The Courier and Her Conscience

by ScrimshawPen

Summary

A courier loses her identity to a bullet and builds an entirely new one with the help of the people she meets. Haunted by a dark past she can’t remember, Megan’s peculiar mix of erratic impulses and good intentions are tailor-made to give her friend Arcade a perpetual headache. A mostly platonic adventure story, with a merely incidental F!Courier/Boone relationship, this is rated a light M for reference to non-explicit/offscreen sexual violence, as well as the usual canon-typical violence and drug (sorry, “chem”) use.
The afternoon sun sifted through the dirty panes of the window, bathing Doc Mitchell's surgery with warm light and catching dust motes in its path. Glad of a reason to step aside from his messy experiments for a moment, Arcade Gannon leaned back in his chair, listening tolerantly to his young friend's chatter about the day's explorations. She did so love to talk, and he didn't mind listening, at least in small doses.

"...and then I followed a coyote pup for an hour, and guess what I found? New plants!" She held up a handful of dark green stalks, all oozing a greenish liquid from one end, for the doctor's inspection.
"What's this one, Arcade?"

"Aloe verde. That's a good find. Once processed properly, it's useful as a burn remedy and a component in some creams. Nothing like hydra, of course, but without the risk of addiction." The doctor accepted the spiky plants and looked around for a bucket in which to store them until later. "Doc Mitchell mentioned that he could use something like that. If there's enough, I'll put up a jar for him before we go." Working with a mortar-and-pestle, a hotplate, and miscellaneous lab equipment, Arcade had spent most of his daylight hours in Goodsprings studying desert plants in search of new medical remedies. The girl, an irrepressible bundle of energy and good will, was only too happy to focus her daily forays into the desert on the task of finding him new materials to work with. More often than not, she delivered exactly what he asked for and more, somehow navigating the hazards beyond the town's boundaries with no worse injury than a little sunburn and an occasional gecko bite. He worried, but he didn't know how to teach her caution. So far, she had experienced no downfall serious enough to learn that lesson; he hoped that her eventual education wouldn't kill or permanently damage her. At least not more than she already was.

She beamed up at him - she might have been tall for a wastelander, but he was a head taller still - showing a full set of white teeth. They were the teeth of someone who'd been raised with good nutrition and some kind of dental care. Arcade still wasn't sure where she'd come from, but he'd eat his hat if she'd been born and bred in the desert. Though she was still thin from her recent convalescence, her bones were too strong, her skin too clear for that. Unaware of his scrutiny, she continued her itemization. "Good. It's all mixed up in the bag, but there's a lot of it in here. I also found several more xander roots and broc flowers, if you're still experimenting with the ratios on your alternative stimpaks." Moving with her usual, graceless speed, she turned out her gathering bag on the metal table, spilling tubers, stems, and blossoms everywhere, in addition to a large, dead lizard with a neat machete cut across its neck. Seeing her fastidious companion wince at the clutter, she awkwardly shuffled the plants into messy stacks, leaving the surface relatively clear, except for a dribble of blood from the dead gecko, which she stuffed hurriedly back into the bag.

He sighed, running a hand through his blond hair, and waved her away. "Don't worry about that, I'll clean it up properly. Thank you for the supplies. Did you have any trouble today?" He watched her movements closely now, concealing concern under a casual tone. His new friend was only four months removed from an early grave, and still carried the scars from her would-be assassination: occasional absence seizures (though those were growing less frequent as time went on), a slight weakness on her left side, and other, less obvious signs of brain injury, both physical and
psychological. Arcade hadn't known her before her injury - and mental health wasn't his specialty anyway - but he suspected that her impulsivity and lack of an appropriate fear response to, well, *everything* was the result of the bullet to the head that had almost killed her, nearly four months before.

She shrugged nonchalantly, well aware of his concerns and constantly trying to downplay her own risk-taking to him. "Nah. I stayed pretty close to Goodsprings this time. Nothing worse than a few geckos. This young one will do for our dinner, along with a few jalapeños for seasoning. I'll skin and clean it while you work. Where's the Doc, anyway?"

"Napping. Last night's poker tournament wore him out. What time did you get back in, anyway?" Arcade was tired too, actually. His idea of a good time was an evening to himself with a book, and people drained him. All the same, the game *had* been fun. He couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd played cards with anybody.

She grinned again. "Well, me 'n Sunny's winnings were burning a hole in our pockets, so we went to Trudy's and split the cost on a bottle of whiskey and a couple of nuka-colas. Then she wanted to go target shooting up by the cemetery and we stayed up there talking for a while. Did you know she’s from Arizona? Apparently it's even hotter there." Now she, too yawned, rubbing her eyes and getting plant juice and gecko blood on her face. "The last time I checked the time on my Pip-Boy it was almost 2:00 AM and I headed back here shortly after that. It was a nice time. I’d go so far as to say it was the best night I can remember. Which isn't saying much, really..."

"All that and you were up at dawn. Such is the vigor of youth."

"You talk like you're an old man," she teased. "You could have come out with us." She laughed at his exaggerated shudder, an innocent sound that made him smile. He turned away to hide this, shaking his head and sorting through the mess that she'd made of his desk.

"Someday, if by some miracle you live long enough, you'll learn the difference between twenty… or however old you are… and your late thirties. Notably, the value of a good night's sleep and just how bothersome a hangover can get when you're older. Now, get out of here with that lizard and let me work."

Later that night, with the gecko steaks eaten and the dishes washed, they adjourned to the living room for what had become a nightly ritual for them all. Doc Mitchell rocked in the corner, smoking coyote tobacco in a crude pipe, the young woman lounged on the couch, and Arcade sat in the armchair nearest the lamp, reading aloud from a book he'd found on the shelf. It was a new book for him, but one that he'd been quite gratified to discover in the older doctor's collection. Part history, part adventure story, and part travelogue, T. E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of the Wisdom* had proved a fascinating and surprisingly poetic read. Arcade had always been a bookish man, yet he had seldom read out loud to anyone before coming to Goodsprings, and now found that he enjoyed the sound and taste of words shared with others. This was fortunate, as the task fell exclusively on him, night after night. He found his spot and picked up from where they had left off before:

"...We were fond together because of the sweep of open places, the taste of wide winds, the sunlight, and the hopes in which we worked. The morning freshness of the world-to-be intoxicated us. We were wrought up with ideas inexpressible and vaporous, but to be fought for. We lived many lives in those whirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves: yet when we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory to remake in the likeness of the former world they knew. Youth could win, but had not learned to keep, and was pitifully weak against age. We stammered that we had worked for a new heaven and a new earth, and they thanked us kindly and made their peace."
The girl interrupted him from the couch. "Who are the 'old men' he's talking about, Arcade? I forgot what the context for this passage was. I think I was asleep when you stopped reading last time." Her eyes were closed, as they usually were, but she was listening closely.

He paused and looked up. "I believe they represent the powers-that-be among the victors of World War I. The soldiers, the young men, fought for the principles they believed in, but found the actual victory hollow and the price in lives too high. This author felt particularly strongly about the way the British government had treated his friends and allies among the Arabs after the war."

She frowned and stared up at the ceiling. "What did Lawrence do after the war, then? Did he try to make the British more worthy of his principles?"

Arcade had read ahead and knew the shape of things to come. "The biography in the back of the book says he continued to advocate for the independence of the Arab people, albeit unsuccessfully. As a war hero, he had some influence, but one man can do only so much. He hated bureaucratic work and tried to reenter the army under a different name to escape his fame, but was quickly discovered. He died fairly young in a motorcycle accident, so we can only guess at what more he would have done had he lived."

Doc Mitchell spoke up from his chair, which was rare for the usually taciturn man. "I'll tell you. He would have lived to be a tired old man watching the world move on. That fella doesn't seem to have been mean enough to be one of the ones making wars and sending boys to die for reasons they don't understand. Sitting out the second World War on the sidelines would have killed him." He sprinkled more tobacco on his pipe, which had gone out, tamped it down with his thumb, and re-lit it. "This world chews up principled folks and always has. Whether it's the Nazis, the Enclave, or the Legion, there'll always be bastards with the power and will to shape the world the way it suits them, everyone else be damned."

They were all quiet for a moment, the girl either thinking or dreaming and the old man smoking contemplatively. Arcade looked over, sharply and inquisitively, at his fellow physician, wanting to ask something, but thought better of it. He reopened the book and continued reading until the chapter was over and both of his companions were asleep in their places. He supposed the prose was a little dense for a late night, but they had both agreed to his selection without complaint; next time, perhaps, he'd choose something a little lighter.

He had been a guest in Goodsprings for three weeks now, ever since he'd met the strange young woman who'd saved his life. On his first evening in the house, she had approached him shyly, asking if he could read to her a little bit before bed. He was tired and sore and desperately wanted some time to himself after his hellish experience, and had responded shortly, telling her to go read to herself. She'd blushed and apologized, but had gone straight to bed instead of the bookshelf. To his shame and dismay, he'd learned the following day that the bullet that had taken two decades of her memories had also robbed her ability to decode written language. Her vocabulary suggested some formal education, so she probably had been literate before, but now it was beyond her ability to puzzle out even the simplest of words, even though she could recognize individual letters and numbers. She understood the rules of phonics on some level and tried to apply them, but the effort hurt her head and strained her eyes.

Ever since then, he'd read to her every night without complaint, choosing books from Mitchell's small collection that he thought she'd like instead of the philosophical texts he preferred. It was refreshing to meet someone so genuinely interested in books, and if it had not been for her disability, he would have recommended her for a course of literature study with the Followers, preferably somewhere safely back in the heart of the NCR. As it was, her current trajectory suggested "mercenary" or "hunter" as a career path, and he lamented the fact that this life didn't suit a person
with clear literary interests. Mitchell, whose eyes had become weak with age (a distressing trait in a practicing surgeon, Arcade thought privately), also seemed to enjoy hearing his own books read aloud.

Arcade replaced the bookmark, laid the book down on the lampstand, and turned the light off. She could sleep anywhere, but he wanted a bed when he could get one. The cot in Mitchell's surgery was surprisingly comfortable and he'd be sorry to leave it behind when the courier decided it was time to move on. He knew that would happen soon. She was restless, bored of Goodsprings, and wanted to see more of the surrounding area, especially New Vegas, whose glowing lights were visible even from this distance. He'd tried to tell her that it was a terrible place with terrible people, but she just gave him an exasperated look and said she wanted to see it for herself. She had another reason to go to Vegas, but they had settled on an unspoken agreement not to discuss it, him from disapproval and her from uncertainty. He worried about the day she would go somewhere he couldn't or wouldn't follow, or do something that he couldn't condone: a Followers doctor, especially one with his past, had no business getting caught up in the business of killing for selfish reasons. While she could certainly teach him a thing or two about courage, he hoped that he could help her see the merits of non-violent solutions and prudence. Unless she learned those, he feared that she wouldn't last out here… or, if she did, that she'd become someone unrecognizable in order to survive.

As far as personal assets were concerned, she had some inherent strengths. She had some kinds of intelligence in spite of the brain damage, was equal parts lucky and capable when it came to fighting, and a charmer when she wanted to be - in a lost puppy sort of way. But oh, this girl was distressingly naïve. She was not sufficiently afraid of the Powder Gangers lying in wait along the highway, the Legion patrols that occasionally ventured across the river, or the thousand other ways that a person could come to grief in the wasteland. He could just imagine her trying to appeal to the better nature of the first raiders she met and cringed at the image in his mind's eye.

He thought back to the day they'd met, a dull, hot afternoon in early August. His first words to her had been a scolding for risking her life and freedom to save him – a complete stranger! – from the Legion raiding party which had kidnapped him between Freeside's east gate and the Aerotech refugee camp. After watching, stunned, as the last legionary fell to her machete, he had begun shouting about the dangers – enslavement, rape, and crucifixion – but she'd only nodded, smiled sweetly, and answered...

"Yeah, yeah… you're welcome! My name is Megan Martin. At least I think it is. I'm staying in Goodsprings. Who were those guys? Why were you tied up - are you dangerous? What's your na-" Her stream of questions cut off mid-word as her vision fixed and her hand froze in the act of cutting his bonds.

"Uh… Megan? Are you okay? Can you hear me?" Arcade tried to take the knife from her trembling grasp, but only succeeded in knocking it to the ground, his arms awkward in the knotted ropes. He looked closely at her eyes and detected the tell-tale signs of an absence seizure: eyes rolled back, lids fluttering. His eyes moved to the ugly dent on her right temple, just visible under a ragged but clean crop of mouse-brown hair. His hands still tied, he felt helpless to examine or aid her properly but knew the incident should pass quickly.

"-ame?" she continued, as if nothing had happened, her face bright and awake again. She frowned, looked down at her empty hands, and bent to recover the dropped knife. "Damn it. Thought I was over those. It's been a week since the last one – that's the whole reason Doc let me go exploring today. Oh well, what he doesn't know can't hurt him. At least it didn't happen during the fight, right?" She laughed nervously. "Like, that could have been really bad. I'd be tied up with you right now."
Arcade stared at the damaged, cheerful girl. Now that he had heard her talk more, he heard a slight slurring in her speech. Though she had proved a whirlwind of death while fighting the five legion soldiers, hacking and bashing with wild abandon, her fine motor skills were lacking and her two hands grossly uncoordinated, as was evidenced by her accidentally cutting her own palm while sawing through the thick rope. The bonds finally fell to the dirt and she stepped back, cradling her bleeding hand. He stood there, looking at her in disbelief as she danced with pain on the spot.

"Ouch! That stings. Are you okay?"

He finally roused himself to respond. "Yes, excepting some rough handling and rope burns, I'm fine, thanks to you. But you – you shouldn't be out here like this. Not alone." She scowled at him and started wrapping her hand with a filthy bandana fished out of her brahmin-skin coveralls. He took a deep breath and tried to be professional. "Hey, no. That could get infected. Let me –"

She sat patiently beside him on a nearby ledge while he carefully cleaned, stitched, and lightly bandaged the cut, using the travel-sized first aid kit from his coat that the legion thugs had thankfully allowed him to keep. She winced, but didn't move or pull away when the antiseptic and needle hurt her. When he was done, she looked at him with clear-eyed curiosity and a disarming lack of fear.

"Thanks. Who are you and why were you a prisoner? Where do you get off being so bossy? Aren't you grateful? I saved you just now, you know."

"If I'm 'bossy,' it's because your recklessness horrifies me." He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, trying to calm down. "I'm Arcade Gannon. But you can just call me Arcade. I'm a doctor with a group called the Followers of the Apocalypse, from Freeside. This band grabbed me outside of the city three mornings ago, and were trying to cut across the open country to get back to the river."

She started with realization and interrupted, "Oh, so this is the Legion that everyone's been talking about? I thought they weren't supposed to come this far west."

He nodded wearily. "They don't usually. The NCR usually keeps them on their side. But I suspect that some high-ranking Legion officer needs better medical care than their tribal medicine can provide." He didn't mention that he had overheard their leader say words to that effect in Latin. Having a reputation for knowing that language could be hazardous to one's health in the current climate. "I'm sorry I shouted at you. Really. When you jumped out with that peashooter, I thought I was about to see my would-be rescuer killed in front of me and that scared me. What these legionaries do to women is unspeakable…"

She looked a little offended, and said stiffly, "I appreciate your concern, but I wouldn't have attacked if I hadn't thought I could take them with the element of surprise. This varmint rifle isn't great, I know, and I'm actually not a very good shot with it, but my machete is great and I'm actually pretty okay with it."

Since said machete was currently buried in a legion soldier's skull, Arcade couldn't disagree with her there. But he wasn't going to let her put him off. "Your abilities aside, this could have ended really badly for you. And then, on top of that, you had a seizure and were immobile for several seconds, which could get you killed out here really, really easily. It distresses me that you exhibit so little regard for your own safety. I don't think you should be doing stuff like this on your own. That's all. No offense meant. I do thank you for… risking your life to free me. That was entirely unexpected and went far beyond your ethical obligation to act."

"Anytime!" she answered happily, adding reproachfully, "You're the one who should be more careful. Don't get caught again." Without another word, she stooped to begin looting the bodies. He
shook his head, muttering under his breath about fools and angels and the paths they dared to tread, and wondering silently to himself how someone like this had survived as long as she had. Still grumbling, he began putting an antibacterial salve on his wrists where the ropes had cut into the skin. He wondered whether one of these goons was carrying his cherished plasma defender, or if they had left it in the dust where they'd grabbed him. He opened his mouth to ask the girl to look for it, when her voice broke in first.

"Do you know if anyone takes these coins in Vegas?" She was holding a handful of silver denarii, looking hopeful, her bloody machete already reclaimed in her belt-loop.

"Some shopkeepers will, some won't. Hardcore NCR supporters might look at you suspiciously, but most won't care. You'd get more purchasing power with them in Legion territory, but I can't recommend going there just to save money. Why do you want to go to the city, anyway?" He'd seen enough of Vegas and its spillover to last him a lifetime, and he didn't see this crazy person fitting in with the culture there all that well.

"It's the biggest place I've ever seen. You can see that big tower from the Goodsprings graveyard. It looks neat. Also -- here, she broke off and rubbed self-consciously at the raw scar on her head -- "the guy who shot me in the head a few months ago was a Vegas Strip type, apparently. I don't remember. I don't remember anything from before, actually. Not even sure about my name. 'Megan' seems right when I say it, but the 'Martin' part doesn't feel exactly like me. It's close, though. I need to spend more time preparing, but I'm going to find him, and then -- well, I'll talk to him. Ask him why he did this to me."

"Will you kill him?" Her answer to this question seemed important to Arcade, though he didn't know why. She had killed the five men now lying around them like it was nothing. Whatever her modus operandi was under all of the disarming weaknesses, she was clearly well-acquainted with death-dealing. He waited for her response with baited breath.

She considered a moment, speaking slowly and thoughtfully: "It depends on how he answers, I guess. He shot me in the head and threw some dirt over me before he left. Stole the package I was carrying for the Mojave Express. I was a courier... before... although the only way I know that is the papers Doc Mitchell found on me." She added bitterly: "I lost myself there. I should have died... and so maybe he should too. That's only fair, right?"

As a timely reminder of his own ability and willingness to kill - at least sometimes - Arcade spotted the handle of his weapon sticking out from the bag of the dead soldiers' leader, who was now sprawled out with a 5.56 round in his eye. He reclaimed it and addressed himself to the girl. "Fair enough. If that's where you want to go, I'd like to help you get there, if you'll let me. I don't feel good about the vengeance part, but I do want to make sure the desert between here and Vegas doesn't kill you. I owe you that much, at least, for saving me from a life in servitude to Caesar." Answering the skeptical look in her eye, he continued, a little defensively, "I'm more competent in a fight than present circumstances might suggest. I'm also a really good doctor." No false humility from him. It was true.

She still looked uncertain and began cautiously, "I'm not ready to leave yet. I need to recover more and get stronger. You were right - I shouldn't have come this far from town by myself, not with the risk of more seizures. If you need to get back to Freeside sooner rather than later, you should just go."

He shrugged. "I'm in no hurry. My main job lately with the Followers is medical research. As long as Goodsprings has native plants to study, I can do my work anywhere. I'll send word with one of the caravans to let my colleagues know I'm alive." He felt strangely compelled to protect this girl from
herself at all costs, and hoped he wasn't coming off as creepy or desperate. He didn't often reach out to people; afraid of closeness, afraid of rejection, he came across as an awkward loner most of the time. But something compelled him to take a risk on this one.

She smiled that sweet smile again and responded cheerfully, "Alrighty then. Let's go home. If Doc won't let you stay - though I think he will, he's nice - there's an bunkhouse where the single fieldhands sleep. There's not many of them around right now, so there should be a bed available." Then her face became stern. "Arcade, don't take this the wrong way. You're cute and all, but I'm not… looking for a boyfriend or anything right now. I only want to be friends. Is that okay with you?"

He smiled for the first time in days and answered smoothly, "That works perfectly for me. Lead the way, Megan."
"You sure y'all don't want to stay a little longer? I can't say I haven't enjoyed the company these last few months. The house'll be kinda quiet without you." Doc Mitchell stood on his doorstep as his two houseguests returned with one last delivery of clean spring-water. They'd volunteered to lay in a good supply for their host as a parting gift, knowing that the long trek from the well was hard on the old man's leg. Anxious not to appear sentimental, he added, "Least-ways, I liked having someone to fetch fuel and bring in fresh meat. You kids are kinda rowdy, but you do good work."

"No, sorry, Doc. I appreciate all you've done, but I've got things to figure out that I can't here. Plus, Arcade has pulverized every useful herb in a five-mile radius. It's time for us to move on." Megan put down her bucket and gave the crotchety old doctor a hug. "I've asked Sunny and Trudy to look in on you from time to time. I don't think any of them realize just how hard it is for you up here by yourself. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it."

"Don't worry about me, girlie, I got along just fine before you came and I'll get along when you're gone. You just worry about not getting yourself killed again. Don't know how many lives you got left, and it'd be a shame for the world to lose you." He then addressed himself sternly to the 39-year-old Arcade, who looked a little affronted over being called a "rowdy kid." "And you, young man, take care of her."

"I'll do my best," he answered. "I left you a couple dozen packets of my latest formula for healing powder. It's still not up to stimpak standards, but it's a lot better than nothing for speeding up recovery on minor injuries. Also, if you get low on medical supplies, send word to the Followers of the Apocalypse, and we'll do what we can."

"Thanks. Y'all take care out there," He watched them leave until they were a dark speck on the road to Primm, then went inside and sat down in his too-quiet living room. "Well, Caroline, I admit I feel kinda responsible for that kid. Sorta glad we never had any of our own – it's a heartache waiting to happen." He paused, as if to listen for his dead wife's response. "I don't know. Heads she survives, tails she doesn't. But I ain't got a coin on me. We'll just have to wait and see."

The road to Primm was uneventful. As they skirted the patches of glassy, irradiated sand, Arcade kept a wary eye out for bloatflies, geckos, and Powder Gangers, but saw none; Megan, for her part, seemed frustratingly oblivious, poking idly at her Pip-Boy and humming along to the Ink Spots. Knowing the doctor's aversion to avoidable violence, she had elected not to mention that she'd already cleared this stretch earlier in the week, leaving the convicts' looted corpses hidden in the weeds for the bugs to scavenge. After seeing what Joe Cobb's gang had done to poor Ringo when he tried to slip out of town one night, she had felt no compunctions about sneaking up and pulling the trigger on the likes of them. A single stick of dynamite, thrown into their midst, had been enough to touch off a chain reaction in their own munitions and take out the entire roadside camp. Other than a ringing in her ears that persisted for a full day afterwards, she'd come out entirely unscathed, if a little horrified at the spectacularly violent effects of her actions. Still, if anyone deserved it, they did.

Oblivious to this inner conflict and trying to get her to pay attention to her surroundings, Arcade commented, "I'm glad you finally upgraded to a hunting rifle. I wouldn't trust a varmint rifle against a radroach, let alone anything bigger." He had been unusually edgy all morning, nervous about leaving the relative safety of Goodsprings for the wastes. Primm might have the answers his friend sought, but it had a reputation for being all too "wild west" for his tastes. Arcade preferred things to be safe, comfortable, and civilized.
"Tell that to Sunny," Megan countered without looking up. "She can shoot the eye out of a coyote at a hundred feet. And we can't all have bizarre energy weapons that eat up a whole town's worth of energy cells in a month. Are plasma defenders standard issue for the Followers, then?" She kept her tone deliberately light, but knew the question would provoke her companion. Ask him any pointed questions about military tech or his personal history, and he'd stammer out some ridiculous deflection, his voice going up an octave, and then change the subject. It was all very mysterious, and Megan was determined to figure it out, hopefully without pushing him too far. It was at that moment that curiosity drove her to ask something she'd been wondering for weeks. Easy Pete had marked Hidden Valley on her Pip-Boy map a month before, and while she hadn't yet made the hazardous trek over to check it out, the rumors surrounding its occupants had intrigued her: energy weapons, Old World technology, and total secrecy. Arcade had preemptively refused to accompany her on any hypothetical visits ("I'd rather teach a radscorpion to dance than set foot in that bunker."). This seemed more than a little telling to her.

He hadn't responded at all to her jibe about his gun, so she tried again. "Arcade, did you used to be a member of the Brotherhood of Steel? It's okay if you were. I wouldn't judge you for that."

This got his attention. The look he gave her at this point, mixed anger, exasperation, and (unless she was imagining things) fear, made her duck her head in shame. "Exigua est virtus servare silentium, sed culpa gravis esse loqui de quibus didicit. It is but a small merit to observe silence, but it is a grave fault to speak of matters on which we should be silent. Ovid. No, I've never belonged to the Brotherhood of Steel! Perish the thought. And stop asking things like that. I'd really rather not tell you any lies." He sounded genuinely offended at the insinuation.

She answered boldly, tongue stumbling over the foreign phrase he'd taught her, "So, it's 'or something,' then. Veritas per violentiam, vel per mendacium silentio. Truth is as violated by silence as it is by a lie. Can't remember who said it first. Who, then? Where are you from? I only thought the Brotherhood because you've got an otherworldly vibe and a fancy gun. That is the limit of my knowledge about them. I don't know very much about any group, really."

"Cicero said that," he said shortly. "And I mean it. If you keep pressing the point... I... I'm going to expedite my return to Freeside. This line of questioning doesn't end well. Not for anybody. Either you accept that or you lose me as a travelling companion. Okay?" He turned away from her, physically as well as emotionally, his longer legs speeding up and leaving her behind in his wake. She trotted to keep up, but didn't dare say anything else. They travelled the remaining miles in chilly silence, except for the occasional warning: "watch out for animals in that ditch" and "let's go around this spot - my Geiger counter is clicking." She felt bad for transgressing his boundaries and wanted to apologize almost immediately; she was actually on the verge of doing so, several times, but irritation and hurt feelings won out each time. Why shouldn't I know? Aren't I his friend? What can he possibly be hiding? She'd definitely touched a nerve with her guess, but didn't know how to interpret that meaningfully.

At last the crumbling loops of the ancient roller coaster arose on their left, and they pulled aside to examine the strangely-silent town from a safe distance. There was no sign of any guard or patrol, and no sign of danger either, only a slight smell of decay wafting over from behind the walls, like meat left out in the sun too long. Pointing to a flag among the crumbling buildings on the perimeter of town, Megan led them off the road and toward the overpass. She spoke carefully, without looking at him. "Looks like there's an NCR encampment just ahead. I've never been out this far - we'd better stop and check in before we go into town."
They hadn't gone far before a soldier in desert browns ran out from nowhere to accost them. A relatively young man with the beet-red appearance of someone unaccustomed to the heat, he fingered his rifle nervously as he tried to inject an air of toughness to his challenge. "Halt! Where do you think you're going? Primm's been taken over by escaped convicts and the bridge is mined to keep them in. We don't need any more civilians in the mix."

"I'm a courier with the Mojave Express and I have business with their office in Primm. This is Dr. Gannon. I'm escorting him to the Old Mormon Fort in Freeside." Noting the guard's suspicious look, she added breezily, "Yes, I know we're going the wrong way. We're... er... taking the scenic route. Too many deathclaws to the north, anyway."

"Like I said, Primm is not where you want to go right now, courier or not. No one who's gone in in the past week has come out." He hesitated, then turned to Arcade, "However... are you a medical doctor? Only, one of our new recruits blew off half his fingers with a faulty mine last night. All we have is an inexperienced field medic and he doesn't really know what to do to keep the wound from going septic. He's in a lot of pain. We can't spare any caps, but could at least share some supplies and allow the girl access to Primm. At her own risk," he added hastily. "We've already lost a few men to the head-on approach."

"Certainly, I'd be glad to help if I can-"

"And while you're doing what you do best, I'll slip into town. No, Arcade," who had opened his mouth to protest, "that white coat is the opposite of covert. At least I can pass for a raider at a distance. Go help that guy. I'll be in and out before you can say 'military intelligence.' It's just a trip to the post office."

Bidding farewell to Arcade, who actually seemed to prefer the prospect of a maiming to gangsters and explosives (but who didn't let her leave without first issuing his usual invectives for caution), Megan left all but a light bag of necessities - first aid, food, water, and extra ammo - with the soldiers and examined the hazardous path which led into town. She began the nerve-wracking task of picking her way across the booby-trapped bridge. When one of the frag mines began beeping its warning, she didn't think twice before kicking it over the side, where it exploded on the pavement below. Looking back sheepishly at the NCR guard behind her, she yelled, "Sorry! Just add it to my tab." Exercising more care, she reached the other side, took a deep breath, and sprinted across the open courtyard to the old post office, feeling very exposed. Her Pip-Boy wasn't showing any nearby hostiles, but it had been wrong before; there could easily be a half-dozen enemies around the corner, their heat signatures blocked by the crumbling brick walls.

