesture. Everyone loves that. Some kind of public declaration of love. That'll show you're not ashamed of him."

"Like write an article for Piper's newspaper?" I'd seen a movie like that once. The girl wrote a heartfelt article in her newspaper, asking the man to forgive her and meet up with her. But how many
people outside of Diamond City read Publick Occurences? No, I needed to reach a wider audience.

Like lightning, I was struck with an idea. "I've got it! Oh, thank you so much, MacCready, you're the best! You were right about everything. People should make a shrine to your wisdom."

He laughed. "No shrines, please, but I wouldn't mind some help getting those Gunners off my back."

"You've got it."

My first stop in Diamond City was Nick's Agency. I figured he'd want to be updated on the happenings, and I needed help writing my speech. The obvious choice was Piper, but she was off in Covenant, probably doing something dangerous. Really, it was for the best. I was trying to write a declaration of love, not an exposé.

Nick was pleased with the progress I had made, but declined to help with writing my speech. "I'm not a poet."

Ellie turned out to be surprisingly helpful. The woman had acquired a couple of romance novels that survived the bombs. I actually had to tone her back in parts.

Travis had been more than willing to play my recording on the radio. "You helped me get my confidence back. Sure, Scarlett and I didn't work out, but you've done so much for me. On the hour, right? I'll start playing it tomorrow."

After that, the hard part was done. Now it was time to get everything set up. On my way, I passed through the market, deciding to grab a bowl of noodles for lunch. While I was sitting there idly, I noticed someone new hawking their wares on the streets, though all it looked like he had was a single cardboard box. Most people that passed by didn't give him the time of day, but some people looked into his box. They always shook their head no and then left anyway. The burn of curiosity pulled me to him.

The man was aging, skin wrinkled in places and a bit tanned. His hands were rough with callouses and there was dirt under his fingernails. This didn't look like a citizen of Diamond City. He looked more like a farmer. I waved hello at him.

"Good day there, ma'am, would you be interested in buying a cat?"

I looked down, and sure enough, five little kittens mewled up at me, tumbling over each other on their newly acquired legs. These things look like they had just opened their eyes. Dogmeat sniffed at the box curiously, which made the man sweat nervously. "You're selling kittens? Where'd you get them?"

He scratched the back of his head, shoulders hunched. This guy was a pretty jittery fellow. Reminded me of the old Travis. "My barn cat got knocked up, some stray, I guess. I can't keep them, too many hungry mouths to feed, so I thought I'd try to sell them up in Diamond City, but..."

"People aren't interested in feeding another hungry mouth either," I finished. I couldn't blame them. Sometimes it was hard just to find food for yourself. "And if you send them off into the wild, they're
The man nodded. "I can't...I can't just let them die. I have a responsibility to at least try."

That was admirable. "If you don't find any luck here, I'd try Vault 81, they got kids there who would love a pet."

He thanked me for the advice.

"In the meantime, I'll take that one right there." I pointed at a little calico kitten trying to climb the walls of her cardboard prison.

"Really?" His eyes lit up. "That'll be 50 caps."

"It'll be zero caps, I'm afraid." I picked up the kitten, cuddling her to my chest.

"What? They're not free."

"This one is. Look, buddy, I'm doing you a favor. You said it yourself that you can't take care of these kittens. You feel responsible and want them to find a good home, and I can promise you this one will be well taken care of. If it was just about the caps for you, you would have sold the whole litter to that meat shop over there. I even gave you some free advice, so no, I'm not paying for this kitten."

"I...uh...well..." The man stammered, sweating, but he didn't stop me when I walked off with the cat.

Trying to step over garbage in pumps was about as dangerous as walking through a minefield. Walking to Bark Avenue had been no problem, but the inside was still as much of a wreck as when Hancock had shown me the first time. Trying to place all of the candles on a flat surface had been an exercise in balance. By the fifth candle, I decided to just go barefoot until it was time.

"God, how is anyone supposed to move in these pants," I heaved. The tight leather pants came up to my waist, lined with a wide black leather belt, and a cropped red top with a neckline so low, the tops of my breasts were cold. The small red scarf tied around my neck did little to warm me either. This is what I get for letting a woman who reads those trashy novels dress me. I should have just gone to Daisy like the last time. It would have been worth the trip. The makeup was almost a foreign feeling. It'd been half a year since anything had been on my face. I missed it.

Straightening my back, I did a final checklist: candles, sexy outfit, brahmin steaks ready to be grilled on the camping grill I found, oh, and of course, the truckload of chems I trailed around a double mattress on the ground like rose petals. If this didn't win him back, then I was out of ideas. A mewl from behind a counter drew my attention.

I shushed the kitten, checking that she hadn't spilled the little saucer of water I had set out for her. She hadn't eaten the cat treat I'd left for her. That was the only cat food I could find in the place. Maybe it was too hard for her? Or it just tasted bad. Shit, I knew nothing about taking care of cats. This probably wasn't my best idea, but it'd seemed like a brilliant plan at the time. "Be quiet, girl," I whispered to her even though no one else was around. "You're supposed to be a surprise."
A noise at the door drew my attention. Dogmeat sauntered into the store, idly sniffing the air. I promised him some of the steak as payment for keeping a lookout. "Any sign yet, boy?"

He shook his head, ears laid back.

"Well, there's still time. There's no guarantee he's even heard it yet."

Dogmeat looked at me.

"Well, my hope was that someone would hear it and tell him. I suppose I could have just told him to listen, but I wanted everything to be a surprise." I may have not thought through the logistics of this plan.

Feeling a bit anxious, I checked my pip-boy where it lay on a counter next to some watermelon patterned harnesses. 6:58 PM. Travis would be playing my recording soon. Every hour on the hour, I told him. I flicked the radio on to DCR, and Travis' new suave voice spoke out in the quiet of the pet boutique. "--was Elton Britt with 'Uranium Fever.' We're coming up on the 7 o'clock hour, folks, and you know what that means: time to hear Suzie's recording again. If anyone out there knows Hancock, please tell him to tune in now. This is all for love, Commonwealth, and there's nothing more powerful than that."

A beat of silence, and then a weirdly high-pitched version of my own voice spoke to me. God, I hated how I sounded in recordings. "My name is Susan Quinn. I'm a human, but I'm in love with a ghoul. A ghoul known as John Hancock. But more than a ghoul, he is the most amazing man I've ever met. And I hurt him. I'm sorry. I will spend the rest of my life making that up to you, maybe even longer. I'm a selfish person, because more than your love, I want your forgiveness. If you think you can forgive me, meet me at the quiet place you showed me, the one that only the two of us know about, tonight at 7. I'll be waiting."

"And there you have it. Hancock, my man, if you're listening right now, please forgive her. I'm afraid she'll keep playing messages to you on my station." I flicked the radio off. Nick had told me to just write what I was really thinking, but it sounded stupid over the radio. I was the star of the debate team, I should be able to write a speech, dammit. Here's my thesis, and the next three paragraphs will expand on the evidence of why you should take me back. I've even prepared a helpful chart.

The only thing left to do was wait, so I lounged on the mattress, twirling a Med-X syringe around my thumb idly. I promised myself that no matter what happened tonight, I wouldn't use it, but the allure was still there. I shouldn't have even brought any, but they were in the pile of chems I had taken from Marowski's chem lab. He wouldn't be too pleased with me, but hopefully he would be too scared to do anything about it. Being "friends" with the mayor didn't hurt, either.

By 8 o'clock, I considered just going ahead and grilling the steaks. They sat in the cooler I got from the meat market in Diamond City, taunting my growling stomach. Dogmeat would come inside more often to check on me. I could tell he was worried about me, but I kept a stiff upper lip.

By 9 o'clock, watching the candles shrink did nothing to distract my anxiety. I ended up giving Dogmeat the pouch with all of the Med-X syringes to go hide someplace. Too many times I found myself reach for one. I paced around the store, barefoot, and then in heels for the challenge. I played with the kitten, who was certainly turning out to be a climber. Even though she was meant as a present for Hancock, I couldn't help imagining names for her.

"Calicos are supposedly lucky, so why not Lucky?"
She climbed up my arm, her tiny claws surprisingly sharp.

"Ow, ok, too obvious. Fortuna? We could call you 'Tuna for short. You like tuna, huh?"

The kitten mouthed my finger, fangs not really biting down.

I heard a dog bark. I nearly dropped the cat. Shit, shit, that was the signal. I tripped trying to rush to the box to put the kitten away, but righted myself at the last second. The steaks! The steaks! I wanted him to come into a room filled with the smell of cooking meat. I flipped the switch for the gas, listening for the click of the pilot light. Sure enough, the charcoal and sticks I had thrown in there were quickly lit aflame. I threw the slabs of meat on the grill and shut the lid. I saw a candle that had gone out and rushed to quickly light it, but my heels tripped over a Jet inhaler, and I fell like a piece of timber. Luckily, it was onto the mattress, so the fall didn't hurt too much.

"Your idea of seduction isn't very subtle."

A tangle of limbs, I flicked my head around to the source of the voice. I hadn't even heard the door in my panic. Shit, he found me like an idiot with my ass hanging in the air. I wanted him to follow the trail of chems to the bed to find me lying there in a sexy pose or something. "I'm new to this sort of thing." I righted myself, standing nervously. "You came."

"I strongly considered not coming."

"So, then...does that mean...?"

"Tell me, if I had that drug that could turn you into a ghoul right now, would ya?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation.

"You don't mind changing for me? You don't think I'm too controlling?"

"It wouldn't be changing, not really. I'd still be myself, just..." I couldn't help covering my mouth, hoping the lipstick didn't smudge onto my hand. "If you promise to stay with me forever, I would do it."

He tipped his hat up. "You really don't seem like the person who would be so concerned with her looks."

My other arm hugged myself, and I turned away with red cheeks. "I didn't think so either. You bring out the worst in me."

"I could say the same." He sighed, and stepped forward, pulling my arm away from my face. "I suppose I do want to be a bit controlling. I want you to be unable to look at anyone but me." He lifted my chin with a finger. "And I want you to only hear how beautiful you are from me. That's pretty messed up, huh?"

I couldn't help my stupid grin. "You think I'm beautiful?"

He laughed. "It was you who said I kept saying it too much, and it gave you this weird complex." His eyes drifted to my open mouth, and it snapped shut instantly. I had forgotten... "And I like your smile. Gives you this cute little rascal look. So don't ever think you have to hide it from me."

I hid my face in his shoulder, which I knew was the exact opposite of what he asked, but it was too much. "Dammit, this is supposed to be about me taking care of you, and here you are taking care of me."
"That's fine," he murmured softly into my ear, arms snaking around my shoulders. "I like taking care of you. Like I said, a bit controlling."

I couldn't help laughing, even as my eyes burned. "And I'm self-centered and like attention. See? Perfect for each other." I pulled away, wiping at the corners of my eyes. "So, ah, dinner's cooking. I probably should have started it earlier, but I wasn't sure if..." I gestured to the orange camping grill.

"You're grilling inside? That seems like a fire hazard."

"It's ok. I opened a window."

"That's not... You know what, it sounds great. And I see the trail of breadcrumbs meant to lead me here." He pointed at a tin of Mentats.

"What can I say? I was desperate."

"Is that what the outfit is too?"

I flushed. "I thought we would keep with the theme from our last date. Is it bad?"

"Bad? It looks like we're going to have to cut you out."

"But the plan is to get me out of it, right?"

"Are you kidding me, Sunshine? The makeup sex is the best part."

My heart soared at the nickname. How much I've longed to hear it. This time, when I was smiling widely, I didn't cover it up. Instead I walked carefully over to the counter and pulled out the box. "I have another present for you, actually."

He stepped over, peering into the container. "A kitty? You got me a cat?"

Oh, shit, maybe this wasn't a good idea. "W-Well, you told me you used to have a cat when you were a kid, and some guy was selling them in Diamond City, and it was just kind of a spur-of-the-moment decision. I understand that taking care of a kitten is a lot of effort, but I figured you could train it to pickpocket or--"

I was silenced by a quick kiss. "I told you, I like taking care of things. This is a great gift. Is it a guy or girl?"

"Girl."

"Hmm, she'll need a name as tough as she is. How about Chemy?"

"Hancock, that's a terrible name."

He picked her up gently, the kitten protesting at being woken up from her nap. "I like Destructo the Atomic Kitty."

I laughed. "Is that her full name?"

"Oh, no, she's got plenty of titles, that's just the colloquial version. I don't know, I'll probably change it, depending on her personality. So far it would be Sleepy. Do you think I could train her to fight with a switchblade?"

"Why would she do that when she has claws?"
"Shit, you're right. But I don't think she could carry a pistol. I wonder if they have cat armor in this place."

"I highly doubt that. You might find a patriotic hat."

His eyes lit up. "Do you think they have a little hat like mine? That would be the bee's knees."

"I love you." It came out of nowhere, but I didn't regret saying it.

Hancock froze, staring at me with that same raw expression from before. "I love you too, Sunshine."

"H-Hey, maybe we should turn out the lights."

"That's a lot of candles. And you lit them all."

I rubbed my arm, which was a bit awkward from where I was positioned underneath Hancock on the mattress. My exposed torso tickled from the cold, even as Hancock's hands warmed it. The rough texture of his fingers tickled as they trailed up my ribcage to cup my breasts. "I know, it just seems too...bright in here."

Hancock paused to hit me with a look. "You look beautiful." He trailed down, placing kisses on every single scar. "Nothing's changed."

Everything's changed. But he was right about how much effort it would take to blow out all of the candles. Damn, I went too far. So instead, I let him convince me.

His mouth traveled down my stomach and past my pubic hair. I let out a breathless cry when I felt that wet heat on my clitoris. It was like a pulse grenade, lightning dancing along my nerves and sending my heart into overdrive. When I felt his tongue probe at my entrance, I pulled on his head, knocking his hat off accidentally. "Wait, wait--"

He lifted his head to regard me curiously, saliva dripping down his chin, and God, I was going to pass out just from that sight. "What's wrong, Sunshine? No good?"

I shook my head emphatically. That was more than good. "I'm suppose to be making up to you. I should be the one taking care of you."

"I told you before..."

"I know, I know." I pushed myself up into a sitting position. "But I want to make you feel good too." I flipped us over so that now I was the one on top of him. "Let me show you how much I love you."

He moaned so deep I could feel the vibrations from where my hands were on his chest. "You keep up like that, Sunshine, and the fun's gonna end too soon."

I leant down so that our chests were flat against each other, and I even rubbed my breasts against him for the delicious tickle it caused for my nipples. They brushed over Hancock's own and he clenched his teeth with a hiss. My mouth watered, and I hungrily stole a kiss, my tongue brushing up against
the same one that had just been exploring the folds of my vagina earlier. I was truly shameless to find
the taste arousing. Unbidden, my hips started rocking against his own, and I could feel his cock
harden against my pelvic bone, and oh, how tempting it was to change the angle just a little, but I had
other plans.

I moved my mouth to nibble at his ear, unable to hold anything back. It was like I was starving, and
Hancock was a big juicy steak. Or maybe that was just the lingering smells from the grill. Either
way, lust drove me to move faster than the slow tease I had intended. If the hands fondling my ass
were anything to go by, Hancock was having a hard time restraining himself as well. "John..."

His fingers dug tight, and he moved my hips so that I could feel a hard weight rubbing all along the
dripping folds to the cleft of my buttocks, pivoting furiously back and forth, but never inserting. It
was delicious torture. I bit down onto his neck to keep myself from screaming.

"Oh baby girl, oh babe, yes, yes!" And then something hot and wet burst onto the globes of my ass.

The fingers unclenched, no doubt to leave bruises, and we both struggled to catch our breath. "I
hadn't even started yet, Hancock."

He chuckled breathlessly. "I can't help it. You're too sexy, Sunshine."

"Well, you better muster up that ghoul endurance, because I'm not done with you yet." I shifted my
body lower, laving my tongue over the rough texture of his sternum, feeling the moans escaping him.
I continued even lower and lower until I was mouthing at the underside of his cock. Sure enough, it
was already starting to stiffen again. I had to be very careful about this. I needed to get it nice and
wet without him blowing his load again. He usually climaxed many times during a single session of
sex, but I intended for the majority of those to be inside of me.

"This is going to take some gymnastics," I murmured against the gnarled skin. Once I had decided it
was good and wet, I pulled back, delighted at the little whimper Hancock made. I grabbed my own
breasts in my hands. They had shrunk a cup size since I'd first woken up from my cryo chamber, but
hopefully this would still work. "Gotta make use of these babies before the radiation burns them
away." I squished them together, and leaned down as far as I could, so that they enveloped the tip of
his cock.

"Shit, Suzie," Hancock hissed. "Where'd you learn a trick like that?"

"A dirty mag I'd snuck from my roommate back in college. I've never had the chance to try it out
until now." I leaned further down and the tip of his head poked through my cleavage. I pulled up a
little and then down again. Even with my saliva to smooth the way, I could still feel the rough pull
against my breasts.

Hancock threw his head to the side, clutching on the edge of the mattress like a lifeline. "Fuck, how
do you keep getting even sexier?"

I chuckled, and moved as fast as I could, considering the awkward positioning. Hancock began to
thrust upwards, fucking my tits with abandon. With him moving as well, his cock got so high up that
it even began to poke my chin. So, licking my lips ravenously, I tilted my head down to open my
mouth so the tip would hit my tongue at its zenith. Hancock started chanting "fuck" like it was going
out of style and with a growling roar came all over my tongue and the tops of my breasts. The taste
was horrible bitter, so I quickly wiped it off by licking his hip bone to get the semen off.

"Holy fuck, Sunshine," Hancock panted, arm over his eyes. "Just...holy fuck."
I smirked in victory. I've never seen Hancock look so spent before, so thoroughly fucked, and if I could purr, I would definitely be doing it now. God, I loved this man. I glanced down to the streaks of white on my chest. I touched it experimentally with one finger, marveling at its stickiness. "You know, your ejaculate has some low levels of radiation, right?"

"Come on, Sunshine, just call it cum like everyone else."

"I was just wondering, if we get enough of your cum and rub it all over my body," I trailed my finger down, smearing the liquid down onto my stomach, "if that would be enough to turn me ghoul."

Hancock froze, his limbs tense. For a moment, I wondered if I had said something wrong, before the world spun around me and my back hit the mattress. Strong hands were digging into my shoulders to pin me down. Hancock hovered over me, looking crazed, his eyes wide and his mouth open to reveal yellowed teeth. His voice was that delicious growl that sounded like danger. "Let's try it out, then, shall we?" And then he entered me in one hard thrust.

I saw stars, and the snap of his hips was hard enough to knock the breath out of me. It stung a little, too forceful, but god, I had missed this feeling. Now, now I was whole. Hancock didn't give me any time to adjust to the stretch before he started furiously thrusting like a beast in heat. All I could do was lie limp in his arms while he pounded me into the mattress, and I made abrupt moans punctuating each onslaught. My legs tightened around him, urging him deeper, faster, even though any more would surely kill me, but I must be a slut because I only wanted more.

"I feel like I'm going feral," Hancock growled out, and he looked it too: his face scrunched tight, his teeth bared and his eyes wild. Like a mortal struck with crazed lust by Aphrodite.

"Me too."

His pace slowed a fraction, but his muscles were still tense underneath the mutated skin. "I love you so much it's scary. I don't think I can ever let you go again, or I'll go crazy."

I pulled him down until so that our breaths mingled and our lips just barely touched. "Then never let me go."

He looked like a wreck, and his eyes glittered with starlight. He looked like he was crying, but still he pumped into me with brutal force and loud squelching noises. "Say it. Say you'll never leave me."