The town seemed deserted, but the atmosphere was nonetheless foreboding. This impression was augmented by a desiccated body slumped against the wall of a building bearing the Mojave Express's symbol - the same that she'd seen on the paperwork that Doc Mitchell had found on her person, the primary clue to her identity. She wondered if the dead man was a courier too, but didn't want to search his stinking pockets to find out. "Glad I'm out of that business. It's too dangerous if you ask me," she said to the corpse, trying the door of the office and slipping inside when she found it unlocked.

It was almost completely dark inside, with only a small, battery-powered lantern breaking the gloom. "Hello? Is anybody here? I'm looking for the postmaster to ask about a package..." Spotting a scared-looking old woman hiding behind a counter piled high with scraps of metal and broken gadgets, she went on soothingly, "Sorry to barge in, ma'am. I'm not with the convicts and I won't hurt you. I'm
just trying to find out about a package I was supposed to deliver. Are you in charge here?"

The woman blinked, stood up slowly on creaky knees, and answered tremulously, "No, that would be my husband, Johnson. He's over at the casino trying to talk the cowards in this town into taking a stand before those gangers burn it down or kill us all. I'm Ruby Nash." She looked uncertainly at the her battered armaments and piecemeal leather armor. "I didn't think the NCR was letting anybody in or out, for all that food and water's running short. Did they send you to help us? Because if they did, they're not paying you enough. There's at least ten of those murdering bastards holed up in that old hotel, and more creeping around outside. You can't do it by yourself."

Some instinct for self-preservation fought briefly for survival against her more altruistic side, but it surrendered almost immediately, quashed by her unwillingness to say "no." "I didn't come here to help, but I can try. Can you think of anybody who'd be likely to come with me?"

"Try the sheriff and his wife, in the corner house by the gate. Both of them are pretty handy with a shotgun. I ain't heard from them for a few days, though, so I'm worried the Gangers already paid a visit. There's a deputy around someplace too, but he's 'bout worthless for anything that risks his sorry hide." She paused and looked around helplessly. "We don't have much, but if you can help this town out, I'll pay you back somehow." She pointed to the messy heap of electronics on the counter. "Do you like robots? I'll give you this old hovering bot here, plus any parts you need to fix it up. My husband usually has some extra caps from selling scrap, too. Just get rid of those convicts. Please."

Megan ran a hand over at the device's spiky carapace, interest piquing at the possibilities of having a flying pet. Perhaps it could hack terminals and zap things for her. Although the head trauma had blocked the specifics of her prior self, she had somehow retained the skillset of a reasonably adept mechanic. Some of the more intricate work was difficult for her sluggish left hand, but daily exercises were helping with that. In any case, the damage to the robot's propulsion didn't look that bad and would be an easy place to start. "You've got a deal, Ruby. I'll see you later."

Outside, the mid-morning sun still overlooked a deserted town, although she now noticed a plume of smoke arising from the raider-infested hotel. The sheriff's house was an ugly construction, corrugated tin with only one small screen window. She approached the door cautiously and knocked twice.

"Hello, sheriff? I'm a courier from Goodsprings. The NCR let me in. Can we talk?" There was no response. She stepped off to the side, standing on her tiptoes and shading her eyes against the sun to see inside the dim dwelling. This move saved her life, as just then a shotgun blast from the inside tore a ragged hole through the flimsy wooden door, throwing it open from the force of the hit. The wielder of the shotgun, a bulky thug clad in Powder Ganger blue, stupidly stuck his head out to see what he had hit, and without hesitating she reversed the stock of her rifle into the side of his head, dropping him to his knees. He made as if to bring the shotgun to bear again, and received another crushing blow for his pains. And another. And another. Long after he'd stopped moving, she continued bashing away, her movements more panicky than rational. Breathing heavily, she looked down at her blood-flecked clothes and at the ruined mess of what had previously been a human head.

"Ugh. One down… a dozen to go… oh, crap…" Retching, she added a layer of vomit to the messy scene. She'd killed people before - Legion, Gangers, and miscellaneous raiders - but this one had been particularly sudden and horrible. And close, damn it. Not for the first time, the former courier wondered if she was cursed, living on borrowed time. Perhaps the universe thought she belonged in that grave, and it was only stupid luck that had saved her thus far.

The smell inside made her gag again, forcing her empty stomach into a hard ball. She breathed through her sleeve while she made a quick survey of the interior. The sheriff and his wife were dead, the bodies unceremoniously dumped in the kitchen, and the house was otherwise empty. With
an apology to the dead, she claimed the lawman's nice leather cowboy hat from a hook on the wall, gladly discarding her cheap straw one. At least now she looked the part. Venturing outside, she surprised two more criminals who'd come to investigate the shotgun blast, but was able to dispatch them both with a .308 to the head before they had even drawn their weapons. *Yes, I am awesome. All must fear me!* she thought triumphantly and with just a hint of hysteria. Trying to get ahold of herself, she admitted that if she was being fair, none of these opponents had even been sober, judging from the smell of cheap liquor on their corpses. Megan wondered scornfully if the NCR had even attempted to retake the town, because it didn't seem to her that they could have properly tried.

Tensions in the casino were running so high that a dozen people drew their guns when she pushed through the door. "Easy! I'm not one of them. Who's in charge here?"

A weathered old-timer stepped forward, hand on a holstered pistol, looking wary. "That'd be me, hon. I'm Johnson Nash. Where'd you get that hat from?"

She stood still and kept her hands visible. "Found it in the sheriff's house, along with two bodies. I killed the guy who did for them, along with two others out there. I'm going to take a shot at the hotel now, and I'd prefer not to go in blind. Do you have any advice?"

The old man nodded, relaxing his hands to his side. "Funny you should ask. We do have a plan, uniquely suited for a team of one, but hadn't yet decided who should 'bell the cat,' so to speak. If you think it sounds up your alley, I've got… let's see… 167 caps with your name on it when the work is done." He eyed her, a little doubtfully, "You are a mercenary, right?"

"It's a career I'm considering, but this would be my first job. Anyway, your wife already offered me a robot and I said I'd do it for that. Also…." Megan pulled out her crumpled courier order and handed it to him. "Later, if you can tell me about this package I was supposed to deliver, we'll be square. So, what's the plan?"

He had turned aside to a crate of gear standing beside the door and was rifling through it. "Hotel's a dark place. What windows it has are mostly boarded up. Our plan is to swipe the fusion core from the external generator, and at the same time send someone in with these night vision goggles while the gangsters are stumbling into walls. It should be easy now that you've killed the ones wandering around outside." He handed her a heavy, green-lensed helmet and showed her how to switch between regular night vision and thermal imaging. "I'll grab some people to guard the exits with me. If any of them try to escape, they won't get far. As for that courier order - it looks like it's several months old and I'll need to reference my records back at the office, but that won't take long once things are calm over here."

Megan took a deep breath, set her new cowboy hat aside, and slipped the helmet over her eyes. It muffled her voice and made the well-lit casino look like an over-saturated fever dream. She pushed it up again, and nodded to him. "Okay, let's do it. Y'all won't shoot *me* when I come out, right?"

"We'll try not to. Wait outside the front entrance until you hear two pistol shots - that'll be the signal that the generator's off. That's when you'll head in. Also, they kidnapped our deputy a few days ago. If you find him alive there, you might could press him to help you finish the job. You can take this flashlight for him, should give him a fighting chance." He looked pained. "Look, kid, be careful in there, okay? I feel bad about throwing you into our fight, even if you *did* volunteer. These guys are bad business."

"I'm not totally sure yet, but I don't think I'm the kind of person to keep my head down when other people are in trouble." This felt true when she said it, and it made her happy to claim a little piece of
identity that was just hers and no one else’s. Too much of her personality was a cheap copy of the people she’d spent the most time with. Whatever else she’d been, before she’d been shot, that person must have been brave. Of course, she reflected, that person had also almost been murdered; this reminder dampened her joy, but only a little. She said aloud, more emphatically, trying to convince herself as much as him, “I'll be okay, Mr. Nash. This isn’t my first rodeo. I usually come through things okay.”

This is... not what I told Arcade I was going to do. She was beginning to feel a numbing sense of panic, waiting in tense expectation of the signal, muscles tensing like a runner before a race. It was genuinely hard to see anything with these goggles in broad daylight, but she didn't want to waste valuable time by taking them off. At least someone was watching her back while she was temporarily blind. A middle-aged couple whose names she had learned and forgotten already stood by the door with her, each clutching crude but effective pipe rifles. One of them patted her on the back, whispering words of encouragement, "Good luck in there, girl. Make you get inside and close the door as fast as possible - you'd be a great target backlit by the sun."

Two sharp cracks from the other side of the building and she plunged into a shadowy world of green and black, the sound of the door clicking shut sounding abnormally loud in the gloom. She overheard someone yelling into a radio from a lobby desk in the next room and crept towards his voice, hugging the sheltering wall until his illumined silhouette came into view. If he hadn’t been shouting into an unresponsive mouthpiece, he might have heard her approach; she wasn’t all that stealthy. A silent machete, a spray of blood, and he was down and she was moving on, his unfired 10 millimeter pistol an extra weight on her hip. Groping his way out of a pitch-black hallway, another man appeared, this one a veritable giant armed with what looked like a sledgehammer. Moving low, she hamstrung him to bring him to his knees, and finished with a savage blow to the back of his neck. Her body had gotten stronger in her weeks of exploration and foraging, and she knew instinctively how to move in a fight; how she knew, she couldn't say. Muscle memory had been generous to her, one of the few things she had inherited from that person she’d been before.

Trying not to slip in his blood, she stepped over the body into the hallway, which was apparently some kind of maintenance access corridor. It appeared completely empty. She could hear confused shouting not far away, but nothing nearby except her own breathing and heartbeat. Opening a double door at random, she walked into a large kitchen and saw a man crouched on the floor, head down. Resisting the irrational urge to shoot him on sight, she called out softly. "Deputy Beagle? Is that you?" The figure gave a muffled reply, which she took as confirmation. She felt for a gag and pulled it out, then stooped to use her gory machete to cut the ropes hog-tying him in place, trying not to slice his wrists in the process. "Hi there. The NCR let me in and the town hired me to kill the Powder Gangers and rescue you. I've got a gun and a flashlight for you - can you give me some backup, please?"

He took the proffered items and clicked the flashlight on, but said nothing as he stood up and stretched. A balding fellow with a weak chin and a ridiculous wisp of a mustache, he seemed unenthusiastic about her request. He looked nervously at her, at the kitchen's other exit, and back to her, all the while edging slowly into the hallway she’d just come from. "Most of them are in the old ball room out there," he whispered, "along with their leader, the aptly-named Flamethrower Bill. But I think you'll do just fine without me. I'm only a small-town deputy, not some NCR commando. I didn't sign on for this. Toodle-oo!"

"Come back here!" she whispered as loudly as she dared, but he was already gone, footsteps disappearing with the light. "Fucking coward..." Taking a deep breath, she raised her rifle, slipping between the double doors, and stepped into some real trouble.
They can't see me. They can't see me. They can't see me. She aimed for the nearest one, a burly thug fiddling with something on a table. At this range, with the night vision, she could hardly miss. At the exact moment that she sent her first bullet into his skull, someone else shooting from the far side of the room came within inches of killing her, the bullet striking the door behind her head, sending stinging splinters into her unarmored neck. She flung herself backward into the kitchen again, pushing the goggles up and trying to peer through the smoky glass porthole. Viewed in the normal spectrum, it was obvious that they had some light in the ballroom - a low cooking fire and at least one small lantern. Before she had time to think, the rightmost door swung inward with considerable force, knocking the wind out of her, thumping the back of her head hard against a row of cabinets, causing her to lose her rifle in the clutter on the floor. Whoever had burst in must have tripped upon entering, however, because a heavy body fell across hers, and brass-knuckled hands were hitting and grabbing whatever they could find. She couldn't breathe, couldn't roll away, and couldn't begin to match the strength of his arms. She would only have one shot at this, and hopefully the lack of light would play to her advantage - as the doors closed upon them once more, they returned to near-total darkness - he had yet to find her head or neck, but she knew exactly where her machete was. Putting all of her strength into a upthrust knee, she thrust it as hard as she could into her attacker's stomach, making him gasp and push away; given the space, she drew her machete and found the same target with its sharpened tip.

Rolling away from the dying man and trying futilely to wipe his blood off her leather chest piece, she pulled the helmet down again and sought the lost rifle. Spotting it in the corner closest to the hallway, she crawled to it on trembling hands and knees, pulling it to herself as she sagged against the kitchen island, keeping it between her and the remaining hostiles. There were at least two more in the ballroom - the one who'd almost shot her and Flamethrower Bill - and she was spent, scratched, bruised, and almost paralyzed with fear, all boldness forgotten. Making a break for the exit to regroup sounded good, but as she prepared to force her traitorous legs to move, the doors opened again and a heavy, tread paced into the kitchen behind her. She tried to control her treacherous breathing, staying perfectly still, when a gravelly voice growled out, "That you, Beagle? You finally grow some balls?" To an unseen person behind him, he added, "Follow me with that headlamp, Rusty. If anything moves, shoot it. Damn civvies finally wised up. It's high time we finished off this lousy town."

The heavy footfalls passed the island, revealing the broad back of a man wielding – what else? – a primed flamethrower, the small blue flame illuminating the hallway beyond him. Megan didn't stop to think or aim, but squeezed the trigger, hitting him somewhere in the lower back. He groaned and spun around, reflexively unleashing a wall of fire across the kitchen. She flinched as the heat licked her left hand, but fired twice more, hitting center mass both times. He sank to the ground twitching and the jet of fire stopped, but an unearthly screaming arose from behind her. Terrified, she looked around the corner and wished she hadn't - the aforementioned, Rusty, who'd been following close behind his leader, had gotten the full force of the misaimed fireball. His clothes, hair, and skin were ablaze, but he was still alive and in agony. Horrified, Megan unloaded the rest of her clip into the dying man, continuing to shoot even after the screams had stopped. The smell of burning flesh was more than she could take, and, crawling out into the hallway, she gagged and heaved until there was nothing at all left and white stars danced in her vision. Wrapping her arms around herself, she curled up and closed her eyes until her body stopped shivering, but she still felt too overwhelmed to even sit up. Knowing that this would be a dangerous place to linger, even if the first floor was cleared, she tried to pull herself together to assess the situation and her resources.

I'm losing it here. What do I need to get back to equilibrium and useful consciousness? Water, rest, light…and other people . Hands still unsteady, she pulled a bottle (thankfully, unbroken) of pure Goodsprings water from her pack and drank it slowly, rinsing her mouth to get the sour taste of bile
out. Rising carefully to her knees, she patted her body down, searching for serious injuries she might have missed in the moment. Everything hurt, but nothing (except her burned hand and pounding head) was clamoring for immediately relief. Standing invited some dizziness, but it was manageable and she stumbled back toward the entrance she'd come in. The green world of night vision – of which she was growing profoundly tired - seemed to conceal new enemies behind every turn, and it was with the greatest relief that she finally found the door and stepped into daytime again, tearing off the helmet and filling her lungs with fresh air. A leathery hand steadied her when she threatened to fall on her face, and she heard a familiar voice, cheerful but concerned.

"Hey kid, you look like hell, but you made it! We picked off a half-dozen convicts trying to hightail it from the second floor. How’d it go in there?"

Her tongue seemed oddly heavy and she couldn't focus on Johnson's face for some reason, but she tried obligingly to answer: "I killed… six, I think. Flamethrower Bill… he's dead for sure. Found Beagle but he ran away. Bad deputy.  Don't wanna go back in, but I didn't go upstairs yet.” She was shaking, but didn’t know why. She had no reason to be scared. It wasn’t cold; quite the opposite - she was sweating hard now. “I don’t feel very good. Can I go lie down for a while?"

She heard him give instructions to the others and felt two pairs of hands half-supporting, half-carrying her somewhere. "Take her to my house; my wife can take care of her while I go find an NCR medic." To her, he responded, "You've done enough, girl. We can take it from here - with their leader dead, any survivors are going to wish they had left while the leaving was good. I'll bring your hat and caps along in a little bit. Just take it easy."

He said something else, but his voice trailed off until it faded into the distance, along with her vision. It seemed to Megan that she blinked and found herself transported indoors instantly, now lying on a lumpy mattress with some kind of sticky salve on her hand and a damp cloth on her head. Her armor was gone and someone had dressed her in clean underthings and a long men's t-shirt. Every part of her ached, and her head in particular hurt abominably. She wondered how long she'd been out and groaned aloud. "Ow… oh no, Arcade is going to be pissed."

A tense voice at her elbow made her jump. "Arcade is pissed. It seems he has a friend whose idea of 'in and out' involves taking on a nest of bandits by herself. This, I might add, is something that not even the greenest, stupidest NCR recruit would do without backup. I would have helped you, you know. I don’t mind killing killers for a good cause." He leaned over her, looking both irritated and worried. Shining a penlight in her eyes, he peered closely, frowning but was apparently satisfied by what he saw. "You have a nasty bump on the back of your head, but I think it was more exhaustion and stress that made you pass out. How do you feel?"

"Sore… um, really sore. My hand hurts a lot. A little dizzy. Thirsty." Was this what winning felt like? If so, she’d hate to lose.

"Here you go. Drink slowly." He helped her sit up, bruised ribs protesting, and held a bottle to her lips. It tasted sweet and salty, with a fruity flavor she couldn't place. This was spoiled slightly by a bitter, gritty aftertaste.

She made a face at the first sip. "Whazzat? Not water?"

"You need to replenish electrolytes as well as fluids when running and fighting in this climate, especially if you're vomiting, suffering from diarrhea, or losing blood. This is diluted cactus fruit juice with some added salts, along with a painkiller so you can sleep. I know it tastes bad, but I don’t have any med-x." Arcade in lecture mode always gave more information than was strictly necessary.
She finished the bottle and laid back, fighting back a wave of nausea at the sickly taste, but her head did become clearer. "Thanks. I did throw up. Twice. I thought I was used to killing by now, but some of the deaths I saw today were really awful." She held still for a while, letting the throbbing in her temples settle down and examining her burned hand by the dim light of Arcade’s lantern. It didn’t look as bad as it felt - the skin was blistered under the greenish dressing, but she could still move her fingers. Using her good hand to push herself back to a seated position, she looked around, taking in her surroundings for the first time. They were in a square-shaped room with very little furniture and a closed door hanging crookedly in its frame on one side. A small register on the top of the wall opposition was the only source of ventilation, and it was stuffy and warm. "This the Nashes' house? How did you get here?"

"Yes, this is a back bedroom where couriers spend the night sometimes. Johnson crossed the street to tell the NCR that the Powder Gangers were dead and that he needed a medic for the girl who'd taken care of them. I was done with the patient they’d asked me to treat and followed him back." He leaned against the wall, crossing his arms and staring at her intensely. "I don't think you appreciate how hard it is for your companion to be left behind every time you want to do something dangerous. The way Lieutenant Hayes had talked up the hotel situation, I thought I was going to find you dead or dying. As it was, you were absolutely covered with blood, and I had no way of knowing at first glance that almost none of it was yours.” He shook his head wearily. “We've been on the road for less than a day, and I'm already regretting it. Right now, I want to wrap you in cotton wool and send you straight back to Goodsprings to live out the rest of your natural life. It’s difficult to feel responsible for someone as reckless as you."

"You don’t have to take responsibility for me," she muttered. "But sorry. I'll try not to leave you so far behind next time. It's just that, you know, you're the smart, useful one and it's more important that you stay on the sidelines fixing people. I don't want to bring you into a firefight that any hothead with a gun can handle. You're more valuable than that. More good-er. Er, better." She yawned, her eyes closing involuntarily and thoughts slowing. “I’m sorry about what I said before, too. I’ll try to… treat you better in the future. Respect boundaries and all. I don’t want you to leave."

He sighed. “I’m just not used to living with nosy people, or being close to people in general. When the questions start - and they inevitably do, sooner or later - that’s when my relationships generally end. People can’t help ferreting out a mystery, and I can’t blame them. But I also can’t talk about it. Not to anybody.”

He looked so depressed at this that she felt like she should try harder to make amends. “Friend, you're… really… fuckin' awful at hiding the fact that you have a secret, but that doesn’t mean I should harass you for it. I won’t ask you again. You have to admit it’s weird, though. You’re weird. But nice." She opened eyes that felt like they had little lead weights pulling them shut, and lifted her drooping head with some effort. He was looking at her oddly, at once pained and thoughtful, and she smiled reassuringly, feeling pleasantly light and altogether better than before. A little too good, actually. Even her hand felt okay now. "I feel a- may-zing. Whatever was in that juice is great."

He gently guided her head back to the pillow and covered her with a scratchy blanket. "Don’t get used to it. Next time I'll let you suffer to teach you a lesson in caution, but I’m in charitable mood right now. Good night, Megan. Sleep well."
The Past Comes Home to Roost

When Megan inexplicably found herself flying high above the desert, with the sand, scrub, and cliffs a distant pattern far below, she didn't question it. She simply enjoyed the ride, banking this way and that like a leaf carried along by the hot, dry wind. Soon, she left the open waste behind and crossed briefly over the sprawling ruins of the city she had not yet seen up close, her imagination filling in the gaps of her knowledge with equal parts squalor and gawdy splendor.

Rising high above the rubble, Vegas' most striking landmark stood out like the world's biggest chess piece, the gleaming tower a queen – or a pawn – alone on the board, but even that seemed uninteresting and irrelevant as she soared further and further west. The terrain was rougher out here, the elevation more extreme, and the settlements more sparse. Sharp peaks on the horizon had trapped a dark cloud above them, and her line of sight became hazy and dim as a polluted miasma obscured the view of the ground below. She found herself sinking into this cloud, losing elevation at an alarming rate.

She had no control over where she went, but she still fought to turn aside or pull up again. All to no avail. She was compelled to descend into an enormous valley, an immense cracked bowl belching smoke and fire into a blasted sky. Now at ground level, she saw that what she had assumed at a height to be rocks and building rubble was actually human bones of every shape and size, some twisted and blackened, some shattered to sharp fragments, and some whole, skulls grinning, gleaming in the weird, reddish light.

There the wind dropped her and she was bound to the earth once again. She was barefoot, her bruised body wearing only a thin cotton shirt. Broken rib bones cut her feet as she tried to walk through them and an unstable pile of skeletal remains shifting under her weight almost sent her sliding. Up a hill and to the left a rocky hillside loomed, stamped by an immense, gear-shaped disk of metal. The vault door, she thought, although she could not recall having ever seen anything like it before. Her heart leapt at the sight, and she made it her destination, rejoicing in the expectation of what she would find within. Picking her way along the treacherous path, she approached the door boldly but found it sealed shut, with no visible intercom or mechanism for opening it. Pounding on the unyielding surface, marked only by the number six, she only succeeded in bloodying her fist. She tried to call out, but the words were swept away by the wind.

"It won't open," said a curiously mechanical voice behind her. Turning wildly - there had been no one there a second ago, she knew - she came face-to-face a metal-skinned humanoid monster with black sockets instead of eyes. No, not a monster - that was just a helmet, with a built-in gas mask and voice modulator. Power armor, some forgotten memory whispered again.

"Why not?" She felt no fear for the expressionless guard, only impatience at finding the way forward impassable. She knew that answers to who she was and where she was from lay behind that door. If only it would open.

"This is the Courier's vault. You wouldn't want to go in anyway. Only the dead live there. They're terrible company for a little mouse like you."

She was indignant at this brush-off. "But I'm the courier. If that's my vault, then they're my dead. I need to see them. I need to know."

"No, you're just a courier, with a lower-case 'c.' Someday, maybe, you could be more, but not yet and probably never. In any case, everyone here is 'your dead' and that is your fault." She (for some reason, Megan was sure it was a woman behind the mask) made a sweeping gesture that took in the
entire desolate field. "Claim them and know them all, if you dare. The way to your vault lies through them."

Megan felt cold and afraid. The figure who stood in her way betrayed neither pity nor contempt, but their matter-of-fact words settled into her heart like a block of ice. "Wh-what do you mean, my fault? I didn't kill anybody. I wouldn't."

"You wouldn't, I know. You couldn't. Someone took your teeth and claws and rage and threw them away. All that's left is a lame kitten, a broken plaything for smarter, stronger people to tinker with and train for their own ends. The doctor's one, for all that he means well, and there will be others. They'll try to block you from a past that only stands in the way of your usefulness. But if you want to be the vault-dweller you were, you also have to be the killer again."

Megan swallowed. "I want to know who I was, whoever I was. I don't believe that I am a killer at all, but I'll accept the guilt if I deserve it. I won't let anybody keep me in the dark."

"You accept? That makes this easier than." The filtered voice dropped and became almost kind. "It seems cruel to punish you for crimes you can't remember, but I didn't make the rules. Goodbye, little courier." The figure picked up a long, complicated-looking weapon - a device with coils of copper wire and rings of magnets all down its length. It made a whining sound as it charged, emitting its own blue light. "Any last words?"

Arcade. I've left him behind again. She tried to bargain with one who had judged and sentenced her in a moment. "Please, let me go back and say goodbye to Arcade first," she begged. "He'll think I broke my promise. Abandoned him without so much as a word. You can kill me later."

"You sure about that? You want him to know what you did? Fine, we can do this another time. Mark my words, there will be another time," the guard said, lowering the weapon and letting it power down, and chuckled, as if remembering something. "While you're at it, ask him where he was when the oil rig went nova. Can you remember that? That'll make his day." The colossus in armor looked down at her then, and laughed unpleasantly. "Oh, never mind. Forget farewells, confessions, and messages from your subconscious. The radiation is already melting your skin off. Forgot that would happen out here. I'd guess you have about a minute left. Does it hurt?"

"No," she answered, amazed and bizarrely unafraid to see her own skeleton showing under sloughing skin and charred cloth, brilliant red flames coating her entire frame. And then it did hurt, horribly, especially when her charred legs snapped off at the knees and sent her rolling across the boneyard. She writhed and screamed, trying to find relief from the pain. Just like Rusty! she thought, wildly. Please, someone, help me!

The guard seemed to have repented of her earlier callousness, and was trying to put the fires out, holding her still, saying, "Hey, it's okay, Megan. Wake up now. I've got you. Shhhhh." With a jolt of realization, she stopped struggling and opened her eyes to find herself back in Primm, being shaken awake by a sleepy-looking Arcade clad only in a shirt and boxers. Ruby and Johnson Nash, also wearing pajamas, watched warily from the doorway.

"Ugh… I'm sorry, I'm so sorry you guys. Bad dream." She panted, heart racing wildly, her cheeks warm with embarrassment. "I thought… I was on fire, like that one Powder Ganger." Tears pricked her eyes and she rolled on her stomach, hiding her face with shame. She could still feel phantom flames stabbing into her bones, but the intense heat was gone.

"It's okay, I'll make sure she's alright. You two can go back to sleep." Arcade turned the lantern up and knelt closer, pulling her over to her left side. With one hand he touched her neck, with the other, he brushed her forehead. "That must have been a hell of a dream. You're strong when you're afraid.
Do you want to talk about it?

Squeezing her eyes shut against the images of her dream, she pushed his hands away, sat up and shivered, "No… just a drink of water, please. And no drugs, please. I don't want to sleep anymore tonight."

"One water, opiate-free, coming right up. That first dose should still be working, anyway. You've only been asleep for about four hours." He screwed the lid off and handed her the bottle, which she drained and handed back.

She just wanted a moment alone, away from his anxious looks. "Thanks. Uh, do they have a bathroom or a bucket or something around here?"

"Indoor plumbing, just one of the marvels of our modern age. Out that door and to your right." He helped her to her feet and she hobbled away, Pip-Boy bathing the hallway in greenish light. When she returned a few minutes later, he was sitting cross-legged on the floor, flipping through a small hardback book. "Would you like me to read to you for a few minutes? You really should get some more rest, and I personally find poetry very calming."

She lay back on the mattress, feeling emotionally wrung-out and physically battered. Poetry actually wasn't really her thing, but listening to Arcade talk always made her feel more grounded. "Um, sure. That would be nice. Is that a new book?"

"Yes. It's a collection by a man named Ralph Waldo Emerson. Easy Pete, of all people, gave it to me as payment for an arthritic ointment yesterday. One poem in particular has been turning over in my head, and I'd like to read it to you. It's called "The Past." He licked dry lips and read:

*The debt is paid,*

*The verdict said,*

*The Furies laid,*

*The plague is stayed,*

*All fortunes made;*

*Turn the key and bolt the door,*

*Sweet is death forevermore.*

*Nor haughty hope, nor swart chagrin,*

*Nor murdering hate, can enter in.*

*All is now secure and fast;*

*Not the gods can shake the Past;*

*Flies-to the adamantine door*

*Bolted down forevermore.*

*None can reenter there,* -

*No thief so politic,*
No Satan with a royal trick

Steal in by window, chink or hole,

To bind or unbind, add what lacked

Insert a leaf, or forge a name,

New-face or finish what is packed,

Alter or mend eternal Fact.

Megan listened for more, but that was the end. Arcade seemed to be waiting for her reaction. She tried to coax her drowsy mind into engagement. It seemed the least she could do. "Um, so… he seems weirdly reassured by the idea that the past can't change. I find that depressing. And is it all set in stone, really? We've lost so much knowledge that no one really knows for sure what happened before. Also, even though there are some major events that we can pretty much all agree on, anybody can spin the narrative to suit their purposes… making history into the founding myth for whatever their group is into."

It didn't matter if was the middle of the night and his conversation partner was half-asleep. Arcade loved to talk. "There's something to that line of reasoning, although you could take the abnegation of truth-seeking too far. Even if past events are ultimately unknowable and a factual account of history is a unattainable ideal, we can still observe the consequences of the past in the ruins of the present day. It's not a work of fiction to make educated and unbiased hypotheses about the causes behind effects on the level of a civilization. As someone somewhere once said, 'Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.' We could throw up our hands and abandon the effort because it's hard to nail down or makes us feel bad or can be manipulated, but that would be doing the future a disservice. If and when it ascends again, humanity needs to know what has already happened. Our species can't survive flirting with our own destruction again."

It didn't take much for her friend to warm to a topic and converse at length, and Megan usually tried to respond intelligently, but this seemed unlikely just now, with her brain foggy from narcotics and exhaustion. She yawned and said sleepily, "Sure Arcade, you've convinced me. History good, collective ignorance bad. Mutually-assured destruction very bad." She pulled the blanket up to her chin and finally relaxed, feeling safely removed from that nightmare valley. "So, I know you Followers are secular humanists and all… but sometimes you sound kind of religious. No offense," she added hastily.

He laughed. "Yes, I know what you mean. Back at the beginning of my training, I heard sermons about preventing a future nuclear armament that could make a grown man weep. I guess we indoctrinate our young as much as any cult would. I hope we're better than the average group of crazies, though." He lapsed into thought for a moment, then looked down to notice that her eyes were closed and her breathing was slow and even. He reached to turn the light off, when he heard her mumbling something.

"What?" he whispered, not wanting to wake her if it was just sleep-talk.

"I said, 'what's an oil rig?'"

Her face was peaceful and her dreamy voice didn't hint that she knew she was asking anything significant, but he felt his mouth go dry with shock. Voice cracking, he tried to answer casually, "It's a piece of pre-war technology used for mining petroleum from the ocean floor. Turns out you need some fossil fuels even with nuclear fusion. Why… why do you want to know?"
"The guard in power armor told me to ask you 'Where were you when the oil rig went nova?' Didn't say why… oh, never mind, Arcade, that was a dumb question and it was just a dream anyway. I'll try not to wake you again. 'Night."

Having lobbed this unwitting bombshell at his sanity, she slept peacefully until morning. Arcade did not. He lay awake for hours, fighting the crazy urge to flee the Mojave and never look back until he was far, far away from his father's old friends and this blundering, oddly perceptive creature, who observed and asked about things she had no business knowing. In two decades of failed romantic connections - fellow students back in Los Angeles, the chief of medicine at his first posting (that one had lasted three years and left him cynical about love), the occasional soldier on leave in Vegas, and an on-again-off-again thing with Ignacio Rivas - not one of these men had learned or guessed as much as she had in only a month.

They all asked, of course, the ones that cared - honestly, the good ones cared enough to stop asking, but his inability to give good answers and unwillingness to weave complex falsehoods had cast a pall over every relationship in the end. It was inevitable. No matter how good the sex was, after a while there had to be a more personal give-and-take, and scraps of Latin, literary trivia, and philosophical discussion could only get you so far. He had almost confided in his first boyfriend, a dark-haired poet a year below him in medical school, but his mother's dying warning had stopped him in the end. Their relationship hadn't survived the summer harvest break.

Miriam Gannon's health had been poor for years, but it was cancer that killed her in the end, like so many others. Then a student at the start of his education, Arcade spent all of his free time those final weeks lingering in the palliative care ward, a depressing institution meagerly supported by the donations of the wealthy. One night he was sitting next to her bed, attempting to memorize the finger bones for an anatomy test in the morning, and pretending that everything was going to be alright. He was trying not to look at her too closely, the woman who'd given birth to him and kept him safe all these years, who was now subsisting entirely on IV saline, glucose, and morphine. He was afraid that she would die in between metacarpals and he didn't want to see that last exhale. She surprised him then by plucking at his sleeve and opening parched lips to speak, for the first time in days. He'd leaned in to hear her breathless whisper, with long pauses in between words as she struggled to fill her lungs. "Arcade… there won't ever be a safe time to be your father's son. Not in the NCR. They'll arrest you, execute you just for the association. We brought so much fear here that they won't risk pardoning you. You can't… tell… anybody. Promise me."

He'd promised, she'd died that night without saying another word, and he'd barely passed the make-up test a week later. He finished his education, embraced the Followers ideology, and told nobody about his family or the training he'd received as a teenager. There was one symbol he held onto openly: his father's plasma defender, recovered from his body by the pilot who'd flown him on his last mission. While a doctor carrying a weapon openly in the Boneyard was unusual in this relatively civilized age, in Freeside it was almost mandatory; nevertheless, this weapon in particular raised a lot of eyebrows in the Fort. It wasn't enough to get him in trouble, but probably contributed to his reputation as an odd duck… though not as a war criminal. No one had come close to guessing. Until now. He finally dropped into an uneasy slumber just before sunrise, his mind still turning over the one important question: What (and how) does she know?

When he awoke some hours later, it was from his own troubling dream of a sky dark with vertibirds and a column of storm-troopers in Tesla armor burning Vegas to the ground. Megan was gone, but most of her stuff (including her rifle) was still there, so he knew she hadn't gone far. Pulling on some pants and shoes, he walked down the hallway to the front to find Ruby Nash doing some calculations on an adding machine at the desk.
"You're finally awake! Your girl's been up for hours, messing with that old hover-bot. My husband's out there with her. It's closer to lunch than breakfast now, but would you like me to make you a cazador-egg omelet?"

"Ah… no thank you. I don't usually eat breakfast. I appreciate the offer, though." Something in what she had said rang a warning bell. "Hover-bot?"

"Sure, you know, one of those little flying robots with antennae stuck everywhere. Or maybe you don't know - I haven't actually seen one working since I lived in California, and that was forty years ago. One of our couriers left a broken one here last year, and it's been collecting dust ever since. We offered it to Megan as a thank-you for saving the town, though she deserves a lot more."

Arcade didn't trust himself to respond to these details without gibbering like a madman, but only nodded and gave her a strained smile as he reluctantly headed outside. Behind him, Ruby called out, "Come back in an hour and I'll have some radscorpion casserole for y'all. Make sure those other two don't forget to eat either."

Johnson and Megan had set up a card table in the shade of the casino's awning and their heads were bent over the carcass of an honest-to-goodness Eyebot, with random electronic detritus and tools scattered all around. She looked up when he approached and flashed him a bright smile, eyes dancing under sweat-soaked bangs. "Arcade! Check this out. We've almost got it ready to turn on. Can you hand me that soldering iron, please?"

He located and handed her the item wordlessly, standing back and looking on blankly as she used a tiny bead of copper solder to join the wires Johnson was patiently holding together. They did this three more times, connecting a refurbished circuit board, a fission battery, and a pint-sized vacuum tube to the innards of the damned thing. "Right, well, the lasers and tasers aren't engaged yet… but, you know, let's make sure it doesn't want to kill us before we give it weapons." She eased everything inside the shell and carefully snapped it shut. "Okay, everybody hold your breath."

He did hold his breath and prayed it would stay dead, but the courier apparently knew what she was doing. The bot rose slowly to head-height, and beeped twice, LEDs flashing as it ran a diagnostics check. Chest bursting with anxiety, Arcade seriously indulged the idea of melting it into a pool of plasma on the spot (I'll plead temporary insanity and I won't be lying, he thought in a rush), but one look at Megan's obvious pride and happiness stopped him short.

She beckoned him over. "Arcade, meet ED-E, our newest companion. I'm just going to call him ED." She pronounced this "ee-dee." Some of his misery must have showed on his face, because she scrutinized him closer and frowned. "Are you okay? Sorry, but you look awful. Did you have trouble going back to sleep after I woke you up? I really feel bad about that."

He had to say something. "No… and yes, but it's not your fault. Listen, can we talk? Alone?"

She looked apprehensive, but didn't hesitate. "Sure, just let me take ED inside and clean up this mess."

He helped her and the old man carry the equipment inside, each making several trips. When ordered to wait, the Eyebot hovered obediently in the corner, scanning the room at regular intervals with its tiny radar dish. Arcade knew he was being paranoid, but he imagined it was watching him the closest. As they walked toward a bench outside of the (hopefully enemy-free) hotel, he broke the silence. "You're moving around well today."

"Yeah…” she looked sheepish. "I know you're saving those last three stimpaks for a severed limb or something, but I took some healing powder from your pack this morning. I would have asked, but
"That's what it's for. As long as you mix it with water and avoid taking it on an empty stomach, it can't really do any harm." He spoke mechanically, dreading the conversation ahead.

"Yeah," she laughed nervously, "Gritty water and cazador omelets, all part of a balanced breakfast. It's actually not as bad as it sounds. Hey," she said suddenly, grabbing his arm and facing him. Her face was earnest and apologetic, and the words tumbled out in a rush. "I know you're mad about yesterday. I don't remember much from last night, but if I didn't say it then I'll say it now: I'm sorry for making you worry and for asking you about things you're uncomfortable talking about. I won't do it anymore. Please keep travelling with me. I like you."

"You did say that already. I forgive you on both counts, and I'm not planning to leave. This is about…something else." He sat beside her on the bench and looked out onto the courtyard, wondering how to begin. He took a deep breath. "Does the word 'Enclave' mean anything at all to you?"

Megan looked thoughtful. "It's funny… that's one of those things I feel like I should know, which probably means I did know before…" she mimed a pistol shot to the temple, and chuckled ruefully, "It's on the tip of my tongue, but I can't place it. What is it?"

"The Enclave was a powerful organization that gave the NCR and other groups a lot of trouble several decades ago. They considered themselves an extension of the U.S. government as it existed before the war, and had a lot of very high-tech weaponry at their disposal, including aircraft, high-end power armor, and… robots."

A light dawned in her eyes. "Robots like ED. So he was one of theirs." She frowned, "But he's pretty small and the weapons on him really aren't that powerful. What were they used for?"

"Propaganda. Reconnaissance. They weren't meant to do much damage by themselves, but where they went, death and destruction followed shortly after. They were the eyes and ears of the Enclave. They called them Eyebots."

She snickered. "Catchy. So…you're worried that ED will attract unwanted attention from the NCR and other people who remember the Enclave? Or that he's somehow still reporting to whatever's left of the faction?"

"More the former than the latter. The Enclave in the west fell - explosively - when a lucky tribal and his companions blew up the oil rig that had served as their base for over a century. That was almost forty years ago. Fighting continued for a long time afterward, with the NCR and the Brotherhood of Steel actually working together toward the common goal of eradicating the survivors." His face darkened unconsciously. "As much as the Enclave deserved to be destroyed, their pursuers' methods of extermination were… extreme, sometimes. Especially at the end, when the NCR forced them to make their last stand at Navarro, in northern California. By then, the risk they posed was minimal, but there were innocents there who got the same treatment as the soldiers: imprisonment and execution. Almost no one escaped Navarro."

Arcade realized with horror that his eyes were filling with tears, and he tried to conceal this by cleaning his glasses. He continued as blandly as possible, looking anywhere but at the girl beside him, "A lot of the high-ranking survivors took off immediately with the remaining vertibirds for the east after the oil rig was destroyed, but no one's heard from them since. They may have established themselves there, but without a reliable line of communication to that coast there's no way to tell."

She had been silent throughout this narrative and stared at him now, as if seeing him for the first time.
He looked down at his hands and sniffed, wishing he was back in his stuffy research tent in Freeside, doing anything except this. He waited for the questions to begin. She took his hand in her own unburned right hand and squeezed it gently before releasing it. Then she spoke, calmly and decidedly. "What I'm hearing you say, Arcade, is that you're uncomfortable travelling with ED, and would prefer not to have it come with us. That's fine. I'll switch it off and stash it somewhere safe in the hotel before we leave. Or see if the Nashes want it for a guard dog."

He choked on an actual sob that slipped out, but tried to cover it with a cough. "You would do that? Just because I don't like it?"

"Of course. Your opinion means a lot to me, and I'd rather have you with me than some old robot any day. Seriously, it can't even talk, let alone manage sarcastic quips." She added quickly, "I'm not saying I won't come back and get ED when you and I have parted ways. I desperately need something to help me with terminals - those code words are impossible to line up when I can't read. But until then I've got your… ah, perfectly adequate hacking skills." She cleared her throat and stood up. "If that's all you wanted to say, I'm going to go inside to see if Ruby needs help with lunch. You should join us in a few minutes and we'll see what radscorpion casserole tastes like."

He watched her walk away, overcome with relief, realizing that he finally had someone in his life who knew the beginning of his secret - and didn't seem to care. *Sorry mother*, he said silently, *but I think I'll be okay with this one.*
"Thanks for lunch, Ruby. I never knew rad-scorpion venom had so much flavor to it. Or that you could eat it at all. I would have expected it to be poisonous, actually." Despite earlier misgivings, she'd eaten two large helpings at the older woman's insistence.

"Well, I don't add much, dear. A few drops mixed into some Brahmin milk, poured over ground maize and diced xander root. The two venom-sacs you gave me should be good for about ten more batches."

"I'm glad you had a use for it. The general store owner back in Goodsprings wouldn't buy it off me; he said he wouldn't find a buyer before it went bad. According to Arcade here, it's the main ingredient in antivenin, but you also need nightstalker blood, and I haven't killed any of those yet."

If the courier was trying to get Arcade to engage in conversation, this was a miss. He only jerked his head up and said, "Mm-hm," and went back to poking at his food. He perked up at Ruby's next statement, though: "One of the best things about my casserole is that it'll give you a little bit of protection if you get stung by a scorpion in the next 24 hours. I mean, you'll probably still get clawed to pieces if it's a big one, but the poison won't burn as much. Saved a couple of caravaners last year, or at least that's what they told me when they came back around."

He broke out of his reverie to think aloud: "That would make some sense, actually. Xander root extract has antihistamine properties and could help speed up the body's processing of the venom; Brahmin milk, for reasons I don't understand yet, neutralizes toxic substances, or at least ameliorates their effect on the nervous system. When I return to my quiet life of research in Freeside, I'll see if I can get the support to do some trials with rats…” trailing off, he gave Ruby a distracted smile and said, "If your recipe helps me come up with a more affordable antidote for insect venom, I'll be sure to give you credit."

She beamed and cleared the plates. "It was my mother's, actually. She'd be pleased. I'm sorry you don't like it, though."

He looked down at his unfinished plate, and said apologetically, "No, it's not bad at all, I'm just not very hungry. Do you want the rest of mine, Megan?"

"Sure." She devoured the leftovers with relish. Still chewing, she looked up hopefully, "Ruby, Johnson…is it okay if we spend one more night here? We're taking the long way to Vegas via Novac, and I'd like to leave early in the morning."

"You can stay as long as you want. That's easily a two- or three-day-trip though – it might make sense to plan to spend the night at Nipton on the way. Also, I know you said you're done with courier work, but if you were to run a package down to the Mojave Outpost for me, I could write you a order good for some credit at the depot there. They usually have ammo and some medical supplies in stock. In any case, here's what you came to Primm for." Johnson handed her a handwritten sheet of yellow paper. "The details on the job that got you shot are on one side and what little I found on your personnel file is on the other. It was a weird one, coming from pretty high up in the Strip. I was supposed to hire six couriers, and you were frankly not my first choice for the job – you were a number without a face, a total unknown from out west somewhere, and I wanted reliable people. This was the first job you'd done for the Mojave Express."

Megan took the paper with trembling fingers and passed it to Arcade to read, gripping the arms of her chair until her knuckles turned white. Her voice sounded to her as if it were someone else's,
coming from a long ways off "If I wasn't your first choice, how did I end up with the job?"

"The last courier that checked in took one look at my list of names and said that he'd changed his
mind about taking the job. He said that Courier 6 should carry the package, and that turned out to be
you. I'm afraid I didn't even recognize the person matching that number as you until I checked my
records – I remember a tough, unsmiling girl who spoke only as much as necessary. She had your
face, but she wasn't like you at all."

She tried to imagine that other girl's face in the mirror, no scar on her head, but couldn't. "The guy
who told you to hire me – what did he look like?"

"I didn't know him very well. He came through every six months or so, taking the long-distance jobs
that spanned the full range of NCR territory. He stood out, I'll tell you that. Taller than your friend
here. Very strong-looking, with dark skin. He wore sunglasses and his hair was all in knotted braids.
When he turned to leave, I saw a symbol on his coat that I'd never seen before: a circle of white stars
on blue with red stripes running down."

Arcade glanced up sharply from perusing the document and spoke, sounding ill, "Was there a big,
white 'E' in the circle?"

Johnson looked at the doctor curiously, "No, just a larger white star. Why?"

Relaxing imperceptibly, Arcade answered, "You're describing some version of the pre-war United
States flag. Maybe he was just wearing it because he liked the look, maybe not…but an 'E' could
have signified something much more dangerous."

Putting her face in her hands, Megan growled in frustration, "Forget the coat. So, did he set me up?
Did he tell his city-slicker friend to shoot me and steal the package? What was it anyway?"

Johnson sighed. "I don't know. He hasn't run any jobs for me since. And your package was just a
trinket – a shiny poker chip. All six packages were worthless junk that had to go to the Lucky 38 on
the Strip for some reason. I shouldn't tell you this, but the client behind this job was Mr. House
himself. He wanted six couriers to carry six things from his contact on the Dam to Vegas.
Apparently, none of them actually arrived there. It's possible Courier 42 was responsible, since he
knew the details…but I don't know. He didn't seem like the sort to be making a power play on the
Strip."

She felt a headache building, "Did he have a name?"

"A lot of 'em don't in our records. You didn't. But this guy went by 'Ulysses.' It sounds like a
nickname, but that's what it says in his file." He looked at her somberly. "That's all I have. For what
it's worth, I'm sorry for what happened. I know you lost a lot by taking this job. I didn't imagine it
would end so badly for all of you. People usually leave our runners alone, since they don't carry a lot
of caps."

"It's okay. I don't blame you for this…I just need some time to process everything and decide what to
do next." She looked around the tiny kitchen like she expected to find the answers there. "Is there a
bar in the casino? 'Cause I'd like a drink or five."

"Yep. Jack'll probably give you whatever you want on the house. If not, tell him to put it on my tab."

Ruby, sounding slightly disapproving, added, "The leftover casserole will be covered up on the stove
if you're hungry when you get back."

"Thanks a lot, both of you." She stood up and turned to Arcade. "Do you want to come? If you'd
prefer some time to yourself, I don't mind. I'll probably be out for a while though."

He sighed, rubbing his eyes, "Give me a couple hours and I'll join you. I want to study this a little longer and then I do want some time alone. Try to pace yourself, alright? I don't want to have to carry you back tonight."

"Uh-huh. Oh – there's a water-proof envelope in my pack. If you could put that paper in there when you're done reading, I'd appreciate it."

Arcade, exhausted from the day's cumulative emotional toll, ended up falling asleep for several hours instead of reading like he'd planned. When he stepped outside, the evening shadows had begun to lengthen. Walking briskly to the casino, he stepped into a smoky room filled with broken slot machines and green velvet gambling tables. He spotted his friend at a circular booth across the room and made his way over to her. As he approached, he noticed that she was talking to a scowling man who stood beside the table with his arms crossed over his chest. Already intoxicated, face flushed and words noticeably slurred, her voice was louder than usual: "What do you mean? You're the sheriff now. God help this town…"

"No, I'm just a deputy. I can't be in charge! We need someone else to come take over."

"And that's my job, why? I don't know anything about law enforcement. At all. You need to figure it out amongst yourselves. Hire someone from Vegas, talk to the NCR… heck, ask the Nashes to get their new robot to reprogram that protectron over there for security detail. It'll be inflexible, unresponsive, and probably ineffective, but it'll do a better job than you would."

He started to protest, but she cut him off with a rude gesture, "Not. My. Problem. Go away."

Arcade watched the angry man walk away and slid into the booth beside her. "You're quite the diplomat. The NCR should send you as their ambassador to the Khans. So, are all these empties yours?" He gestured at the scattered beer bottles and shot glasses in front of her, along with a half-empty bottle of vodka.

"Yeah." She still looked mad. "I saved that guy from the Powder Gangers yesterday. I gave him a gun and asked him to help me, but he ran off and left me in the dark. I almost died. Screw him."

"Oh," he said lamely. "Well, that robot idea was good-ish. It probably won't end terribly."

"Whatever. I'm going to go pick up another round. What do you want?"

"I'd like to go see what they have myself. However, I will happily get you something – water? Sarsaparilla? Pinyon nuts?"

"Nuka-Cola and a glass, please. I want to mix it with the rest of this vodka."

"Got it. Um…are you still planning to leave first thing in the morning?"

"Yes, why?" She seemed genuinely confused at his asking.

"Just curious." He suspected she had never gotten more than half-drunk at Goodsprings, but figured tomorrow's now-inevitable suffering was a lesson she had to learn eventually. There were some things in life that made a person want to drink themselves blind, and the revelations of the day had been pretty staggering. As the self-appointed "responsible adult" on the team, he'd make sure she stayed safe tonight and didn't make this into a habit. Too many people out here used alcohol and other chems as a temporary escape hatch from life, and ended up destroying their lives in the process;
he'd be damned if he let her start down that path.

As he walked back from the bar with a tray holding a beer, the requested soda, two waters, and a bowl of salty snacks, he saw her making a wobbly bee-line for the lobby restrooms. Having a sudden thought, he quickly poured two-thirds of the remaining vodka into an empty planter nearby and made up the difference with water. He felt a little bad for this. On the one hand, she was technically an adult who deserved to make her own mistakes…on the other hand, she was also the one who'd be watching his back on the road tomorrow.

When she returned a few minutes later, he pushed the Nuka-Cola toward her. "What a day, huh?"

"Yeah. A lot of revelations to take in." She emptied the now-diluted vodka into the glass and filled it up to the brim with Nuka-Cola, only spilling a little bit on the table. Taking a sip, she commented, "You know, that's not too bad. By itself, this stuff tastes like paint thinner." She set the drink down and looked at him uncertainly. "I have a question. That flag you described, the one with the 'E.' Was it the En-"

Arcade shushed her, looking around at the other revelers in the large room nervously. "I barely want to have this conversation with you sober, in private. I will not have it now."

She went on as if she hadn't heard. "I only remembered after a few drinks and I'm afraid I'll forget it again. In my dream last night, there was someone wearing black power armor. They had an insignia on their chest that looked like that, except it was all white. What do you think it means?"

"If I were a superstitious man, I would say that it means you are the physical embodiment of my worst fears, sent from hell to torment me," he said, only half-joking. Seeing her face fall, he added, more gently, "No, I don't really mean that. It's obvious that your unconscious mind has access to memories your conscious mind does not – in short, you've seen armor like that before. We'll discuss it on the road tomorrow, I promise."

They drank in silence for a short time. Megan finished her drink, but, to Arcade's relief, made no move to acquire more alcohol. Instead, she sipped water and ate nuts, staring balefully into space. "Is the name 'Ulysses' from anything?"

"Yes. It's the Latin name for a character from a pair of ancient Greek epics – King Odysseus of Ithaca, hero of the Trojan War. In the first book, called The Iliad, he fights a ten-year war alongside his countrymen; in the second book, The Odyssey, he gets side-tracked on the way home, and spends another ten years getting lost, encountering monsters, and romancing beautiful women. When he finally gets home, he has to fight again to reclaim his identity, his kingdom, and his wife. I haven't read it since I was a teenager (and even then, only in English), but I don't remember enjoying it very much." He paused, measuring his words. "With Nash's description of his hair, along with that name, I would expect this Ulysses to be a tribal-turned-Legionary…only he's apparently working as a courier at the edge of the NCR now. It's disturbing and suspicious, and I can't imagine what he has to do with whatever Mr. House is doing. Proceed cautiously."

She put her head down on the sticky table and sighed heavily. "Some days I think I could just…walk away from this whole mess and be better for it. No revenge, no mysteries, just normal dog-eat-dog wasteland survival. I don't know why, but I feel like my stepping onto the Strip's gonna open the floodgates to some inexorable wave of consequences that will sweep over everything I touch. I don't know where I get off feeling so significant, but I do think – more now than ever – that something or someone has manipulated me into a place where I have to start pulling strings and choosing targets, and that no matter what I do – action or inaction – I'm responsible for what happens. Is that crazy?"

"Just a little grandiose. Don't get me wrong. You have a certain strength when it comes to motivating
others and getting things done – surprising qualities for someone with your background. But, for right now, you're only one person with no powerful allies and you don't know enough about all of the pieces on the board to have a vision that accounts for them all. But, in the words of our old friend Ovid, *Ut desint vires, tamen est laudanda voluntas*. 'Where the power is lacking, the will is commendable.' No matter what, whatever you do and whatever you become, I'll teach you and advise you as long as you'll listen to me. However, my own hopes for this region aside, I'd rather see you live a happy life in anonymity than burn out quickly as someone who has to make their mark on everything. I personally think you've suffered enough and you should walk away from this...quest...before you get too deep. Regardless, it needs to be your decision."

She lifted her head, looking at him seriously, and said in that desperately-honest way that drunks have, "Arcade, you know that I love you, right?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well..."

She interrupted him impatiently. "No, not like *that*. I know, I overheard you talking to Ricardo back in Goodsprings. I just mean...I don't have any family. The only moral foundation I have is the one you laid. You're the person I look to when I want to know what's right and true. I would do almost anything to keep from disappointing you. If you told me that the best thing for the world was to walk into the Fort and assassinate Caesar, I would try to do it."

Arcade was touched, but more than a bit alarmed by the naked sincerity in this pledge. "*Et tu, mi amica*? No, don't do that; you'll get killed or captured before you're past the gate." He cleared his throat, and went on, feeling embarrassed. "Those feelings are normal. I was one of the first people you met and you...er...kind of imprinted on me."

"What's 'imprinted'?"

"When a bird hatches out of its egg, it assumes that the first thing it sees is its mother. It imprints on that mother-figure, even if it was a human who had taken the egg from its nest. It then takes all of its visual and behavioral cues from that figure as it learns how to be a bird."

Megan looked a little offended. "So...you think I'm a baby bird?"

"No, a young, impressionable human. You may be about 20, give or take a year or two, but mentally and emotionally, you are younger. That's not an insult," he added hurriedly, seeing her frown deepen. "It's just a statement about where you are in your emotional development as a result of trauma. The Followers have one mental health expert at the New Vegas Medical Clinic who could explain it much than I could, but speaking from experience, adolescents do sometimes gravitate toward authority figures as objects of imitation and even reverence. I had one teacher when I was 16...but, ah, enough about that. You'll meet more people soon and break away from slavish admiration – I'm seriously not worth that – in the course of discovering more mature, adult feelings and relationships."