"I--oh!-- I'll never leave you. I love you, John, I love you so much." My vision blurred, my eyes burned, but I didn't close them for fear of missing the look on his face. He was even so kind as to bring it closer for my perusal by kissing me passionately.

"You close, baby girl?"

Unable to answer, I just nodded my head enthusiastically.

"Come on, together." And then one of his hands left my shoulders to rub at the spot just above where his cock was stirring me up, and I climaxed so hard that I almost missed the feeling of him ejaculating inside of me. The feeling persisted, dancing all across my body so that I twitched and squirmed. My vision was white, as white as the time the trunk opened for the first time, and I knew I'd found god.
Goodneighbor was the sleepiest in the morning, and yet we were welcomed by an entire party of people at the gate. Thank god I had thought to bring a change of clothes with me. We really did have to cut me out of that outfit. I tugged the kerchief up my nose self-consciously. Even Fahrenheit was there, looking not nearly as murderous as she had been yesterday. We received catcalls and applause, which was a first for me. People didn't usually congratulate me on sex. Daisy was even holding up a small banner with "Congratulations!" painted in white.

Kent ran up to me, biggest smile on his face. "You guys got back together! I'm so glad!" He wrapped me in a hug.

"I wasn't expecting a congratulation party."

"Well, everyone heard your speech on the radio, and we all saw Hancock walk off, so..."

Daisy spoke up, "We had another made just in case things didn't go well either."

That certainly instilled me with confidence.

Hancock strode forward, arms thrown open wide. "And in celebration, drinks at the Third Rail, on me!"

The gaggle of people cheered and rambled off to the bar, leaving as soon as they had arrived. Hancock, however, didn't follow. Fahrenheit had lingered long enough to silently hand him a pack and then she too took off. The mayor grabbed my arm and lead me back towards the town entrance.

"What are you doing? I thought we were going for drinks?"

"This early in the morning? Nah, I just said that to get them off our backs." He shook his head and closed the door behind me. "I figured, what better way to get back into the swing of things than to go kill something."

"How romantic." I smiled though, trailing beside him happily. God, it was so good to be back in boots again.

Hancock smiled at me. "I've heard of some guy selling bad cans of meat, lots of people getting sick, so I figured we could go pay him a visit."

Walking past Cabot House gave me an idea. There had been no point in stopping to pay a visit, if anyone was even still in that house. We did, however, walk past the USS Constitution. I decided I was going to help these metal sailors move on.

Hancock didn't agree. "You're not seriously going to help those tin cans over actual people, are you?"

"Yes, I am." I carried the FLL3 Turbopump Bearings up into the ship.
"There's stuff on that ship that could help those people, rare machinery. Instead you want to send these robots off to complete some useless mission? They've got a giant hole in the bottom of their ship. It'll sink anyway."

"Then the scavengers can get at it. Look," I stopped, turning around in front of the captain's quarters, "This ship meant a lot to Emogene, who means a lot to me. It'll be symbolic, a farewell ceremony for her. After that, I don't care what happens to the ship." I turned back to open the door with the key Ironsides gave me, before glancing over my shoulder, "So what's it going to be, Hancock? Are you going to pull a gun on me again to stop me from doing something horrible?"

"You can be a real bitch sometimes, you know that?" I really needed to do something about the delightful shivers that growl in his voice gave me. It was unhealthy.

Taking it as the accedence that it was, I returned to installing the bearings into the ship. "I think this is something that we need to work on, Hancock, if we're going to be together again. It's not going to be all sunshine and rainbows all the time. There will come times when we disagree with some things, and we can't always break it off every times that happens."

He snorted. "Heh, when did you get all wise?"

"I've had a lot of time to meditate. Ah, there, finished." I stood up from where I was crouching, dusting my hands off.

Hancock followed me back up to the deck. "What if there comes a point where our convictions don't align? Where we're both unwilling to compromise?"

"Then I suppose we'll duke it out then," I answered with a shrug. "But if you really put your foot down, I can't see me ever denying you. I don't think there's anything I value more than your companionship."

He smiled. "Even the world?"

I smiled back. "Especially the world." It was scary really, how much I loved him. If he were an evil man, he could control me easily, getting me to do whatever he wanted so long as he kept threatening to break it off with me. But that wasn't the kind of man I fell in love with. Still, it was terrifying being that weak against a person.

Captain Ironsides thanked us for our service, and as one last task, sent us to switch on the auxiliary power, which gave us a lovely view of the ship launching off. The noise from the rockets was deafening, even at this distance. I can't imagine how bad it was on the ship itself. Truly, this felt like a magical moment, like I was watching Captain Hook's ship laden with fairy dust take off into the afternoon sky."

"Now I'm pretty sure I'm hallucinating," Hancock breathed beside me. "This has to be one weird trip."

I chuckled, but then my smile dropped when the ship crashed into a skyscraper. The glow of the rockets died. Then I burst out laughing. "Looks like they won't have to go scuba diving after all."
"I like this," I said between bites of some grilled molerat. "What'd you put on it?"

"Secret sauce," Hancock smacked his lips, wrists loose. He sat on the overturned log, legs spread wide, stick of meat pinched between fingers. "Ok, alright, I might have mixed in a crushed up Buffout pill we got from those raiders."

I spit out my half-chewed meat.

Hancock broke out into cackles, slapping me on the back. "Ah, I'm kiddin' ya. That'd probably taste nasty. It's just a squeeze of mutfruit juice, gives it a little tang."

I pushed him playfully in the arm and went back to eating my molerat. "You know, it's like old times. Killing raiders together, eating their food."

"Nothin' like some good ol' fashion justice to bring people together." He leaned against me, chin resting on my shoulder. "You know, when that guy was aiming his gun at you, and you shot it out of his hand, that was pretty hot."

I couldn't turn my head fully to look at him without knocking heads, so I could only speak to him out of my periphery. "You really wanna go right now? How are you not tired?"

"It's that wonderful ghoul endurance, baby," he lifted his chin to kiss my cheek. "But I guess I can hold myself back for the weak little human."

"Ok, calm down there, Superman." I rolled my eyes. "But I really am tired."

"Ah, don't worry about it, Sunshine," he ruffled my hair. One good thing about it being so short now was that he couldn't tangle it up like before. "I won't pressure you into sex. I'm a gentleman."

"I sincerely hope not. Gentlemen are boring."

"Is that so?" His grin turned wicked, and he pulled me forward by the back to give me a proper kiss.

It was nice, until I remembered our furry audience. I pushed him away. "No, Hancock, not in front of Dogmeat."

"We've kissed in front of him before. Besides, he was there for the makeup sex. Nothing new to him."

I flushed and punched him in the arm. He didn't even flinch, damn him. "No, he wasn't! He was outside the building keeping watch the whole time." We weren't exactly in a safe neighborhood. Best not to be caught with our pants down, literally.

"Babe, he's just a dog."

No, he wasn't, but I wasn't sure if Dogmeat wanted me to tell him. After all, it took him this long to tell me. Or, maybe, it had to be me at exactly that time because of something that would happen in the future? I still wasn't quite sure whether to believe Dogmeat had the power to see the future or not, but apparently so did Mama Murphy, so why not a dog, too? Either way, he was purposefully looking out at the nearby Finch Farm, a dark shadow in the night. He was intelligent enough to know not to look, which only made it more embarrassing.

Hancock sighed, rubbing a hand down his face. "Fine, fine, just go to bed. But if that dog starts
cockblocking me..."

"Dogmeat stays," I said with finality.

"I wouldn't dare to suggest you get rid of your faithful bodyguard." He laid out the bedroll for me, patting it with a smile. I laid down on top of it, not liking the constricting feeling of the sleeping bag. It was cold, sure, but it didn't leave me kicking around in a frenzy. "Just, you know, maybe we should bring a blindfold around."

"I'm not going to blindfold the dog," I scoffed, resting my head on my arm.

Hancock shot me that devilish grin of his again. "I meant for you." And then he laid out his own bed roll next to mine. He moved to stomp out the small campfire we had going.

I held up a hand. "Actually, could you let it keep going?" I looked up at the cloudy night sky. Not a star in sight.

"You cold? That's why you're supposed to get under the covers, you know."

"I know, I know. Just...could you?"

He shrugged, and then laid down to get his minimal rest.

The rain started just as we made it to Longneck Lukowski's Cannery. Many people, not just in Goodneighbor, had been complaining about getting sick after eating this canned meat. And when we got inside, we found a merchant in a Vault 81 suit cancelling her business with him based on the sickness it caused.

Theodore Collins who was unfortunately neither named Longneck nor Lukowski as I had anticipated was as nervous and shifty of a man as the farmer that I bought the kitten from. He had an unfortunate nasally falsetto voice and just all around seemed like a wet rag. "Seven out of ten people prefer our Longneck Lukowski’s Canned Meat over even fresh brahmin. Care to try some for yourself?"

I've never heard a worse idea. The man kept deflecting our questions, blaming his problems on a 'couple' of molerats. Something smelt fishy here, and it wasn't the canned meat. "You know, I could take care of that molerat problem for you. I'm an exterminator of sorts."

"Really? That would be great. Can't stand the little buggers myself. You're welcome to look around, but stay out of the old basement. It isn't safe down there."

That sounded like exactly where I should go. We went through the double doors to the back. Worker robots were busy slicing and canning the meat on a conveyer belt. Theodore had been right about using a mix of meats. I could recognize the leg of a radstag, the body of a radroach (yuck), and, indeed, some molerat meat. The robots didn't bother with us poking around, but no matter where we looked, we didn't find a single molerat.

"I don't like this," Hancock whispered to me. "He's letting us in so easily, but there's nothing here."
"He did say not to go down into the basement," I whispered back.

"And when have we ever done what we were told?" He grinned wickedly.

We found our way to the basement via a giant freight elevator, probably used to bring up large crates of meat, or something. The descent tickled my stomach, but that feeling dropped when a robotic voice announced "Local elevator controls disabled by system administrator."

"Bastard locked us down here!" Hancock growled, shouting up. I frantically pushed the button, but nothing happened. "Ok, he's definitely hiding something."

There was only one way forward. At least the basement lights were still working, so we weren't trapped down here in the dark. God, how horrible would that be? One door revealed a small storeroom filled with the carcasses of many dead animals and one living radroach, which caused me to scream when it flew at me. Hancock batted it away with his shotgun, shooting me a teasing grin.

"It's a giant bug, ok? It's just gross." I was way better than when I had first left the vault. I had nearly wet myself then.

The other door led to a dark area, only a few rays of light filtering in from above. Just enough to reveal a chain link fence. That seemed weird and out of place. I shivered at the cold. "It's a little dark down here. Let me turn on--" A sound like a corpse trying to breathe air interrupted me. I knew that sound, the first roll of thunder in that terrible storm. And then suddenly I was back in that trunk, curled up into as small a space as I could, trying so hard to ignore the crash of the waves, the earthquakes shaking my world, and not even my screams could override that cacophony, and I could hear something else, something different from the storm, the sound of a voice like the glow of radiation shouting at me to get up, get up, Susie, what's wrong? But how could I get up when I was being broken down in the dark again?

The first sense to come back was touch. I could feel a warm, fuzzy texture underneath my fingers. When I moved my hand, the texture moved, like I was rubbing a piece of cloth between my digits. Then came my hearing. At first, I thought it was the sound of a saw, someone moving the blade back and forth over a piece of wood rapidly, but then I realized that it was breathing. I blinked, and put all of these things together with the sight of a dog panting lightly, tongue lolling, my fingers hidden in the fur of his neck. I looked around, smelling the tinny smell of canned meat, and tasting it on my tongue.

I was sitting in a chair in the front entrance to Longneck Lukowski's Cannery, a table in front of me displaying the various cans proudly, and Dogmeat sitting loyally by my side. I unclenched his scruff, causing the dog to turn around to regard me curiously. I nodded my thanks to him.

"Oh good, you've come to."

I couldn't help the flinch. The nightmares were not yet faded from the back of my eyelids, and
Hancock's face suddenly appearing before me, looking so much like theirs... The hurt was evident on his face.

"Are you ok now, Sunshine? Do you remember where you are?"

I nodded silently.

"What happened to you? You suddenly collapsed to the ground, and you weren't moving at all, and then you started screaming. I kept trying to help you, but we were ambushed by a whole pack of ferals. Turns out that's what's been filling the cans."


"Bastard's dead. Just so you know, he attacked me first. Not like I wasn't going to kill him anyway, but technically it was self-defense."

I nodded along, only half listening. This attack had been the worst. It almost felt like I had been back in that trunk. I stood up suddenly, wobbling a bit at the wooziness that caused. Hancock had his hands on my elbows instantly, giving me some stabilization. "I need to go outside. Get some air."

Abruptly, the air felt too thin in the building, like I wasn't getting enough oxygen. Hancock nodded, and helped me outside.

The relief was instant. The air was cooled with a pleasant breeze, the sun blocked by clouds so that its glare didn't blind. With each breath, I felt a little bit better.

"What happened to you, Susie?" Hancock had let me go so that I could stretch. "What happened to you when I was gone?"

"Nothing happened." I flexed my legs, swinging them back and forth a bit just because I could.

"Bullshit. You were completely catatonic. If me and the mutt hadn't been there, you would have died."

I stopped myself from saying "No, I wouldn't. I was protected by the trunk." Instead, I just shook my head. And began to walk away, knowing it wasn't very subtle.

"Don't walk away from me. I have a right to know."

"You don't, actually." I kept walking. "What happened to me while we were apart is my business, just as what happened to you is your business."

"But something did happen."

I just shook my head. I really didn't want to talk about this right now. I just wanted to get as far away from that cannery as possible. But of course, my life couldn't be easy, because who should I see clanging up towards me but Paladin Danse and Scribe Haylen (I suppose we weren't too far from the Prydwen). They were followed by another Brotherhood Knight in power armor. I couldn't recognize him because of the helmet he wore. Danse liked to go without his often, which seemed unsafe, but he had told me that there wasn't much breathing room inside. I could hear Hancock swear under his breath.

Dogmeat barked and bounded up to Haylen happily, tail wagging so fast it was only a beige blur. Traitor.
"Dogmeat!" She squealed with delight.

"Susie?" Paladin Danse looked at me with raised eyebrows. "What are you doing here? I thought you would have gone back home by now."

"I did, if it escaped your notice," I looked back at Hancock whose back was ramrod straight. "What are you doing out here, Danse? Or, should I say, why are you walking?"

"Well, it startled the Elder how close a raider camp was to our base, so we only use the vertibirds for long-distance missions."

"We're on a research patrol," Haylen supplied helpfully, still petting Dogmeat. "It's not that far from here, so we have to walk."

"Just like the rest of us peasants," Hancock snorted.

Danse frowned at him, but spoke to me instead. "How have you been? Better?"

This was getting dangerously close to the elephant in the room. "Yes, much, thank you. And how have you guys been? Haylen, still working on that promotion?"

She heaved a weary sigh. "Yes. I'm starting to think that Proctor Quinlan is just using it as a carrot to hold above my head."

Probably. That guy was shrewd and not very companionable, but he certainly seemed capable at his job. Which to the Brotherhood was the only important factor.

Hancock stepped forward, frowning. "When did you get so buddy-buddy with the Brotherhood?"

Danse stepped forward, towering over all of us. "Maybe she's learned to keep better company, freak."

Oh boy. Here we go again. "Danse, don't call--"

"What's wrong? You sound jealous."

"I'm not the jealous one here."

Haylen stepped up to Danse with a soft voice. That was problem number one right there. "Paladin, there's no point in--"

"Are you trying to tell me I have something to be jealous of?"

"Why she's hanging out with you, after all that's happened, I'll never understand. You're practically feral."

"Oh, you wanna see feral?"

"Stop it!" I screamed. It was supposed to be a very authoritative shout, but it turned shrill. "Just stop it, stop it, please."

"Susie, you need to calm down." Haylen had her hands up as if I were a barrel fire and she a cold hobo.

"Sunshine, we'll stop, ok, we'll stop."
"Oh no, she's hyperventilating."

"Susan, you need to calm down."

"Oh, yeah, like that's going to work. Why didn't she just think to do that in the first place?"

"I'm not the one who put her in this state."

"Shut up, both of you," Haylen yelled. "You're both at fault." Then she turned to me, speaking clearly, but gently. "Ok, Susie, I need you to focus on me ok. Look at my face. You're safe right now. There's no ferals. No darkness. No trunk. Look at my face."

_I'm looking at your damn face, ok?_

"Good. Now tell me what color eyes I have."

"Brown, I think." _I don't know. I don't normally go gazing into women's eyes._

"Close enough. You're able to talk, at least. How are you feeling?"

"Annoyed, mostly." She laughed. "And really tired."

"Is this the first time you had a panic attack?"

"No."

Hancock added helpfully, "She had one way worse just a little bit ago. She was completely unresponsive. I had to fight through an entire basement full of ferals and carry her out."

Haylen and Danse gasped in unison, and then their personalities switched. Suddenly it was Haylen who was rounding on Hancock in righteous fury. "What the hell were you thinking, taking her to a place like that?"

Hancock took two steps back, black eyes wide. "It's not like we knew what was down there, and we got trapped."

While she began to animatedly yell at him, Danse knelt beside me in his power armor so we were finally at eye level. "Are you really ok? Do you need to see a doctor? I've heard of some sort of neurologist in Goodneighbor, I forget her name. We tried to recruit her once but she refused. She may not be a psychologist, but she might be able to help you with these panic attacks."

"Thanks, soldier boy, but I'm fine, really. This is something I have to deal with."

"But you don't have to deal with it alone." His eyes flicked to where Hancock and Haylen were now having a much more subdued conversation. "I don't think traveling with a ghoul is the best idea for you right now, but you're not my soldier, so I can't give you orders."

"Thank god for that," I laughed quietly.

He stood up just as Haylen and Hancock stopped talking and looked to us. His eyes found mine, and I could read the set of his brows. He wanted to talk about this, but he'd let me take the lead. Like usual. "It was nice seeing you guys, I guess, but Hancock and I," I looked over at Haylen pointedly, "and Dogmeat are just going to head home now."

The Brotherhood soldiers waved goodbye and then were on their way, heading somewhere to the north. It was a shame I bumped into them while Hancock was around. Not that I was ashamed of
Hancock, of course not, but he always kept picking fights. Not that Danse helped any, but it didn't make for good small talk. He wasn't so bad when there was no one around to push his buttons.

And yet, Hancock strutted beside me like he had won an argument. "So, we heading to Sanctuary next?"

I shot him a confused look. "Wha-? No, we're going to Goodneighbor."

He skipped a step, then his face split in the stupidest grin. "I told you so," he muttered just audibly under his breath.
Chapter Summary

The gang deals with Susie's feral-phobia.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I sat on the couch in Hancock's office, playing with the kitten who was currently named Killer. Hancock had trouble deciding on a name and it changed frequently. (He had been really upset when Cool Ass Tabby, or CAT for short, didn't really work.) At one point he had considered Catmeat, but I told him to be original. So far, I've just been calling her Kitty. I don't think she even understands that we're calling to her yet, just hears the tone of our voice and gets excited. She's also proven to be a master climber, always climbing up anything she can dig her little claws into, including flesh.

Breaking through stereotypes, Dogmeat had actually taken quite well to the cute little ball of fur and pain. Whenever the kitten would stray too far from safety, he would lift her up gently by the scruff and carry her back. The two liked to cuddle a lot, and it would send me throwing out a string of curses that I hadn't found a single working camera yet. So instead, I just spent the whole time staring at them to commit the sight to memory. Why is it that holotape recorders are easy to find in working condition, but not cameras? Well, I suppose I would need a functioning darkroom too, along with all of the chemicals necessary for photo development. I didn't know anything about developing my own photos. We usually just took our film to the pharmacy to be developed.