Megan looked like she was about to cry, and Arcade felt terrible. "Hey, don't be sad. I care about you, too. I just don't want you to put me on a pedestal I don't deserve. I'm happy to be your friend, but I don't want to be your idol. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, sorry." She sniffed and blinked her eyes owlishly at her Pip-Boy. "I think I'm ready to go to bed, even though it's only...whatever time this says. I can usually read numbers, but my eyes aren't focusing very well right now." She shoved her left wrist at him.

"It's 8:07. Early to bed, and all that. Let's get out of here."
"Don't you want to finish your drink?" She had gotten successfully to her feet, but was holding tightly to the back of the booth to support herself.

"No, I don't actually like beer that much. Or liquor. Or wine, unless it's the good stuff, which it never is outside of California. If you spend enough time coaxing alcoholics through rehab, you lose your taste for it. Come on." He wrapped an arm around her and guided her to the exit and out into the cool night air.
The road between Primm and the Mojave Outpost was "a long stretch of nothin,'" according to Johnson Nash, but he was careful to warn them about giant ants, scorpions of all sizes, and occasional raider attacks. "Stay on the road, mind your own business, and get there before dark. It shouldn't take y'all more than six hours." This was good, since they didn't actually leave until almost ten o'clock.

Despite Arcade's foul-tasting salt-juice and what Ruby called "the best breakfast for a hangover" (yucca root hash and gecko bacon), Megan felt very queasy and her head was pounding in time with her steps. Scanning the bright sand on every side hurt her eyes, and she wished she had sunglasses. She couldn't seem to stop drinking water, either. They had refilled their bottles and canteens at a pump in Primm, using a drop of what Arcade called "chlorine" in each vessel to purify it of disease-causing germs. There was nothing to be done about the residual radiation, however, and she knew she was probably coming due for a course of radiation treatment sooner rather than later – at least according to Arcade's rules, which were much stricter than Doc Mitchell's. Arcade said that 100 rads (or one sievert) was the highest level you'd want to carry for any amount of time, even though the symptoms at that threshold were almost unnoticeable. He'd explained weeks ago that long-term radiation exposure increased one's risk of sterility and cancer; she'd retorted that she didn't want kids and didn't think she'd live long enough to die of an "old peoples' disease," but he had been firm. "If you think cancer just affects the elderly, I've got a pediatric ward in the NCR to show you," he said bleakly. "And you should try not to screw your future self over just because you can't see more than a month ahead of you right now. At least leave yourself the option of having children someday and living to see your sixties." He'd seemed almost angry, and she'd dropped it, consenting to biweekly doses of radaway that left her feeling weak and itchy afterward.

She was focusing so hard on not throwing up that actually starting a conversation seemed like too much work. It was Arcade who broached the subject he'd suppressed the previous night, waiting until they were resting in the shade of a Joshua tree to ask: "Can you tell me more about the dream you mentioned?"

Holding her head and gritting her teeth, she described the flight west and the tableau of horrors she'd seen there. She told him about the locked vault with her courier number on it and the guard who'd held her responsible for mass-murder, and who'd goaded her into asking him about the Enclave oil rig. She described the guard's weapon in great detail, and this element in particular seemed to confirm something to him: "That sounds exactly like a Gauss rifle. It has elements of both ballistic and energy weapons, and uses electromagnets to propel a projectile with extreme force at its target. I wouldn't expect anybody around here – except maybe the Brotherhood – to carry one."

"What do you think it all means?"

"Regardless of what Freud might say on the subject, dream interpretation is a shoddy science. I wouldn't presume to say anything for sure. I would guess, however, that you were carrying a heavy burden of guilt for something before you got shot, and that you've had contact with some human or material remnant of the Enclave. Those two things may or may not be related. Also, your subconscious has a mean streak."

She swallowed, trying to keep the bile from rising in her throat, "If I did do…something bad, before…like, really, really bad…do I deserve to be punished for it?"

He looked troubled. "I don't know. It depends on a lot of things, especially what you consider the purpose of punishment to be. If it's to rehabilitate the wrongdoer and prevent them from doing similar
actions in the future, then it serves no further purpose in your case, both because you've experienced a total personality change and because you don't remember what you did. If it's to seek justice for the victims, restore social order after a crime, and deter others from acting similarly, then I guess some societies would be justified in pressing charges in your case. This whole deliberation is moot, however, since no one remains to accuse you except you and we don't even know if you did anything, let alone what or why or where. If you want me to say, *Ego te absolvo*, then I'm sorry – I can't. I'm not a priest, and I can only forgive you on my own behalf, not on behalf of anybody else who might have been hurt by your actions. If you can, though, I would let the question lie for now, and continue making a reasonable effort to learn the truth. If you do find out what happened, you could try to exonerate yourself by making amends. If it means anything, I don't think you are now or have ever been capable of wanton murder for purely malicious purposes. If anything, it could have been an accident."

"I'm awfully good at killing…" she said doubtfully, palms pressed against her eyes.

"Yeah, you are, but this is the wasteland: some people just need a bullet to the head. Some don't. You know the difference. Now, are you sure you don't want an analgesic? I don't mind giving up the last of my acetaminophen if it makes this trip a little less miserable for you."

"Oh, alright. Thanks." She held out her hand for the small, white pills.

"Just promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Count your drinks next time."

She laughed ruefully, wincing as it hurt her head, "Oh, don't worry about that. I'm never drinking again. Honest. At least for a while..."

The courier's mood and perceptivity improved after that, which was fortunate, as an hour later they began to pass giant ants on either side of the road – just a few stragglers foraging at first, then larger groups including soldiers as they drew alongside a wide, sandy basin.

"Don't start shooting them unless they attack," Arcade whispered out of the corner of his mouth, his own hand already gripping his plasma defender. "Some of the ants out here can spit and ignite a sticky, flammable fluid from their mandibles...because radiation? Don't ask me why. If they do charge, try to aim for the antennae on the larger specimens – if we can drive the soldier ants into a frenzy, they may take each other out instead of attacking us."

"Better tell that guy," Megan said apprehensively, jerking her head to indicate a blue-clad figure a hundred yards behind them hitting an ant frantically on the head with what looked like a lead pipe while others threatened to overcome him. She hadn't seen or heard him, but the Pip-Boy had flagged the activated hostiles for her.

"Oh crap. Here we go!" Arcade dropped his pack and took off running toward the idiot, leading with a greenish bolt of plasma that melted the legs off an ant that had crawled up behind the man.

*I suppose a good person is obligated to help a fellow human being, even if that human being is a Powder Ganger. Maybe I'll just be an okay person...* Looking nervously ahead at the now-agitated ants which had closed over the road and were now running to join the fight, Megan doubled back to assist Arcade and the stranger, but not before rolling her one grenade in the swarm's direction and scattering the middle ants like ninepins.
It was a nasty, confused fight, especially when the main body of the bugs reached them. She almost shot one of the men by accident, and the disorientation became worse as the combatants kicked up dust in the scuffle. The ants weren’t breathing fire, as it turned out, but the soldiers were waist-high on her and had powerful jaws with sharpened edges. Their exoskeletons weren’t much better defense than a gecko’s hide, but they seemed impervious to pain and continued fighting long after they had been fatally wounded. She took out two before her gun was empty and she switched to her machete, hacking away at legs and backs with indiscriminate fury. Aiming a kick at a large ant trying to mob their lead-pipe wielding friend, she was horrified when it clamped down hard on the high-topped leather of her right boot and started dragging her by the ankle down into the dust-bowl off the road. Hitting the back of her hand on the asphalt caused her fingers to involuntarily send the machete skittering over the ground and out of reach. Having pulled her away from the fight, into the sand, it gave her leg a shake and dropped her on her back, moving in to seize her neck.

Lunging forward out of desperation, she forced her leather-armored torso into its gaping jaws, forcing them open wider than they were meant to. Faced with too big a bite, it now struggled to close its mouth, shaking its head and squeezing her ribs painfully, the razor-sharp edges sawing through the upper layers of her armor and getting dangerously close to the skin below. Her arms still unpinned, she quickly reached up over the mouth and seized an antenna in both hands, pulling as hard as she could while planting her feet against its thorax. First the left and then the right popped off, and the ant shuddered, relaxing its jaws and releasing its hold abruptly, sending her sliding over compacted sand and gravel. She scrambled back up the embankment, found her machete, and rejoined the fight, which had become much easier with an unwitting ally.

Driven insane by the loss of its primary sensory organs, the frenzied soldier ant began to tear into its fellows, making short work of them with its own powerful jaws. The humans picked off the small ants nearest them, but allowed the crazed insect to finish off the remaining two soldiers before Arcade finally put it out of its misery at a distance.

"Wow…that was intense. Good call with the antennae." With the adrenaline subsiding, Megan was finding it painful to breathe in deeply or put much weight on her bruised ankle. Rounding on the fool who’d gotten them into this mess, she demanded, "Who the hell are you? Are you a Powder Ganger? Because I don’t like Powder Gangers."

The stranger was lobster-red from the sun and seemed wholly out of touch with his situation, which now included a shredded and bleeding leg from an ant bite. "I'm Oliver Swanwick. And yeah, I used to be, but not anymore. I won the lottery!"

"What lottery?" Megan and Arcade asked together.

"What lottery? The lottery, that's what lottery! Are you stupid? Only lottery that matters! Oh my God, smell that air!" Giggling shrilly, he ran off surprisingly quickly into the desert in the general direction of Primm, without so much as a thank-you. Within seconds, he was out of sight behind a low sand-hill.

They watched him go, open-mouthed with surprise. "He's going to die out there," said Megan, bending down stiffly to retrieve her rifle and reloading it automatically. "It's too bad. He's obviously insane."

"Maybe he'll make it to Primm. If he's lucky, he'll lose that vest first, though." Arcade pointed to his right coat-sleeve, which was torn and stained with blood just above the elbow. "Hey, you want to practice your first aid skills? Like, right now?"

He coached her through irrigating the cut on his bicep with some of their untouched water and sanitizing the wound, her hands, the thread, and the small, hooked needle from his kit with antiseptic.
He explained: "Infection kills more people than anything else out here. We have some antibiotics at
the Old Mormon Fort, but they're rare and expensive and don't work all the time." When that was
done, he nodded approvingly. "Okay, now I'm going to hold the skin together with my left hand
while you sew together the skin. You don't have to go too deep – just make sure the thread gets into
both sides." Noticing her nervous expression and trembling hands, he tried to be reassuring. "Look,
it'll be fine. You know how to fix your clothes, right? This is exactly the same. You can do it."

"But it's your skin!" She felt panicky and couldn't keep her voice from squeaking with fear.

"Yes, but I can't reach it to stitch it myself. You'll almost certainly need to do this again, possibly on
yourself and probably under more serious circumstances. Time to learn."

He gritted his teeth but didn't move while she drew the needle over and under a dozen times, closing
the gash, and knotting off the end neatly. She paused after every stitch and it took a long time to
finish. "Good. They're a little further apart than I would do them, but it should be fine. Take some of
that gauze from the roll and tape it over the wound without touching the underside with your fingers.
And done. Nice work."

Megan used another cup of their precious water to clean the blood off her hands, and drank some as
well. She watched him shrug the lab-coat back on, the right sleeve of which was now a total loss,
and handed him the canteen. Voice still shaking a little, she asked, "White's a hard color to keep
clean out here, isn't it?"

"It is, but it's been our color and a symbol of our neutrality for a long time. With some significant
exceptions – fiends and other raiders, for example – a lot of otherwise dangerous and violent people
will give a Followers doctor a pass out here, knowing that we'd treat their injuries just like anyone
else's. For that reason, it's nice to be readily identifiable."

"What about the Legion?" They had retrieved their belongings and were walking slowly up the road,
which had begun to slope upwards toward two massive statues. Not wanting to delay any longer in
the brutal afternoon sun, she was trying not to show how much her ankle and ribs hurt, but it was
hard to move too fast. Fortunately, Arcade seemed content to match her lazy pace.

"Well…usually. The situation when you found me was out of the ordinary." He looked at the sky,
apparently considering whether to go on. "Not many people know this, but Caesar used to be one of
the Followers, many years ago. We…er…don't like to talk about that much, for obvious reasons."

"No…no, I can understand why. What happened to turn him into…what he is now?"

"No one knows. Students respond to what they learn in our schools in different ways. Some find our
vision and idealism inspiring and devote their lives to the cause, and others become despondent when
they realize how much work remains to be done. Still others take the knowledge and tools they gain
and twist them to achieve unworthy goals. An intelligent young man named Edward Swallow
disappeared on a research assignment in Utah, and when he popped up again, many years later, he
had donned a faux Roman ideology, complete with a new name, and had built himself an army by
unifying several different tribes under a single flag. If and when I get an audience with Caesar, I'll be
sure to ask him exactly what his reasoning was, although I suspect it's two parts brilliant but
misapplied philosophy and one part insanity. In any case, his soldiers seem to have standing orders
not to kill or enslave us. Again, usually."

Megan spotted a few square feet of shade beside a rusty bus up ahead and sighed in relief. The slope
had grown steeper and walking was becoming a real challenge. "Hold up. I gotta sit down for a
minute." She sat down on a rusty well rim and gingerly pulled her boot and sock off. This was
harder than it should have been, as the joint had swollen to twice its size.
He knelt down beside her and prodded her foot gently, flexing it back and forth and side to side. "Ouch. What happened? I was distracted while you were tangling with that big one."

"It grabbed my foot and dragged me. I think it would have cut it clean off if I hadn't been wearing these clodhoppers."

"It's so swollen I can't tell if there's an actual break. Normal treatment would be to keep it elevated, apply intermittent cold compresses, and use a stimpak – but all that needs to wait until we're to a safe stopping point for the night. And getting there's going to be a trick, since it's still a quarter mile to go, all uphill."

"I can walk," Megan said stubbornly. Actually, she wasn't sure this was true anymore. Seeing her purple ankle with the bruised ring of broken flesh had made it hurt even more, and the acetaminophen she'd taken hours before was doing precisely nothing to help. There was also the band of pain around her aching sides to contend with. All of a sudden, she felt very, very tired and closed her eyes, tucking her chin to her chest. She added, reluctantly, pointing to the ruined leather above her ribs: "It also bit here and here. I don't think anything's bleeding, but it hurts to breathe."

He didn't answer and she looked up. He had gotten to his feet and was looking ahead on the road. "Hi there! Can you give us a hand, please? My friend is hurt."

A hatchet-faced merchant leading two Brahmin and flanked by three guards, was picking her way around the rusty vehicles as she descended the hill. Peering at him suspiciously under rancher's hat and greying hair, she said gruffly, "What do you want us to do? Not like we're going to carry her all the way back up that bloody mountain. We're trying to get to Nipton before nightfall, and we still have to skirt those damned ants."

"Do you have crutches or Med-X for sale? Or can we hire you to make the trip back up, paying you whatever it takes to make you delay your trip until the morning? We did kill about twenty of those ants today, so the road is somewhat safer now."

One of the guards looked at the woman, "C'mon, Ma. We've only been on the road for fifteen minutes. We can help them. It'd be nice to pay them back for the ant-killing."

"The ant-killing he says they did." But she softened, a little. "Fine. The Med-X you can have for 20 caps. We don't have any crutches and the Brahmin won't take a rider, but for another 30 we'll carry her pack and she can lean on an animal while we head back to the Outpost."

Her son made a noise of protest, but Arcade was not in the mood to haggle: "Deal. Here's the 50. Med-X first." He stuffed her boot into her pack and handed the whole thing to the sympathetic guard. Injecting the painkiller into her arm, he gave her a minute to let it take effect before he wrapped the ankle lightly with a long strip of cloth, then pulled her up to her good leg. He guided her right arm over the laden back of the patient creature, and took the rest of her weight on the other side. "Alright, keep that foot up and hop. This is going to be fun."

Their progress was painfully slow. Sneering, the caravan leader set her own pace with the other Brahmin and soon left them far behind, with only her son remaining to lead the animal. "Don't mind Ma," the young man said apologetically. "She's just sore on account of we've been stuck at the Outpost for a week now. The NCR holds caravans indefinitely at the Outpost if the road ain't safe, but they're not doing anything to make it safer. Ma made the guards mad enough with her complaining that they just let us go, but none of us were looking forward to the trip, to be honest. You okay, girl?"

At that moment, the courier was seriously considering playing dead, as every hop jarred her body
and the Med-X was only nailing down some of the pain. All she said, however, was: "Fine."

"You're lookin' kinda gray, is all."

"I said I'm fine. What kinds of dangers are between here and Nipton?"

"Well, in addition to the ants, which y'all apparently already met, there's a bunch of scorpions and a nest of Vipers that like to prey on caravans going north."

"I ne'er seen any snakes around here…at least they'd be small and easy to shoot." she mumbled, becoming momentarily distracted and forgetting to hop, instead getting dragged a few feet by the mutant cow and making Arcade stumble beside her.

"Erm…I'm not talking about real snakes, see. They're a gang of raiders that call themselves Vipers, I guess because they're low down and sneaky."

"Oh. Well, we can get rid of all those things, easy-peasy. Right, Arcade? Think the NCR would pay us?"

He responded curtly: "Let's get through this day before we invent new ways to kill ourselves for caps, okay?" His arm was stinging and he was afraid the exertion of helping his friend walk was going to tear out her clumsy stitches. Turning to their guide, he asked, "Is there a bunkhouse or something up there for travelers?"

"Sure. Caravaners, soldiers, you name it…there's plenty of beds to fall into at the depot. It's kind of noisy, but it's safe."

A torturous half-hour later, they finally arrived at the gate leading into the compound. The guard, whose name they'd learned was Joe Miller, took pity on them and carried both packs inside while Arcade carried Megan, who'd finally had all she could take and had lapsed into a completely genuine semi-conscious state. He put their stuff on the top bunk of an empty bed while the doctor laid the girl on the bottom, on top of her bedroll.

"Thanks for helping us. We'd still be there without you."

"No problem. Hope she's okay. Hey, maybe you should take her back to whatever vault she crawled out of, yeah? Doesn't seem like this is the right place for her." Shaking his head, he went whistling over to the bar in the next room.

"I don't…know where it is," she whispered to the ceiling. "An' I don't want to go back, anyway."

"You don't have to go back. And, oh, now you're awake? Were you just faking so I'd carry you?" His tone was joking, but his eyes were serious as he undid the traces on her armor and carefully pulled it off. "This is junk, by the way. You desperately need better armor."

"Wasn't faking. Sorry. And good armor is super-expensive, y'know."

"I know you weren't. I'm just kidding." He pulled her shirt up and examined the damage. "Alright, you've got some lovely new bruises to go with the fading ones from two days ago. It cut the skin in two places, but not seriously. The ribs might be broken or might just be bruised, but at least they don't seem to displaced at all. I'll give you one stimpak to the chest and one to the ankle, and hopefully you'll be breathing and walking semi-normally tomorrow. I'm going to go ask the bartender if she has any ice to spare or sell. Where is that delivery Nash gave you? We need the credit to partially replenish our supplies."
Nash's delivery was good for 100 caps. Ice cost 2 caps for a pound, and two stimpaks at 37 caps apiece plus two squirrels-on-a-stick drained the remainder of their account. Borrowing two clean dish-towels at no extra cost, he made ice-packs to treat the bruising and swelling. Megan was sitting up by the time he got back, and was content to eat her squirrel while he treated her ankle.

"Keep switching sides every ten minutes," he instructed her on her ribs. "The cold will be uncomfortable, but it does wonders for reducing swelling."

"I have never seen a squirrel," she commented, licking the greasy skewer. "Where do they get them?"

"Oh, I'm pretty sure that's giant rat. Just like 'iguana-on-a-stick' is actually gecko testicles. It's clever marketing."

"Ew. Oh well. Hey, so, I was wondering: how do new doctors practice things? Like, do y'all pay vagrants to drug them and cut them up?"

"Um, no. That would be unethical. Well, we do hire people for human trials of new medications sometimes, but only with their informed consent and after it's been tested extensively on animals. For learning about the human body and most pointedly how to do surgery, medical students practice on cadavers. Dead bodies." Laughing at her horrified expression, he explained, "It's not like we're out there robbing graves. We don't do it without theirs and their families' permission, and we provide a dignified burial afterwards. And it's a hell of a lot better than trying to figure out where the appendix is for the first time on a living person who needs it removed. Salus aegroti suprema lex. 'The well-being of the patient is the highest law.' As an interesting historical note, much of the ancient world forbade physicians from dissecting dead humans for religious reasons, but allowed the occasional vivisection of condemned criminals."

"Yikes. Okay, that makes sense." She looked at the slashed chest piece and sighed. "We're pretty much broke, aren't we?"

"We have about 150 caps left between us now, so yes."

"I still have sixteen denarii, but I don't know if I can spend them here. At any rate, that's not enough to fix or replace that. Or stay here very long, with the cost of food being what it is."

"It is exorbitant. There's more demand than supply, on account of the delayed caravans."

"So we'll need to look for work tomorrow. See what the NCR thinks it's worth to clear the road." She looked exhausted just thinking about it.

"We'll see how that ankle looks in the morning. If we have to wait another day, then so be it. We'll manage." Finishing his own 'squirrel,' he pulled out a fragile, coverless paperback wrapped in maize husks. "Want to start a new book tonight? This one's a novel I've been carrying around for a while, about desert life on another planet. It's called Dune, by Frank Herbert."

"More deserts? Alright then." Propping her foot on a bundle of dirty clothes, she lay back to listen.

"A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the balances are correct. This every sister of the Bene Gesserit knows. To begin your study of the life of Muad'Dib, then, take care that you first place him in his time: born in the 57th year of the Padishah Emperor, Shaddam IV. And take the most special care that you locate Muad'Dib in his place: the planet Arrakis. Do not be deceived by the fact that he was born on Caladan and lived his first fifteen years there. Arrakis, the planet known as Dune, is forever his place..."
The Fox and the Sheep

*Author's note: Mild trigger warning for this chapter. Mention of rape, but nothing explicit. I've taken the precaution of changing the rating on this story to M, even though I think it's still a safe T.*

The depot was a quiet place in the early hours of the morning, with only a few soldiers stirring over breakfast in the dining area. Megan changed into a clean-ish shirt – at least one without blood on it – and pulled on her boots, marveling at the deep scoring in the leather on the right one. Limping a little, she crept out of the sleeping area and sat down at the bar, waiting for the irritated-looking woman behind the counter to notice her. Two seats over, a red-haired woman in plaid was asleep on her stool, hand still clutching what had probably been her last drink of the night.

"What'll it be?" The woman acted like having a customer was the biggest inconvenience one could encounter. Megan decided to be extra nice, if only to annoy her further.

"Good morning! One of those mutfruit and a bottle of clean water, please."

"Pretty manners won't get you a discount. 18 caps."

She counted the caps out their dwindling fund and pushed them over. "Is she okay?" she asked, pointing to the slumbering red-head.

"Cass? As okay as an alcoholic without work can be, I guess. She's barely left that stool since she found out her caravan was destroyed. Here's your food."

"Thanks. Do you know of any work around here?"

"How the hell should I know? I just serve drinks. Talk to the brass next door or the spooky sniper on the roof, and stop bothering me."

She quietly finished her breakfast and licked her fingers. "How much for another bottle?"

"10 caps. 9 if you give that empty back."

She grabbed some healing powder to mix with the new bottle, noting that Arcade was still fast asleep. Grabbing her hat and clipping her machete sheath to her belt, she headed outside to meet the "spooky sniper," draining the bitter water with a grimace. The sun was just beginning to rise, and the air was still grey and chilly. Mounting the wooden ramp wrapped around the building, she spotted a figure sitting perfectly still looking north. "Hi! I'm a courier moonlighting as a mercenary. I heard you might have some work."

A woman with dark shades and the whitest skin Megan had ever seen turned to look at her and frowned. "No, I don't think so. I do need someone to scout out Nipton for me, but I actually need that person to come back alive. You're half-chewed up already."

Feeling defensive, she responded heartily, "I'm stronger than I look, and my friend will come with me. Why do you need someone to go there?"

"The Followers doctor you came in with? Yeah, I'll bet he's a real whirlwind of death." The sniper pointed to dark pillar of smoke on the horizon and said flatly: "Nipton is on fire. Has been since yesterday morning. I need to know why. If you go, talk to any people you find there, stick your head in the town hall, and come back. No heroics, just find out what happened. I'm Ghost, by the way."
"Megan Martin. I'm from Goodsprings."

"My advice to you would be to go back there and take up farming, give up this mercenary nonsense, but whatever. Before you head out, talk to Ranger Jackson. He has some kind of bounty on any vermin you kill on this road and you might make a few extra caps along the way."

She thanked the woman and headed down the ramp again, turning right at the bottom, toward the outpost headquarters. A bored-looking young man who looked far too pale for a desert assignment was slouched over the desk, but snapped to attention when she entered. "Hello there, I'm Major Knight. Caravaner, guard, or…?"

"Um, courier I guess. I was hoping to talk to Ranger Jackson about his pest problem."

"Thanks, I just need something for the records. He's probably up already – check the breakroom down the hall."

"Appreciate it. What is it you do here?"

"I file the paperwork for supply requests and repairs, civilian and soldier alike."

"Do you sell any armor? Reinforced leather or similar, preferably?"

"I've got a few suits in storage. The cheapest will cost you 300 caps."

"I might take you up on that later. Depends on how the day goes, though. Take care."

Ranger Jackson was in the break-room, trimming an extraordinary mustache by the aid of a broken mirror. He looked as skeptical as Ghost had when she asked about work, but eventually told her the going rate was 3 caps apiece for ant antennae, 5-15 for a rad-scorpion stinger (depending on size), and "whatever gear I can spare" if she was able to bring back proof of the Viper gang-leader's death.

"So, like a head?" she asked, not looking forward to her first decapitation.

"Yeah, or just that stupid hat she wears."

Already imagining putting on her new armor, Megan strolled back to the depot, whistling. Arcade was finally beginning to stir. "'Bout time! Eat some breakfast or don't. We're going to Nipton today."

Arcade was not at his best in the morning. He sat up and blinked uncomprehendingly at her. After a long pause he asked, "Why?"

"Ghost wants us to check it out, find out why there's smoke coming up from it. She's the sniper upstairs. Hey, what would make a person's skin look totally white?"

"You're…way too cheerful right now. Okay. We can do that if you're up for it. And to answer your question: albinism. It's a genetic condition that prevents the body from producing the pigments normally found in hair, skin, and eyes. It'd be hell living with that in the desert; if I recall correctly, people with that condition sunburn extremely easily and generally have terrible eyesight. Give me 15 minutes and I'll be ready to go."

She paid the surly barkeep an exorbitant fee to refill their canteen and two bottles, and bought two ears of roasted maize and some gecko jerky for lunch, all of which brought their funds down to the low 40s. They left their bedrolls and other bulky items in a storage locker in the back, fortunately without having to pay an extra fee.
Having suited up, she was waiting impatiently for him outside when he finally joined her. "I just realized I only have 37 bullets left. I hope that's enough for today. How are you on cells?"

"Considering you never fire more than five shots in a fight before switching to melee, that should be plenty. I have enough. You know that there's a good chance whoever burned Nipton is still there, right? It was a pretty rough town with a major criminal element. I wonder if someone staged a coup that went bad. Or the Legion rolled in, but that'd be unprecedented for them…"

She went on, not listening: "Good, good…we also need to collect as many ant feelers and rad-scorpion stingers as possible. Ranger Jackson will pay us for them. And if we happen to meet and kill some Vipers, we have to take the leader's hat."

Arcade looked uncomfortable, but resigned. "Bounty-hunting, huh? That's not really my cup of tea…but if it makes this road easier to traverse, I guess I'll contribute a few shots. I'll try not melt your target, but no promises."

Walking down the hill was a pleasant change from the previous evening's via dolorosa. The exertion brought out some soreness in her chest and ankle, but it was many times better than before. They reached the ant-massacre in only half an hour, and Megan spent a busy five minutes cutting and bundling antennae, thirty-one in all (one of the ones she'd already ripped off had gone missing somehow, and several of the other bodies had not survived the plasma defender treatment intact). "93 caps! Nice. Um, Arcade? Is there any way you can get your gun to not destroy things so thoroughly?"

"No," he said dolefully. "That's what it does. Every third shot or so just melts them. I don't understand the science behind why. Sorry. Do you want me to refrain from shooting the next giant rad-scorpion that burrows up behind you?"

"That's a hard one, but I guess I'd rather live than get the 15 caps."

"Good. There's hope for you yet. For my part, I will hold back if it looks like you have things under control."