The door opened and Hancock walked in, shoulders slumped and eyes haunted. Whatever business he had been dealing with must have been bad. He sat on top of his desk, popped a Mentat and then lit a cigarette, taking a deep, deep drag. Oh boy, he was definitely upset.

"Baby, what's wrong?" I left the cute animals on the floor to put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he croaked out.

I dropped my hand. "Wait, you're not still hung up about Danse, are you? Look, we've never even had so much as a spark between us. Yes, he's become something of a friend, but I've noticed when you two aren't pushing each other's buttons, he's quite nice. And like you're one to be all high and mighty. You were sleeping with all those women-- and men apparently-- but I never once had a single romantic thought about another person."

"That's not what-- Really?" His cigarette hand fell into his lap.

I shook my head. "You were all I could think about. But it's ok, I'm not angry at you. We weren't together, so you had every right to pursue whoever you wanted."

Hancock scoffed. "You weren't in the least bit jealous?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Ok, maybe a little bit, but I knew you were only doing it to forget about me, so that made things easier to bear. So long as I'm the one you think about."

"Oh really? So if I were to go sleep with someone else right now, but think about you...?"
"I would kill them and beat you up."

He shook his head with a smile. Then, he seemed to remember something else and his smile dropped. "That's not what I wanted to talk about. Why didn't you tell me? What happened to you at the school?"

It took a minute for me to understand what he was talking about. What school? Then he pulled a folder out of his jacket and flopped it onto the desk. My eyes were instantly drawn to the Brotherhood of Steel logo stamped onto the front. My stomach felt cold when I went to flip it open. Inside were my medical records from my small sojourn there. "Where did you get this?"

"Your friend Haylen was kind enough to send it to me."

"How could she--? She had no right! This is an invasion of privacy." As angry as I was, I couldn't help reading through my file. So far, it was a simple list of my ailments when I came in.

"I'm glad she did. Were you ever going to tell me?"

"I would have, eventually. I didn't want you to forgive me out of pity, and then when we've just gotten back together... I didn't want to drop this bomb on you and strain our newly reformed relationship. And frankly, you don't have any right to know."

He slid off the desk and onto his feet. His voice gained that growl in it. "Of course I have a right to know if my lover is afraid of me. Are you? Are you afraid of me?" He was standing right up against me, glaring me down.

I didn't drop eye contact. "No, I'm not afraid of you, or any other ghouls for that matter. I'm afraid of ferals."

"Then why did I make you go into a panic attack? Do you think I'll go feral? Maybe I already have."

I gripped his wrist. "No, Hancock, never! Even when you pulled that gun on me back at Parsons, I was never afraid of you. It was just too soon after that incident in the basement, and it was still fresh in my mind."

His face was contorted with all manner of emotions pulling him to and fro like a game of tug o' war. I tugged slightly on his wrist, in the hopes of winning him to my side. "I think they're right. You need to see someone about this. What happened to you..."

"I can handle this on my own." It was too personal for someone else to understand. This was my chance to mold myself into the person I wanted to be. "It all turned out for the best in the end. We got back together."

"How in the hell was that the best? What does you being beaten and starved to near death and locked in a fucking trunk have to do with us getting back together?"

Hold the phone. I never told anyone about what happened to me there. "How do you know that?"

He flipped a few pages in my file. "The sick bastards kept a log of everything they did. When the Brotherhood raided the place, they found it."

Sure enough, when I read through, I found the recorded logs of a terminal they found where the cells were. I suppose this was a lawless land, and so they would never stand a trial if found out, and thus had no need to hide evidence, but it still seemed so blatant to record everything they did. I had no idea who Red Finger or Stinky were, but the moment my eyes fell upon the name Jack-in-the-Box, I
knew it was me. I almost laughed. That was what he came up with? I liked Ghoulie better. So weird to see it all out in writing. It felt too simplified, like it was missing important details. My tongue ran over the gums where a tooth should be.

When Hancock spoke again, his voice was small. "How can you not be afraid of me after that?" His head hung at the neck.

"John." His name got his attention, and he looked up at me. Delicately, I trailed the fingertips of my free hand across the rough edge of his cheek, thumb grazing the edge of his nose cavern. The other was rubbing a thumb against the pulse point of his wrist, one of his sensitive spots. "The thought of you is what got me through all of that. I am the opposite of afraid of you, whatever that is."

"Trust," he supplied, but the corners of his lips were quirking upwards.

In reward, I gave him a kiss, which got him to smile fully, but only for a moment. He gently grabbed my hands, taking them away from his face and wrist to hold in between us. "We still need to do something about this. You won't get very far in this world if ferals cause you to short-circuit."

Way to ruin the mood, but he had a point. "I thought I had faced fear already, but it wasn't my fear. I think I need to tackle this head on."

"Do you mean...?"

I nodded gravely. "I need to go hunt down some ferals."

Hancock looked very much like he thought it was a bad idea, but instead he said, "Then I'm coming with you, no argument."

People didn't usually go out looking for ferals. Ferals just happened upon you (part of their charm). There was one place that Hancock's intel had alerted him to. Jamaica Plain was the rumored sight of some pre-war treasure, but no one had ever found out what it was because the place was crawling with ferals. Probably too many for my first try, but I was always a fan of exposure therapy.

Hancock wanted to make two stops first. To my surprise, the first stop was Diamond City. He leaned up against the statue of a bronze swatter. "There's one other person who knows about this, right? I think he should come with."

"What, really?" This was already going to be painful as it is. I didn't need an audience.

"Nick cares about you, and you brush him off too much. Don't you want the extra support?"

I worried my bottom lip. I probably would feel safer if there was an extra gun at our side. And I really should update him on my situation so he doesn't punch Hancock again. I looked to the open gate where a security guard was watching us idly, then back to Hancock.

"Don't worry, Sunshine, I'll be waiting right here." He waved me off.

I stopped by Publick Occurences to check in and Piper still wasn't home yet. I wasn't sure if I should
be worried or not. Who knows how long it took to do an article. So, I headed to Nick's place. The synth was still there, as reliable as ever. I know he travels a lot for his cases, so how is it that he's always ready when I need him?

"So, you two are back together, huh?" He said when I finished explaining everything to him. "Just tell me one thing: are you happy now?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I am."

"Well, so long as that doesn't change, I won't need to punch anybody." He smiled around his cigarette. What were the effects of smoking on a robot?

And so when I came back out with a synth in tow, the two greeted each other in a friendly manner. I don't know what I would have done if there was still bad blood between those two, but it seemed the matter was already forgotten.

Our next stop was Hancock's storage facility at that freight depot. I hadn't been back here since that horrible fiasco with Bobbi No-Nose. The place had one guard on hand, who had to be woken up from a nap to his eternal chagrin. Hancock just laughed it off. Inside he led us to one boxcar that housed a set of power armor. It was a different model from the one I had back in sanctuary, and it was covered in flame decals. I gasped. "Is this the power armor you got from that gang?" What were they called again? Nuclear Cats? No, Atom Cats.

Hancock grinned. "Yup, I've since had it improved. This is one hulking behemoth meant to take on any danger. I figured you could use a little armor."

I smiled at him. I hadn't even considered using power armor. Hopefully, that would give me the strength I needed to face the darkness.

Jamaica Plain still had many of its buildings in much better condition than most cities nowadays. Some of the houses on the outskirts were only skeletons of their former selves, but the brick and mortar buildings were still standing tall. We waited until daylight to arrive, hoping that would make it easier to handle, less scary. I stood outside the city limits in Hancock's power armor. My small fear that my claustrophobia would act up inside the metal suit proved to be unfounded. Maybe because I could still see and move around.

"Well, kiddo, this is it," Nick said. Strange that he had to look up to speak to me now. "I don't see any ferals yet."

"They're probably all hiding so they can pop out and scare you. They like to do that." Hancock held his shotgun at the ready. "Don't worry, Sunshine, we'll be right beside you the whole time."

I nodded, holding Zeus in my armored hands. It was awkward trying to pull its trigger with my clunky fingers, but I wanted its familiarity. Nobody moved until I took the first step. The power armor clanked with my movement.

We passed by an old auto repair shop, a truck still sitting in its garage, missing a tire. Still nothing. That's ok. They'll jump out, and that's fine, I'll just be ready. It's ok to scream--Oh fuck! The ghoul
didn't even make any noise before it leapt out of the doorway of the auto shop towards me. I froze in place, gun held in front of me like a shield instead of a weapon. Before the monster could make contact with me, Dogmeat tackled it from the right, landing in some dead shrubs, shaking it about viciously. I took a couple of steps back, my heart racing like it was in the Kentucky Derby. The canine finished quickly, muzzle soaked in red.

"It's alright, it's alright," Hancock shushed me, which must have been weird doing to a faceless set of power armor. "You're still alive, see?"

"And you didn't go into an attack," Nick added. "You're still standing, and still aware of your surroundings, right?"

I nodded as much as the suit would let me. "Yeah, yeah, I'm fine. I think." I wasn't curled up on the ground, so that was a plus. "But it means nothing if I just freeze."

"It's progress," Nick insisted. "No one expects this to be done instantly. Hell, we don't even know if this will work at all."

"It has to work. I don't want to be scared anymore."

"I know, kid. Just don't get upset when there's no magical transformation."

"Actually," Hancock stepped in. "I think she does need to get her hopes up. If she believes she can get over it, then she will. If she keeps having doubts, she'll hold herself back."

Nick frowned. "If only believing hard enough could solve all of our problems. Will she need some fairy dust too?"

Fairy dust... "There might be something I can take to help."

Hancock flicked his face towards me, frown pronounced. "No. Absolutely no chems. That's how addictions start. Do you want to need a chem every time you encounter a feral?"

I was surprised that he of all people would so empathically shut that idea down. "It's just for now, to help me relax. Just like this power armor. You said it yourself: I wouldn't get addicted from just one use."

"That was to get you through a tough fight. You're safe here. You don't need them."

"Yes, I do! Yes, I do!" I wanted to scream at him. What a hypocrite. "Oh, so you get to use them and not me."

"I know what I'm doing. I have walked this path before, and I'm telling you that you don't need them. The fact that we're even using the word 'need' just means that this will become an addiction. I'm not going to let you go through that."

I could punch him with this power armor. It would hurt. Who does he think he is? Acting like he knows what's best for me. He's not a doctor. I know my body, I know myself. There's nothing wrong with a little chemical help. And I'd only use it this first time, after that I would take on ferals without all of this extra help. Take off my training wheels, as it were.

"Susie," Nick spoke, voice even compared to our raising ones. "Let's just keep going, ok? We've just got started. Let's try again."

Reluctantly, I agreed. Determined not to freeze up this time, I strode further into the town. When we
reached a playground, a handful of ferals attacked. The sounds they made instantly transported me back to the trunk. The deathly storm raging outside of my shell, the cracks of thunder from Hancock and Nick, the growling wind from Dogmeat. I froze, completely immobile. I couldn't move inside of my person shaped box.

"I'll sign... I'll sign..." I didn't even recognize my own voice, but I knew that no one else could be saying those words.

That's when a feral broke away from the protective ring my companions had made around me. While they were distracted with the others, a ghoul in tattered rags launched itself at me, broken limb swing in the air right for me. It's gargling roar sounded a little like "I know you will" inside my head. I heard Dogmeat's warning bark before the limb connected with my helmet. For corpses, these things were surprisingly strong, and the force of its blow actually took me back a step. My head smashed about the walls of my helmet, but the padding kept it from any actual damage. I heard the repeat of a shotgun, and then the feral that attacked me was blood on the pavement.

Hancock's face rushed into the yellow-tinted view of my lenses. "Susie, oh god, are you alright?" His face was so wrinkled in worry. It was cute.

"I am fine, actually." I laughed. "I'm fine. Totally fine." The storm reached me, and I wasn't hurt. Maybe all I really needed was to let one attack me. "I...I think I can do this."

"Really?" Nick looked just as worried as Hancock.

"Yeah. Let's go find some more."

We left the playground and went inside an old church, whitewash peeling off of the wood. The windows were boarded up so very little sunlight slipped through the cracks. The pews were broken and a couple still housed a skeleton, some poor soul come to pray in their final moments. Dogmeat sniffed around and then let out a low growl. There must be another one nearby.

"Let me take this one, guys. I can do this."

"You sure?" I was getting a little annoyed with being asked that.

"Yes. Don't try to help, even if I freeze up and get attacked. I think it will knock me into gear."

Hancock looked very much like he didn't like this plan. "I'm not going to let you get hurt."

"And you won't. I'm already in a suit of armor. It barely hurt me last time. I'll be fine."

Hancock grumbled but stood down, shotgun angled towards the floor. When I strode further into the church, they didn't follow. I was almost to the pulpit when I heard it. The feral, dressed in preacher's vestments clambered up from where it had been laying on the ground, as if it really had been dead all this time and then suddenly sprung to life. It opened its mouth, a green glow in its throat. The gurgling noise was terrible, and made me want to throw up, but instead, I forced my muscles to face Zeus' barrel towards my enemy. It took a step, and I instinctively fired. I wasn't really aiming, so the bullet struck it in the clavicle. The feral stumbled back from the blow, but was still standing. I readied for another shot, and this time I hit it in the mouth. The jaw was knocked off and blood was trickling down its neck like a gruesome necklace, but still the thing didn't go down. This time, it didn't wait long enough for me to pull back the bolt. It launched itself at me, and instantly my muscles seized.

This blow was much harder than the feral I had encountered before. It hit me in my chest and actually did knock me off of my feet. The thing was on me before I could stand back up. It swung its arm and bashed it against my helmet. My skull knocked around. That was going to be one terrible
headache. It attacked again, this time it hit the lenses of my helmet. Suddenly my vision was cracked and then the sensors shut down, leaving me in total darkness.

It was almost instantaneous. With the darkness, my breaths bouncing off of the inside of the helmet back at me, and that horrible sound, I was transported back into that trunk. I tried to curl up into the position to fit inside the trunk, but I couldn't which meant I wasn't safe. The storm was going to get me, and I couldn't protect myself, because my body was disintegrating. I tried screaming, but my mouth was already gone, and then my ears were gone again too, and even though I was quickly ceasing to exist, the bright terror never faded, and I just wished so badly that I would fade away too just so that I wouldn't have to feel that again.

With a crack of lightning, the storm stopped, but the gods were still arguing above me. Their voices louder than the thunder, but I was not worthy of understanding their tongue. Then Zeus struck my eyes with lightning, and I could see, the light not as blinding white as it had been the first time I was reborn. So my vision came back much quicker, and my god was not Zeus, but Hancock, the one who demanded even more devotion from me. I could see the fire of punishment in the fury of his eyes that said "Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God."

"Why am I still being punished?" I prayed to him. "My penitence was real. Where is my mercy?"

"Dammit, Nick, get her out of this thing."

Then I was being righted, and with it so did my vision. Dogmeat was worrying about my front, pacing around and tail wagging anxiously. I heard voices behind me, and then the click and and release of air, and then the back of the power armor was opening, and I stumbled out, falling backwards into two pairs of arms. I looked up into Nick and Hancock's faces, and the worry and disappointment there was too much. My left hand twinged in pain. I leapt out of their hold, feeling like every nerve was on fire.

"Woah there, Susie, you shouldn't move around so much," Nick said from behind me while I flicked my head around for where my pack had ended up. "You got quite the nasty bump on your head."

Finally, I found it. Hancock must have dumped it when they came to rescue me. I fell to my knees, digging around frantically. Dammit, where was it? Where was it? "I need it. I need it." The feeling was almost too much to bear, my eyes watered.

"Need what?"

Was this part of it? Was using it cheating? Was that why I was still being punished? I didn't care, but if I didn't find that Med-X now, I was going to explode. My fingernail scratched against something made of plexiglass, and I felt the point of the cap. "Oh thank god." I pulled out the syringe, shaking hands uncapping it with a flick of my thumb, and shoving the needle into the crux of my elbow. It hurt like a bitch-- I wasn't delicate-- but with the pushing of the plunger, the numbness soon spread. I cried from the sheer amount of relief.

When my breathing evened out, I finally glanced up into two faces full of disappointment. They hurt so much that I wanted to look away, but Hancock had that same look on his face as he had at Parsons, like I had just taken the ice cream cone he was going to eat from him. No wonder I was still being punished. I was still hurting him. My gaze drifted to the floor, the cool unfeeling floor.

Out of my periphery, I could see Hancock kneeling down beside me. I expected shouting, yelling, but instead, he spoke softly and as calmly as he could. "Susie, when did this start?"
I hugged my arms around myself, suddenly feeling too cold. "I don't know. I was put on them after...well, after. And I just never stopped, I guess."

I could feel him analyzing every moment since we were reunited, trying to find the signs. He was silent for a while, probably deciding on my judgement. So strange to be the defendant this time. "Why do you think you're being punished?"

My arms squeezed tighter. I said all of that out loud. "It just makes sense. Why else would I be suffering like this if I didn't deserve it?"

A throaty intake of breath. I wasn't sure if that was Nick or Hancock. Then my vision was filled with Nick's face as he pulled my head up to look at him. "Listen to me closely, Susan Quinn. You did not deserve what happened to you. No one does."

"Then why did it happen? If I didn't deserve it, why was I put through that?"

"Sometimes bad people happen to good people. The world's just shitty like that. It's not your fault."

I shook my head. If that was true, how could I ever feel safe again? If such horrible things just happened to people for no reason, how did anyone go on living? I would much rather live in a world where I deserved it. "No, it was karma." "Karma's gotta be a load of bull."

"What could you have done that was so horrible?" Nick sounded a little frustrated.

Unwittingly, my eyes drifted over to Hancock. I could see the moment when his eyes lit up with realization. He stood up with a growl, fists shaking in front of him like he very much wanted to punch something. Wild fear said it would be me. "Are you serious? How stupid can you...Argh!

"Torture does not equal a broken heart, Susie. Is this why you wanted to get back together? Because you thought it would end your 'punishment?'"

I could see the leap his judgment was making. "No, No, Hancock, I love you. I never lied about that. I didn't beg for your forgiveness in the hopes that this would stop. The punishment is what made me realize what my problem really was. It's a good thing it happened, see? Who knows how long my pride would have kept me from apologizing to you?"

He grit his teeth. Why was this making him so angry? "Let me get one thing straight: what happened to you was bad, and the only reason it happened is because that raider was a fucking psycho. The fault's on him, not you. You are the victim, not the bad guy." His fists were clenched so tight, I was afraid he'd break his fingers. He took a deep breath. "And I am going to spend the rest of my life convincing you of that fact. First thing's first, give me all the chems you have. We're gonna get you clean."

My first impulse was to steadfastly refuse. If I didn't have the relief Med-X gave me, I was almost positive I would die from the overstimulation. But the minute I looked into his eyes, the eyes of the man I loved, I knew that I could deny him nothing. With a defeated sigh, I handed him my pack. "I'm sorry, Hancock. I tried to bring her back, I really did."

He took my pack, kneeling in front of me to place a kiss on my forehead. "Silly woman, you already have."
A shame it took addiction and broken power armor for Hancock to finally show me the infamous Atom Cats gang. Their garage was quite the pad, built inside of a Red Rocket station surrounded by broken cars. It even came complete with a racetrack where two suits of power armor with familiar flame paint were racing. When the winner crossed the finish line, he tripped a laser wire that set off pillars of flame into the sky.

After dropping off the power armor in the garage, Hancock led us to their clubhouse where he was welcomed with a chorus of cheers like a returning war hero. Everyone except for one young woman wore a familiar leather jacket and blue jeans. One man who was sitting at a bar stood up to welcome Hancock more personally. "Hey, Jack, welcome back to Coolsville. Who's the fuzzy duck and the private eye over here?" The man wore sunglasses, even indoors, so he reminded me a lot of Deacon. I almost wondered if that was actually him in disguise, but they sounded different.

Why were they calling him Jack? His name was John. Hancock smirked back, "This here is my main squeeze Susie Q, and the master of the international intrigue dodge, Nick Valentine. We just came here to fix my plates and crash for a while. That cool?" Why was he talking like that? Who was this ghoul? And was it just me or did his posture suddenly get more sloppy?

"It's all good in the hood. Any friend of Hancock's is a friend of the Atom Cats. Let's go say hi to the whole gang." He gestured us forward like we were the new students in class. Seems we had interrupted dinner. Most people were sitting down at the bar, a couple standing and playing billiards on the pool table by the radio.

Everyone had already heard our introduction, so the man listed off the members of his little gang. "We got Bluejay over there running sales," the brown haired fellow waved from behind the bar, "Rowdy, who you can usually find in the garage. No one can supe up your power armor better than this gal." He gestured to a black haired woman leaning on a pool cue. "And the cat getting his ass handed to him is Johnny D." Johnny shrugged his shoulders easily. I imagined he lost often. Then he gestured to the two sitting at the bar, eating off of old cafeteria trays. "And then we have Duke and Roxy, who is no longer the newest member." Duke, an auburn haired man with not much hair aside from his chin nodded, and the brightly smiling girl in a ratty dress with the leather jacket on over it waved.

"And I am their fearless leader and the coolest cat in town, Zeke." He gave a little mock bow.

"Nice to meet you all," Nick said, sounding as wary of these people as I was.

"Alright," Zeke seemed way too excited for this. "Let's make it a party. Hey Rowdy, crank up those tunes!"

The woman nodded stoically and turned the dial all the way up. The radio started blasting "Tutti Frutti." Zeke snapped his fingers in time, head bopping along and shoulders jiggling. "And a round of drinks on me." Now that got everyone up and dancing.

Nick and I just shared a look.

"These guys really know how to throw a party," Hancock told us in a laugh.

I wasn't so sure these people weren't all on something, but the music was pretty catchy. I couldn't be blamed if my feet started tapping. Roxy was passing out the drinks, a tray of brown bottles, but when she stopped in front of Nick and I he held up his hand in rejection. The woman just shrugged and moved on. Nick's yellow eyes glanced at me. "It's probably for the best if you refrain from any vices for a while."
Oh. Right. Good point. A drink would have been nice, though.

Hancock sauntered up to the counter where Bluejay was pulling out the drinks from a surprisingly working refrigerator. I knew these guys were good mechanics, but I hadn't found a working fridge outside of Vault 81. Or Buddy, if he counted. "Hey, Jay, can I get a Nuka for my girl here?"

"Here you go," he slid an ice cold Nuka-Cola over the counter towards me, and, wow, I hadn't had one of these cold in so long. "Will you be wanting some straws so you two can share?" Bluejay waggled his eyebrows overtly at us. Oh lord.

"No thanks," Hancock laughed at the look on my face. "Maybe on the next date."

If this was a date, then that meant Nick was our chaperone. How old were we again? I focused on taking a large swig of soda instead.

"Actually, I was wanting to buy some Addictol off of you." Hancock leaned on the counter, voice dropping a decibel.

"Sorry, Jack, all out." Bluejay didn't bother to keep his voice down. "That stuff's hard to come by." He shrugged his shoulders apologetically. "No one uses here, so there's not really been a demand. And we've got plenty of alcohol anyway."

"Shit." Hancock turned to me, teeth clenched. "Sorry, Sunshine. Looks like we're going to have to do this the hard way."

"The hard way?" I didn't like the sound of that.

In his defense, he looked completely empathetic. "Well, we could go run around trying to track down some Addictol. I know I got a stash back in Goodneighbor for emergencies, but that trip takes about three days. You'll be feeling the effects by then. I'm not so sure you'll be up for all of that walking."

Fuck, fuck, why weren't there any damn bicycles around? Detoxing was not fun, but I wasn't so sure I wanted to be at the mercy of the Wasteland at the same time. I bit the lip of my bottle of pop.

"The Castle isn't too far from here," Nick suggested. "You could be somewhere more familiar."

I shook my head. Preston was there, and there was no way I was going to let him see me looking like that. "No, here's fine. I'd prefer it, actually." It was bad enough that Nick and Hancock were there already.

Hancock leaned in closer, shoulder-to-shoulder. "You sure? Well, the gang gave me my own trailer when I joined, it's behind the clubhouse. It's not the Hotel Rexford, but it's a place to lay your head."

"Hancock, I--" My words were interrupted by an arm slung over my shoulder.

I turned my head to see Zeke's boozey grin blocking my entire view. "What are you wet rags doing just standing around whispering? Hey, Jack, you mind if I take this little duckling for a spin?"

"Go ahead, just mind the clutch, alright?"

"Wait, Hancock, what--" But I was pulled into a twirl. When I came out of my spin, I found my hands clasped in grease-stained ones that swung them from side-to-side. I looked up into the face of the black haired woman who was playing pool before. What was her name again? Howdy? By the time I remembered it, we were joined by the other female Atom Cat so that all our hands were linked and we were dancing in a circle. At one point in our dancing, I caught Hancock dancing with an
incredibly embarrassed Nick. I ended up laughing and dancing with everyone in the end, forgetting about any trunks or storms.

The compulsion didn't start until the next night. My muscles began to ache in that nerve deep way that no massaging could relieve. I knew exactly what it was my body was crying out for. To keep my mind off of it while I still could, Hancock would take me out on scavenge runs with Duke. Fighting off the fauna of the wasteland was a good distraction, and the movement helped to numb the pain a little.

I'd gotten to know Rowdy better. The woman was much more cool and standoffish without alcohol and good music to whip her up into a jovial party girl. She agreed to teach me some more about power armor, and Hancock agreed to let us use his set of power armor for me to tinker on. I was never a mechanic, but Rowdy was a good teacher, and I may not know exactly how things worked, but I knew what they were supposed to do. With the clanking of metal upon metal, Rowdy told me about her old life. She used to run with a raider gang, but when they left her for dead, the Atom Cats had taken her in.

As touching as her story was now, my stomach began to feel queasy. How many Rowdy's out there had I killed? How many people who had the capacity to be better people if they were just given the chance to make a better decision? And I took that decision out of their hands.

I knew what Hancock would say. She made her choice. And she would have kept making that choice if she hadn't been left for dead and then found by Zeke. That didn't make me feel any better.

As it turned out, my queasy feeling wasn't entirely regret, but also the herald of my oncoming sickness. The withdrawal had fully kicked in by this point: shakes, vomiting, diarrhea, pain all over. I had never gone this long without Med-X before, never let it get to this point, and half of me was screaming to just take it. Doctor's always told you to listen to your body, and my body was telling me it desperately needed some medicine. If it weren't for Hancock staying by my side nearly every second, I probably would have given in and found something to alleviate this pain. But every time I saw that pained look in his face, I knew I couldn't do that to him.

"Please, can I have some Sugar Bombs or something?" My voice was as rough as a ghoul's. "I just need to get this taste out of my mouth."

"We're trying to get you off of your addiction," Hancock half-joked. "Here, have this Nuka-Cola. It's the cherry flavored kind that you like."

I took it gratefully, chugging half of it down in one go, which probably wasn't the best thing for nausea. The carbonation burnt down my throat like acid, and in my head, I imagined it to be burning the sickness away. I must have been making some sort of face, because Hancock was smiling fondly at me. Instead of teasing me, he pulled out a can of purified water. "Make sure to keep your hydration up. You're losing a lot of water. You know, between all the puke and the sweating."
"Oh, Hancock, you know just how to make a woman feel beautiful." I set the glass bottle on the wooden crate next to my mattress. Right next to the desk fan that was cooling my face gently.

"That's good, because you look like shit, honestly," he teased, but his hand was gently smoothing my hair from where he sat on a metal fold-out chair. He laughed when I pouted at him. "Hey, I'm just trying to keep away from your weird narcissism complex."

I groaned. "You're never going to stop teasing me about that, are you?"

"Sorry," he didn't sound sorry. "It's hard to stop when you get all cute like that."

I just buried my face into my straw pillow with another put upon groan, which turned into a very real pained one when the movement racked up the pain in my head. Hancock's hand moved to rub circles in my back, which despite all evidence to the contrary, actually did soothe me a little. "How many times have you gone through this, Hancock? You seem experienced."

"Not that many, actually. No withdrawal if you always have your poison with you. And then when I became mayor, I started keeping stashes of Addictol to avoid that kind of thing ever again."

"Then why do you take chems at all? If you know what they do to you."

"Why did you keep taking Med-X even though you knew what that would do to you?" He rested his elbow on the bed, causing it to creak loudly. "I'm smart about it, alright. I only do it recreationally, and I've ordered Fahrenheit to kick me out of office if it ever affects my work."

"I don't think you can do these recreationally."

"Look, I know what I'm doing. Whenever I get addicted, I go clean. I sparse out my use so there's never too much in my system at one time." The corner of his mouth quirked up a bit. "All of the benefits with none of the consequences."

That didn't sound right. When was that ever true? "But why take them at all if it's so much effort?"

"What? Are you writing a book?" He leaned back in his chair, the corners of his lips falling.

My stomach roiled. No. I will not throw up here. "You're the one teaching me about the dangers of chem addiction. Seems a little hypocritical if you keep using."

"Look, it's no secret that chems give you benefits. They can make you stronger, faster, smarter. In this world, you can't ignore anything that will give you that boost."

"Ok, that would make sense if you used psycho or buffout a lot for battle, but you mainly use when we're safe."

"It's not just raiders you have to worry about out here."

What was it that Hancock was scared of the most? I've never seen him flinch in battle, even against a Deathclaw, and he's always suave and cool in heated arguments. The only time I've really seen him messed up was when I got involved, but he was using way before then. "Are you afraid of people? Is that why you prefer Mentats? So you can always be one step ahead of them?"

Hancock sat rigid in his chair, his black eyes drilling into me. Surprisingly, the squeamish feeling it gave me counteracted my need to throw up. His hands were clenched into fists in his lap. "You knew already that you were dating a coward."
My heart swelled. Or maybe that was just the nausea. "Oh, John..." I reached my sweaty hand out to clasp onto his fist.

He slowly lifted my hand to bestow a kiss upon it, bitter smile on his face. "One intervention at a time, alright? Let's deal with your problems first."

"You're right. We need to have this conversation where I'm not bedridden and can come after you when you run away."

If I had thought the withdrawal was bad before, I had no idea how much worse it could get. When the fever hit, it hit me hard. My body suffered a constant tremor, muscles spasming in pain, including my left hand which told me that all of it was in my head. Still didn't lessen the shouting of my nerves. The fever also caused me to go in and out of sleep a lot almost to the point where most of my time was spent in this hazy in-between area. The sunlight hurt my eyes, so I had Hancock put up thick curtains to block it out. He didn't laugh at my vampire joke. Then it was too dark, so he gave me some candles. With all of those, it was hard to read the passage of time. I had no idea how many days had passed, but all of it was in pain.

I could remember begging Hancock for some Med-X, that the pain was too much, that I would surely go insane if I suffered even a second longer. The broken face he made at me only hurt me more. Right now, I felt more solid, still sick, but aware. Looking back, it was all a haze of illusions that I couldn't be so sure were real. At this moment, though, I knew it was night, felt its cool breeze rustling my curtains. My blankets were drenched in sweat, so I threw them off of me. I was cold, but dry, at least. My head still pounded, and my stomach felt like it was trying to cave in on itself, but the painful tremors had vanished. On the crate by my bed were several cans of purified water, most of them unopened. I licked my chapped lips, grabbed an already opened one that still had some left and gratefully guzzled down the rest of it.

Then the distant sound of voices drew my attention to the window by the door. My knees wobbled when I stood up, reminding me of my recovery at the Prydwen, but I could walk after my legs woke up. When my hand gently pushed the curtain just enough for me to peek out, I could also hear the soft tones of music. Outside, Hancock and Nick sat in rusted patio chairs, a table between them that held up four bottles of beer and one radio that was softly humming "Moonlight Serenade." And sure enough, the moon hung in the sky, a bright disc among sparkling broken glass. The cigarette smoke drifting up from Hancock caught the moonlight in its slow ascension. They weren't facing me, so their words were a little hard to hear, but I could still make them out.

"...back in that box. She kept begging me to let her out." Hancock slammed his beer down on the table. "And then another time, she begged me not to turn into a monster like her father did. Fuck, Nick, her parents really did a number on her. I mean, I thought my parents were shitty, but they take the cake." He took a long drag from his cigarette, speaking around his exhale of smoke. "Were people just really shitty back then?"

"'Deep into the darkness peering; long I stood there, wondering, fearing.'" Did Nick just quote Poe? "People are people throughout the ages," he answered back, lighting up his own cigarette. "There were monsters back then as there are monsters now."
"She breaks my fucking heart, Nicky. I'd do anything just to see her happy again. It's scary how much control she has over me."

"That's love, kiddo. But it's all worth it when she smiles, right?"

"Yeah. She does have a nice pair of chompers." They were silent for a minute, the muted brass from Glenn Miller's band covering up the quiet. "Hey, do you think we could go find her parents' corpses and go shoot them up, just for good measure?"

"That's a little overkill there, Hancock, but I understand the feeling. All we can do is make up for their slack."

I went back to bed, feeling just a little bit better.

Once the fever left, so did all of my other symptoms. Hancock told me the fever was the breaking point, the final boss. I knew I was healthy again from how hungry I was. The Atom Cats had a barbeque in celebration of my recovery, and no amount of brahmin steaks could fill me up. I suppose I was making up for all those days of being unable to keep anything down.

"Damn, Ducky," Rowdy whistled, watching me stuff another piece of steak into my mouth. "You sure can put them back for such a skinny woman."

"I feel like I haven't eaten in days," I answered once I had swallowed down that bite.

"That's because you haven't," Nick said, sitting down on the picnic bench next to me. He handed me a bottle of Nuka-Cola Cherry. The synth had no need for food, so he didn't eat. I wondered what would happen if he did. Would his gears and circuitry get all clogged up with mashed food?

I swallowed down my last bite with a generous gulp of pop. Now I was starting to feel it. Whew, maybe I shouldn't have eaten so fast. To keep myself from eating any more, I stood up from the table and walked over to where Hancock was manning the grill in a frilly white apron with hearts stitched at the bottom. He wore the outfit with pride, soaking up any jeers or teasing like they were praise. He smiled in welcome when he noticed me walking up to him, and so I couldn't help but to hug his free arm and to kiss his cheek. We received a few catcalls from the table, but we ignored them.

"I take it you liked my meat," Hancock grinned salaciously.

"I always do," I joked back.

"That reminds me." Hancock's voice dropped. "We haven't had recovery sex yet."

"Is that a thing? Have you done that before?"

"Well, no. But I haven't seen you smile in a long time, and I want to make you smile some more."

Suddenly, that seemed like the best idea he's ever had, but then Dogmeat came padding up to the grill to beg for more food, and I remembered where we were. Even if we could find somewhere private, I don't know if I'd be able to knowing Nick and Dogmeat were around. How could I look
them in the eye afterwards? But then I looked back at Hancock, at his playboy smirk, and I considered it would be worth the walk of shame afterwards. I made Dogmeat a plate of food to send him away, and then I leaned close to Hancock to whisper, "Does your trailer have a lock on the door?"

"No, but we could always put a sock on the handle."

"No, Hancock, that's embarrassing."

"A sign?"

"That's even worse!"

"What are you so ashamed of? It's not like everyone here doesn't know that we've already done it before."

My face felt hot. This was an entirely different sort of fever. "I'm not ashamed. Never. Just...I'm not an exhibitionist."

"As hot as that would be, we're not going to have sex in front of them. They'll just know it happened." He used his tongs to flip over another steak on the grill.

I bit my lip. "Ok, ok, we'll do a quick one right now while everyone's at the barbeque."

Hancock just smiled from ear to ear, untying his apron and tossing it onto the chair beside him. As we were making our way, Nick called out to us. "Hey, where are you two going?" And of course, he drew the attention of everyone else.

"We're just going for a quickie," Hancock said aloud to my utter horror. "Be back in half an hour. Johnny, you can man the grill while I'm gone."

"What the hell, Hancock!" I slapped his arm. "What happened to keeping this a secret?"

"They were going to find out anyway, and now you don't have to worry that they will. So we can just go ahead and do it." He lead me away towards the trailer while I covered my face with my hands.

"You're the worst. I'll never go outside again."

"Oh, come on, Sunshine. I'll make it up to you, just as soon as I get you horizontal."

I was never going to be able to show my face around here ever again.

Leaving the Atom Cats was an inevitability, but I still found myself a little sad to depart, even as I couldn't look any of them in the eye quite yet. Instead of trying to conquer my fears, which had started this whole fiasco, I decided to table that idea and to fulfill a promise out here that I made. Arlen Glass had said that the part he needed was in a factory around here somewhere.

"You know, I find it a little funny that I don't get to wear my own power armor," Hancock griped.
"Hey, I am the most defenceless out of all of us, so I should get the armor," I countered. Also, power armor always gave me such a confidence boost. It was almost addicting. No, not addicting. Wrong choice of words.

We headed towards the AtomaToys Headquarters. Along the way though, Nick stopped us, looking towards the side of a broken building, looking as much at attention as Dogmeat was, ears perked up. "I'm picking up signs of life," Nick explained. "It's not moving though."

"An ambush?" Hancock asked, handing drifting to his shotgun.

"I don't think so. Come on, let's check it out."

We followed him towards the building, but instead of looking within the rubble, he went around it to where a bunch of junk was strewn about. When we got closer to a rusted refrigerator in front of a pile of tractor tires, we heard a small muffled voice. "Is someone there?"

"My god..." Nick breathed, yellow eyes lighting up in realization.

"Is someone in there?" I asked in astonishment.

"Yes! Please let me out. I've been stuck in here for so long." The voice sounded like a young man, a boy even.

"Holy shit, I think that's a kid in there," Hancock breathed, eyes wide.

Some kid, stuck in a small container, in the dark, unable to move his limbs... Before I even knew it, I was slamming the fist of my power armor into the door handle. The rusted handle flew off, and the door to the fridge swung open heavily. To everyone's surprise, a ghoul kid tumbled out, falling onto the dirt. I tried to kneel down to help him up, but that was a bit awkward in power armor. Luckily, Hancock and Nick were not so restrained, and they helped the kid up on wobbly knees. When they tried to let him stand up on his own, his legs wouldn't carry his weight, so they ended up having to keep him hoisted up between the two of them.

"Woah, kid, are you alright?" Hancock's frame was bent over to accommodate the height difference.

"What happened to your face?" the kid blurted.

Hancock looked more mildly curious than offended. "The same thing that happened to yours, half pint."

The kid was confused, but then he looked down at his body. He gave a startled shout, examining any part he could see.

I knew then that he had gone into that fridge a human. "How long were you in there?"

The kid lifted his head. "I don't know. It felt like forever. I was at my friend's house when the bombs fell. I hid in the fridge. I don't know, I was so scared. The door can only be opened from the outside, so I was stuck."

The three of us looked at each other, seeing the realization in each other's eyes. This kid had been stuck in a fridge for over 200 years. I had been stuck in that trunk for nearly two days, and I had almost gone insane. I don't know how this kid was still cognizant. I probably would have bitten my own tongue off just to end it.

"What's your name?" Nick asked in a gentle tone.
"Billy. Thanks for saving me, but can you help me get home? I can't exactly walk. My parents must be really worried about me."