He kept his word when they spotted two small rad-scorpions just off the road. Megan approached them and killed them easily at a safe distance with two shots each. She dropped their dripping stings gingerly into her gathering bag. "That's 10 more caps."

They walked along in companionable silence for some time without seeing anything else, passing the turnoff to Primm and getting into uncharted territory. Arcade touched her shoulder and pointed to the dark specks of scavenger birds circling over something a quarter-mile off the road. "I'm not sure how ethical it would be to claim the kill, but there is something dead over there. Do you want to check it out?"

"Might as well. Do you want some food now? It's almost noon."

That was bad timing on lunch, she thought as they arrived upon the scene of slaughter. Seven bloated bodies, the men still in patched metal armor and the women stripped of even their clothing, lay stinking in the sun, sprawled around a dead campfire. Trying not to look at any of them and holding her nose, Megan picked up a sort of twisted metal headdress with ornamental wings on it. "Guess this is that hat he was talking about. Let's go. I don't want to search the bodies."

Arcade also looked sick. "This is Legion work. Look at those spears, look at these women. If they're operating in numbers this far from the river, then we are all in serious trouble. Someone at Camp McCarran needs to know ASAP. We're going to find more of the same at Nipton."
"Looks that way, but I told Ghost I'd see for myself."

"Okay, but for the record, I have a very bad feeling about this."

The day seemed to grow darker as they arrived at the gates of Nipton. It may have been the oily smoke: a massive fire pit still burned sluggishly in the residential section, and the twin smells of burnt meat and hair permeated the town. Two rows of crosses holding the dead or dying flanked the main thoroughfare leading up to the town hall. Arcade checked for a pulse on the ones nearest him and shook his head sadly: "Soldiers broke their legs. They suffocated under their own weight." He criss-crossed the road, checking the rest to be certain, while the courier followed a pace behind, gripping her gun tightly.

Just then, Arcade saw something in the building's ground-floor window that made him regret his diligence – a flash of red. He whispered urgently to the girl, "We need to get out of here. Now." But by then it was too late. The heavy wooden doors were thrown open, and a large troop of red-garbed men filed out, followed by a half-dozen dogs. They formed a circle around the two friends and their leader stepped forward.

An intense figure wearing a black mask and a peculiar hat made from a bear-skin, he addressed Arcade directly, ignoring the girl behind him: "Ave. Welcome to Nipton, Follower." His voice was mocking, and Arcade did not answer. "You look upon the work of Lord Caesar's greatest frumentarius, Vulpes Inculta. Don't you have anything to say about it?"

The doctor, sounding more angry than scared, found his tongue, "It's a damned desecration. You've made this town into a graveyard, and for what? To tell the NCR that you're here?! Next time, just send a letter."

"Oh, but this is so much more personal. And I will send a messenger. You will spread word of what you've seen here to those cowards at the Outpost and those freaks and degenerates in Novac. Tell them we're coming to see them next. Yes," he said simply, "I'm going to let you go. Caesar pities the blindness of you sheep and has ordered us to spare you whenever possible." He smiled unpleasantly, "He did not, however, say anything about a sheep's whore. Come here, profligate."

She stepped forward, nerves jangling, finger twitching automatically toward the trigger on her rifle. He noticed this and laughed at her, saying derisively, "Oh, please. Try it. We'll hobble you where you stand, crucify your friend, and rape you in front of him."

Arcade broke in, sounding unconvincingly desperate, "She's a Follower too, my apprentice. She is protected by Caesar's order as well."

Vulpes stepped close to her – so close she could feel his breath on her cheek – and stroked her face. She trembled, fighting the urge to smash his face. He leaned in like he was going to kiss her neck, but licked it instead. Her mind breaking a little, she gasped, almost dropping the gun, and wiped frantically at the spot, skin crawling with disgust.

"This isn't a sheep. She's not one of yours. She has a fighting spirit. It's unfortunate that she's a woman."

"I am, though. A Follower, not a sheep." It sounded like someone else talking, from miles away. Worried that she was going to faint, she bit down hard on her tongue. The pain brought her back a little, brain feeling clear again. "Go ahead. Ask me something only one of us would know."

He smirking, licking his lips. "I have heard that the Followers are cunning linguists. Tell me, if you have been educated in one of their schools, what does my name mean?"
Her mind raced. Arcade had taught her mostly fixed phrases, famous sayings and proverbs. But "vulpine" meant "foxlike" in English, and *inculta*, well...'in-' could be a negative prefix. "Your name means 'Fox'...um, 'Uncultured Fox.'"

His laughter sounded genuine now. "Close enough. It's a translation of my old tribal name, 'Wild Fox.' Tell me then, little lamb, why are you here? Didn't you see our smoke, pass the dead bodies on the road? Your kind usually keep clear of danger."

"We're gathering plant and insect samples for research in this area. Someone at the Outpost asked us to look in on Nipton while we were close by because they were worried about the town."

"Someone at the Outpost doesn't like you, lambkin. What exactly did they ask you to do?"

"They said 'no heroics,' just to talk to people, see what happened, and...look inside the town hall."

"Oh. Well, in that case, I'll give you a one-on-one tour. You can leave your weapons and bag out here. No one will steal them, I assure you. When we're done, you and the other sheep can tramp on your merry way, no worse...well, not *much* worse, for wear."

Feeling like she had no choice, she left her stuff by Arcade's feet, shooting him an anguished look. He was pale with anger, and looked as if he was considering a suicide run against the wall of red. She whispered to him, trying to keep him from doing anything foolish, "Don't worry. I'll be back."

Striking a gallant pose, Vulpes held the door for her and she preceded him into the darkened interior. Once inside, she squinted in the dim light, eyes trying to adjust to the darkness. What little she could see was worse that the Viper camp had been and the smell was appalling. For his part, Vulpes seemed bored and gestured casually in various directions, "Bodies in here, bodies in there, all the women over here...none left alive for your doctor friend to fuss over, I'm afraid. My men had a lot of energy to burn. Would you like to see the upstairs?"

She swallowed, wishing more than anything that they'd delayed this trip by a day. "Ah, no thanks. I've done due diligence here, I think. We can leave now."

Vulpes lounged indolently on the lobby couch, picking at his long fingernails with a knife. "No, not yet. Think about it. I've just brought a sweet little thing into this building for some alone time. There are certain *expectations* for our behavior."

Megan felt cold, "Are you going to rape me?"

"Not unless you make me. Honestly, I'd rather have a go with your friend out there. Think he would?"

She shook her head numbly. "Not willingly. You aren't his type."

"Ah well, *c'est la vie*. If you'd like to stay unraped, then you *do* need to sell the illusion for the audience, namely my men. How are you as an actress?"

"I don't know." This conversation felt unreal and she found herself worrying absurdly about whether she'd packed her extra socks back at Doc Mitchell's. That had been, what, three days ago? It seemed worlds away now. "Probably not that good."

"Too bad for you, then. I'll try not to break anything." Leaping over the couch, he caught her in the eye with a right hook, and followed it up with a nasty swipe of his nails across her right cheek and a glancing elbow across the mouth. She staggered back and he winded her with a punch to the gut. "That's enough, I think. Let's just tease this hair...tear off these buttons...and get rid of this god-
awful armor altogether. You should see if the Followers will spring for some better equipment, as long as you're doing protection duty for one of their researchers. No, I don't really believe you're one of them."

She lay stunned and gasping on the floor as he pawed over her, tearing her clothes and sucking violently at her exposed skin. Finally, he backed off, and courteously helped her to her feet, where she stood, crying silently. He tenderly placed her hat, which had fallen off in the scuffle, back on her head. "There! No acting needed, my dear. Let's go. I look forward to our next meeting."

She couldn't see the soldiers through her tears and wasn't listening to their catcalls. A gray mist had descended over everything. She didn't later remember picking up her things or passing the crosses again or telling Arcade, over and over again, luckily when they were out of earshot, that Vulpes hadn't really hurt her, that it was just an acting lesson. When the mist lifted, she was sitting on a rock with his coat draped over her shoulders while he put something that stung on the scratches on her cheek.

She blinked and looked around. "Ouch. That hurts. How did we get way out here?" They were already at least a mile away from Nipton.

"We walked. You were in a short-term fugue state brought on by emotional shock. It's a little like those seizures you used to get, except your brain keeps you going on autopilot. I wanted to put some distance between us and them before stopping." His expression was unreadable, but grim.

"That's so strange. I'm okay now, though. He was awful and creepy, but he didn't even take my shirt or pants off. Aw, I have a black eye, don't I? Hehe, I said 'eye' twice...ignore me, I'm babbling..."

He looked sad and disbelieving, "Megan, I think your mind is trying to keep you safe by hiding from what happened. That's normal after trauma. But you need medical treatment to prevent pregnancy and STDs. There's a female doctor in Novac we can get to by tomorrow, if that's what you'd prefer..."

She got a grip on herself and handed him his coat back. "Nothing happened, Arcade. Really. He said he'd rather have sex with you, actually, but felt like he had to put a show on for his men. He didn't trust my acting skills and roughed me up a bit, but that's all. I'm really sorry you believed it, and sorry we went to Nipton at all. It was a bad idea. Let's go back to the Outpost now. Can I have the canteen, please?"

He handed her the water, staring at her face and body as if he was trying to work out a puzzle. "I didn't think we were both going to walk out of there when the Legion showed up. It was the most scared I've been in a long time."

She smiled at him, making her split lip bleed, "Me too. Thanks for claiming me as a Follower. I'm flattered. Vulpes didn't actually buy it, though. He told me."

He flinched at the mention of that name, but went on resolutely, "You actually would be a good one, with training. You'd have to let go of the one-size-fits-all violent solutions, though."

"I wouldn't mind leaving the fighting behind someday, but I'm not smart enough to join."

He looked surprised and said incredulously. "Do you really believe that? You are quite intelligent. You listen actively, remember and synthesize information well, and ask good questions. You bring a lot to the table, even without literacy. In any case, we don't turn away anybody who wants to be a contributing member of the community. You could join. I would sponsor you."
She thought about what he'd said for most of the hike back, partly because it was easier than thinking too hard about Nipton, and partly because the idea of a total reset was tempting. Of course, there were things – *important* things, surely – that needed to be done first, and questions that had to be answered, but afterwards…maybe. The reality of bigger problems than her own personal quest was beginning to dawn on her: there was no acceptable future for Vegas or Goodsprings or the other settlements that included a Legion takeover. They *had* to be stopped. She would fight to stop them, and encourage others to do so. When that was done, she would put away her gun and take up the cause of civilization-building. Or mole-rat farming. Or something nice and peaceful at least.

"What will happen in the Mojave if the NCR withdraws from the region now or loses it to the Legion?" It had been a hour since either of them had spoken, and Arcade had been deep in thought as well, occasionally mumbling to himself as he often did when upset.

"If his general formula holds true, Caesar will first make a mass grave of those most likely to resist him – factions with military clout like the Boomers and NCR-loyalists, for example – along with the ones who'd make poor slaves – the elderly and infirm. He'll then use his officers as administrators to restore order after the chaos and people will be so grateful not to be dead that they'll accept his offer of stability in exchange for their freedom. Misogyny has always been one of his official organizing principles – he institutionalizes the idea that women are good for breeding and recreation and nothing else – so while the men will have few civil rights, the women will have none. Vegas will become a slave hub, trading in human misery. It won't be good."

"What will the Followers do?"

He sighed. "What we always do. Whatever we can. I don't expect Caesar to allow us to stay, but he might permit us to leave unharmed." He hesitated. "I don't know if I'd still be around at that point. I have a suit of armor that belonged to my father – original-issue Tesla power armor worn by Enclave officers – and I'd be tempted to put it on in defense of Freeside. It's light-years beyond the sort of tech the Legion normally uses, and they'd be hard-pressed to get through it." He looked at her nervously, "Just so we're very, very clear: the NCR would try to arrest anybody suspected of Enclave connections, even if they fought against the Legion. This would have to be a resource of last resort."

"I understand. I can keep your secret. But Arcade, you don't need to be the one holding the bridge for Freeside. Let me do that, or someone else more capable. Any resistance movement would need doctors, and the survivors would need visionaries to rebuild. That's where you belong, not on the battlefield. Anyway, what happened to rejecting 'violent solutions'?"

"I'd rather fight to protect innocent people than be a thoroughgoing pacifist. Not every Follower would agree with me, or even most of them, but that would be the day they'd throw me out anyway. We can't afford to be associated with rogue fascist elements." His voice, which had become bitter, now softened. "Thank you for being so accepting of my past with the Enclave. I know you don't really understand how bad they were in their day, but it still means a lot that I can trust you. I haven't been able to confide in anybody about this before."

"I'm sorry. That would be really hard. Excuse me, there's some ants over there." She shot three worker ants browsing on a rotting mole-rat and collected their antennae. Returning, she went on as if nothing had happened, "Isn't there anybody else you can talk to about this? It sounds like you've had to bottle things up for a long time."

"Five former Enclave members from my father's generation escaped Navarro to settle in this region. They were responsible for mine and my mother's survival as well. There are only three that I'm on genuinely good terms with, and only two that I actually see on a regular basis – one in Westside, the poor side of Vegas, and one just outside of Novac. I talk to them sometimes."
"Well, can I meet him when we get to Novac?"

"Her," he corrected. "And yes, I'm looking forward to the visit. She'll like you."

They had drawn close to the Outpost by then, the setting sun casting huge shadows behind the statues, and dropped the subject. Noticing that Ghost was not currently at her post on the rooftop, Megan headed inside to collect their earnings for the day, first handing Arcade the rest of their money to buy his dinner with. Major Knight's look of shock told her that she probably looked worse than she thought, but he said nothing. Taking her messy collection of insect parts to Ranger Jackson, she collected the 113 caps due her, and then handed him the Viper leader's hat without telling him how she'd obtained it.

"Ah, excellent. I see she gave you some trouble, but I'll make it worth your while… could you use a service rifle? It takes 5.56mm cartridges, and I'll throw in a box of 100 to start. Knight said you were after some armor as well. If you were to trade in your hunting rifle, we could give you a set of ranger patrol armor. It belonged to one of our female rangers who retired last month and, if you'll let us remove the insignia first, we don't mind letting you wearing it."

Megan accepted the offer with all of the enthusiasm her tired self could muster, feeling slightly guilty over the deception. "Thank you, that'll be perfect. Um, is there someone who could show me how to break the rifle down and stuff? I've never used a gun quite like that."

Happy for the chance to do anything but sit behind a desk, Knight willingly showed her how to load, clean, and disassemble the gun, and watched her do it three times. "Keep practicing, but you've got the right idea. Go get cleaned up and get some rest – I'll have your new armor oiled and ready for you in the morning."

"Sounds good. Oh, I'm going to go report this to Ghost when she comes on duty...but y'all may as well know now: the Legion sacked Nipton and killed everybody there."

The pale young man turned even paler at this news. "She'll be up there any minute now, at 8:00. Sleeps all day because she likes the dark." His voice was a nervous whisper. "Did you see them? How many?"

"About 18 or 20 legionaries, plus some dogs. Their leader, Vulpes Inculta, called himself a frumentarius. He let me and my companion go because he wanted us to tell people what we saw there." She shivered involuntarily and covered her eyes. "It was bad. People were burned, crucified, and torn to pieces. I thought about fighting, but it would have been suicide. There were too many."

"Jesus. No, that's not your job, it's ours. It's just that with Camp Searchlight destroyed, that whole quarter of the map is out of our control… if they've already got a foothold on this side of the river…" Knight seemed to remember he was talking to a civilian and stopped talking. "Thank you for the information. I know Ghost will pay you something, but please have a drink on me. You look like you could use it."

Megan took the 10 caps he gave her without protest. "Thank you for everything, Major. See you tomorrow."

Feet dragging and her new gun feeling heavy on her shoulder, she climbed the ramp once more and found Ghost smoking and watching the last rays of the sun dip under the horizon. Not wanting to tell the whole story again, she tried to keep it short: "I'm back. The Legion destroyed Nipton. I already told Knight the details. I hope that's alright."

"Shit."
"Yeah." Too tired to be polite, she sat down against the wall and waited for questions.

"One of them do that to you?"

"Yeah, but it's not what it looks like." She felt dull and stupid and just wanted to be left alone.

The older woman studied her for a moment, and Megan looked away, avoiding the eyes behind those sunglasses. "Here," she said, handing her a cloth bag of caps. "That's about 100, give or take a few. Take this too." She handed her a metal disk with a teardrop shape crudely etched on it.

"What's this?" It was a handbreadth across and heavy.

"My shower token. We get them twice a week. It'll give you a minute and a half of non-potable water in a private stall in the building over there. If the guy staffing it gives you any grief for being a civvie, just tell him I gave it to you. Use it whenever you like, but it ain't as warm in the morning. Solar-heating. Got it?"

She tried to say thank you, but the words stuck in her throat. Instead she nodded and turned to go, almost plunging straight off the side of the ramp in her haste to leave before she started crying again.

The first shower in Megan Martin's life was heaven. Too short and barely lukewarm, it nevertheless felt wonderful to clean herself with actual soap and water, washing away the dust and grime and blood of the past few days on the road. She'd only ever bathed using a bucket and a rag back in Goodsprings, and this felt like the highest luxury imaginable. It was a little horrifying to actually see what she'd put her body through lately – she particularly hated the little half-moons of violated flesh Vulpes had left on her neck – but at least she was still alive and in one piece, which was more than a lot of people could say. She put on a clean pair of underwear and a bra, but had to be content with a travel-stained shirt paired with her only pair of pants. How do people wash their clothes on the road? she wondered. Hopefully, I'll figure something out in Novac.

Arcade was reading on his bunk by the light of his lantern when she got back. There seemed to be a full-on party going down at the bar and the raucous laughter and conversation drifted into the sleeping area, but she didn't think the noise would matter to her tonight. Stuffing her dirty clothes into her bag and laying her gun carefully beside her with the safety on, she flopped down on the bunk with a sigh. Her friend said something from above her head, but she was already out.

That night, the courier dreamt only of water in the desert.
People were talking by her bunk, and it was annoying.

"I got to go to bed now. You'll give her the message?"

"Yes, and we'll deliver your letter."

"Thanks. Watch your six out there."

Footsteps retreated from the bed, a door closed in the distance, and the bunkhouse was relatively quiet again. Megan was fully awake now, but kept her eyes tightly closed. She felt… very vulnerable today, and wanted to stay wrapped up in her bedroll forever, or at least until it was too late in the day to set out toward Nipton.

"I know you're awake. Are we leaving today, or what? It's almost 10 o'clock, Miss Early Riser."

Eyes still closed, she nodded reluctantly. "Yeah. We should go." She made no move to get up. "Who was that talking just now?"

"That was Ranger Ghost. She asked us to deliver a letter to her friend, Craig Boone, in Novac. She's worried about him. She also wanted to tell you 'nolite te bastardes carborundorum,' which she said means 'don't let the bastards grind you down.' It's her family's motto, apparently from some long-forgotten book."

"Didn't think she was the type to study Latin," she said absently, trying to catch hold of her dream again – it had been beautiful, cool, and green… a garden like she'd never seen…

"It's not real Latin. Two of the words are made up. I don't even understand where the 'carborundorum' part comes from."

"Weird."

"Uh-huh. Do you want to come eat with me and we can talk about this trip? I don't usually eat breakfast, but I'll make an exception for brunch."

"Okay." She gave up on her dream and finally opened her eyes to look at him. "Arcade?"

"Yes?"

"I'm scared of the wasteland now. I wasn't really before. I don't know if I can do this anymore."

"A certain amount of fear is healthy. It keeps you alert and alive. And if by 'this' you mean almost dying every day, you don't have to do that at all. Just be more careful."

"It's not the prospect of dying that bothers me. That's inevitable, and I think I'm okay with that. I just can't stand the thought of being helpless again." Her voice got shrill and fast, stuttering a little, "When V-vulpes was h-hitting and t-touching me, I-I c-couldn't do anything to stop him. H-he was stronger, he was in c-control. I was a t-toy he wanted to pl-play with." She felt drained and exhausted despite her long rest. "If that happens again, I think I'll lose my mind…"

"Are…are you sure he didn't…" he began, sounding out of his depth.

"No, he didn't, but I still feel violated. Ashamed for letting him hurt me, even though there wasn't
another choice." She rolled over and stared at the wall. "I need a few more minutes. We'll eat and go soon."

Arcade retreated to the bar and ordered soup, corn bread, and fruit for them both, wishing they were back in Freeside. He just wasn't that good at this sort of thing, but Dr. Usanagi had a particular gift for counseling women who'd experienced trauma. Between the lawlessness and poverty rampant in the Mojave, there were a lot of them, unfortunately.

A dry-eyed courier appeared 15 minutes later, belongings already neatly stored in her pack, fancy new rifle on her back. Leaving her stuff by a stool, she stepped outside without a word and returned a quarter of an hour later wearing an impressive set of armor with dark brown plates on black ballistic webbing. She attacked the food with gusto and was done before Arcade, despite his head start. Pushing the dishes aside, she studied the map on her Pip-Boy. "Okay, so, the question of the hour is: have the Legion left Nipton, and even if they have, can we handle spending the night there?"

"Some of the houses were in good shape, and might not be full of bodies. We could try one of those. That unspeakable smell will be everywhere, though."

"It will. I'm honestly not sure I can sleep there at all, but we don't want to be stuck in the open at night. Looking at this map, I can tell that second day's going to be tough. It looks like about 12 miles as the crow flies, with some pretty rough terrain to get through. We should leave early and expect to arrive pretty late. H'm, it looks we'll pass a ranger station around midday – that makes me feel a little better about that stretch of road. Do you have anything to add?"

"No, I've never approached Novac from the south…oh, we should try to look non-threatening as we approach the town – there's a couple of snipers who take it in turns to guard the town from the mouth of the T-Rex." Seeing her mystified expression, he added: "It's a giant statue of a prehistoric lizard. Novac used to be a tourist trap back in the good old days."

"Oh. We should take all the water we can carry, as well as some sturdy, light-weight food. Not much, though. I'll bet anything we can kill a mole-rat or something on the road."

"Mole-rat: the other, other white meat," he quipped. "Alright. That all sounds suspiciously like a plan by your standards. Here, put this in one of those fancy pockets on your armor. Somewhere readily accessible." He handed her a small, plastic box.

"What is it?"

"Your own emergency first-aid kit. It contains a small bottle of antiseptic, needle-and-suture, gauze, a stimpak, and a syringe of antivenom. Also one Mentat, but only take that if you're having trouble staying conscious – it's a powerful stimulant and an addictive drug, and I do not endorse using it except in an emergency."

"Thank you. This will come in handy sooner or later." She slid it into the large pocket on her right thigh.

"You're welcome. I would have made you one weeks ago, but there weren't a lot of extra supplies to be had in Goodsprings. That's some high-quality armor, by the way. How much does it weigh?"

"Knight said about 25 pounds. I'm not going to lie – it's going to take some getting used to. And I'm already sweating."

"Yeah, you'll basically need to double your water intake, and swallow a salt tablet every few hours. I'll carry the lion's share of the gear for a few days. It'd be very inconvenient if you had a heat
Laden with the necessities of life, the two travelers descended the long hill down from the Outpost for the last time. Megan had picked up a patchy radio signal on her Pip-Boy, and was humming happily to whatever corny twentieth century songs they were playing today. Her mood had taken a strong uptick since she woke, and Arcade suspected she was unconsciously repressing the bad memories instead of dealing with them in a way that could help. Whatever had happened yesterday, it had stolen some of her naïveté and shaken her already-precarious stability. He was concerned.

The music turned to static as they reached the flat road, and she switched off the radio, interrupting his thoughts with a question: "Can you teach me hand-to-hand combat?"

"I'm going to give you a hard 'no' on that one. I have never been one for anything resembling a fistfight or even melee combat. Part of it's from wearing glasses for most of my life – I can't afford to risk getting them broken. I also need my hands intact for surgical work."

She looked disappointed. "I've realized lately how much trouble I'm in when I'm in close quarters with someone stronger than me – which includes almost every man – especially if I drop my machete. I'd like to have some better options in a pinch."

Arcade thought for a moment, trying to say something helpful without being discouraging. "A biological fact is that most men are stronger than most women without trying too hard. Testosterone gives us a huge advantage when it comes to building muscle. That said, I can show you some exercises to build upper-body strength, and there are techniques you can learn from other people to take down a bigger, stronger opponent. Some of the NCR soldiers stationed at Camp McCarran outside of Vegas offer a free self-defense class on Saturday mornings to train people how to get out of a bad situation – escaping holds, hurting an attacker enough to get away, that sort of thing. We often refer domestic abuse victims and prostitutes tired of clients taking advantage, but they'll teach anybody."

"Cool. I'll check it out when we get there. Thanks. " She picked up a pebble and tossed it from hand to hand a few times before dropping it. "Back when I first woke up, Doc had me doing a bunch of exercises to work on hand-eye coordination and fine motor control, as well as some basic strength-building stuff. This was months before I met you, but I couldn't even walk or grip a fork on my left side. The exercises helped. Once I got to a functional place, though, I stopped doing them, and my body still feels a little uneven. It's weird, though, since I got shot on the right side of my head. I don't get it, and Doc didn't explain it very well. I believe his exact words were, 'brains are crazy things and yours is crazier than most.'"

"The right side of the brain actually controls the left side of the body. Yes, it's counter-intuitive. You're lucky for a lot of reasons, but especially that you're so young – a youthful brain can compensate extremely well for damage that would permanently impair an older person. A healthy left hemisphere can take over for a damaged right, and do most of the things the right used to do. Back when brain surgery wasn't a prohibitively dangerous thing to do, doctors could even remove half of a person's brain as a last-ditch move to treat serious seizure disorders, and the patient would do reasonably well more often than not."

"That's amazing!"

"It is. In any case, you should go back to doing those exercises. The first 24 months after a traumatic brain injury are the most important for recovery. Improvement plateaus after that."

They walked along some more, the courier juggling pebbles, badly, but enthusiastically. She tried out her new gun out on a lone soldier ant they passed, and seemed pleased with its power and rate-of-
fire. She deliberated out loud over harvesting some ant meat for dinner later, but decided they could probably do better, which was a relief to Arcade. He didn't like eating bugs. They passed the turn-off to the former Viper camp, and she shuddered a little at the memory. "I really needed this armor, but I feel a little bad for misleading Ranger Jackson to get the bounty. In my defense, he did only ask me to bring him proof of the leader's death…and it's not like the Legion was going to do it, right?"

"Whatever helps you sleep at night," he said lightly. Noticing that she really did look guilty, he added, "It was disingenuous, but you're exactly the kind of civilian ally the NCR needs in the field right now, and you'll be more effective with that gear than without. Just…do some nice things for the rangers, and don't tell them why. Then you'll be fair and square, if that matters to you."

They made good time, stopping only twice to cool down in the shade, and it was only about 4:30 when they arrived in Nipton, which appeared to be empty. They hadn't spotted any more wildlife, but had brought enough dry food to get through the night. Megan suggested they check the general store for supplies and shelter, and Arcade agreed.

She stepped into the building first and immediately screamed. Alarmed, he drew his gun and followed her in. A Powder Ganger was sitting in a chair in the middle of the room, glaring at them both. Even in the dim light, Arcade could see that his legs had been shattered with extreme force and that infection had taken hold in the midst of the blood and bone-splinters. His face was sallow with pain and fever, and his lack of perspiration spoke to extreme dehydration.

"Shut up, bitch. Ain't I got enough fucking problems without you screeching and goggling at me?" His voice was raspy, and almost inaudible.

Getting over her fright, she responded stiffly, "Sorry. We didn't know you were in here. Why didn't the Legion kill you, anyway?"

"Prize for second place was I got to live, but they beat my fucking legs with hammers. I'm fucking crippled, get it?"

"Second prize in what?"

"The Legion's fucking lottery. I wish the runner-up had just gotten a fucking bullet to the fucking head. That lucky motherfucker Swanwick waltzed outta here with his ticket, and I'm left rotting here." He coughed and groaned. "Cantcha just shoot me, girlie? You look like the sort who'd want to kill me anyway."

Megan froze, looking to at Arcade uncertainly. He stepped forward to examine the man more closely. "I'm a doctor, but there's nothing I can do for you now, I'm afraid. I don't even have enough painkillers on me to administer a fatal overdose. Would you like some water and enough pills to fall asleep? I could either stay and talk to you or give you some privacy, then shoot you when you're unconscious."