I looked at Hancock. Ghoulification was genetic, so there was a small chance that this kid's parents had turned ghoul, but that was still no guarantee that they were alive. A lot could happen in 200 years. Still, it's not like I could say no. "Yeah, we'll help you get home, Billy. Here..." I picked his limp body up from Nick and Hancock, holding him like a princess. Thanks to the power armor, none of the strain was on my muscles. Poor kid was too weak to even hold onto me. He was going to need a lot of therapy.

He stayed quiet most of the trip, only speaking up when a Gunner mercenary we passed up had the gall to try to buy the kid off of us. He found his head blown off by Hancock's shotgun before he could finish explaining how convenient workers ghouls made. Billy had flinched terribly at the loud report and then hid his head in my chest plate. Oh, yeah. This kid had only known a time where rampant murder and crime were frowned upon. "Sorry you had to see that, Billy." It felt flat.

Hancock and Nick blinked over at me as though they never experienced my realization. I could see when it hit them. "Come on, kid," the detective said. "Let's get you home to your parents."

After his unwitting witness to murder, I thought the kid would be meek, but he wondered at all of the giant bugs we passed along the way. Even the bloodbugs. Turns out he was an aspiring entomologist. Kid was in luck.

When we reached the little farmhouse sitting in the middle of a swamp, Billy excitedly asked to be put down. To my surprise, he was able to stand up on his own, though walking required some assistance. Ghouls really were amazing. The kid hobbled along as fast as he could. "Mom! Dad!" He burst through the door, and sure enough, two adult ghouls were standing in the kitchen area, turning towards us in shock.

"Billy?" the woman spoke in a nasally voice. She rushed forward to swoop the kid up into her arms.

"That's our boy," the man in the tattered scarf exclaimed, wrapping his reunited family in a big hug. The scene was touching, straight off the silver screen.

The Peabody family, as I learned that they were, had been over themselves to try and reward us. I refused their offer of caps (they needed the money more than me), and only agreed to crash at their farmhouse when the orange rays of the sun were dipping down into the horizon. Might as well take a break. Hancock had gone to the kitchen to whip up some grub, and the Peabody family had been sitting around the kitchen table intermittently crying and laughing, so I went in search of more robotic company.

I found Nick sitting outside on the porch in a rickety old rocking chair, a radio humming "Nature Boy" softly on top of a wooden crate beside him. I moved a wooden chair from the other side of the porch to sit by him.

He nodded at me in welcome. "Mind if I smoke?" He held up a small pack of cigarettes.

I shook my head. He lit one up with a flip lighter from his coat pocket. "Why do you smoke?" I asked. "Surely you can't feel any of the effects?"

"Nah, it's just old habit. Going through the motions of a memory. It helps me to think, or at least I think it does." He exhaled a long cloud of smoke.

"So what are you thinking about now?"
His yellow eyes flicked to me. "The first human I ever met, a boy named Jim. He grilled me for an hour, asking me all sorts of questions: what mad scientist created me, how many weapons of mass destruction did I have, was I made by aliens. You know, the usual stuff." He smirked fondly. "Once the town had decided I meant no harm, the other folks in the neighborhood had come out to ogle the mechanical man. The local mechanic even gave me a once over, free of charge. Those people, they treated me like a human being. Jim, most of all. He wanted to take me everywhere with him." He chuckled, synthetic skin around his eyes crinkling. "He probably just saw me as some exciting new toy, but I dare say we had fun together."

"Where's that town? We can go visit them."

The nostalgic smile fell from his face. "It's gone, wiped off the map. Raiders. Besides, that was so long ago, the people I knew would have been long dead anyway."

Right. Immortality certainly had its downsides. "I'm sorry, Nick." I put a hand on his arm, trying to comfort him in the only way I really knew how.

He regarded me with a warm smile. "Thanks, Susie, but I'm fine. I only knew them for about a week."

"Still..." I shook my head. I bet Nick would have made a wonderful father. I already wished he was mine.

We sat on the couch inside of what turned out to be Arlen Glass' office in the Atomatoys Corporate Headquarters. We found the part he needed inside of his personal workshop, along with a heart-wrenching holotape from the man's daughter. My eyes still stung, but I was very determined not to cry. Dogmeat was dutifully snuggling with his chin on my knee. Nick had used the excuse of checking the perimeter to give Hancock some time to console me.

"Billy had the same genes as his parents so he turned into a ghoul. Do you think it's possible that Arlen's daughter...?"

Hancock shook his head. "I'm sure his family was the first thing he went searching for when the bombs fell. If he hasn't found them by now, then they're probably long gone." His arm wrapped around my shoulders in a side hug.

"But Billy was still alive."

"That was a special case. I doubt we're going to find Marlene in a fridge."

That was probably true. Billy's parents probably stopped searching because they assumed him to be dead. They wouldn't think to look inside of a fridge. "We have to get this holotape to Arlen."

"Of course."

"But after that, I want to talk with the Railroad again. I've been putting it off, and admittedly I was a little sidetracked, but I need to find Shaun. I can't fully close that chapter of my life until I find out what happened to him." I looked up at Hancock's worried face. "Besides, it sounds like I'm going to have to deal with this Institute at some point if they keep terrorizing the Commonwealth."
"You know this means taking on another Courser."

I nodded. "Meeting Billy, finding this holotape, it's all made me realize that time is never on your side." I scooted around on the bench so that I could fully face Hancock and his black glazed eyes. "Once I find Shaun, I want us to focus on finding a way to turn me ghoul."

"Sunshine..."

"I want to spend the rest of my life with you." My voice dropped to just above a whisper. "And I would like for that to be a very long time."

He smiled that dopey smile of his, which I gladly kissed. And who knows? Maybe once I was a ghoul, the ferals wouldn't be so terrifying anymore.

We had barely even made it into the city proper when we were ambushed. The Courser appeared out of nowhere, heralded by a mighty bolt of heavenly lightning. We all jumped back, barely having time to reach for our guns. They probably would have been useless anyway. I had just enough time to register that this Courser was the same one that had kicked our asses back at the Greentech building, before he raised some strange looking gun at me and pulled the trigger. There was no bang or hiss of laser fire, no noise at all, just complete darkness. I wondered briefly if he had shot off my head, before realizing how little that idea made sense. Then, when I tried to move my arms and legs, and they hit only unyielding metal, before I understood what had happened. My power armor had completely shutdown. But that made no sense. Even without a fusion core to power it, the power armor can still be bent and the limbs moved. Panicking, I pulled the small lever to open the armor, but still, the metal remained steadfast, as if it had been welded shut.

I was trapped, and all I could do was scream into the close darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Don't self-medicate or self-diagnose, kids. Leave it to the professionals.
The Sins of the Father

Chapter Summary

Susie finally meets her son.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I never thought the blinding clear light of fluorescent bulbs could feel nostalgic. With the light bouncing off similarly white walls, I knew I was nowhere in the Commonwealth. I sat up in the plain white bed, the thin but comfortable sheets sliding down what looked like some kind of hospital pajamas. My bare feet touched the cold tile floor. Even the rest of my room seemed to match, everything clean, clinical, and efficient. Even the small potted fern in the corner served a purpose. From somewhere, I could hear an intense piano etude playing, something by Chopin, probably. On the wall across from me was a Nuka-Cola calendar, in fairly good condition considering the year printed was 2087.

With a quiet hiss, the door to my room slid open, and in walked an elderly gentleman in a green sweater under a pristine white lab coat, carrying a clipboard and pen. Both the silver hair on his head and chin were neatly trimmed and combed. He regarded me with a polite nod. "Ah, so I heard that you had finally awoken. Tell me, Mrs. Quinn, how are you feeling? Any nausea?"

"What?" I shook my head. "Where am I? Who are you?"

"I understand your confusion. I am Doctor Annemann. You have been asleep for a very long time, Mrs. Quinn. In a coma, in fact. This is the Boston State Hospital."

"Hospital? Coma? What's going on?"

Dr. Annemann took a breath, as if he were dealing with a toddler's tantrum. "Ma'am, you might want to sit down for this. It can be a lot to take in for someone who just woke up. First, I would like to check that there is nothing physically wrong with you."

Numbly, I did as he told, and sat on the edge of the bed. The doctor strode forward with a stethoscope, listened to my chest briefly and shined a light in my eyes. "Do you feel anything abnormal? No pain or sickness?"

"No, I feel perfectly fine. Doctor, what is going on?"

He set his clipboard down on the metal nightstand. "Mrs. Quinn, this is going to be difficult for you to take, so please bear with me. You have been in a coma for the past ten years."

"A coma? What? No, I was frozen in the vault, not a coma."

"Vault? Is that what you dreamed about? That you had been in a vault?"

My stomach began to turn. I didn't like where any of this was going. "The day the bombs fell... What year is it?"
"It is November the 11th, 2087. A little over ten years since you fell into your coma. There were no bombs, Mrs. Quinn. Interesting that bombs is what your mind chose to explain your trauma." His eyes studied me as if I were a frog on a dissection table. It gave me the shivers.

"What trauma?"

"Your murder-suicide, Mrs. Quinn. On October 27, 2077, you shot your husband in the head, and then overdosed on pain medication in order to kill yourself. For some reason, even though we pumped your stomach, you would not wake up. It has been a medical mystery."

The doctor's face was impassive for all of the bombs he kept dropping on me. "I didn't kill my husband, he was murdered, and my son was kidnapped."

"Your son was not kidnapped, Mrs. Quinn. He's been in foster care. He visits you every day. In fact, he's here right now, if you think you can handle seeing him."

"Shaun?" There was no way. This all had to be some horrible nightmare.

Dr. Annemann smiled kindly, the same way a plastic doll smiles, and went to open the sliding door. Standing in the doorway, as if he knew he had been summoned, was a young boy with combed blond hair. He wore a plain striped t-shirt and blue jeans rolled at the bottom to show just a little bit of ankle. He looked exactly as I remembered him from Kellogg's memories. With his small hands clutching a red backpack, he nervously stepped into the room.

"Mom? You're awake."

"Shaun? Is that really you?" If this was the real Shaun, then what the doctor was saying could all be true. That would be the worst possible outcome.

He nodded shyly, still not coming too close. I can't say I blamed him. I was practically a stranger to this kid. "I'm glad you're awake. Are you feeling better? When you get out of the hospital, will we live together?"

"I...I don't know." My fingers dug into the cotton fibers of my blanket.

Sensing the awkward atmosphere, Dr. Annemann went to Shaun to gently direct him back out of the room. "Your mother only just woke up, Shaun. While I'm sure she's happy to see you, she needs her rest."

"Rest? But I thought she'd been asleep this whole time?" Still the kid let his body be led out.

He said something quietly to the kid, and then shut the door. "You don't seem particularly happy to see your son alive and well." His tone was not accusatory.

"My son was kidnapped, he shouldn't be here. None of this should be here. The world was destroyed!" I could feel myself starting to sound hysterical, but the fear that lived inside of my gut was crawling up my throat to escape.

He didn't react outside of a cursory nod. Instead, he pulled up a plastic chair. "You said that in your dreams the bombs fell, the world eradicated. Why do you act as if that is the preferable outcome?"

Because my life was so much better. I couldn't tell him that; it would only make me sound more crazy.

The doctor took my silence in stride. "Tell me about this world you lived in."
I told him about waking up in the vault to my husband's murder and my son's kidnapping, told him about the wasteland and all of its terrors, told him about the people, and how they themselves mutated. I left out Nick and Hancock though. They felt too personal and precious to release to this stranger with the false smile.

"These ghouls are reanimated irradiated corpses, you say? They do sound terrifying, but perhaps you do not fear the awakening of all corpses, but one corpse in particular."

I frowned. "I didn't murder my husband."

"Do you consider it justified then? We found you with several wounds and missing teeth, as if you had been beaten. Was it self-defense, and then you couldn't live with the guilt?"

My outrage was genuine. "How dare you! My husband never raised a finger against me. He was a good man. And he was murdered inside of a vault by a mercenary named Kellogg. And I'd like for you to leave now." My eyes darted around for the nearest object to hurl at him if he refused. I wished I had my weapons on hand. "Give me back my stuff and let me out!"

The doctor bowed out politely, not in the least bit offended. "This has been a lot for you to absorb. When you are ready to accept, we can move towards a full recovery." He replaced the chair where it had been against the wall, and then left.

I waited a few minutes until I felt he was truly gone before I leapt out of my bed for the door. Disappointingly, I found it locked. My only exit... I was trapped here.

Doctor Annemann visited me twice a day. Sometimes we had meals, either brought by him, or by a very deflective nurse who was as bland as the white walls that surrounded her. I never left my room, except to go to an adjoining bathroom that I had somehow missed before. The powered sliding doors blended in with the walls, they were so seamless. Shaun came every day too, just as the doctor said, but I didn't want to see him. If he were real, then this was all real, which meant nothing that I had experienced was real, and I probably would actually commit suicide if that were true.

So I sat on the bed, in a fresh pair of the exact same clothes I had woken up in, eating some kind of nutritious goop. My teeth ached for some Sugar Bombs, or even a good brahmin steak. The doctor ate the same mush happily, as he tried to convince me that everything I knew was a lie.

"So tell me, Mrs. Quinn, you say your son was kidnapped and you traveled all across an irradiated wasteland searching for him. Why?"

I stopped pushing my science goo around with a plastic spoon and looked up at him. "What do you mean? He's my son."

"You certainly had a lot of distractions, and in the end, as you say, you never did find him. What were your motivations for looking for him in the first place?"

I put my spoon down on the tray. This was a question I had struggled with the whole time. "He was kidnapped by bad people. I owed it to him to save him, or at the very least find out what happened to him. Who knew what they wanted with a baby?"
"So it was out of a sense of guilt, rather than any actual desire to be reunited?"

I turned away. "I never wanted to have kids."

When I turned back to gauge his reaction, I caught the tail ends of what I would dare to call sadness before his face retained that same neutral expression it always had. I almost wondered if I had imagined it at all. I waited a breath before trying my latest plan. "You know, I think some fresh air would do me some good. Perhaps even seeing that the world was not in fact destroyed would help me to recover."

Dr. Annemann smiled politely. "I'm afraid we can't let you do that. You are, in fact, the primary suspect in a technically on-going murder investigation. As soon as we say you're fully recovered and in your right frame of mind, then you will be taken into custody, but until then, you cannot leave this room."

This old geezer had no right to look so surprised. "You want Shaun to resume his visits?"

I shrugged. "If he's really all I got left, then I want to try to be the mother he needs. We've got 10 years to catch up on. Does he...know about what happened to his father?"

"No, no, we've just been telling him that he died of a disease, and the sickness almost got you too. The truth would be too much for such a young boy."

I nodded. That would explain why he still wanted to see me.

The next day, Shaun entered my room around 4 o'clock, backpack hanging off his shoulders. Still in that same striped shirt and jeans.

"Hello, Shaun. How was school?"

"It was okay, I guess." He set his backpack on the ground next to my bed and pulled up the chair.

"What did you learn?"

"Mr. Karlin was teaching us about photosynthesis today. We got to look at plant cells through a microscope. It was pretty cool."

"Microscopes? Sounds like a fancy school. Where do you go to school?"

"Malden Middle School."

"That's a bit far from here. Do you walk?"

"No, I take the city bus. I have a bus pass."

"Your foster parents don't drive you around?"

"No, they both work. I don't usually see them until dinner time." He paused, sending me a worried look. "But I'm never home alone. We have a Mr. Handy named Codsworth. He talks funny."
"Codsworth? Did you choose that name?"

Shaun shrugged. "That's the name he came with."

I nodded. "So, what kinds of things do you do for fun?"

"I like to take things apart and build something new. Father is teaching me to take apart a biometric scanner. I like to read comics too."

"Comics? Like Grognak the Barbarian?"

"Yeah, and the Unstoppables, too. The Silver Shroud is my favorite."

"Me too. Do you watch the TV show too?"

"Oh yes! I love it."

I smiled from ear-to-ear. The Silver Shroud TV show never aired. Complications with production. "Well, it's getting late, Shaun. You better head home before you miss dinner and worry your parents."

"You're probably right." He stood up, grabbing his backpack. "I'm glad you're letting me see you again, Mom. Can I come tomorrow too?"

"Of course. I'll be right here."

The minute the doors closed behind Shaun, my smile dropped. With this new certainty came a relief. That kid was not my son, and Doctor Annemann, if that was even his real name, had been lying to me. I had to get out of this hospital.

My chance came when the nurse arrived to bring me my breakfast in her usual bland manner. The minute she set the tray down on the table next to me, I snatched her wrist and hurled her over the bed and crashing onto the tile floor on the other side. While she worked to right herself and get around the bed, I launched myself towards the open door and out into the brightly lit hallway. Each end simply led to identical white corners, so I veered left, having no time to dally. My path was interrupted by a set of locked double doors. I cursed in frustration, kicking them, before the doors slid open on their own. On the other side stood a dark man in an even darker uniform, shades hiding his eyes. The Courser.

"It's you!" I hissed. I could still see him raising that strange gun at me as he pulled the trigger and threw me into darkness. "You kidnapped me. This...this is the Institute." The realization threw me into a fit of rage. I raised my fist to punch him in the face, but it was easily blocked.

"It's a shame you left your room," the man said in a bored tone. "Father will be most displeased."

We broke out into a small fight in which I was easily subdued, and then transported through more white halls, and fluorescent lights until we reached a very plain atrium room with nothing but a few consoles with blinking red and yellow lights lining the walls and rooms with glass walls. Prison cells,
I realized. I was thrown into one of the larger ones with the nicest looking bed I've seen since I woke up in the vault. Aside from a single shelf on the wall, a drinking fountain coming up from the floor, and a space-age looking metal toilet tucked in the corner, the cell was empty. The Courser shut the sliding door behind me, locking me inside.

"Do you realize what you've done?" I demanded of him, banging on the glass walls, if I could not hit him.

"Yes, I've detained you," the barest hint of derision creeping into the synth's tone.

I shook my head furiously. "I can never enter another suit of power armor again. That was my only chance to cure myself." How was I supposed to overcome my fear of ferals if I couldn't use the one thing that worked now? If I ever tried to enter a suit of power armor again, I'd only remember my immobile limbs trapped in an all-encompassing darkness.

"I do not understand how that is my fault, nor does that seem like it should be your primary concern at the moment. Now I must go inform Father of your blunder." With little care for my fuming behind him, the Courser turned and left me in the silent room.

Dr. Annemann arrived not too long after. There was no clock in this room, and with the artificial lighting, I had no concept of the passage of time. He stood now in his lab coat, a disappointed frown on his face. "I'd rather hoped you would have indulged me a bit longer, Mrs. Quinn. Things would have been much easier if you had cooperated."

"You bastard, I want to punch you more than the Courser." I rammed my fist into the glass just to make my point. It sent a painful shiver up my arm, but I needed to vent this newly awakened rage somehow. "You tried to mess with my head, making me believe I was a murderer and crazy. You tried to take Hancock away from me, make me think he never even existed." If it weren't for Hancock, I wouldn't have ever thought I could be happy or find love. A world without him in it was no place I wanted to live.

"But you are a murderer. Have you not killed hundreds of people across the Commonwealth? You killed Kellogg, did you not?"

"I killed murderers and bad people. I made the Commonwealth a better place for it. And how many of your Institute's synths have killed people? How many innocent people were killed just to be replaced with your spies?"

"The way life is up there, death is a mercy."

"How would you even know? Have you even been up to the surface?"

He only turned up his nose. "I have no need to see that irradiated garbage pile in person. The synths have brought back plenty of information."

"Why are you doing all of this? Why kidnap me and try to make me think the war never happened? Who are you?"
"I am Father. Director of the Institute, but more importantly to you, I am your son."

My fists fell from the glass. "Are you still trying to mess with my head? There's no way you could be my son. You're older than I am."