The man looked at the doctor with fear and hope in his eyes, "Yeah…if you would…I'll take that over dying slow. And I would like to talk while it's kicking in. But not with that girl in the room. She makes me fucking uncomfortable."

Arcade turned to the nervous courier and said heavily, not looking forward to this duty, "Wait outside. Don't go far and come inside immediately if you see anything or anybody."

Left in the near-dark, he gave "Boxcars" three of his dwindling supply of pain-pills and helped him wash them down with half a bottle of their precious water. He had become so weak that it didn't take long at all for him to slip into unconsciousness. Until then, Arcade listened to a half-delirious stream
of confessions, boasts, and regrets, saying little in response, but encouraging him to go on when he stopped. When there were no more words and the former convict was unresponsive to stimuli, he shot Boxcars at close range, obliterating his head, and left the building.

Megan was uncharacteristically sensitive to his desire not to talk and led him to an unoccupied house on the outskirts of town, which turned out to have a functioning deadlock on the door and two clean twin beds. They spoke little as they unpacked for the night and ate a cold dinner together. He demonstrated some callisthenic exercises, and left her attempting push-ups in the living room while he read poetry in bed.

An hour later, she came in and lay down on her bed, looking at him like she wanted to say something. He put down his book and spoke preemptively, "You want to know why I wasted time and resources on a criminal, right? After all, we could have just shot him on the spot."

"I wasn't going to say anything, but yeah. You did it, so I know it was the right thing to do, but I'm confused about why. I'm also a little shocked that you went straight to killing him, but I guess I can understand why that was better than just leaving him there."

"My vocation is to alleviate human suffering to the best of my ability. As a person, I obviously prefer friends to strangers, and allies to enemies, but when there is someone sick or hurt whom I have the power to help, I have an obligation to them as a doctor, regardless of my personal feelings on what they've done. It cost me little to give that Powder Ganger a humane end to his life. I didn't like giving him medicine that other people might need, or water that we're probably going to be wanting by late afternoon tomorrow, but as a doctor, even one working within an economy of extreme scarcity, I don't feel like I can make those kinds of judgments and withhold care that's needed.

"As for killing him? Yes, sometimes assisted suicide is kinder than any other option, especially as we lacked the resources to provide palliative care until he died on his own. Barring a lot of antibiotics and other things we don't have with us, nothing would have saved his life."

"Um…" He wasn't sure how to address the other thing she'd said. "You know, a thing isn't automatically 'right' just because I do it. I am wholly capable of being a selfish human being who does the wrong thing for the wrong reasons. I need my friends to be people who will at least sometimes challenge and question the things that I do. Otherwise, I could go mad with unchecked sophistry and become just as misdirected as Caesar…well, probably not that bad, but you get the idea. You need to start making your own decisions about what's right, and pushing back if you disagree with me."

"Okay. Note to self: stop Arcade from becoming the next evil genius." She had scrunched up her eyes in thought. "What if…those Legion guys had gotten you all the way to the Legion Fort? What if they had wanted you to give Caesar himself medical care, even save his life? Would you have done it?"

"Ah…I was afraid you were going to ask me that. I don't know. Some legionary in a prison camp hospital? Sure, I would treat him on principle. But as captive myself, in a position to end Caesar's life with a turn of a scalpel? I think my decision there, no matter what I did, would keep me awake nights for the rest of my life. I have heard that his second-in-command, Legate Lanius, is much more brutal, so that would be one point in the 'save Caesar' column. On the other hand, Caesar deserves to be punished for what he's made possible in the Southwest and the murders and miseries that his armies have inflicted. I'd like to kill him for that, and to prevent anything he might do in the future, but I don't feel like I can if he's come to me as a patient. Or, rather, ordered me dragged for days across the desert to force me to treat him...I've argued this one in my head a lot, and have mostly just come down to hoping that I'm never in that position, which is kind of a cowardly moral retreat."
"No, that's a hard one. Well, for you. I'd just shoot him, but that's different." She stood up restlessly and tried to look outside the boarded-up windows into the greying dusk. "I guess I'll try to sleep tonight. Didn't think I could, with all the dead people here, but it's easy to forget they're out there." She checked the time on her Pip-Boy and remembered something else, "Oh, do you have any radaway to spare? I've been ignoring it lately and hit 150 this morning."

"Yes." He hung the IV bag on an empty picture hook behind the bed, and set the needle in the large vein in her inner arm. "Do you want me to read you more Dune while that drains? It picks up after the first few chapters."

"Sounds good, thanks."

Nipton made her nervous and the radaway made her arm burn, but Arcade's voice eventually lulled her to sleep. She had a fitful dream in which Caesar – a faceless brute with a fox hat in her imagination – handed her a scalpel and told her to remove the bad half of his brain. She was trying to explain to him that, as a courier, she had a moral obligation to kill him, when Vulpes Inculta grabbed her from behind and she woke up in a sweat, head pounding feverishly.

_Fucking radaway always makes me sick._ Her Pip-Boy said that it was just before five, and she figured she'd let him sleep another hour before waking him. Instead, she went to the other room and ran through the strengthening exercises again, surprised at just how sore she was from the unaccustomed exercise and heavier gear. Quickly growing weary of that, she practicing stripping and assembling her weapon until that too was boring. It was then 5:45, and she was getting tired of waiting. Heading back into the bedroom, she pulled on her armor as noisily as possible, and, when that didn't work, accidentally-on-purpose knocked a dusty alarm clock off her beside table with a satisfying crash.

Jerking awake, Arcade yelled out, "Thursday! Wait...ugh. Dammit."

"Sorry buddy," she said laughing, "but we need to get an early start today. Long road ahead. I'll let you sleep in at Novac tomorrow morning."

It was no good trying to engage the doctor before he'd properly woken up, and this normally took an hour or so. She took point and led the way through a man-made canyon, the road snaking its way back and forth uphill. It was probably best not to talk in an unfamiliar place like this – they would be vulnerable to an ambush from the rocky walls on either side. Spotting something suspicious on the road ahead, she stopped suddenly, and he, not paying attention, blundered into her, almost knocking her down.

She hissed, "Careful!" Pointing ahead, she whispered, "Look, there's a line of mines ahead. Some of them are under trash, but they're there. Should we tiptoe around, or set them off to spare the next traveler? They're probably functioning both as a trap and as an alarm system for someone, so we will have company if we blow them."

Arcade blinked, thinking, "Um...if we do set them off, we need a plan first. Some place to hide so we can ambush them when they come to see what their trap got."

"There's an empty coyote den over there. They would have to be close to ground level to see inside that. It's not big enough for both of us, but you can sit inside and I'll crouch by the entrance since I'm camouflaged and armored. If they're still alive after the initial volleys, I'll charge them and you can provide covering fire while still taking shelter. This will work best if we do it now, while it's still kind of dark."

He consented reluctantly to this, squeezing his six-foot-two frame into the little recess, while she
stationed herself in front, pulling her hat low to keep her pale face from betraying them in the dim light. Taking aim at the nearest mine, she threw a medium-size stone at it, lighting up a chain-reaction of explosions. This had the desired effect. Shouts rang out from around the bend in the road.

"Trap's sprung, everybody move!"

"If that's another coyote, I'm stringing you up by your eyelids, Marky!"

Keeping perfectly still, Megan checked her Pip-Boy's proximity displays. Five red dots were moving toward them, one reading a higher elevation the others, apparently on the ridge above and behind their hiding place. She showed Arcade, pointing upward, and he nodded.

A powerfully-built Viper member with decent armor approached the debris cautiously, kicking at scraps of the material that now littered the pavement. The others looked around anxiously, but relaxed when they didn't see anybody.

"Nothing," the leader growled. "Five mines gone, and for what? Marky, what happened here?"

"Prob'ly a rock rolling off the mountain, boss," Marky said glumly. "Sorry."

The leader lit into the other Viper, shouting and spitting into his face, while the other two lowered their weapon, looking disgusted at the false alarm. The one above hadn't moved, but Megan figured this was the best chance they were going to get. She flashed Arcade a silent count of three and opened fire, aiming her first and most accurate shot at the leader's head. It only skimmed his scalp, but downed him at once, leaving him screaming on the ground. Marky got the first blast from the plasma defender, which left a smoldering hole in his unarmored chest. The other two didn't get to fire a shot either, as Megan's semi-automatic chewed them down before they had a chance. Arcade finished off the leader, and the screaming stopped.

"Goddammit, who's down there?" The dot representing the surviving gang member was moving, trying to get to a vantage point from which he could shoot them. Megan decided not to give him the chance, and ran out into the middle of the road to shoot him first. Distance and accuracy were not her forte, however, and she missed him clean. He was apparently a pretty good shot, however, because the next thing she knew she was lying on the ground feeling like someone had slammed her in the chest with a sledgehammer and driven all the air from her lungs. Her field of vision was filled with the gold of sunrise and the glowing green of plasma bursts; she tried to get up to help, but couldn't do anything but gasp for breath. Something heavy plummeted to the earth ten feet away from her, and she just managed to turn her head to see that it was the half-melted remains of a Viper gang-member.

She tried to say, "Nice shot," but only a hoarse whisper came out.

"So, how does it feel to get shot while wearing body armor?" Arcade was leaning over, checking her vitals, but didn't seem overly worried.

*Probably better than when not wearing it,* she thought, but just gave him a thumbs-up, waiting for the black specks on her vision to clear. The sky was so pretty in the early morning. She tried again and this time got out the words, "Good work, team."

"Mm-hm. I especially liked the part where you ran out into the open to blindly shoot at a waiting sniper. That stuff doesn't let you *ignore* bullets, you know, and a bigger caliber could actually punch through. Plus, you have a head, at least for now."

"That was just...er...a diversion to draw his fire. It worked perfectly." She sat up and rubbed her chest, finding a shallow dimple on the tough ceramic plate above her heart. "Aw, my new armor got
Shaking his head, he laid out the spoils. "Some ammo. 5.56mm and .308s. Two of their weapons – an assault rifle and a hunting rifle – are in decent shape and would be good for trade if you can take the weight. I can't carry anymore. The guy up there had a sniper rifle, but my plasma defender destroyed it. The unfortunate Marky had a nice combat knife, if you want to try it on for size."

"Great!" She secured the guns inside her sleeping roll, and attached the heavy bundle to her pack. The knife she tucked into a built-in sheath on her armor. "Let's go look at their campsite. I want some more breakfast."

Having finished the Vipers' squirrel – no, rat-on-a-stick, she tried roasted banana yucca for the first time and found it starchy, but pretty good. She'd been at least a little hungry most of the time since they'd left Goodsprings, and it was nice to be full for once. Even Arcade partook of some of the food that couldn't be stored in the heat. While the bandits' water was free of parasites, it was still slightly irradiated; Megan drank it anyway, figuring that there was probably still some radaway in her system, and poured the remaining half-gallon into the camel-pack on her armor.

"My Pip-Boy says that this road should go past the ranger station in seven or eight miles. It's hard to tell, as it's kind of a circumventuous route. It straightens out into a highway after that." She stood up and staggered a little under the extra weight of the weapons and water. "I might have to slow it down a little."

"We're not in any hurry. Drop the assault rifle if you have to. It's not worth that much."

Arcade waited for the usual chatter and questions, but for once the courier was totally focused on walking. He took over the lead and set a gentle pace, keeping a wary eye out for danger. They surprised two young cazadores which he handled easily, but otherwise the way was clear.

Calling for yet another break only a mile or so from the station, she flopped down on the ground, panting from the heat. "I…don't…suppose Novac has showers, does it? Cold showers, not hot."

"No. It's back to bucket-and-sponge baths. Drink more water. You're very red. Any chills or dizziness?"

"I'm good. Just exhausted and hot. The whole world's not a desert, is it? Like, there are places that aren't like this?"

"The bombs royally messed up our climate even more than humans already had done before, but yes, some places in the east and north are temperate or cold during the daytime for at least part of the year."

"I wanna go to one of those places someday."

"You should get work as a caravan guard heading to New Canaan, in Utah, someday. Utah's still very much a desert and has been since before the war, but the weather patterns are more normal. It actually rains there, or so I'm told. Ready to go? We can take a long break at the station, and it should be safe enough to take that stuff off for an hour."

"Yeah. Help me up, please. I feel like a turtle stuck on my back."

Megan didn't jump for joy when they spotted the rangers' station in the distance, but she did pick up her feet a little. Arcade, however, sensed something that something was amiss as they drew nearer to the compound. "Hold on. Something's wrong. Where is the flag? The guards? Why is the gate open? Keep your weapon out."
They spotted the first dead ranger just inside the walls, a cursory look around revealed a half-dozen more bodies sprawled in the outbuildings and the guard tower. The courier shrugged off her pack and sat down on the ground, face in her hands. Arcade felt like he needed to take charge before she totally fell apart, "Don't despair. I'm going to check to see if they're actually all dead. While I'm doing that, you go look inside that office to see if there are any survivors. Be very careful."

He dutifully checked the dead men and women, knowing the task was futile before he began it, and noticed that the blood was not completely dry where it had splattered on the walls. Whoever had done this (three guesses who, he thought), they had been here not long before. If they hadn't been going so slowly, they would have walked straight into a hot situation. Even as he was thinking this, he heard a series of explosions coming from inside the closed trailer. He ran in, fearing the worst, but found only the courier standing with her back to the door, listening to a tape player:

"This is a message to the NCR from the Legion. We are coming for you. Run, and we will catch you. Hide, and we will find you. No matter what you do, you are all going to die. We took one of the women alive."

She popped the tape out and stuffed it into one of her armor pockets, and turned, face grim with anger and disgust, voice unrecognizable with rage. "Watch out, Arcade. This whole place is rigged with traps – under the bodies, behind the doors, you name it. I set off most of them on purpose, but there could be more. The time-stamp on this tape is from 45 minutes ago. We can catch them. We have to. We'll leave everything except our water, ammo, and medical supplies here and rescue that woman. We can come back for it later today or tomorrow."

"Okay." Arcade knew better than to argue with the courier when she was set on doing something, but he still thought it was worth pointing out: "Two can move faster than a group if they're fresh, but you're about spent and I'm…" His voice broke off as she pulled out a small white pill bottle and shook out two on her hand, crunching and swallowing them with a long drink of water. "What the hell was that?"

"Buffout. Knight gave them to me. You can lecture me later, after we've saved her. Follow me, stay here, or go to Novac without me, but I'm going after that woman."

Without another word, she strode from the building, out of the compound, and struck out confidently to the east, between two peaks, where the grass had been beaten down by many heavy feet. As the Buffout hit, she began to run, a pace which he struggled to match, getting a stitch in his side after five minutes. They ran out of the hills, across a crumbling highway, and into a treeless grassland beyond. They had covered about two miles in 15 minutes when she stopped abruptly, sucking impatiently at the camel pack straw and checking the proximity alerts on her Pip-Boy while he caught up.

Breathing quickly in short, hard gasps, she snapped out the plan (such as it was) in painful bursts. "Eight I think. 200 yards ahead. Going to lead with my gun. Shoot if hostage is clear. Close with melee. You cover me."

"Understood. First, though, take a second to slow down your breathing and breathe deeper. You're going to hyperventilate and pass out." Or have a stroke, he thought. Buffout put tremendous stress on the heart and lungs, which effect was exacerbated by overheating and thirst. Arcade had seen more than one soldier pay the price for using it to push their body beyond its endurance.

She tried, but ended up with a coughing fit instead, resting a gloved hand on his shoulder to stay upright. "I'm good. Just...have to do this. Rest later. Let's go." She double-checked her weapon and sprinted toward the group and he, of course, followed. The legionaries had stopped for a break and were talking and laughing, with someone or something lying in a heap off to the side. Three fell at
once to the strafe of Megan's service rifle, and Arcade winged one on the left, though his other two shots went wide. Then she was in among them, machete in her right, knife in her left, slicing and stabbing with effective fury, if not with any finesse. Hesitating for fear of hitting her, Arcade finished the one he'd wounded, and turned to see what other targets were left, but it was already over, Megan down on one knee gasping with her machete stuck in a dying Legion officer's chest.

A cold weight settled into his chest as he turned to the woman, who was naked except for the remains of a t-shirt and chains on her wrists, half-reaching for medical supplies that he already knew were useless. Her throat had been cut from ear to ear, probably less than ten minutes before. She was still warm, but very much dead.

His friend staggered over, dropping to her knees and trying to close the wound on the ranger's throat with her hands and smearing blood all over. "Oh no, oh no…help her, Arcade. Please help her. We saved her."

"No, I'm sorry. We were too late. She's gone." He felt like crying himself. They'd been so close.

Arcade expected screaming, sobbing, and denial, but her actual response worried him more. She said "Okay," stood up, legs shaking, and walked slowly back toward the ranger station and their belongings without a backwards glance.

He unclasped the woman's NCR dogtags and stuffed them in his pocket to give to the next ranger they saw, picked up the weapons Megan had left behind (which was all of them), and jogged after her. She accepted them with thanks, but said nothing else. When they reached the station, she let him wash her hands and examine her for injury without complaint, and drank an electrolyte drink when ordered, but was otherwise unresponsive.

It took another two hours before the town's classic dinosaur came into view, and she'd been very quiet, giving one-word answers to most questions and flatly ignoring any mention of the dead woman. A large mole-rat got within six feet of her at one point, but she'd barely drawn her rifle before he had killed it. Fortunately, there was nothing else to attack them on the highway.

They passed under a glaring sniper and entered the gated courtyard of the old motel as the sun was setting. He dropped his bags at the foot of the staircase and told her to wait while he rented them a room. Sitting down on the bottom step, she seemed to wake up a little and looked around dreamily, "This is a nice place."

"Sure. Kind of. I'll be right back." He first went to the office, which was locked, and then toward the door in the side of the dinosaur, hoping that someone there had keys to rent.

It was difficult to describe exactly what was going on in Megan's mind at that moment. There was something painful bouncing around in her soul with sharp, hurtful spikes, but a fluffy cloud of amnesia was protecting her from the memory for a moment. She remembered arriving at the ranger camp and remembered leaving, but for the moment was missing the interim. It hadn't been a nice visit, she hypothesized. And there was something else…something small and square, in her side pocket…a tape. Frowning, she picked it up and was about to play it on her Pip-Boy, when a door opened on the floor above and a woman came out.

She was as old as anybody you expect to see in the wasteland, with white hair and a brown, wrinkly face under a canvas hat. She was looking down at the young woman curiously. "Hi there! The name's Daisy Whitman. You just roll into town?"

"Yeah. Megan Martin. My friend's getting us a room. I think. I sort of dozed off when he was talking."
"Long day, huh? You do look a little peaky."

"It was. We walked all the way from Nipton. I'm just tired. What do you do around here, Daisy?"

"A little of this and a little of that. Mostly I scavenge parts from old tech sites like the REPCONN test site up the road. Used to be a be a pilot when I was your age…God, I miss it some days."

"Oh, you flew for the NCR?"

Daisy seemed to find this question funny. "'For?' No, not exactly. It was a long time ago. Things are a lot different these days, and those days are way behind me."

Something clicked in the courier's sluggish brain, and she asked slyly, "You don't know Arcade Gannon, do you?"

"Sure I do. He's like the son I never had. I see him every now and then, when he makes the trek down from Vegas. How do you know him?"

"He's actually travelling with me right now. That's him coming out of the dinosaur right now." She pointed and waved him over, smiling a little bit at his too-serious expression.

"Arcade! Good to see you. You and your friend should join me for dinner and drinks after you get settled in. I've got plenty just now – the McBrides have practically been giving their steaks away lately, what with all the attacks on their stock."

"Um…" He stood looking between Daisy and Megan, apparently at an impasse.

"Of course we'll have dinner with you," Megan said impatiently. "C'mon, Arcade, you don't have to stay in and read every night. And we never had lunch today, so you're probably as hungry as I am."

Still looking concerned about something, he relented, "Yes…okay. Thanks, Daisy. Just give us a few minutes and we'll come over. Are you back in your old room now? I'd thought you were living with…"

"Yeah, it didn't work out with Sandra Gibson. We broke up six months ago. You should visit more often. I'll go put the steaks on. See you in a little bit."

Megan felt like she was forgetting something. In a flash, it came to her: "Daisy, which room belongs to Craig Boone? We have a letter for him from someone at the Outpost."

"Second from the right down there, honey. Don't knock, though, just slide it under the door. The kid works all night and needs his sleep."

Their second-floor room was dark and dirty, even when Arcade lit his little lantern and set it on the table. There was only one bed – a king-sized – and he said apologetically, "Sorry. He didn't have any doubles left. I'll take the couch tonight if you want."

"Don't be silly. I don't mind if you don't." Sitting down on one side and pulling off her sticky armor, Megan was intrigued to find powdery white salt crystals all over her arms and legs. "Wow, I guess you really do sweat out a lot of salt. I never saw that before." Partly undressing and choosing her shorts instead, she pulled the mysterious tape out of her pocket, looked at it for a moment like it was a snake about to bite her, and then set it on the nightstand, puzzled about why it scared her.

Glancing up, she caught Arcade watching her with a frown. Laughing, she said, "Yes, I know I'm filthy. I'll take a bath tomorrow." More seriously, she added, "It's probably nothing, but I feel a little
odd. Like my body can't decide whether it wants to go run a marathon or melt into a boneless puddle on the floor. I think maybe I should've worked up to a long hike wearing that get-up rather than just doing it, yeah? Oh well. Ready?"

Arcade loved Daisy, but wasn't used to talking with her in the company of other people, especially not a friend who was possibly in the middle of a mental breakdown and coming down from a drug she didn't remember taking. But Megan, amazingly, used every bit of charisma she had to make the conversation flow. She asked Daisy about her days as a pilot, listening raptly to her descriptions of the landscape and the thrill of flight; she encouraged Arcade to share about some of the advances he'd made in his research; and she explained about the amnesia and rescuing Arcade and her various objectives for the future in a way that made their strange partnership make sense. As the evening progressed, Arcade even found himself laughing over a glass of terrible wine while Daisy told a funny story about the time Johnson had painted an innocuous pink heart onto the back of Moreno's power armor (it hadn't been funny at the time – Moreno had almost killed Johnson for the prank). Two hours and a couple of drinks in, though, he realized that the courier, who'd been quiet for a few minutes, had fallen asleep sitting up. He gently moved her to the couch without waking her and, after hesitating a little, told Daisy what had happened at the ranger station and afterwards, as well what Vulpes Inculta had done at Nipton.

"...and I don't know if I should explicitly remind her, or wait for it to come back naturally. I'm not a neurologist, but I'm beginning to suspect that her automatic response to moments of extreme stress might be related to the physical injury she suffered, or some other trauma that happened before then. I don't know what would help."

"You should tell her, Arcade. Something's going to trigger that memory sooner or later, and it's better that should come from you in a safe place rather than the next legionary she meets in the field. As for the other stuff – at times when she's calm and happy, talk about healthy ways to cope with trauma. You know at least a little bit about treating PTSD, or you wouldn't have been able to get Johnson through his dark time; hold her hand through the hard stuff until you can take her to see one of the head-doctors you know." She smiled at him. "You've always been a good boy, Arcade, and kind in a universal sort of way. It's nice to see you thinking so much about another, specific human being rather than stewing in your own thoughts."

He thought about what she'd said as he carried the sleeping girl back to their room and wrapped her in her bed roll on top of the questionably-clean motel blanket, and decided that she was right. His association with the courier had brought him back into a sense of purpose and engagement with the world that he hadn't felt for a long time, and a lot of it came down to having a real friend he could trust. Putting a bottle of water in easy reach if she woke up thirsty, he went to sleep himself.

Several hours later, the light of the moon spilling into their room through the dirty window, Megan woke up shaking all over, stomach knotted with nausea. She'd dreamt that she'd been naked, wrapped in chains, and forced by men with swords to dig her own grave. When she finished, they made her kneel in it and one of them bent down to kill her. As she lay dying, she realized with horror that her killer was Arcade dressed in Legion red, and she tried to scream, except her throat was cut. She woke up feeling her throat for a wound that wasn't there. Swallowing the urge to vomit, she found a water bottle on the table beside her, and drank it dry. Then she noticed the tape again. Acting on a whim, she grabbed it, put on her boots, and went outside, into the chilly night air.

Leaning on the balcony and admiring the full moon, she slid the tape into her Pip-Boy and pressed "play."
Boone –

I know it’s been six months, but I just heard about Carla. I'm sorry. I know you loved her. I hope you made the bastards responsible pay for what they did.

Last time my patrol came through, you told me that she was the only thing keeping your head above water. I want you to find another reason to keep going – something other than killing Legion, maybe, but if that's what keeps you breathing, then go for it. Don't give them the satisfaction of giving up before you’re done.

Still at the Outpost if you want a drinking buddy or someone to shoot with. Old times, and all that. Take care of yourself.

-Ghost

PS: The kid I'm sending this with needs a hell of a lot of help if you're in the mood for charity work. I'm told it's good for the soul.

Holding his lighter close to the dingy paper, Boone read the letter for a fourth time, looking up after every line to scan the moonlit road for new threats. So, Ghost thought he needed a hand up. His old training partner and one-time girlfriend wasn't wrong, but she was months too late to pull him out. And with a damn letter. Boone didn't even know what he was waiting for anymore. Carla had been taken from him. Carla had been killed. Carla had been avenged, with help from a bitter, angry drifter. The Courier (as Boone thought of her) had helped him, made promises, and then disappeared. She had said she’d be back in a week, but it had now been more than four months. The only thing that kept him from a suicide run was the certain knowledge that an assault on Cottonwood would be the end of him, and his unfounded hope that someone would walk into town to show him how he could do more to strike back. Carla had been the one good distraction in his life, and without her he was all alone with his demons. It was a fight he was losing.

Wondering about the "charity case" Ghost had mentioned – in their terse conversation at shift change, Manny hadn't mentioned any visitors except a Followers doctor and his guard – Boone put the flame to the letter and let the burning paper fall to the sandy road below. The glowing ashes blew away in the night wind, fading into black within seconds. Boone's sharp eyes caught movement on the far side of the highway – a skinny figure shuffling north with its head down. A faint green glow suffused its torso and head.

"Fucking irradiated ferals from fucking REPCONN." He casually drew a bead on it, began to squeeze the trigger…and stopped. It didn't look like a ghoul through the scope. He looked again and decided it was a person carrying a light. A stupid person, out alone at night. A woman or a teenager, based on the height. He lowered the gun in disgust. Was it Strauss, out on another bender? Some fucked-up Khan kid on a vision quest or some shit? Whoever it was, they were going to die out there. Maybe sooner rather than later, he thought, as he spotted quick movement fifty feet behind the oblivious walker. This was a real ghoul, an all-too-common sight on the highway, which launched itself into a frenzied, flailing charge at that very moment. Drawing and aiming with quick confidence, he shot it an arm's reach away from the person, who was bowled over by the creature's dying momentum. The ghoul didn't move again, but neither did the human, except to sit up and hang its head. Growling in frustration about civilians with a death wish, Boone stomped down the stairs, out the gate, and across the road.
It was a unarmed girl in cut-offs and a grey shirt, which was now speckled with the ghoul's greenish blood. Her hands, elbows, and knees were scraped and bleeding from being knocked down, though she didn't seem to notice or care. Instead, she was sitting cross-legged on the ground, playing with a glowing green Pip-Boy on her wrist, brown hair hanging over her face. "What the fuck are you doing out here in my line of sight? Didn't you see that ghoul behind you?" He wanted to strangle her for making his job harder, and for being stupid.

She spared him a sidelong glance, looking confused. "Oh. Was that loud noise you? I remember coming outside to clear my head, and then I was out here. Sorry. If you killed a ghoul for me, thanks. I was asleep or something." She rubbed her eyes with her left hand and he saw her face clearly for the first time, gasping with angry surprise in recognition.

"You. What the fuck. You disappear for months and then come back here to stroll around the wasteland at night. What are you, high? Drunk? Did you actually have deliveries to make, or were you just playing some twisted game with me? Answer me."

The girl looked a little more alert now, and seemed both alarmed and hopeful at his outburst. "Wait…you know me? What's my name?"

Boone gaped at her in disbelief, his anger giving way to despair. She was crazy. Or an addict of some kind. She wasn't the answer to his problems and never had been. Feeling weary and resigned, he answered in a dead voice, "You are Megan. You are a courier. You are not the person I thought you were."