Father shook his head, like a chiding grade school teacher. "You were frozen in a vault. You thought ten years had passed in between wakings. Why not 60? Your concept of time was understandably skewed."

"60 years? So you were, what, raised by the Institute the whole time?"

"Yes, they needed my unaltered DNA to make the breakthrough into developing Gen 3 synths. I thrived in the Institute and with hard work, became the Director. I was the one who ordered for you to be awakened remotely."

This guy certainly liked to drop bombs on me, whether they were true or not. "So you woke me up? Why did you wait so long?"

Father, or should I call him Shaun now, shifted, the first sign of any emotion from the man. "To be honest, I had no interest in you, growing up. I understood that biologically, you were my mother, but I had no emotional attachment to you. You were simply the backup." That last word echoed in my brain. "But lately I had begun to wonder about the strength of the bond between biological family. You obviously would have more emotional attachment to me, since you were not even aware of the 60 years difference. So I tested my theory, set you loose to see what lengths you would go to to find your son. And now, you have answered my question. It is as I theorized: biology has no affect on emotional bonds. We feel the same way."

"So this was all just some experiment? That's what all of this was for?"

"I do admit, some part of me hoped you would like it here and would stay, perhaps give us a little time to bond, but I can see now how futile that would be." Then his eyes grew cold. "You did not want me back, and now, neither do I."

Who gave him the right to try and guilt trip me. "Then why am I still here?"

"You are a unique organism, isolated from the radiation as I was, but you have also experienced the Commonwealth. There is still more we could learn from you."

"I'm a lab rat, then?" To be stuck in this cage until one of their experiments eventually kills me... "There's no way I'm just going to sit here quietly."

"A shame." He truly sounded like it was. "I will admit I had had hopes of you joining our cause. An outsider's perspective could prove useful to shaping our future and helping us to deal with the Commonwealth. The Institute exists to preserve humanity, improve it, even. Mankind--redefined. I thought someone who had seen the beauty that was destroyed could appreciate that." He shook his head mournfully and left.

Who would have thought that my son would turn out to be such an asshole?
Despite Father's vague threats of experimentation, no one came to visit me the next day, or at least, it felt like the next day. Somehow this was worse than my imprisonment at the Courthouse. At least with the constant terror, I wasn't bored. The room was well-lit and spacious enough for me to walk in circles for some exercise, but with nothing to occupy my attention, I thought my head just might implode from how empty it was. No amount of screaming or banging on the door brought anyone into the atrium where my cell was located.

Just when I considered biting my tongue to end my torment, I heard the muffled hiss off one of the doors opening to the atrium. I pressed myself against the glass to get a good view. To my disappointment, it was only one of the Gen 1 synth carrying a tray of the synthetic food. Was this goop another form of experimentation? Surely the Institute people didn't eat this.

"Hey, buddy, what's going on?" I asked the robot. It regarded me with it's bare eyeballs, but simply slid the tray of food through a slot in the glass, and left.

If that was to be my only source of entertainment, I really would die.

I had grown so accustomed to the hiss of the door equaling the arrival of the synth with the tray of food, I didn't even bother turning over in my bed to look. I spent most of my time sleeping now, since it was pretty much the only thing I could do, even if the lights were on constantly. This time, however, I could hear multiple footsteps. My feet landed on the floor, and my face was was pressed against the glass in a heartbeat. Two Coursers, including the one who seemed to be determined to ruin my life, walked ahead, dragging a body between them, though I couldn't see who with them blocking my line of sight. Behind them strolled Father, calm and neutral as always, though he seemed a bit more chipper than usual. They stopped in front of the cell across from me, and when they turned to throw the poor soul in, I recognized that dusty red outfit. "Hancock!"

"Ah, so you do know him?" Father asked unnecessarily. "He was screaming your name when he came charging through our relay, to our surprise. We thought it was one of those feral ghouls at first, but I've never known one that could form coherent speech." He chuckled.

"You bastard! Let him go!" Even as I shouted the words, I knew they were useless.

"I thought you might enjoy the company." Father smiled plastically.

My shouting must have awoken Hancock from whatever had knocked him out. He lifted his dazed eyes, his hat askew on his head. "Susie?" And then they shut the doors close on him. His black eyes scanned his environment, and then landed on me, and I could see he understood the situation instantly. I expected him to rage at our captors as I had, but instead he looked at me with big ol' puppy eyes. "You're alive?"

I couldn't help a sad chuckle. "Yes, you damn fool. I'm alive."

"How sweet," Father smiled, and then left with the Coursers.

I barely even noticed their leaving. My hungry eyes soaked up every detail of him I could. A laser burn on his ribs, which caused him to hunch over. His outfit was even worse for wear, but luckily his
hat remained untarnished. He would have lost it if something had happened to his signature look. "Hancock, you beautiful idiot, what are you doing here?"

"I'm rescuing you," he answered with a grimace.

"I can tell. How'd you get here?"

"The Molecular Relay. I finished what we started."

Virgil's plan? Then that would mean... "Wait, you managed to kill a Courser?"

He looked like he was in pain, holding his side as he was, but he still shot me a cocky smirk. "I had some help, but yeah. I couldn't lose you again."

My eyes burned, so I let my forehead fall against the cool glass. "I'm so glad you're real," I murmured to myself. A lump lodged itself in my throat. I sat down on the ground by the glass wall, as close to him as I could get. "Why is it just you? Why didn't you bring the Railroad with you?"

"We only had enough power to bring so much mass through the relay, so I volunteered to go in."

Of course he did. "You're lucky you're still alive. They care less for ghouls than the Brotherhood of Steel."

"I can tell. But enough about me." He sat up properly and pressed a hand against the glass. "What did they do to you? Did they hurt you at all?"

"Not physically, no. The Director of the Institute is a fucking psycho who likes to play mind games. Oh, and he's my son."

Hancock's hand dropped. "...Pull the other one."

"How do you think I felt? That old man that was taunting us was him. It seems more time passed during my freeze than I initially thought."

"Susie, this is pretty fucked up."

"That's been the story of my life so far." I sighed. Nothing could get more complicated.

"I don't think the story's ever changed, Sunshine." He licked his lipless mouth. "Now that all the excitement's gone, I could really go for a cigarette."

"There's no smoking down here. It's unhealthy and inefficient."

He looked like he might have a stroke. "The fuck is wrong with these people?"

I cracked a wry smirk. "Just wait till you see the food." Hancock would live just fine without it, but I would have to suck it up.

"Well, at least we're together. Sort of."

Yeah, that was kind of strange. "Why would he do that, though? Everything he's done so far has been to coax some kind of reaction out of me. If he really wanted to torture me, he would have killed you -- not that I'm not glad he didn't."

"I know what the torture is. It's putting you right in front of me, but I can't touch you. I think they are trying to kill me. Do you think they'll allow conjugal visits?"
Although Hancock getting captured was the opposite of helpful, I couldn't help grasping desperately at the companionship.

Father's angle soon became apparent. Hancock fell sick, and with it his temper went out of whack. Long spells of silence would cause him to snap and start screaming and clawing at the walls, and then other times he was hunched over his little metal toilet puking up air when he had nothing left to give. Even with all his raging and sickness, the Gen 1 synths that delivered our food were deaf to our pleas. Maybe they had no audio detectors and could receive no input outside of a connected terminal.

Hancock finally lifted himself up from toilet to wash his mouth out in the drinking fountain, shoulders quivering weakly.

"Hey, babe, are you okay?" I called over softly, cursing my inability to soothe his aches.

Hancock snapped at me with yellowing teeth. "No, I'm not fucking okay." The rest of his air left him and he deflated into a crying puddle. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you. My emotions are just going haywire. I feel so angry all the time. I feel like..." He looked up at me with glittering night eyes. "...like I'm going feral."

I needed to stop that train before it reached the impending cliff of despair it was inevitably headed towards. "No, no, baby, no. You're not going feral. You never have and you never will. After all, I'm scared of ferals, and I'm still not scared of you. I can be your feral gauge, and the arrow is currently pointed to 'sweet little ball of rainbows.'"

I considered it a victory when Hancock chuckled weakly. "What's after that?"

"A fluffy kitten."

"I feel like this should bump me up to kitten."

"Nope, cause this isn't really you. They must have given you something when you were passed out."

Hancock's lighter mood instantly dropped. "No, I gave me something. A lot of somethings. Honestly, you should recognize the symptoms by now."

My eyes widened. "Chems? But this is so much worse than when I--"

"You didn't take enough to kill a human. It's Psycho withdrawal. I needed the help to kill that Courser, and well, my power armor had been kidnapped along with you."

"John..." I shook my head. It was stupid to cry. It's not like he was dying.

"I would do it again. I told you before. I may have run out on a lot of things in my life, but I'll never run out on you."

I was disastrous to this man's health. "....'til death do us part."

"If I have it my way, it will never come to that."
Despite Hancock's promise, he only got worse. He could barely pick himself up from his bed, usually just rolling over to dry-heave. Then came the hallucinations. Out of the blue he would start screaming, either in fear or in anger. Worry clawed at my stomach. When he began to cough up blood, I couldn't just sit still any more. I pounded my fists on the walls and screamed my lungs out calling for help. Anything, just to give him some relief. His body was destroying itself. Ghouls may be endurable, but he was really starting to scare me.

Only when my raw throat silenced me did someone finally show up. None other than Father himself strolling along leisurely as if he were in a museum. He stopped in front of my room, arms folded behind his back loosely.

"Help him," I spoke first, though whispered is more appropriate.

He tilted his head just slightly to regard Hancock, as if he hadn't even noticed he was there. "Why should I?"

"Because he'll die," I answered. And then what would be the point of all of this?

"What if that is my intention?"

"Then you wouldn't be here." Talking really hurt, I wish he would just agree already.

He brought his hands forward to pull a small vial out of his pocket. It didn't look like any chem or medicine I had ever encountered, but I could only hope it was the equivalent of addictol. "Then I suggest a trade. That's what you people in the wasteland do all the time, isn't it? I will completely heal your...friend, and even return him to the surface, to remain unharmed by the Institute for the rest of his unnaturally long life, if you stay here, in the Institute, for the duration of yours."

I didn't even have to think about it. "No."

It was worth it to see his composure slip. "It was my understanding that you held a certain amount of affection for this creature. You would condemn him to die down here with you? Why?"

"I'd negate his sacrifice. He'd just keep coming back."

He studied my face intently, searching for something. I'm not sure whether he found it or not, but he nodded his head absently. "I see that eros is stronger than storge." He turned away from me and opened the door to Hancock's cell. It was a testament to how bad off he was that the ghoul didn't even turn over to look at him. It took a simple nudge from Father to get him to turn over to expose his elbow. He administered the medicine as if he actually had an MD, slid his sleeve back down, and then exited the cell.

"Why?" I croaked out. I didn't agree to the arrangement.

"We already know all of the science behind addiction and ghouls. There's no educational benefit to his withdrawal, and the impact on you is useless." Without further ado, he simply left.
Maybe I should stop going to sleep if I'm going to keep waking up in worse situations. My new cell looked to have been refashioned from an old supply closet or something. The room was smaller and the walls opaque with only a small circular window in the door to let me know that I wasn't even in the same atrium as before. From my limited view, I could make out smooth white consoles and many screens hooked together to show different views of the cells in the atrium room. One screen showed a bird’s eye view of Hancock sleeping in his bed, another showed the view of the entrance to his cell from the outside. I couldn’t see the rest of the room, and I gave up trying to look.

Returning to my new prison, I realized that the wall across from my bed had a surprising new addition: a terminal. Why would they give me access to a computer? I gently tapped one of the keys to wake it up. Password needed. Damn. I knew nothing about hacking computers. Why even put this in here in the first place? My hand froze on the keyboard when I heard muffled voices from the other side of my door. As quietly as I could, I tiptoed over and placed my ear flat against the cold metal surface.

A female voice didn’t sound very pleased. "I really don't think you should be wasting your time on this, Father. We need to focus on getting the reactor up and running. We still need the beryllium ag--"

"I know perfectly well what it needs. You are authorized to take a squad of synth soldiers up to the surface to retrieve it." Father had an impatient tone to his normally polite speech that implied his dwindling patience with whoever was speaking with him.

"What you're doing here...it's not science. It's torture. There's no benefit to keeping them locked up here. What are you expecting to result from this? Stockholm Syndrome? And then maybe your mother will finally love you?"

"You are out of line, Doctor."

"I'm sorry. That was too harsh. It's just... I know you, Father. I've known you the longest out of all the scientists here. Is this really what the Director of the Institute should be focusing on at such a critical stage?"

Neither of them spoke after that. I expected this other doctor had left. When I heard the click of footsteps approaching, I leapt from the door. My feet hit the edge of the bed by the time the doors slid open. Father stood there, face a neutral mask. "Ah, good, you're finally awake. I trust you have settled into your new accommodations nicely?"

"What's going on?"

"I've decided to change the experimental parameters a bit. Test out a new hypothesis." He stepped into the small room, and the doors slid shut with a click behind him. He walked past me to the wall terminal, typing in the password so fast, I had no hope of trying to memorize it. The screen flashed a bright white before settling on the image of myself in my previous cell, sitting on the floor, facing the glass window. I was probably chatting with Hancock.

"Why show me a recording of myself?" What was his game now?

That plastic smile split open his face. "This isn't a recording. It's a live feed." He pressed a button on
the keyboard, and the camera shifted to look at Hancock in his cell, his position mirroring mine. He was smiling, laughing even. He looked healthy.

"I don't understand," I said, as my mind was beginning to put the puzzle pieces together.

Father nodded, as if he expected such. "I still want to test this bond the two of you share. How strong is it? Strong enough for him to be able to detect a synth copy?"

When did he...? Of course, when I was in the "hospital." They would have had easy access to my DNA. They must have also done their mysterious memory extraction process while I had been asleep. I clenched my teeth. "What do you plan on doing to him?"

"For the time being, nothing. We shall simply observe. So far no one has been able to tell the difference between synth and human. Even family members have no idea. Will your creature be able to?"

"Sick bastard," I huffed. Just when I had gotten him back, now they took him from me to watch some gross facsimile of our relationship. God, at least they were in two separate cells. If I had to watch them kiss (or worse) I'd probably puke. I couldn't let anyone take Hancock from me, not even myself.

Watching a near exact copy of myself was disorienting. Was I really that ugly? With my bandana gone, the scars on my chin stood out in high definition, and heaven forbid Hancock make the synth smile and reveal those missing teeth. My hand covered my own mouth shamefully. With all of the terror Father instilled in me, with all these synth replacements he kept tricking me with, I had completely forgotten about how I looked. It seemed such a silly thing to worry about now, but a part of my brain would always be thinking about my missing teeth.

So instead, I spent most of the time just watching Hancock. It was a sweet kind of torture, being able to see him but not to speak or touch. I was back to my only interaction being the synths that brought me food. They talked just as much as the previous ones did. Maybe I should go on a hunger strike? They'd probably just force feed me, but not rebelling in anyway seemed even worse.

Speak of the devil, the door slid open to reveal another synth with my meal, whether it was dinner or lunch, I couldn't tell. Nutritious goo was the same for all three meals. "I'm not eating it, so you can just take it back." No time to start like the present. I stared defiantly at the computer screen.

"Eating what?"

My heart skipped a beat. I hadn't heard that voice in....oh, I don't even know how long. I leapt up from my chair. "Nick!" I stopped myself short when I got a look at the synth. This wasn't Nick. Sure, all the Gen 2's had the same face as him, but this one had the synthetic gray flesh covering the entirety of their body under all of that white armor. "Is this another trick?"

The synth tilted its head in a very human-like manner. "Trick? Oh, I do look different. It's my disguise. I couldn't just waltz in here as ol' beat up Nick, ya know."

"Prove it. Say something only Nick would say."
"If I rescue you, will you promise to never call me Daddy again?"

Tears instantly sprung to my eyes. "Nick! It really is you." I launched myself into his arms, squeezing his metallic frame hard.

He chuckled. "Good to see you too, kid."

I pulled back just enough to see his face. "What are you doing here? Why do you look like that? How do you look like that?"

"You think we just sent Hancock here without a contingency plan? The chance of him succeeding was slim, but he couldn't be stopped." He shrugged. "The Railroad wasn't planning on risking everything on storming the place when they had no knowledge of what they would be marching into. I'll admit I wasn't too keen on this plan either, but no one else could do it, and there was no way I was just going to leave you two kids here."

I squeezed him for a second to convey my affection and gratitude.

"As for how I look like this, well, Tinker Tom had the plan to capture one of the Institute synths and to repair me with their parts. I've also got their designation codes and voice data." He said the last part in the deep robotic tones that the earlier synths all had. Creepy.

"Thank you. You didn't have to go through all that for me." I finally retracted my arms from his sides. So strange to seem him in the Institute gear.

"You'd do no less for me."

He's right. "So what's your plan?"

At this, Nick looked a little uneasy. "I'm kind of making it up as I go along. We're working on very little intel here. I was able to pull some knowledge about the Institute from that synth's memory banks, but it only knew so much. So far, the plan is for me to get in, find you guys, and then input Tinker Tom's program into the Molecular Relay to send us back."

"There's a lot of things that could go wrong with that plan. Father's always watching us..." My heart skipped a beat. "There's cameras installed in here somewhere... He knows!"

Nick put a hand on my shoulder to calm me down. "Don't worry. I already put them all on a loop of your past 5 hours. All they can see is you staring at that computer screen. What were you watching on there, anyway?"

"Oh, right. That's another wrench in our plans." I led him to the terminal where I clicked it on, revealing the camera feed of Hancock and my synth's cells. "Hancock's in a completely different spot. I don't know where. And he's been tricked by my synth into believing it's me."

"How do I know you're not the synth?"

That was fair. I scrounged my brain for an idea. "My recall code. Deacon once told me that all synths have a recall code as a fail-safe. Find mine, and whichever one of us doesn't shut down is the real one."

"Where would I even begin to look for something like that? I can't just go snooping wherever I please."

"Well, obviously Father would know mine. And probably whoever built my synth. They've got to
have a record of it somewhere. It's not like they just trust themselves to have every single synth's recall code memorized."

"I guess I'll go snooping around the Robotics division then. While I'm looking for that code, I'll try to think of a plan to get us all out of here."

"Wait." A terrible idea had just come to me. I had to go through with it. "We can't let this chance pass us by."

"Chance?"

"There's no way we'd be able to sneak back into the Institute after this. I'm sure they'll have their Molecular Relay heavily guarded, now that their secret is out. We have to take down the Institute now, while we're on the inside."

Nick frowned deeply. "It's already a stretch trying to rescue the two of you as is. Now you want to attack them too? Who do you think is going to be doing all the legwork here? It's only a matter of time before someone realizes I don't belong here. I've only got this far, because no one pays attention to an earlier model synth walking around, because they think they have no autonomy. But eventually, I'll slip up, and they're going to decide I need to be reprogrammed." His voice held a note of fear.

His fear was justified. The scientists would just be thinking he had some kind of bug or malfunction, and when they reset him, he would lose everything that made him Nick. Essentially, he would cease to exist. He was risking everything he feared, just to come rescue Hancock and me. "I understand," I said softly. "If you really don't want to, we can just bust out of here as soon as you find Hancock, but I already have a plan in mind."

Nick shook his head. "No, no, I'll do it. You're right, we need to take this chance. But it's going to be hard doing this with only the three of us, and two of you in cages."

My eyes flashed. "Maybe there can be four. My synth. She's basically me in every way, right? Has the same memories and everything? That means she wants to help Hancock escape too. She'll help us."

"She's stuck in a cage too."

"Then I guess you'll have to find a way to free us, so that we can help."

Nick visited only two more times after that to go over our plan. He couldn't find the recall code, but he had made great strides in mapping out my plan with me. Literally, he had drawn me a map of the Institute, so that when the time came I could run straight to where I was needed.

"You're in the observation room just above the prison block in the SRB. Normally, they would hold synths here who needed to be reprogrammed, and the occasional kidnapped human to await memory extraction. This Father guy is the one who decided to turn it into a testing chamber."

"Yeah, the others don't seem happy with his rule lately. If we had the time, I'd say we stage a
"While interesting to know, I don't think that will come in handy here."

I nodded. "Ok, so you're going to sneak me a weapon in my food. Too bad they don't serve cake here."

Nick shot me a look. "That move wouldn't have worked before the war either."

I waved off his sarcasm. "Ok, and then after we head downstairs and free fake me and Hancock, we sneak through Advanced Systems to the abandoned parts where the reactor is. Then we'll break the protective coating and funnel the radiation through the air vents."

"Correction, Hancock and I will be doing all that. You and your synth escape. And we'll figure out which is which later."

"What? No, I can help."

"And which of us can withstand radiation?"

I crossed my arms. Damn him for always being right. "Then I'll warn everyone before I leave. I don't actually want to kill anybody."

Nick snorted. "Just set them loose on the Commonwealth."

"The whole thing that made them all bad and scary was that they were isolated underground with advanced technology. Take them away from that, and they're basically children as far as survival skills are concerned. I wonder if they even know what real food looks like."

"Well, we don't want to warn them too early and they fix the problem."

"Then we'll--" Nick shot me a look "--you guys will seal the entrance when you leave, so that they won't have enough time to fix it. And I guess I'll save myself."

"I'm serious, kid. This is all for naught if you get stuck down here. Hancock and I would at least survive."

I huffed, flopping down on my bed. "I know, I know. It just feels like I'm abandoning you guys."

He put a hand on my knee. "It'll be alright. Those felt like famous last words."

Even with Nick's map, when the time came, I was still completely baffled by the world outside my prison. Everything was the same clinical, smooth white walls, and futuristic looking furniture and computer panels. We passed by a couple of broken synths Nick had no choice but to defeat to get to me. This was crunch time. Stealth was a slowly dwindling option. We entered the atrium room from a different door, but I still knew which direction Hancock was in. I ran to his cell, peaking through the glass doors to make sure he was alive. He was sitting idly on his bed, fiddling with his hat. When he noticed our approach he looked at me with wide, black eyes. "Wow, so there really is two of you. I had a dream like this once, but it was a lot more kinky."
I laughed, hearing an echoing one behind me. How could he still crack jokes at a time like this? "We'll figure that out later. You know the plan?"

He nodded.

"Alright, then." I turned to Nick, who was already typing away at the keypad outside his door. The doors slid open with a hiss, and Hancock practically leapt into my arms. I twirled him a little with the movement, and then his lips crashed into mine, as desperate as I felt. "It's so nice to finally touch you, Sunshine," he whispered into my mouth.

I chuckled, tears forming at the corners of my eyes. "Me too, you raisin."

He cracked a smirk, and then we turned to the other cell, hosting an uncomfortable copy of me. It felt more like I was standing in front of a mirror. When the doors flew open, she stepped out, unsure. To my surprise, Hancock left my arms to wrap himself in hers, giving her a great big smooch.

"Hey!" Was it considered cheating if it was myself?

He looked over his shoulder at me. "I don't know which of you is the real one, so I gotta treat you both equally until we figure it out. And...you know...if we never figure it out...I'm always up for a threesome."

"Hancock!" My synth and I shouted at the same time.

He just chuckled easily, releasing the other Susie to look at Nick with a serious frown. "Ready to go, Nick?"

The synth nodded back, handing one of the Institute's laser pistols that he had snatched off of those defeated guards to him.

I walked over to my synth copy. "So one of us is a copy created by Father for his twisted games, but we both want the same thing, right?"

I could see it in her eyes. Protect Hancock. She really was me. "They'll regret making two of us." She turned to look at Hancock, and so I did to.

Nick stepped forward to hand us some more gear. "Here, this is the uniform all the Gen 3 synth workers wear, and some make-up I nicked to cover that scar. Synths don't have any perceivable imperfections. And in case that doesn't work, I have two stealthboys the Railroad gave me, one for each of you." We took the gear, glancing at each other. "I put your weapons and stuff in a cabinet by the relay. I wish I could arm you, but it would immediately raise suspicions."

Without Zeus by my side, I would feel naked, but you couldn't really hide a four foot long sniper rifle in these form-fitting jumpers. I couldn't even carry an Institute laser pistol, because there's no way Father would allow for his robotic slaves to be armed. "We got it. We'll meet up at the Relay."

"I'll see you ladies in a jiff," Hancock waved off, following Nick. It hurt to see him go off into certain danger after we had just finally been reunited, but we would have to do our part too.

While we each quickly put on the cover-up, I laid the map out between the two of us. The Institute was one big circle with four main departments branching out like the petals of a flower. "Alright, so we're here in the Synth Retention Bureau," I pointed to the black circle on the map. "And we need to get to the Director's quarters which is on the other side of the main atrium." I moved my finger over to where a crudely drawn set of stairs pointed to a red star. Our destination. "We'll need to go all the way over past the BioScience entrance. That's a long way to go out in the open." Should they use
their Stealth Boys here? It is where they would be the most exposed, and even in the Institute, identical synths would throw up some red flags, if everyone didn't happen to know who I was straight away.

"Wait a minute," did my voice really sound like that? It seems much more high-pitched. "BioScience... Virgil! We promised him that we would get him the cure from the FEV lab,"

Oh yeah. "But do we really have time for that? We're already pushing it as it is."

"We can't come back for it later. Because--"

"--of the radiation. It could irrevocably alter it. Dammit."

"I know. This is all getting too complicated."

"Fuck, we're going to have to split up, aren't we?"

"Well, as safe as we are in numbers, it's not like the Institute makes twins, right? We'd instantly throw up some red flags." Just what I was thinking.

"Alright, which one do you wanna do?"

She gestured towards me. "I'm fine with whatever. You can pick."

"I really don't mine either. Who knows what dangers are down in the FEV lab? You can pick first."

"No, really, you can-- Fuck, we're gonna be here all day. I'll go to the FEV lab. You can go set up the message in the Director's quarters, alright?"

"Yeah, sure. Meet up back at the relay? You know where to go, right? Should you take the map with you?"

"Nah. It's only a basic outline of the atrium, right? I already know how to get to the giant elevator in the center of it."

"Hey, no need for the sass." I folded the paper map and tucked it into my pocket.

My doppelganger smirked. "There's always a need for sass."

I laughed. "You're right. Stealth Boys in the atrium? Go at the same time."

She nodded. "We've only got 30 seconds. So we gotta make them count."

With our plan decided, we made our way to the exit of the prison. Nick had already taken out the synths guarding the entrance. He had chosen night time (even without a sun, the Institute still followed a diurnal schedule), and so most, if not all, of the humans were in bed, leaving only the synths to worry about. And thanks to the men proceeding before us, our way to the main atrium was clear. No doubt a synth (or worse, a Courser (or even worse, that Courser)) would come waltzing by in no time and raise the alarm, so they had to move quickly. When we reached the exit, we shared a look, each of us finding determination in the other's blue eyes.

The minute the sliding doors flew open in a soft hiss, we activated our Stealth Boys, dashing through the atrium in opposite directions. I tried not to breathe or make too much noise, but I still caught a patrolling Courser out of the corner of my eye turning my way curiously. I didn't give myself time to worry about that, instead I made my way to the staircase by the glowing BioScience sign.
I made it all the way to the top of the staircase when the Stealth Boy ran out. I tossed the now useless device into the confines of a potted shrub, and tried to even my breathing. Like everywhere else in the Institute, the corridor I stood in was as clinically white and empty, with sleek doors that blended into the walls and outlined in yellow. I walked up to such a set of doors helpfully labeled Director's Quarters. At my presence, the doors slid open and I walked into some sort of entry room. There wasn't much in it except for a modern desk with slim blue vase with a single carnation, and a glass room like the same prison cell I had once been in. It housed a single economical bed, a drinking fountain, and a small, blond haired boy. Shaun.

The kid didn't move at all in his sleep, almost like he were dead, and it gave me the heebie-jeebies. So was this kid just a synth version of what Shaun had once looked like? Did they make him just to fuck with me? What's even the point of a kid that can't grow up? What did he even know? Was he in on everything, or had his memories been programmed so that he truly believed he was my son? God, this was all such a mindfuck. Good riddance to this place.

I tiptoed through the room to a balcony area, where strange chairs that reminded me of an airport were faced to overlook the atrium. Now that I wasn't running desperately, I got an eyeful. The place was actually rather nice: sleek, geometric designs with bold, bright colors that were rare in the faded Commonwealth, and to juxtapose the futuristic architecture was a creek that trickled under the clear floor to water the flora that decorated the area like a park. Even the large dome ceiling had black panels with dots of light to resemble the night sky. I could see a couple of people (most likely synths) roaming around. Their pace was leisurely, so the jig mustn't be up yet.

Turning back around, I found a set of stairs leading to an upper level. I crept up, surprised to find no one. Shouldn't "Father" be asleep? The hospital-looking bed in the corner was empty, as was the desk next to it. I checked further, and the bathroom and closet were also empty. Well, best not to look a gift horse in the mouth. I hurried over to the terminal to find it already booted up and unlocked. Wow, luck must really be on my side. I scrolled through the controls and passed by a file labeled: [Phase Three], and saw a directory named Emergency Protocols. Bingo. [Evacuation Order BD-2], set on a 5 minute timer. That should give me plenty of time to make it to the elevator and down to the Mass Relay. But then I spotted another command beneath it: [Director Access: Synth Shutdown]. That could only help Hancock and Nick, surely? And since Nick wasn't actually a part of The Institute, he wouldn't be affected. All synths, even the lifelike ones, were immune to radiation, and so they could be rescued at a later date by the Railroad. Smiling, I hit enter, only to be prompted for a password. Fuck.

"The password is 9003."

Startled, I jump out of the chair to find Shaun, the real one, watching me with a coy smile, hands folded behind his back calmly. Shit, how long was he there?

"You wish to disable the synths, don't you? The password is 9003."

"Why are you telling me this?"

His grin widened, like he was about to tell the funniest joke. "Life's just one big joke, kid. I can't wait until you hear the punchline to yours." Kellogg's haunting last words echoed in my mind, and a stark feeling of dread crawled up my gut. Shaun, however, only said, "Because it's not going to help you. You'll never escape the Institute. So go ahead, key in the password."

So even if I shut down the synths, he's still got me trapped here, is that what he's saying? Well, it might not help me, but it would help Hancock, so I turned just enough to where I could type in the four-digit code, but still keep an eye on the old man. I hit enter, and the last thing I remember is Shaun's glittering white smile.
Father used the alias Dr. Annemann for the famous magician Theodore Annemann.

I couldn't find anything in canon that explicitly stated whether Gen 3 synths were immune to radiation or not. They were designed to be superior to humans (i.e., not aging, not needing to sleep or eat, etc.) but they are also made of real flesh and bone. So for the purposes of poetic justice, I decided to let them be immune, just for the sake of my plan. A lot of the science in this game is faulty, but that's Sci-Fi, right?
The FEV lab had been abandoned in an older part of the BioScience division. The technology was older, clunkier. Virgil hadn't deserted the Institute that long ago, had he? Otherwise Kellogg would have been sent on the hunt for him a long time ago. Or was his team just given an old lab to work with? Either way, I navigated the old lab with ease, knowing that no one would be in this part. The place was pretty smashed up. Perhaps Virgil, disgusted with his work, had destroyed it on his way out? Or when he turned himself into a super mutant, went on a crazy rampage?

No, I didn't have time for speculation. I looked around until I found a large glass tube with some strange blue liquid. The cure. Snatching it, I made my way out of the lab. Out of the old and into the new. The difference was pretty stark. Like the atrium, the BioScience department was an odd mix of clinical white and thriving green. All around plants thrived in little hydroponic planters, and display windows like a zoo revealed gorillas of all creatures. How strange to see such a foreign animal here, and unmutilated at that. Had there been some gorillas frozen in that vault too?

"Attention all personnel." I froze in my tracks at the soothing female voice coming from speakers in the ceiling. "Evacuation order issued. Authorization 15R31. Please proceed to your assigned evacuation points. Thank you for your cooperation." Then an alarm blasted repeatedly. No one could sleep through that. I needed to book it or my goose was cooked.

With little care for who saw me, I ran into the atrium room, surprised by all of the bodies lying on the floor. My first instinct was that they were all dead, but there was no blood, and all of them were synths, what...?

"Susie!" I turned to see Hancock and Nick running towards me. "What the hell are you still doing here?"

"What happened?" I gestured to all the bodies on the floor.

"I don't know," Nick said in a much more even voice than his companion. I suppose not needing lungs meant he was never out of breath. "All of the synths just suddenly fell down, like their strings were cut."

"Some sort of manual override? Do you think Shaun is on to us?"

"Either way," Hancock said. "We got to blow this joint, before you'll need to start popping some serious Rad-X. Oh, by the way, I found your stuff." He held up a familiar bag with an even more familiar rifle.

"Zeus!" I cradled the gun to my chest, feeling whole again. Without the need to blend in, I could wear it proudly over my shoulder.
"You didn't look that happy to see me."

Nick interjected. "We can continue this discussion topside."

Right. Impending death.

We made our way to the large glass elevator in the middle of the room. Just as we stepped inside I could hear a commotion under the blaring of the alarm and looked up to see people in different colored jumpsuits coming out of their rooms, noticing their unresponsive synths and the intruders in the center. The glass doors slid shut, and I looked up onto a balcony where a lone old man stared right back at me, the hatred in his eyes hotter than any radiation. I could still feel it on me even as I ascended up and out of view.

The elevator topped at a dimly lit circular room without much in it. From all of the excitement of before, the silence felt like a vacuum. "Come on," Nick said. "Follow me."

We didn't have to travel very far, just up some stairs and across a room to a large console. Nick inserted a holotape, typed in a few keystrokes, before turning to me. "Alright, it's all booted up. Just to be safe, the computer is set to erase its memory so that they can't follow us, so we can't miss this. Come on."

"Wait," Hancock spoke up, looking at me. "What about your twin?"

Oh right. She should have gotten here before us.

"She'll be fine, she's a synth," Nick said, impatiently tugging me after him. "We have to go, now."

I stumbled after him into a strange, circular chamber ahead. I could hear a whirring noise, like an engine gearing up, or the start of a plane. "Wait, she's the synth?" I mean, I knew that, because I wasn't a synth so she had to be, but it was surprising that Nick knew.

"If you're still functioning, then she must have been hit by whatever shutdown these other synths."

But then we were struck by lightning.

I closed my eyes at the Institute and opened them on an island. The sound of the crashing waves fell over me. The sky (god, I thought I'd never see it again) was a deep grey, like right after a storm, and the dim sunlight was welcome after the harsh fluorescents of the Institute. I wasn't close enough to feel the spray of the ocean, but I could taste the salt in the air, and smell that general overtone of decay that permeated the Commonwealth.

"Holy shit, you guys actually made it." I turned around to see a stranger in a black pompadour and sunglasses (who even wears sunglasses when it's this dim out?) staring at us with raised eyebrows.

"Sorry it took so long," Nick said with a wave of his hand in greeting. "There were complications."

"There's always complications," the man said with a smirk. Something about it tugged at my brain, but I couldn't put my finger on it. "What kind were they?"

"The kind that takes down the Institute," Hancock boasted.
"Wha--?"

"Hey, you guys made it back!" Now here was someone I did recognize. Tinker Tom walked out of a nearby house to greet us with a big smile. Actually, now that I really paid attention, there were a lot of simple houses and buildings on the island, like a small settlement. Where were we? "What'd I tell you, Deacon?" Tinker Tom elbowed the stranger next to him roughly. Oh. Must have been undercover again. "I told you that they would buy my disguise. Didn't they buy it, Tin Man?"

"Yes, they bought it." Nick smiled politely. "And I'd like my old duds back please. I don't feel like myself in this getup." He shifted uncomfortably, looking down at the white security armor he wore.

"Right, right," Deacon waved them to follow. "I bet you guys want to rest. I'll tell Dez the mission was a success. She'll want the full debrief as soon as possible."

"Where are we?" I asked. As we walked up the dirt pathway, a few people I recognized from my previous foray with the Railroad waved at us.

"Spectacle Island," Deacon explained. "The Brotherhood invaded the Old North Church, so we had to relocate. Your General over at the Castle gave us the tip about this place actually. It doesn't hurt to have the Minutemen a cannon's throw away in case of an attack."

Of course Preston would just hand over valuable real estate to the first person in need. Bleeding heart. He lead us into a small metal shack that looked to be like a tool shed on the outside, but when we stepped inside, all we saw was a heavy security door with an attached terminal. He typed in a few keystrokes, and with a buzz the door slid open. I couldn't resist. "Let me guess, the password is RAILROAD again, isn't it?"

Deacon laughed. "No, we took your advice from earlier. It's HERA now."

I blinked. "Is it really?"

"No. It's a secret."

"Oh."

Instead of leading to another room, the door lead to a dim tunnel, lit only by a sparse amount of bare light bulbs strung along the walls. It was just enough to let you see your feet, but not enough to illuminate the end. Without thinking, my hand shot out to latch onto the dirty red sleeve of Hancock's jacket. I didn't even notice until he tugged my fingers down to thread in his. He leaned over to whisper to me, "I'm right here, Sunshine."

I bit my lip to contain the swell of emotions that threatened to burst forth into tears. God, I loved this man. The other two looked back questioningly, but I just let Hancock lead me down into the dark.

"You guys sure do like living like molerats," I said to distract myself.

"What can I say? We enjoy being underground. We're in the middle of building an escape route to the mainland. It's taking a while, but we do have to go under a lot of water." He stopped in front of a lantern on the ground to indicate a door. "Dez is in here." He turned the lever, and the door swung open, the groan of metal on metal echoing down the tunnel.

The bunker was much more well-lit than the tunnel, and reminded me a lot of their previous headquarters. There was no real organization to all of the stuff, just packed in hastily as much as it would fit. Shelves were lined with cans of purified water and other survival goods. Hammocks hung from support beams, and in the center of the room, a large oval table lined with empty beer bottles
and topped with a detailed map of the Commonwealth over which Desdemona leaned. She glanced up at our arrival. "You actually made it back. I owe Tom some caps."

"That's all the reaction we get?" Hancock huffed, but still didn't let go of my hand. "After we took down the Institute for you?"

"You did what?"

After explaining the craziness that we had just been through, we did get a congratulations from Dez, and she even allowed herself a moment of astonished pleasure, but not before she went straight back to planning. "You may have done the Commonwealth a huge favor, but our job's not finished yet. There's still going to be some rogue synths that need help, and we'll need to figure out a way to dig out those deactivated synths that were left behind."


Dez nodded. "It's only able to move a certain amount of mass at a time. And we'd only be able to send in our synth agents. It would take a long time."

Deacon added, "So would digging a giant hole."

"Either way, we need to figure out an extraction plan, and then see if we can find their reactivation codes. The older models can be manually rebooted, since they don't have any implanted personalities, but the Gen 3 synths will need their codes. I wonder if..."

"Hey, Dez, take a break." Deacon sighed. "I think we've all earned ourselves a little celebration. We can figure this all out tomorrow. They'll still be there."

"I... You're right. Now is the time to boost morale. Speaking of..." Her eyes flicked over to me. "I believe there's someone you still need to reunite with."

Deacon smiled. "He's not a big fan of being underground, so we'll have to make the journey back up."