She stood up and faced him with big eyes, looking lost: "We met…before? When I was making deliveries? Please, you have to tell me…"

"I don't have to do anything for you. Get your ass back inside the compound and sleep it off. Or don't. Die out here, see if I care. Leave me alone." He turned on his heel and strode away, wanting to scream with rage.

"Wait!" She ran after him and grabbed his arm. He shook her off roughly and kept walking. She sprinted ahead surprisingly fast, blocking his way into Dinky, arms crossed. "At least tell me who you are."

"Boone. Move, or I'll move you. I have to watch the road."

"Oh! That was your letter from Ghost. Can I come up there with you? I seriously need to ask you a bunch of questions."

"No." He took hold of her shoulders and shoved her to the side, and climbed the stairs to Dinky's mouth, fuming. Five minutes later, he heard footsteps coming up slowly, and then the door opened. It was the girl, looking scared but determined.

"You need to leave. I don't want to talk to you."

She shook her head, flinching when he took a threatening half-step toward her, but went on resolutely. "No, I need make you understand something, and then I need to understand our history together, whatever that is. You expected something from me that I didn't reciprocate. That's because, just over four months ago, I got shot in the head. It took me a month to walk and talk clearly again. I forgot every name, face, and place I ever knew. I have physical and mental problems that I struggle with. But I'm here now and willing to re-learn whatever commitment you think I have toward you, and decide if I can honor it as the person I am now. If you don't believe me, look." She pushed her short, scraggly hair aside and showed him her forehead. Even by the faint light of the moon, he could
"9mm?" He didn't know what else to say.

"Yeah, two. Execution style. Still haven't got the one who did it, but that's an eventual goal of mine."

"What happened to your face?"

"Hm? Oh." Her expression darkened. "The scratches and the eye? A few days ago, we ran into Legion at Nipton, more than we could fight. They let us go to spread the word, but one of them hit me a few times to prove a point."

Boone growled, sounding like a vicious dog. "Who's 'us'?"

"My friend, Arcade Gannon, and I. He's a doctor with the Followers of the Apocalypse. We're going to Vegas together."

"Those anarchic cultists? Why the hell are you travelling with one of them? I didn't think they usually left their little forts."

She looked at him coldly. "He's my friend, and the best person I've ever met. Don't you bad-mouth him."

"Whatever. Even if it's true, none of that explains the shit you were up to tonight. I came this close to shooting you because I thought you were a fucking ghoul. If I had killed another-" he stopped and swallowed, "If I had killed an unarmed woman, no matter how dumb she was, I literally couldn't have lived with myself."

Her eyes grew dull, and she unconsciously fiddled with the buttons on her Pip-Boy. "Yeah…sorry about that. Really. I had some kind of blackout earlier today and again just now when something reminded me." She pointed to the Pip-Boy. "There's a tape recording in here from one of the legionaries who sacked that ranger station south of here today. They killed everybody and wanted to let the NCR know that they had taken one of the women alive..." Her teeth were chattering now, less from cold than stress, and she looked to Boone like a cornered animal, eyes darting around the walls of a trap, heart ready to burst from fear.

He clenched his teeth so hard his jaw cracked, wanting to scream at her to shut up, to stop giving him new nightmares. Instead, he grabbed the thick wool blanket folded in the corner and wrapped it around her shoulders, sitting her down on the enclosure's one chair. "Okay. So you found the station, found the tape…and?"

"We ran," she said simply. "I knew they were close. There were eight in the group we caught up with, though we couldn't see the ranger at first. I killed most of them – first with my service rifle, then with my machete. Arcade killed the last one, then went to help the ranger, who was tied up nearby. But..." she trailed off.

"But she was already dead," he finished numbly.

"Yeah. Hadn't been for long. Her throat was still bleeding, I do remember that. But the next thing I knew I was walking into Novac. I had the vague sense that something…unpleasant had happened, but didn't remember what it was until an hour or so ago. When I listened to the tape again. And that's all." She pulled the blanket tight around her and hugged her chin to her chest.

"You tried. That's more than a lot of people would. And you killed some Legion. That's worth something." Even though he resented her for triggering his worst fears and regrets, Boone felt some
respect for this damaged person, whoever she actually was.

She yawned, eyes drifting shut. "I didn't go out there to kill legionaries. I did it to save a woman. But I couldn't do that. I was too slow." She yawned again, wider. "Sorry. I haven't been sleeping well. Bad dreams."

"I know the feeling." Boone came to a decision. "How's this: I'll tell you everything I know about you when I get done with my shift and after you get some sleep. About 9:30. Deal?"

"Deal." She started clumsily folding the blanket to return to him, but he stopped her. "You can borrow it. I only use it when it's actually cold and tonight's not too bad." He followed her down the stairs and watched her trudge across the courtyard. He kept this vigil until the motel door had shut behind her and the town was still again.

So the Courier had returned to Novac. Or at least someone that looked a lot like her had. She 'needs a lot of help,' huh Ghost? That's putting it lightly.

Megan woke up slowly, confused for a minute about where she was. Arcade was sitting up next to her, writing in his research journal. When he saw her watching him, he tucked his pencil away and smiled. "Sorry. Did I wake you up?"

"I don't think so." She sat up, wincing at her soreness, and let the fuzzy grey blanket slip off her shoulders. Arcade frowned.

"Where did you get that blanket? Why is there green blood on your shirt? And what happened to your arms?"

She looked down at the scratches and was puzzled herself for a moment, then remembered. "I went for…a walk last night. Fell down. Boone shot a ghoul next to me and gave me a blanket."

"Boone?" He used a clean rag and water to wash her arms and legs, before dabbing antiseptic on them.

"Ouch! That stings. Yes, the night sniper. Arcade, he knows me. From before. And he was very disappointed about something. Said he expected me months ago." Her face crumpled, and she made an effort to control herself. "Oh. I remembered about yesterday. Sorry if I was…unhelpful…on the road after the ranger station."

His face was grave, but he kept his voice light. "Well, you didn't fight me, but you didn't fight anything else either. Something in your past has taught you to cope with moments of extreme stress by fleeing. Dissociating. It's…very dangerous in the field."

"I know. I hate not being able to trust myself to stay in the moment, but I have no idea how to keep it from happening again. It's like I experience something that I can't take, and just…go away somewhere. I can't say it's a nice place, because I don't seem to make any new memories there, but nothingness feels better than something bad."

He sighed, retrieving his notebook. "I've been trying to dredge up useful things from my memory of the one practical psychology course I took in school." He flipped through the pages. "The common element I remembered about helping patients with repeat dissociative fugue is to teach them to ground themselves in their environment. Invest attention in sensory input – taste, touch, smell, hearing, sight, pain, balance, temperature, and so forth – and grab hold of these things to keep from going all the way inside."

"So…instead of getting stuck in a loop of horror and disgust, like when I realized that ranger was
dead, I should've focused on the ground under my feet, the hot sun on my head, the way my machete arm ached…that sort of thing?"

"Exactly. Those salt tablets you're carrying would also be an effective, sensory slap. A splash of water to the face could work. Count the cactuses you can see. Anything to orient you externally rather than internally." He looked thoughtful. "Dissociative fugue is an extreme version of a natural defense mechanism that's meant to keep you from experiencing overwhelming pain. Most people do it at some level – like, if you get hurt, your brain wants to switch to a different channel, to 'go away' so to speak, in to lower the body's stress response. The trick is not to let it leave you catatonic. Take all this with the caveat that I am not a psychiatrist, but I do have a colleague just outside of Vegas that I want you to talk with when we get there. She will be able to help you to navigate some of these mental roadblocks better than I can. Until then, every waking hour, or whenever you think of it, practice concentrating on sensory input until it becomes automatic."

"Got it. Be mindful, engaged. Thank you so much." She checked the time. "It's almost 9:00. Boone said he was going to come by in about half an hour to talk. I need to get cleaned up, and get changed into…different dirty clothes. God, I want to do laundry..."

"I pumped a bucket of water for you to bathe. It's in the bathroom. It's not good for drinking, but you can use whatever's left to flush the toilet – it's still hooked up to some kind of septic tank."

"You are awesome."

Thirty minutes later, feeling clean and comfortable and smelling of cheap soap, the courier was sitting on the bed eating cram from her pack while Arcade tried to fix his broken stethoscope with some glue at the room's rickety desk. "I hate cram, but at least it's filling."

"I'll stick with food that's not 200 years old, thank you very much. So, what's this Boone character like?"

"Eh…he's intense and a little scary. Very angry about something, and seems like he's on the edge of violence. Military type. Hates the Legion more than the average person. Does not like the Followers of the Apocalypse." Seeing his wary look, she hastened to add, "Don't worry, I won't let him be rude to you." A teasing note crept into her voice, "It was dark and all, but he's not bad to look at. Nice strong arms."

"Mnhm. Practice mindfulness while you're waiting. Count the dead roaches on the carpet. Savor every morsel of that canned ham product."

She had decided that there were at least 17 and that she didn't want any more cram when there was a knock at the door. Springing up, she let Boone inside and offered him the armchair, returning to her spot on the bed and looking at him expectantly. He said nothing. Following his gaze to the doctor, who was studying him back, she remembered her manners. "Oh, sorry. Boone, this is Arcade Gannon. Arcade, this is Boone. Boone, you said you'd tell me how you knew me."

"Yeah. Okay. You were a courier who came through Novac more than four months ago, carrying two packages. One was going to Sloan and one was going to the Strip. You were worried about the Strip one, and said you thought some men were following you. You decided to cut through the hills and take a short-cut to Sloan, and hopefully throw them off your trail."

"Huh, I never even thought about asking around in Sloan." He glared at her behind his sunglasses. "Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt. Please, go on."

"I had the day off. We went drinking together and got to talking. You said you'd been born in a
vault, but had been trained as a soldier in some state I'd never heard of, out east somewhere, before you became a courier. Not Colorado…further east."

"What vault? Soldier with whom?" She couldn't help but ask, even though his expression tightened with annoyance again.

"I don't know. You didn't say. And I didn't really believe the soldier thing anyway. You're what, 18? 20? And even back then you didn't act like military. You were impulsive and undisciplined and had a huge chip on your shoulder over something. Then again, you drank like someone trying desperately to forget, so maybe you were one. Beats me."

Boone's jaw clenched and he started drumming his fingers on the barrel of his gun; nevertheless, he continued, forcing the words out slowly and painfully. "Anyway, I told you that someone had kidnapped my wife. It's been six months now, so this was pretty soon after it…happened. I suspected someone local was responsible and asked you to help me find out who, and then help me kill them. While I was on duty the next night, you broke into the hotel office on a whim…and found a bill of sale for Carla and her unborn baby. Jeannie May, the old hotel manager, had sold her to the Legion for 200 caps. You invented some excuse to get the bitch out of her house that night and I shot her in front of the dinosaur."

Megan's eyes were wide, "Wow…I'm sorry, that's awful. Um, is it possible your wife's still--"

"No!" Boone slammed his hand down on the arm of the chair, making the other two jump. "No," he said, more quietly. "Sorry, but we've already had this conversation. She's dead. I know that for a fact. Got it?"

"Okay." She looked down. "So, what happened after we killed Jeannie May?"

"We moved the body so no one would suspect. You said you were tired of being a courier, and asked if I wanted to come kill Legion with you – after you delivered those last two packages."

Megan looked at Arcade, who was listening intently, stethoscope forgotten, then back at Boone, "Did I have anything in particular against the Legion?"

"Not that I know of. You had choice words to say about raiders, and maybe you considered the Legion to be a special kind of raider, but mostly I think you were just looking for a good death. And I was…am…too. I agreed. I got Ranger Andy to agree to take my shift over when you got back. And I waited. But you didn't come back. I assumed you'd been killed, until I saw you last night."

"That's…a lot to take in. Do I seem the same or different to you now?"

He laughed mirthlessly. "If I didn't know better, I would think that you had a hard, angry, foul-mouthed twin sister who stole all your meanness. You are nothing like you were. At all. You were smart, focused, and cynical. You were the opposite of nice and sweet. We would have made a good team." He paused, reflecting, "I do still feel like I owe you, though, so if there's something I can do to help you, I will. Ghost asked me to, anyway. I can still ask Andy to take over for a while while I help get you to Vegas safely. Or not. It doesn't matter. Nothing matters anymore." His voice was flat and his knuckles were white on his weapon.

Megan and Arcade exchanged glances. She responded carefully, "We were tentatively planning to stay and rest in Novac for a week or so, if there's enough work around here to support ourselves with. I have to get used to that armor over there before I do another long hike, so I'll be training with that. I have also been wanting to get better at hand-to-hand and melee combat, so if you could help me with stuff like that, I'll consider the 'debt' paid, if you really feel like you owe me." She added
cautiously, looking him in the eye: "I'm not opposed to killing Legion when I find them, it's just not my only raison d'être right now. And I actually do want to live, not throw my life away blindly."

Boone stood abruptly. "Close combat is not my best skill, but I probably have something to teach you, if that's what you want. I'll tell Andy he's on for tonight. Let me rest for a while, and we'll have our first lesson this evening. I want to know what you can do when you're not sleep-walking. See you at five." The door slammed behind him.

As soon as he was gone, Arcade spoke up urgently, "Megan, that guy has problems. Some pretty serious psychological issues that he's not dealing with at all well. He's suicidal and barely has his temper under control."

"Yeah, that's obvious. It does sort of seem like a break from his routine could be good for him, though. And it would be nice to have an extra gun on the road."

"Those are true things, but I'm only secondarily concerned about him. Mostly, I'm afraid he'll lash out at you when you provoke him and hurt you physically. Or go along with your riskier ventures because he doesn't care if he lives or dies."

"Do I provoke people, Arcade?" Her eyes sparkled with feigned innocence.

"Yes, yes, yes you do. Just be careful, that's all I'm asking. Don't needle him mercilessly like you did me. I have the patience of a saint, but Boone does not."

"I'm always careful and tactful, I'll have you know."

"And a terrible liar. Anyway, Daisy said that one of the farmer's wives, Nellie Winters, takes in dirty laundry. Let's carry our clothes over there now and see where the day takes us. We'll get Boone's blanket washed too – it's got blood on it."

Nellie turned out to be a pleasant young woman with curly hair and honey-brown skin, living in a house on the edge of town with its own water pump. She quoted them a reasonable price for the whole pile, and also offered to sell the courier an extra shirt for ten caps so that she didn't have to wear one of her horrendously dirty ones for the rest of the day.

"It should mostly all be dry by evening. Come pick it up before dark." They thanked her and turned to go. She stopped them, asking Arcade shyly, "Excuse me, are you a doctor? A real doctor, I mean?" When he assured her that he was, she continued, "I was wondering…could you go give our Dr. Strauss a crash course in…medical things? If you did, I'd refund 20 caps of my fee."

This sounded ominous to Arcade. "I don't mind lending a hand if I can, but what's wrong with Dr. Strauss?"

"People keep dying after she treats them, even when it didn't seem that bad to begin with. Just of fever and infection, not from bleeding or anything quick. It's gotten to the point where if someone local shoots themself in the foot or whatever, they'll deal with it at home rather than go to her. I'm going to have my first baby in seven or eight months, and I'm scared to death that I'll need her to do something for the birth."

"Yes, I will absolutely go talk to her and ask her about her surgical practices, and you don't need to pay me for that. Has she given you any vitamins for your pregnancy?"

"I haven't even gone to talk to her about it. I don't like her."

"Let me go back to my room and I'll get you what I have with me – I think it's only about a two
months' supply, but these early months are the most important anyway. Otherwise, beans, peas, green vegetables, Brahmin milk, and low-rad meat can provide you with the nutrients to keep you and your baby healthy."

"Are you sure you can't just hang around town until I'm due?" she joked nervously. "Thank you. I hope you can help her figure out what she's doing wrong."

As they walked back to the room together, Arcade quizzed the courier, "Based on what you just heard, what do you think Dr. Strauss is doing?"

"Um, maybe she's not washing her hands or tools well enough? Or whatever disinfectant or antiseptic she's using, maybe it's not strong enough to kill the germs?"

"If you didn't have any real antiseptic, how would you clean a wound?"

"Alcohol if I had it – not wine or beer, but liquor, the stronger the better. If not, then clean water. Rads don't matter so much in the short term, but bacteria does. If I don't have much alcohol, then just a little added to clean water works pretty well."

"When should you use a stimpak?"

"After I've removed any dirt and stuff from the wound and cleaned it really well."

"Yeah. People don't always do that part right. I mean, sometimes you have to stim the patient to keep them from bleeding out on the spot. Preventing death in five minutes takes priority over everything else, obviously. If you leave anything in there, however, especially porous materials like wood or cloth, you'll almost certainly have an infection in a few days, even if the skin is already healed above it. Bullets aren't as bad – they're sterile, and if they do have to stay, the body builds cysts around them to wall them off – but it's a good idea to get them out if you can do so safely. Emphasis on the word 'safely,' i.e., not under most field conditions."

"One vital piece of common knowledge that we've lost in post-war life is a functional understanding of germ theory. People usually get that dirty water makes them sick and dirty wounds fester, but they don't always understand why, which is important for consistent and educated practice." They had reached the room and he took a break from lecturing to repack his overflowing doctor's bag. "The reason I'm telling you all this is two-fold: I want you to be able to take care of yourself. The other is to give you a way to help others: if you can master the basics and apply them consistently, you'd be an improvement over some of these small-town butchers, especially if you find yourself in a place without any medical professionals at all."

"Okay. Lesson over. Do you want to come with me to annoy Dr. Strauss, or do you have other plans?"

"No thanks. I'm going to suit up and do a five-mile sweep of the area, and maybe meet some more of the locals. Are there any plants you want me to look out for?"

"Xander root and broc flower, always. Someone has been burning through my supply of healing powder. Be careful out there and carry lots of water. I know I sound like a broken record, but you have no idea how many cases of heat exhaustion and heat stroke we treat every week at the Fort."

Megan took a leisurely pace as she struck north, walking for an hour before turning off the path within sight of an industrial-looking complex a half-mile off, which included a glittering field of what appeared to be solar panels. That looked like something to check out with company, but she made sure to mark it on her map for future reference. She stopped for a break and a chat with Old Lady
Gibson, a scavver living out of an old garage with several large dogs, who told her in passing that she was willing to exchange metal tools and bullets in exchange for fresh meat for the dogs. Hiking through the scrub, the courier collected a half-pound of ripe cactus fruit, but saw no medicinal plants. The most exciting event occurred in the early afternoon, when a horrific growling and squealing ahead sent her scrambling for cover. It was a juvenile deathclaw – barely more than a baby, really, and only slightly taller than she was – overcome by a pack of mole-rats. They were surprisingly fast animals, and their sharp, yellowed teeth were more than a match for the young deathclaw's pale hide. She waited until it was exhausted and had killed all but three of the mole-rats before stepping in and finishing all of the combatants off with her gun. Since at that point she was equidistant from both the Gibson garage and Novac (about a mile each way), she first carried two of the more intact mole-rats to sell to the old woman, earning a box of ammo for her trouble, then returned to drag the deathclaw back to town.

This second task was easier said than done. Despite its lanky height, the creature was only 50 or 60 pounds, yet it proved cumbersome and tiring to drag through the hottest part of the day. It took another hour and a half and several rest-stops to reach the small outdoor restaurant in the center of Novac, and by then it was after 4:00.

Three people she knew (and several she didn't) looked up as she drew into view with her burden. Boone was hunched over a table, eating alone, and Daisy and Arcade were talking quietly together at the bar. The proprietor, a barrel-chested man wielding a cleaver, stepped up to the front as she approached, looking at the animal with an acquisitive eye. "I'll pay you in credit for the beast, miss, how much do you want?"

She dropped the horns she'd been using as dragging handles, and rested against the bar, exhausted. "I really don't know. What's it worth to you?"

He smiled a little too widely, "Since you're a visitor here, I'll make you a deal: 40 caps."

Daisy broke in, overhearing the negotiation, "A nice, tender deathclaw like that? Better not give her less than 120, Tony."

Flashing an grateful smile at the older woman, Megan turned back to Tony, "How about 120?"

He rolled his eyes at Daisy, and answered, "No. Something's been chewing on it – is it even fresh? 80."

"Mole-rats attacked it, but it was alive two hours ago. I promise. 110."

"100, but I'll give you a free meal today, without touching the credit."

"Take it. It's yours."

He wrote her a receipt on what looked like a candy wrapper and gave it to her, before picking it up one-handed and carrying it to the back. She pulled off her sweltering armor, folding it carefully under her chair, and sat down on Arcade's right side, where Tony served her a slab of fatty meat, some sautéed prickly-pear pads, and a colorless lump that might have been cheese. She hadn't eaten anything since that nasty cram at breakfast, and now attacked the food like she was starving, washing it down with the remaining water from her pack.

Her friend laughed at this display. "Slow down, you'll choke! Ancipiti plus ferit ense gula. 'Gluttony slays more than the sword.' Good day?"

She struggled to swallow her last bite, almost validating the proverb in the process. Taking a sip of
water, she answered, "It was actually pretty boring. I'm used to having company with me now." She lowered her voice. "How did it go with...you know who?"

He groaned. "Not good. She wouldn't listen to anything I had to say, and then she flew into a rage when Nellie sent some of her friends to me instead of Strauss. After I treated a couple of people, she started screaming wild accusations about 'spreading lies' and 'stealing customers.' I've decided to start educating individual people on basic hygiene instead, so they can call her out if they see her being careless. It's not an ideal situation, but the truth is I won't be here very long and they will need her experience for some things. I'll also try to catch her in private tomorrow, and offer her the chance to learn without losing face."

"I hope you can get through to her." She checked the time again and saw that it was 4:45. Craning her neck around, she caught Boone's eye and called out to him, "Hey, I'm going to go refill my water and then I'll be ready. Where do you want to meet?"

"There's some shade and flat ground in front of the hotel. Bring the armor. You have to train the same way you're going to fight." With that, he stalked off.

She stretched her neck and arms nervously, pulling the sticky armor back on. "Alright...see you later. Wish me luck."

"Good luck, but I'm definitely coming to watch. I'll take that bag to the room for you first, though. Go ahead."

Boone seemed taller out in the open, and very intimidating. He was wearing camo pants, a sleeveless shirt, a red beret, and a frown. He'd brought a green duffle bag full of who-knows-what. "Tonight, I just want to figure our your baseline – how fast and strong you are, what your strengths and weaknesses are, and whether you can actually take orders. If I tell you to do something, you do it without hesitation. No games, no banter, no irrelevant questions. You're not military, but I am, and this is the way training goes as far as I'm concerned. I reserve the right to quit if you don't take this seriously. Understood?"

She quashed the sudden urge to crack a joke. This isn't Arcade, she reminded herself. Aloud, she said only, "Yes."

"I know you've already been working today, so we'll probably only go an hour or so. We'll start earlier tomorrow. Do you see that large sage bush out past the last house?"

She squinted in the direction he was pointing. "No, but I'll believe you if you say it's there."

"There and back is about a quarter mile. Run to it, grab a leaf, and run back, as fast as you can. I'll time you on my stopwatch."

Megan took off, booted feet pounding over uneven cement and dirt, dust flying up behind her. She passed various surprised strangers and hoped they wouldn't think she was fleeing a crime, but couldn't spare the time or breath to explain. She skidded to a stop at the bush, picked a tiny grey-green leaf, and ran back, lungs burning horribly. Despite her best efforts, her pace had slowed down considerably by the time she returned, and he seemed irritated at the result.

"2:47. That's not even a minimally acceptable time for a female recruit. Do it better next time. Drop and do push-ups until I say stop."

She began doing them, but he immediately started criticizing and correcting her form. She had never done them in armor before, and was having trouble bending her elbows correctly. She managed only
six acceptable push-ups before failing to get all the way up for a seventh. Boone still didn't say "stop," however, so she reset and tried to begin again and managed three more shaky attempts before faltering. She feebly moved back to start, hoping she would just die instead, and he finally stopped her. "That's 9, if I'm being generous. Crunches, same thing."

By the time he stopped her there, she was wishing fervently that she hadn't eaten anything before doing this. Boone seemed to notice the discomfort on her face, and decided it was time to take a break. Popping a salt tablet and taking a long, slow drink, Megan noticed that there were a number of people observing the workout, and she flushed with embarrassment.

Long before she was ready, Boone ordered her up again. He had put something like a padded leather glove on his left hand and, adopting a stable stance, told her to punch the center of the glove, alternating left and right, until he said stop. "Try to put the same amount of power behind each one. I'm not going to start counting them until I'm happy with your form, either."

This took a while, longer than she would have thought – everything was wrong, the way she stood, what she did with her shoulders, and the way she held her fingers. When she finally did get into the rhythm, he yelled at her to hit harder, but what she actually did was swing more wildly, missing the glove altogether once. Finally he halted the exercise and stepped back.

"Alright. One more thing. You said you've killed with a machete. I want to see how you are with a knife. We're going to spar, and we'll use these." He reached into his bag and drew out two, long combat knives. She opened her mouth, and shut it, wondering what he would interpret as an irrelevant question. He answered her unspoken question, with the barest ghost of a smile, explaining, "They're rubber. They can't hurt us. First one to get three solid strikes on limb or body wins."

Examining one, she marveled at it. It was weighted much like a real knife, but was dull and wobbled back and forth. This was an exercise she felt good, even confident, about; she only wished they could have done this first, before her muscles had turned to water.

At his signal, they began to circle each other. Trying to tap into emotion to give herself energy, she began to pretend that Boone was a Legion soldier, one of the ones who'd killed all those rangers. She let the anger in to give strength to her tired limbs, and aimed a horizontal slash at his left side. He blocked easily, jarring her arm, and thrust forward with his own knife toward her stomach. She forgot for a second that this was practice, and flung herself backwards desperately, rolling over and standing up again. Flipping the knife to angle downward, she stabbed toward his thigh, using her whole body's momentum for force. He sidestepped her easily and swung a killing blow at the back of her neck. Anticipating this move, she dropped to her face and cut across the back of his calves, delivering the first successful blow of the match.

He sounded surprised. "One! Careful going to the ground. It's a hard position to recover from. Back to start."

There was a lot of sweat in her eyes now, and the handle of the knife was slippery in her hand. She tried to get in and out with a quick strike to the neck, but he only extended his empty left hand and drove an aggressive palm block into her chest, knocking her flat and "stabbing" her while down.

"One for me. Remember that I have a longer reach than you. If you're going to do something like that, you need to be faster."

He began the next round on the offensive, driving his knee up and forward into her while at the same time stabbing downward at her neck. She skipped aside, switched the knife to her left, and swung her right elbow into his side. This blow didn't have enough force behind it to make him move at all, but she followed it with a desperate knife thrust anyway. Her attack went home, but so did his
"Point for both, I guess. That's not how to win a fight. You don't win if you're dead."

She was breathing heavily and was mad that he was barely sweating. "If...I...have armor, and... you...don't, then...it makes sense to exchange hits."

"Yeah, except that the ballistic webbing between the plates is not great against blades, just small-caliber guns. A lot of rangers die from a fiend's knife to their ribs. One more round."

Too tired to be effective, she tried a weak feint at his face, then shifted to a lower blow instead. He caught her arm easily, hooked his leg behind her ankle, and threw her to the ground again, where she stayed this time, listening to the pounding of blood in her ears.

"You're done for tonight. Overall, good job on freestyle. That's usually the hardest thing to teach people, but you've obviously had some training. Strength and endurance are what you most need to work on. Be back tomorrow morning at 8 o'clock and we'll pick this up again." He looked at her still sprawled on the ground and sighed. "Do you need help up?"

"No, I think I'm going to sleep here tonight. Sorry, that was sarcasm. Yes, please."

Feeling crushed at her public humiliation, she hobbled over to Arcade and Daisy, ignoring the other spectators milling about. "That was harder than I thought it would be. Should we go get our laundry?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll get it in a minute. You can go collapse now."

"Thanks."

After setting her Pip-Boy alarm for 7:00, Megan didn't even bother to take her boots or armor off, but fell face-first on the bed and was asleep in an instant.
"3:15. That's worse than yesterday."

"Yesterday, I wasn't hurting so bad," she retorted.