Yeah, I know how he feels. We left Dez to plan the celebration and made our way back up into the sunlight. We hadn't been in the tunnel for very long, but even the dim rays of the darkening sky hurt my eyes. I had to shield them briefly until they could adjust.

"Ah, it seems like Agent Cerberus has found us."

Huh?

I heard a familiar bark, and then a heavy weight tackled me backwards into Hancock's stumbling body. Before my vision had returned, I already know who it was. "Dogmeat!"

He assaulted me with long slobbery licks all over my face and more percussive barks that were a little too loud this close to my face, but I didn't care. With all of the craziness the past few days, I had completely forgotten about him. I buried my face into his fury neck, and only now did I truly feel like I had returned.
That night, the Railroad threw one hopping bash. Tinker Tom launched some homemade fireworks; Glory hollered while firing her minigun into the air to the applause of many; and someone had equipped P.A.M. with colored lights and switched her speaking module to a jukebox, so that she was now a roaming party machine. Drinks were passed around and a bonfire was lit away from the buildings where the more drunk revelers danced around like heathens. Nick had left to go change into his old clothes, and I had been given some leather pants and jacket mixed with Tinker Tom's ballistic weave to replace the terrible jumper the Institute had forced me to wear.

Hancock had pulled me into the bouncing crowd by the hand. "Come on, Sunshine, let's dance." He twirled me around until we were facing each other and then he started shaking his hips and pistoning my arms back and forth like a train. Beside us Dogmeat bounced around barking happily, his tail wagging.

"Hancock," I laughed, "what are you doing? Is this what you call dancing?"

He pulled me in so that his right hand could find my waist while his left started yanking me around by the hand. "Is this better, princess?"

"I guess it'll do."

The music changed, and suddenly everyone started doing the twist around an annoyed P.A.M. A few of the more drunken revelers lost their balance and fell over in a fit of laughs. Despite all the extra people, it reminded me a lot of my first date with Hancock back at the Third Rail. I wished I had the same skirt. These leather pants weren't as easy to dance in.

Eventually, though, the events of the day were starting to catch up to me, and I had to tag out. I had had a bit to drink, and the world was starting to spin. Hancock set me down on an overturned log understandingly, and found me a can of water. "Don't worry about me, Hancock. Go have fun."

"You sure, Sunshine? You look pretty tired."

"Exactly, so I don't want your noisy company," I said in jest.

He chuckled, but acquiesced, making a beeline for a group of people sitting around a barrel fire. If I had to venture a guess, I'd say they were probably otherchem users. Well, that didn't take him very long. I watched him from my spot, before the loud noises of the party started to overstimulate me. With Hancock distracted and Nick somewhere else, this was probably my only opportunity. I looked down at Dogmeat. "You better not snitch, okay?" The dog just cocked his head to the side cutely, and followed me as I went in search of a familiar pompadour.

Deacon was leaning against a wooden pole that strings of lights had been nailed to, chatting with Doctor Carrington while nursing a beer. I waved at them as I made my way over.

"Enjoying the revelries?" the good doctor greeted me.

"I'm enjoying the wine someone dug up more. Sorry, it's just taking me a while to wrap my mind around. Just this morning I was being held prisoner inside the Institute."

"It's understandable. At some point, I'm going to need to give you an examination to fix any damage they may have done."

"Thanks, doc, but for right now, I was hoping to borrow Deacon here."

Deacon raised his eyebrows over his sunglasses. Seriously, it was nighttime now. Why was he still wearing those? Was he... Could he be blind, and just really good at navigating the Commonwealth?
How would he use a gun if he was blind?

"Hey, you see any aliens up there, space cadet?"

"Huh?" I blinked, realizing that I had spaced out for a minute there. Doctor Carrington had even left too. "Sorry."

"No aliens? Darn. I was sure I found a UFO once, but it easily could have been an old tourist attraction or something. So what did you want me for?"

"I have a favor to ask."

"You just defeated the greatest enemy of the entire Commonwealth. I think that earns you one favor." He chuckled, taking a swig of his beer.

"Before I ask, I need you to swear you will keep this a secret. No one, not even Desdemona, can know. And you especially can't tell Hancock."

"I appreciate the offer, but I won't make a cuckold of Hancock. I wouldn't survive that."

"What? No!"

He laughed. "I'm just teasing you. Fine, fine, cross my heart and hope to die." He marked an X on his chest with his free hand and then held it up like he was being sworn into court.

"I'm serious, Deacon. You're the only one I can trust with this."

"I am being serious. I won't tell anyone. I make a living keeping secrets." No smirks, no laughs.

Now that the moment had come, my throat dried up. Should I really...? No. I had to go through with this. "The Railroad plans on retrieving all the deactivated synths stuck down in the Institute, right? And you're going to be there for that?"

"Yeah, I imagine it will take all of us. If we don't just end up sending Glory in through the Mass Relay."

Oh, yeah, that might derail this. "There's a synth down there that looks exactly like me. My copy. Could you...make sure she doesn't get found?"

Deacon frowned. "I understand having a doppelganger walking around might be unnerving, but most of these rescued synths are going to get flipped and sent somewhere far away. The Commonwealth isn't sympathetic to synths right now."

I shook my head. "No, I don't want her gone. I just might need a backup. I promise she will get reactivated eventually."

"...Alright. I'll do it."

"Thanks, Deacon."

With the deed done, I excused myself to saunter away from the party and into the darkened edges of the island. So much excitement in one day, I kind of wanted a quiet place to recuperate. The sound-muffling sands of the beach welcomed me with soft crunches as I found a flat stone just the perfect height for sitting on. Away from the lanterns and light bulbs of the Railroad's headquarters, the thick blanket of night really did cover anything. For a moment, I feared I might freeze up again, but this darkness was different from the void of the trunk. The moon and stars glittered in the sky and
bounced off the rippling sea, and in the distance the glow of Diamond City marked the horizon line. I ran my fingers through Dogmeat's fur beside me, reveling in its wiry texture. The sounds of his panting breath was a sound I didn't know how much I missed until this moment.

"Not enjoying the party?" I turned around to see yellow eyes watching me from the darkness.

"Nick. Sorry, I just wanted some alone time."

"I would think that you'd have had enough of that at the Institute."

"I think I just got a little overstimulated. Didn't mean to be rude."

He stepped into the moonlight. He certainly looked much more comfortable in his faded trench coat and battered fedora. Even his tie had been strategically loosened. He really liked to maintain his image. "I didn't mean to sound like I was giving you a hard time, kiddo."

The sounds of the party were distant and muffled by the gentle roll of the waves. A half-sunk freight bobbed in the distance next to a barnacle covered buoy. Nick sat down on the rock next to me, the salt deposits on it glistening in the moonlight. The night was clear, so the thousands of stars were unveiled. I don't think I'd ever get over how beautiful they were.

"So," Nick said as he lit a cigarette, an orange spark in the darkness, "looks like the case is finally closed."

"Guess that means I have to pay up now, huh?"

"I think you've paid enough." The smoke drifted up to the stars. "I'm sorry I couldn't bring you back your baby."

I laughed breathlessly. "I actually think this was the best outcome. You saw, Nick. I wasn't some righteous avenging parent. I never really wanted him back." And since he turned out to be such an asshole, there was no need to feel guilty. I wonder if he ever made it out.

"And yet you still traveled all across the Commonwealth to find him. That sounds like a hero to me."

"Sweet talker." But I still smiled at the shoreline.

"So what do you plan to do now?"

"Hancock and I are going to track down the drug that turned him, and then I take it."

"That's not something you can undo. Don't let him pressure you into anything you're not ready for."

That advice was a little too late. "Don't worry. I want this. I'm not ready to part from you guys quite yet."

"Parting is inevitable. If it's more time you're looking for, there are other ways. The Institute figured out a way to preserve Kellogg."

"You mean that place we just flooded with more radiation than the Glowing Sea?"

"It's still more of a lead than a one-of-a-kind drug."

I shook my head gently. "No, it has to be ghoul. I wouldn't mind being immune to radiation. And a ghoul afraid of ferals? That's too ironic to pass up."
He huffed, but let the matter slide. "It's your decision, ultimately. Just know that whenever you need me, I'll be there."

My eyes felt hot. "Thanks, Daddy-O."

A synthetic arm wrapped around my shoulders. "No problem, kiddo."

"Ah shit, I'm always missing the group hugs." Before we could even turn around, warm arms in a red coat wrapped around both of us and Hancock's smiling face popped in between us. He'd lost his hat somewhere, revealing his hairless head. It made me want to pet his head. Unfortunately, the two arms wrapped around my shoulders hindered that particular movement. Dogmeat barked excitedly, his tail wagging.

"Having fun, Hancock?"

"Oh yeah, baby doll. After being forced to suffer withdrawal, it feels real good to shoot up again. I gotta tell you, I'm higher than a vertibird right now. You even look like you're glowing green. Too much rads, huh?"

I thought he was rambling more nonsense like he did when he was on a trip, but then I realized that there was a green glow lighting all three of us up. "It's not radiation," I said with realization, holding up my left arm. "I got a notification on my pip-boy. There's a new radio signal nearby."

"That's a neat feature," Nick hummed.

"Play those tunes, Sunshine. If we're lucky, it might be one of those old world celebrity sex holotapes. I came across one once."

I rolled my eyes. "I doubt it's that." I turned the knobs to tune in to the new frequency. There was static for a moment before a woman spoke, and not in the husky manner of the bedroom.

"This is Scribe Haylen speaking. This message is for Susan Quinn, the vault dweller. I need you to report to the place we last met. I'm calling in that favor."

Longneck Lukowski's Cannery was not something I ever wanted to see again, and just the mere sight of it made me want to retch. There had been nothing fun about this place. I scratched the back of Dogmeat's neck.

"So, is she inside, do you think?" Hancock held his hand across his brow to shield his eyes from the sun (an object he much lamented existed) as he surveyed our surroundings.

Nick had gone back to Diamond City to relay the good news to Piper, and the bad news that I would not be returning there for a while.

"I mean, technically we met outside of the building."

Suddenly, the doors to the cannery flew open and out ran Haylen. She wore her same uniform, but I never saw her look so stressed, so wrung out. "You made it! I'm glad you got my message."

"It's a shame telephones don't work anymore. So what did you want from me? You sounded kind of
"It's Paladin Danse. He... He's a synth."

"What?" That was not at all what I had been expecting.

Hancock said, "What makes you say that? He didn't seem like a synth."

Haylen looked to the ground briefly. "Well, that's how they work, right?" She looked up at me with imploring brown eyes. "The Brotherhood launched a successful raid on the Railroad's secret headquarters at the Old North Church a little while ago. Elder Maxson seeks the destruction of all synths, whether their memories have been wiped or not." She brought her hands together in front of her, twiddling her fingers. "We found a holotape with a list of all the known synths in the Commonwealth and their DNA. We keep a similar list in our medical records and, well, Paladin Danse is a perfect match for a synth named M7-97."

Had he been one of the synths flipped by the Railroad? Did they know?

"The Elder has ordered his execution. He's sent a squad of knights to hunt him down. The thing is... as soon as the information was released, Danse disappeared."

"So what?" Hancock crossed his arms. "You think that now the jig is up he booked it back to the Institute? Well, he's going to have a rude awakening."

"No. I don't think he was a spy, synth or not. Look, I've known Paladin Danse since I was an initiate. He trained me, showed me the ropes, taught me to dust myself off and keep fighting. He truly believed in the Brotherhood, believed that we were working to better humanity. I saw him cry real tears over his fallen brothers, saw him feel real rage at super mutants. He doesn't deserve to be hunted down like an animal by his brothers, by the institution he based his entire life on." Her eyes grew watery, but no tears fell. "Please, Susie, you have to save him."

I put my hand on her shoulder. "Of course I'll help, Haylen. But what do you expect me to do? I can't take on the entire Brotherhood."

"I'm not asking for that. I'm afraid what Danse might do. If he leaves the Commonwealth, gets far enough away, he'll be safe from Maxson's wrath."

"Ok, but that still leaves the problem of finding him," Hancock said. "What if he's already left the Commonwealth?"

"I don't think he has," she said. "We have a place that he said to go in case of an emergency and we get separated. Listening Post Bravo. If I know Danse, I think he'll be holed up there until he figures out what to do."

"So what do you need me for? Why not talk to him yourself? Surely he would listen to you over me."

"I don't think he would." She looked down at her hands. "I'm still a member of the Brotherhood. I still believe in our mission. I don't think I could make him reevaluate his beliefs. But you..." She looked at me with determination. "You questioned the Brotherhood from the very beginning. As an outsider, you can make him see."

And when have I ever been able to convince that man of anything? Especially since I continued my association with Hancock. I looked over to him. He may not have cared for the man and his Brotherhood ways, but I knew that if I asked for his help on this, he wouldn't hesitate to give it. Not
that a ghoul would be very persuasive with Danse. "Alright, lead the way then."

"Huh? I thought I would just mark it on your map, not escort you there."

"Obviously you are coming with. You're going to help me convince him."

"I-I'm not so sure that would work."

"I think power in numbers will help here. He's your friend, after all, right?"

"You... You're right. Come on, there's no time to waste."

Listening Post Bravo wasn't too far. The small bunker had some minor defenses, with some turrets and a single protectron. I easily took them out from a safe distance (oh how good it felt to use Zeus again!) and hit them in their weak spots. I wondered if Danse had set them up to protect himself from any Brotherhood soldiers, or if they had already existed. A lot of pre-war machines still ran after 200 years. Aside from the defenses, nothing else about the bunker appeared to be working. The safety lights were the only thing on to illuminate their path, and most of the consoles and radio equipment had been damaged beyond repair. In fact, it didn't look like anyone had ever inhabited this place since the bombs. There was even still an old cup of coffee on a desk against the wall. The sight of it reminded me of my first day in the ruins of my old house.

A bark from Dogmeat drew our attention to a hole in the wall that had been hidden amongst the shadows. We crept through into a small cavern chamber, lit up by glowing fungus. Nothing here, but there was another hole in the wall from which light poured out of. When we ducked through it, we found another room of rubble and broken machines, and a single man in an orange flight suit.

"Danse." I wondered if he felt the same way as I had when he rescued me from the Judge. He certainly looked as surprised as I had been.

"Susie? Haylen?"

"And Hancock. I'm here too."

I shot him a look which he ignored with a shrug.

"Have you come to terminate me?"

"No, Danse, never." Haylen really did look upset. "I would never do that." Something was up.

"Ok, I'm clearly missing something. Why are you two acting so weird? Even with the whole synth reveal this is still strange."

Danse remained stoic faced but Haylen looked like a kid with her hand caught in the cookie jar. "...I helped Proctor Quinlan decode the data we got from the Railroad. I figured out that Danse was on the list first, before anyone else knew. I could have deleted the information, but...I didn't."

"You did the right thing, Scribe. You remained loyal to the Brotherhood."

"I could have saved you. No one needed to know. You could have remained with us."

Danse shook his head. "No, you did the right thing by informing the Elder that there was a synth on the Prydwen, a security risk."

"You act like you're not talking about yourself," I pointed out. He seemed more calm than I had expected, considering he was a wanted man, well, robot.
"I understand perfectly well my situation." Now he looked angry. His gloved hands curled into fists. "I am an abomination, a machine. I must be destroyed."

"What? No. I thought you wanted to live. Isn't that why you ran away?"

He looked at me with a strained face. "I was scared. I found out about my true identity at the same time as everyone else. I've had some time to think, though. I've always believed in the Brotherhood's mission statement that technology run amuck must be destroyed and controlled. It's what reduced humanity to near extinction. I'm a danger to that mission, and so I must be eliminated."

Hancock snorted loudly. "That's the biggest load of brahmin shit I've ever heard." Not helping!

Danse glared at him. "I don't expect you to understand, freak."

"You're right, I don't understand. You Brotherhood lugs say you want to protect humanity, to restore it to purity, but what even is humanity? You believed you were human. Everyone around you believed it too. Just because you aren't built the same way, that means you have no more value than a toaster? If someone loses their leg and gets a prosthetic, do they lose their humanity as well? If someone's skin is burned by radiation, is their humanity burned away as well?"

"But I didn't start as a human. I was created in the cold confines of a laboratory. These memories of being a kid, of growing up in the ruins, they're not mine. They were implanted."

This reminded me of Nick, of his struggle to identify as the pre-war detective, or as an empty shell filled with someone else. "But those are you," I said, urging him to see my point of view. "Your memories might be programmed, but you were the one who made every decision since then. You interacted and made relationships with people. No one programmed Haylen into being your friend. You did that."

She nodded. "I've never seen anyone else willing to die on principle, willing to protect others. You comforted me when I cried, taught me to be strong. I respect you, Danse."

"Haylen..."

"Our physical bodies do have an impact on us," I said. "We have genetic history, a natural predisposition that colors our view of the world, but it's our choices who make us what we truly are." I looked over at Hancock, at the blackness of his eyes and the mottled texture of his skin. "I am going to become a ghoul." Both Danse and Haylen looked at me in shock. "It's going to change me, change how I see the world, and how it sees me. But this is a choice I am making, and everything I do after will define me just as much as my physicality. It won't make me less of a person."

Danse's face curled in disgust. "Why would you do that to yourself?"

"Because I want to be with the man I love for as long as I possibly can. Because I want to see the world through his eyes, understand how the world sees him. Plus, immortality and radiation resistance are worth sacrificing my looks." They didn't smile at my little joke. "I lived pre-war, Danse. The vault I was in was a cryogenics facility. When you first met me, I had just woken up about a little over a week ago. I know this world that everyone keeps trying to go back to. There may have been "purity" but there were just as many monsters."

Everyone remained silent for a while, as we all waited for Danse to ponder over our words. I really hoped he understood. As much of an asshole the Paladin was, Danse was a pretty swell guy that really did just want to help people.

"Even if I believe you, what will I do? I'm a wanted man."
Haylen grabbed his hand. "Come with me. We'll leave the Commonwealth, go outside of the Brotherhood's range. We'll start our own chapter that's based on actually protecting people instead of a witch hunt against technology. We'll start over."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You're not asking; I'm offering."

"You would just abandon everything you've built here? What about Rhys?"

"He made his choice and now I'm making mine. You're my friend, Danse. I want to be there for you."

He smiled gently at her, still holding hands. Those two were definitely going to hook up. "Words cannot express the full range of my gratitude. What you're doing for me..." He looked at me and Hancock. "You also have my thanks. Both of you. I had been prepared to kill myself, but you all have given me hope."

Hancock just waved his hand. "Nah, you should be thanking your friend there. She's the one that asked for our help."

"I wish you both luck," I said with sincerity. "Whenever you get the chance, send me a letter and I might come visit wherever you guys end up."

"I wish you luck as well," Danse nodded back. "I may not fully understand your decision, but I hope it brings you happiness."

With our final farewells said, Hancock, Dogmeat, and I left the bunker. The world outside was quiet, the wind still. I looked up at the beautiful blue sky and the morning sun. "I guess this is the end of their chapter here." They would encounter many hardships on their new path. Eventually, they would have to confront the fact that Danse would not age.

Beside me, Hancock bumped my shoulder with his own, his face close to mine so that I could see the eyes underneath the black film. "And so begins ours."

END OF ACT 2

Chapter End Notes

Fun Fact: The Railroad password is actually A SECRET. He wasn't being coy.

So here's Act 2. They seem to be getting smaller. :/ I haven't finished Act 3 yet, but it's looking like it might fit that trend. Act 3 is going to be consequences of taking down the
institute and the quest to ghoulify Susie. This one is going to involve a lot more of the DLC, but nothing really related to their plots, just their characters.

Keep holding on, folks. We're almost done.

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