"The enemy doesn't care if you're tired. They'll kill you if you don't give your best." Boone seemed, if it was possible, even grumpier today, and her lackluster performance on the run and repetitions wasn't helping. He'd announced at the beginning that they were going to be working on falls and take-downs, and she was already cringing at the prospect of adding bruises to her bruises. At least she'd had the foresight to postpone eating until afterward this time. She hadn't bothered to undress or bathe after waking up, and had now been wearing her armor for over twelve hours. Her own sweat-stink was bothering even her, and she felt embarrassed to be so smelly. As they begun the practice, it soon became clear there was another problem.

"Stop flinching." She flushed. Boone was demonstrating a series of holds, locks, and throws on her, but couldn't keep herself from twitching away every time he moved to grab her. She mastered the impulse a half-second later, but repeated it on each new move.

"I'm sorry. It's just…I'm a little scared of you." He grimaced at this, and she took an involuntary step backward. "Sorry," she said again. "It's not you, exactly – although you are genuinely scary sometimes – but men in general. Frighten me a little. That's all."

He crossed his arms, looking equal parts pained and irritable. "Do you want to do this or not?"

"I do. Don't mind me. I've just got Vulpes Inculta stuck in my head. Do you know who that is?"

"I've heard of him." The coldness in his voice set the hairs on her arms on end. "If you think I'm anything like that Legion scum, then I don't know if we can continue working together."

"I know you're different, but you're still a man I don't know that well who could hurt me if you wanted to. It's hard for me to feel comfortable with you this close." She was frustrated and near tears, wishing they could start this conversation over.

"Do you tense up like that when you're fighting for real? Because that's a huge, fucking problem."

"No. It's not as bad when I get to kill the person who scares me, like when it's a Powder Ganger or a Legion soldier. Fear and anger are actually pretty good motivators. Voluntarily making myself helpless, though, letting you grab me, is hard."

He stared down at her, sunglasses flashing: "Okay. We're done for now. We'll pick this up again tomorrow, if you can get your head on straight. Try to let this sink in: I won't hurt you, except to teach you." With that, he walked away stiffly and disappeared into his room.

Standing frozen in the courtyard for a minute, Megan grabbed an empty bucket and filled it with water from the pump before going inside. Arcade was sorting through his medical supplies when she came back in and looked up in surprise. "You weren't out there very long."

Sitting down on the bed, she shucked off her armor and pulled off her disgusting socks. "No."

"Everything okay?"

She lay back on the bed, covering her eyes. "Yes. No. Boone is mad because I'm afraid of him. I
don't know how to stop flinching when he touches me. I tried to explain, but he thought I was comparing him to Vulpes or something."

"Boone might actually be a good man...deep down...and it probably bothers him that you're unconsciously treating him like a sexual predator." She opened her mouth to protest, and he held up his hand to stop her. "I'm not saying it's your fault. It's not. Our brains use stereotypes to keep us safe: a caveman who survives being bitten by one snake knows to be afraid of all snake-like things from that point onward. Our brains can also make us racist, sexist assholes by the same mechanism. We associate like-stimuli and try to apply specific knowledge and fears to general categories. It's a knee-jerk response that can change with learned experience and intentional effort, and will probably improve as you get used to him. You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"No, of course not. But I met you before I was afraid of anything." She sat up. "Anyway, there's a place I wanted to check out today. It's a big building a few miles north of here."

"Could it be a solar plant? We're very close to Helios One. A scientist that I know was planning to check it out sometime soon, now that the NCR has driven the Brotherhood of Steel out. I'd like to go too."

"Yes, I saw solar panels. Have you given up on Strauss, then?"

"According to her guards, she went on a wild drunk last night. I'll wait until tomorrow to try anything constructive with her."

"Okay, let me bathe and change real fast. Is it okay if I ask Boone to come with us? I'd like to get to know him better, and we might have a better chance of getting through the door in the company of an obvious NCR ally."

"If he'll come, that's a good idea."

Boone was slow to answer to her knock, and did not look happy to see her again. "What do you want? I told you, we're done training today."

She took a deep breath. "Sorry to bother you. Arcade and I are leaving for Helios One in about twenty minutes. I was wondering if you'd like to come."

"Why?" His voice was colorless and empty, devoid of actual curiosity.

"I'd like to get to know you better. Oh, did you mean, why go there? I don't know. Arcade said the Followers have an interest in it for some reason. I'm just going along for the ride. I've never seen a power plant before."

"Fine. Knock again when you're ready." He slammed the door in her face.

She cleaned up and nibbled some of the cactus fruit from yesterday as well as some weird, nutty trail mix that Arcade had bought for breakfast. They headed downstairs to get Boone, only to find him waiting, equipped with his rifle and some patchy leather armor.

This dynamic was a little awkward, she had to admit to herself after they'd been on the road for a while. She and Arcade walked together, talking as they usually did, but Boone trailed twenty feet behind them. He still hadn't said a word. "I feel like I'm being marched to my death at gunpoint," she whispered to the doctor, laughing nervously. Just then, the report of a rifle shot shattered the air behind them, and they both ducked instinctually and looked back.

"Cazador," Boone explained shortly, and continued walking with his head on a continuous swivel.
"I didn't even notice it," the courier remarked to her companion. "My Pip-Boy didn't either. He has good eyes. So, who is it that you know at this place, Arcade?"

"Ignacio Rivas. He's a researcher, like me, but mostly studies Old World tech, especially the more dangerous artifacts. Once he understands how something works, he tries to make sure it can no longer hurt anybody if it falls into the wrong hands, but still retains any innocuous function it had."

"I thought solar power was clean and safe? Compared to other things, I mean."

"It was. It is. But for some reason the Brotherhood of Steel was very, very interested in this place, and defended it at the cost of many lives. This made the Followers, and probably the NCR, suspect that there's more to it than just a solar plant. If successful, Ignacio will have insinuated himself among the staff of the plant under somewhat false pretenses, but will try to work toward a solution that the NCR will be happy with. It's a delicate balance to strike, but he usually does the job well."

He hesitated for a moment, and continued quietly, looking a little depressed, "Ignacio and I had a thing, off and on, for a while. Like everybody else I've ever dated, he eventually got tired of my secrecy and gave up on the relationship. We're still fully capable of being amiable colleagues, but there's a strain there you might pick up on."

"You really couldn't tell him about…you know?"

"No. I find lovers make poor confidants. That may be more of a personal problem than a general truth, but it's my experience."

When they arrived at Helios One, a strict-looking female officer stepped forward, "This is a restricted area. State your business."

Arcade began. "As a researcher, I have an academic interest in this place…"

She interrupted brusquely, "Oh, another Follower. Yeah, your colleague got here last week. You can't do worse than the guy we hired. Go on in." He shrugged and headed toward the door.

Megan and Boone began to follow him inside, but then she turned back, "Ma'am? I need to make an informal report on Legion ingression into this area. I don't know if you have this information yet."

"It's Lieutenant, civilian. Lieutenant Haggerty. And you are?"

"Megan Martin. I'm a courier."

"Very well, courier. What is it?"

"My friend and I found evidence of Legion activity an hour west of Nipton, and Nipton itself was crawling with them – at least eighteen legionaries and one frumentarius, Vulpes Incula. The people there were dead. That was four days ago. Also, the day before yesterday, we came upon Ranger Station Charlie, which was also wiped out by the Legion. We killed a band of eight leaving the area, but there were almost certainly more on the initial raid. That was all."

The woman's eyes grew wide and her face turned pale at this recitation. "We knew about Nipton from our radio. I suppose you were the courier the Outpost sent to scout it out? Jackson told us. We didn't know about Charlie, though. As bad as that news is, thank you for reporting it and for killing some of the men who murdered our people. I'd like to pay you, but I don't have any caps to spare… could you use some ammo? We have that in excess."

Megan thought, then answered hopefully. "Not me. I actually bought a bunch yesterday. But my
companions use energy cells and .308s respectively, so if you could spare any of those…?"

"None of our guys use energy weapons, but we do have a box of miscellaneous cells that the Brotherhood left behind. Take the whole thing if you want. And we can spare a box of rifle caliber, especially for a First Recon sniper." Here she smiled warmly at Boone, but he only nodded disinterestedly. At her summons, another soldier ran up with two boxes, one larger than the other, and handed them to the courier, who gave Boone the small one and forced the other into her pack.

Megan tried to talk to Boone as they followed Arcade down the maze-like corridors of the power plant, but he refused to expand upon his answers:

"So that hat's from your battalion, right? First Recon?"

"Yeah."

"You ever take it off?"

"No."

"Why'd they make them red? Seems like a good target for an enemy sniper."

"Don't know."

Feeling like she was beating her head against a brick wall, she tried a different tack, "Look, I'm sorry I hurt your feelings earlier. I asked you for help because I don't want to be helpless the next time I'm disarmed or stuck in close quarters with a stronger opponent. I can deal with you scaring me if you can handle that my being scared of you is not personal."

He looked resigned. "Okay. We'll try again. Can we take a break from talking now?"

She took the hint and caught up with Arcade, who, despite being the de facto leader on this venture, seemed to be lost, taking them up and down stairs and into dead ends. Finally, after asking directions of a bored guard, they rounded a corner and walked into a well-lit space where two men in white lab coats were arguing.

The shorter one, a Hispanic man wearing a Followers cross on his sleeve, was yelling at a gangly redhead in reflective sunglasses: "For the last time. You. Can't. Put. Trash. In. There. It's meant to read discs to input information into the computer. You are going to start a fire if you keep doing that."

"Chill, man! I gotta do what I gotta do, dig? Try the same thing again and again and see if something different happens, that's what scientists like me do. Besides, I'm your boss. You can't tell me what to do."

"This a bad time, Ignacio?" Arcade leaned over to examine the contested device, which was indeed spitting sparks as some internal mechanism protested the rough treatment.

"Arcade, thank God you're here, you have no idea. We need to talk." The colleagues stepped into an adjoining room and were soon deep in conversation, leaving Megan and Boone with the stranger. Since Boone seemed unlikely to break the ice, she felt obliged to try:

"Hi there, I'm Megan and that's Boone over there. Who are you?"

"Baby, I am Fantastic. And might I say, you're so hot that you would make a nuclear reactor melt down." He laughed at his own joke. "Like it? I spent all yesterday writing that, just in case some
better chick than that ice queen Haggerty showed up."

She blinked and made an effort to ignore the blatant sexism. "Uh…what do you do here, Fantastic?"

"Fuck, baby. Everything. I push buttons. I turn dials. I read numbers. Sometimes I make up little stories in my head about what the numbers mean. And if you play your cards right, I'll do you."

"No thanks, I'm not interested."

He sidled up close and leered at her, showing crooked yellow teeth. "Are you sure? Because I'd like to put my quantum harmonizer in your photonic resonation chamber."

"What? No. Stay away from me." She walked away and examined the buttons and displays, studying the a representation of the electric grid with particular interest. Three wiggly patterns in different colors overlaid a map of the city, each tracing out different sections. This screen was blinking red and an error message scrolled across the top, but she couldn't tell what it said. She was about to ask Boone to come read it, when a skinny arm snaked around her waist, interrupting her thoughts. Furious, she spun around and cracked the creep in the jaw with a solid punch.

Fantastic groaned, staggering back and holding his face. "You bitch! You broke my jaw. I'll see you arrested for assault…I've got some clout with the NCR brass. You'll be sorry."

Megan shook her hand out, trying to relieve the stinging in her fingers. "Yeah, I don't think so. Anybody, any woman, who's talked to you for more than a minute will believe me over you. Now back off or you'll get worse."

Fantastic acted as if he wanted to say or do something, but then appeared to notice Boone (who had begun casually cleaning his nails with a knife) for the first time. "Forget it. I was going on break anyway." Holding his jaw, he stalked angrily out of the room.

"That had some power, but make sure you're only making contact with those first two knuckles. The two smaller fingers break easily." Boone sheathed his knife and leaned back against the wall, relaxing as much as he ever did.

"Yeah. Thanks." Feeling a little worried, she asked, "You don't think I'll actually get in trouble, do you?"

"With Lt. Haggerty? Hell, no. And a guy like that won't dare drag this out in the open. If we were hanging around here for long, though, I'd watch my back if I were you..."

Boone fell silent as the two Followers rejoined them. "Where'd that idiot go?" the shorter man asked with irritation.

Megan shook her hand out, still massaging her sore hand.

"Good, then this will be easier. Okay, so the NCR wants this plant running as an auxiliary power source, in case they lose the Dam. By some accident, they hired a chem-addicted moron, so we need to…get it working more or less efficiently before they hire someone competent." He looked nervously at Megan and Boone. "Ignacio Rivas, by the way. I'm a physicist with the Followers of the Apocalypse."

"Megan Martin. That's Boone. So…you're anxious to help the NCR quickly because…?"

"Oh, I want to send more power to the grid, especially to outer Vegas..." He seemed highly anxious, and kept shooting glances at Boone in particular. "I'm sorry, I have to ask, do you two belong to any
particular group?"

"Used to be NCR. Now I'm nothing."

Megan considered, "Really just myself, I guess."

"For all our sakes, I hope you serve good masters, then. Would you say you're for war or for peace?"

She tried to be honest, "Given the two options, I'd say I'm more equipped for war…but wouldn't mind peace." Boone just grunted noncommittally.

Arcade grew weary of this maneuvering and took a gamble, "What Ignacio is getting at is that there are broader humanitarian reasons to fix this plant before the NCR does than just powering the city. Given time, they might wise up and get somebody who knows what they're doing…someone who will realize that this is more than just a power plant. It was built to arm a powerful super-weapon, and we can't risk anybody – not the NCR, not the Brotherhood, and especially not the Legion – gaining control of it. So we have two goals: to get the computer in the tower back on-line to optimize power production and to permanently disarm the weapon."

Boone asked the question Megan was thinking: "Why not just let the NCR use the weapon on the Legion?"

The doctor explained carefully, "In the first place, that's not our way. We will not hand any faction the means to inflict mass casualties on other people, and would do a great deal to prevent that end. Secondly, this is a prototype: its range is limited, and it works better on large, stationary targets. I doubt it would work as far away as the Dam or Cottonwood Cove, let alone Caesar's Fort. In the wrong hands, however, it absolutely could destroy anything in the surrounding area. We can't take that chance, especially with the Legion making in-roads into this territory."

Boone shrugged dismissively. "Whatever. I'm only here because the girl asked me, not to make big moral decisions. If she helps you, then I help her. For now."

"And I, for my part, will happily do what I can for y'all. What do you need us to do, Ignacio?"

"First, there are two terminals in the yard outside that needed to be rebooted so they can control the mirrors once the mainframe is online. Both have traps protecting them and require a password. I have the password to one, but Fantastic found the other lying around, and refused to say what it was. He hates me, but one of you could perhaps get on his good side…"

"Uh, that probably won't work," Megan said guiltily. "I hit him." She added defensively, "He was being too hands-on."

"…or, if you help me past the traps, I can probably hack it. Sorry about him – he's truly a terrible excuse for a human being. Anyway, once we've done that, we'll need to enter the main tower out there and fight our way down through turrets, robots, and whatever the Brotherhood left behind to get to the mainframe itself…when I say 'we,' I mean you people with guns. Once the coast is clear, I'll repair the mainframe, we'll disable the weapon and decide how to route the power, and then someone will need to climb to the top of the tower to manually initiate the sequence."

The protections around the outdoor terminals were crude, but potentially deadly – bear-traps half-buried in the sand, wire-triggered shotguns, and thirst-crazed dogs they were forced to kill. It only took a few minutes for Ignacio to hack the western terminal, and soon they were ready to step into the dim coolness of the tower, Boone and Megan leading with weapons at the ready.

"Lucky thing no one's maintained these turrets for 200 years," Megan observed as they passed the
first level of security. A ceiling cannon had begun to shoot at them when they entered, but almost immediately ran out of ammo, dry-firing for a few rounds until it shut itself down.

"Don't depend on all of them to be like that," Ignacio warned. "This security system killed two NCR soldiers before they gave up on getting in here." He pointed to an office on their right. "Let's see if there's any way to shut the rest down remotely before we go any further."

"I'll go first. Stand back everyone." Megan opened the door very slowly, and jumped back when she heard a crackling sound. Mounted directly above the threshold, an electrical trap was arcing sparks from the ceiling to the floor, burning little scorch-marks in the floor. She waited until it petered out, and stepped carefully in. Calling back to the others, "I can see four mines. I'm going to try to disarm them."

Holding her breath, she stepped gingerly around the room, tapping each mine in its center without tripping the countdown sequence. "Okay. That's all I see. The terminal's live. Come on in."

Tapping on the keyboard for a while, the scientist was able to deactivate the remaining turrets, but noted that there could be other dangers. He continued reading silently for several more minutes. Megan took advantage of the breather to gather up the mines and stack them in her bag. She also found three unusual hand-grenades in a box on a shelf and showed them to Boone. "Do you know what these are?"

"EMP grenades. Good against robots. Can I have one?" She handed it over, offered Arcade one, and put the last in an easy-to-reach pocket.

Just as they reached the stairwell leading down, her Pip-Boy's proximity detector flashed red, but before she could sound the alarm, a squat robot with flailing arms came bustling around the corner. Rapid green plasma bursts splashed over its dome, which concealed what looked like a brain floating in liquid, but had no slowing effect. Hers and Boone's bullets only pinged off its smooth surface, ricocheting dangerously in the enclosed space, and it responded by shooting its lasers at them. She ducked, but it grazed her hat, mingling the smells of burnt cowhide and hair. Becoming angry, she bowled her grenade at the robot, scoring a direct hit, and watched it twitch and die, consumed with blue sparks. Grinning in triumph, she turned to Boone and noticed with concern that his shoulder was smoking. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Lasers just make the leather really hot. It didn't get deep enough to burn the skin."

"What was that thing? Why did it have a brain?"

Ignacio answered, sounding disgusted, "Human brains have immense processing power. Some pre-war scientists used them in place of a computer for AI. It's unethical as well as problematic at a practical level – robobrains are some of the most unpredictable robots you'll ever meet, possibly because they retain fragments of their old human personalities. It's abominable."

They were all on edge as they descended down into the bowels of the complex, expecting enemies to jump out at them on every landing. It seemed quiet, however, and Ignacio ordered them to split up to search for the mainframe. "Arcade, you and I will take the left fork. You two, take the right. Look for signs, and be careful about opening doors – there are almost certainly more robots."

Boone and Megan set off in the direction he'd pointed, tense and jumpy. She had a sudden thought, "You can read, right Boone? I assume you can, or Ghost wouldn't have written to you…"

"Yeah," he growled, "Just because I'm a soldier doesn't mean I'm completely stupid." Great. He was mad. Again.
"I didn't mean it that way. It's just that I can't, so you'll have to be the one looking for signs."

"Really?" He sounded surprised. "I'd assumed the thing you had with Gannon was a smart-people thing. You both talk sort of prissy…uh, proper, I mean. That's something that hasn't changed about you."

"Two words: brain damage. I think I could read before. And, anyway, Arcade and I aren't dating. He's gay."

"Huh. So how did you two start travelling together, anyway?"

"I saved him from some Legion soldiers when I was living in Goodsprings, and he's hung around ever since. I wouldn't have gotten this far without him." Encouraged by Boone's newfound talkativeness, she asked him a question in turn, "So, where did you grow up?"

"A farm outside of the Hub. My dad left when I was a baby, so it was just me and my mom. When she died, I joined up and came east." He stopped, listening intently to something. "Quiet. There's something coming."

A clanking sound was coming from one of the side corridors, but the echo in the hallway made it difficult to pinpoint the direction. Her Pip-Boy seemed confused too, whether because of the shielding metal in the walls or the fact that it was most likely a robot. Or three, she thought, as a crowd of shuffling metal figures stepped out twenty feet ahead of them – two of the weaker protectron models, and another robobrain. Protectrons did not have the defensive armor of robobrains, and they were soon pitted and smoking from their bullets, slumping forward before they could attack. Megan was in the middle of yelling at Boone to throw his grenade, fast, when something hot brushed the side of her neck, the world slowed way, way down, and everything became brilliantly white for a while.

**Those sparks are so beautiful and bright. And those fluorescent lights. Why have I never noticed that before? Oh, Boone's saying something. It's so nice that he's talking now.** Trying and failing to say something encouraging in reply, her tongue a useless lump, she laughed at the tickling sensation of pins and needles throughout her body, from her head to her toes. It would normally have scared her that she couldn't feel much of anything, but for now an intense feeling of peace and well-being was keeping the fear pushed down.

Her vision slowly resolved into something more normal, and she noticed with surprise that she was now sitting instead of standing. Her neck started to hurt a little as feeling crept back into her body, but her hand didn't seem to be able to move to touch it. Boone was crouched down between her and a pile of smoldering robots, looking agitated, and from the other direction came the sound of footsteps.

"What's wrong with her?" Boone asked impatiently.

"Nnph rogi me, boo." She tried again. "Nnphn rogif me!" He ignored her, possibly not understanding.

Arcade knelt down and smeared something cool on the stinging place on her neck, and Ignacio explained, "Military-grade robobrains have a non-lethal weapon built into them called a mesmetron. It scrambles the brain pretty thoroughly for a short time, but should wear off entirely in an hour or so. She'll be walking soon, but we shouldn't expect much more than that for a while. Don't give her that gun back until she's talking in complete sentences." To her, he extended a helping hand and said kindly, "We found the computer over this way, Megan. Come with us."
Feeling like a puppet, she accepted his help and followed him, a little unsteadily, back down the hallway, watching her feet to make sure they were still attached. Arcade kept pace beside her, ready to catch her if she fell.

"'Cade, I fee funnee."

"I'll bet you do." He looked simultaneously anxious and amused. "What's your name?"

"Mega Marrin."

"How old are you?"

"Adunno. Twenny?"

"Where are we?"

"Porra pland."

"Ah, you're fine. Last question: who's the president of the United States?" His tone was joking, but she didn't notice.

"Jah Henny Eethen."

Busy counting her fingers and still trying to shake off the numbing effects of the mesmetron, Megan didn't notice him stiffen with shock. "Izokay, 'Cade. Mm good. Jus slow." Patting his arm, she dropped back to check on Boone, who was bringing up the rear as usual. "Didja yuz grade?"

"Yes, I used the grenade. Sorry you got hit."

"Sokay. Wadja grow om fahm?"

"What?"

"Wad ya grow on fahm? Bah Hub?"

He stared at her for a second, then almost smiled. At least his lips twitched. "Maize, squash, and beans. A few Brahmin. It wasn't very big, but at least we had enough to eat most of the time. Let's take another conversation break now."

When they reached the computer room, the researchers went to work fixing the generator powering the computer, Megan lay down on the floor and closed her eyes, and Boone stood watch by the door. It took almost an hour before they announced that they were done, and by then the girl was fast asleep. Ignacio asked Boone to come with him up to the observation tower, and he reluctantly agreed, leaving Arcade alone with her. He was still turning over her answer to his joking question in his head. John Henry Eden. I haven't heard that name since I was a child. If she's heard of him, then he must have been successful. That could be bad.

The sound of the elevator charging up in the distance woke his friend, who went immediately into chatter-mode, interrupting his thoughts: "Hey, I can talk now. That was bizarre, but actually not unpleasant. I would totally do that again if I didn't suspect it was super unhealthy." She smiled up at him, looking absurdly happy. "Where did y'all send the electricity?"

"Freeside and Westside. Thanks to the NCR prioritizing McCarran and the Strip, they don't get much of the Dam's power, and it would really help the locals' quality of life. Of course, the next NCR guy to come down here could switch it over, but by then the people might be sufficiently accustomed to it
to complain." Trying to keep his voice casual, he asked again, "So, who did you say the president was?"

She giggled, still sounding a little out of it, "Oh, no one, I guess. Kimball's the president of the NCR, but there's no US president anymore. I don't know why I said what I said earlier. Blame it on crossed wires in my addled head. You asked the question, and I said what came to my tongue, but that name doesn't actually mean anything to me."

They lapsed into silence, the courier humming and Arcade thinking. When the elevator began its descent from above again, the doctor gave up the idea of pressing the point for now. *We already knew she was from the east. Now we know that the Enclave still exists out there, or at least it did at some point.* The thought chilled him, but he knew there was nothing to be done about it. The continent was a huge, largely-unpopulated buffer zone, and this fact comforted him.

The group returned to the surface and passed back through the main building, bidding farewell to Ignacio, who gave Arcade a copy of his notes on the project to deliver to the Old Mormon Fort for preservation. They lingered awkwardly for a moment while the two younger people went outside. He wanted to talk to him about something other than the problems of the power plant, hash out their break-up again and talk about the future. However, he had to admit that there was no answer to the problem they'd had from the start: if Ignacio knew, he probably wouldn't betray him, but he was too much of a ideological purist to accept Arcade's lingering allegiances and divided sense of identity. Not knowing, he could only assume – correctly, as it were – that Arcade was holding something back out of a lack of trust. In the end, they only exchanged empty niceties and went their separate ways, the doctor kicking himself for a coward.

Angry with himself, he muttered under his breath, *"qui in amore præcipitavit pejus perit, quam si saxo saliat."* *

"Hm? Did you say something, Arcade?"

"Nothing. Just repenting of my sins. Don't mind me."

*He who falls in love meets a worse fate than he who leaps from a rock. – Plautus*
The next several days fell into a comfortable rhythm of exercise, exploration, hunting, and reading, with no major events or emergencies. The courier's armored quarter-mile time slowly approached the two-minute mark, while the one unarmored attempt Boone asked her to attempt was a fairly respectable 1:33. Their hand-to-hand practice became easier after he started opening their sessions by letting her throw him around first. At the times when she did shrink away a little bit, he pretended not to notice, and instead calmly reiterated what they were doing and why. He seldom spoke more than he had to, but eventually stopped complaining about her talking.

Arcade was still trying to improve Novac's access to medical care, but the best he was able to coax out of Strauss was sullen compliance when it came to sanitation – and even then, only while he was present. He'd learned by then that in addition to being the town's only doctor, she was also a chem mule for the Khans' wares, and he had trouble concealing his disgust around her. Knowing that she'd inevitably drink at least some of it, he nevertheless took the time to distill a quantity of grain alcohol to a sufficiently high proof for use as an antiseptic, using creosote oil as a non-toxic additive to make it taste noxious. He had also done what he could to prepare Nellie for a safe home-birth, instructing her nervous young husband, Martin, as well.

Their week in Novac was a good one, a time that the courier would later look back upon as some of her happiest days in the Mojave, although it would always be overshadowed by the events which followed. She made a friend in Cliff Briscoe by buying one of his T-rex figurines, and invited him over one night to be her partner in 42, a game which Daisy had made popular in town. Despite his penchant for the card game Caravan, he turned out to be a very poor dominoes player and they lost every hand terribly, but it was still fun. Having missed out on female companionship since leaving Goodsprings, she also enjoyed spending time with Nellie, who showed her the tiny clothes she'd begun to sew and asked her opinion on baby names. From her new friend, she learned how to make a harsh, brown soap from rendered animal fat and wood ash, earning a block of the stuff for her own stores in exchange for helping to stir the bubbling mixture all afternoon. All in all, even though it was almost time to be moving on, she knew she'd be sorry to say good-bye to these people. Now, if only Boone would come along too...

"Tomorrow?"

"Yeah. I think if we leave early and stick to the road, we can get to the 188 or maybe even the Followers Outpost by nightfall. Arcade's traveled this way before and he says it's not too bad."

They had finished the morning's workout with another exhausting sparring match and were cooling off in the shade. She watched him closely to gauge his reaction, hoping he'd move out with them. It wasn't just that she wanted his gun on their side, she told herself – she'd grown accustomed to his silent company and worried about what he'd do if was left on his own.

"I'll come. On one condition."

"What's that?"

"The NCR's establishing a new outpost in Nelson, a little more than an hour east of here. Supposed to make up for Searchlight being gone, I guess. I want to check on them today, make sure they're okay."

"Sounds good. Give me a few minutes, and I'll be ready to go." Running upstairs, she told Arcade where they were going.
"Do you need me to come? I'm done wasting time with Strauss, and I'd planned to read for a while, but if you want company…"

"Nah, we'll be good on our own. Dinner later? I have a ton of credit with Tony to use up…I could basically buy the whole town a drink now."

"Sure. Just be careful out there. Nelson's uncomfortably close to the river."

"Careful is my middle name. Or would be, if I had one." Sobering a little, she asked, "Arcade, am I too…pragmatic when it comes to people? Like, do I pick them up like tools, just because they're useful to me?"

He smiled. "Well, I don't feel like a tool. Most of the time, anyway." Seeing that she was serious, he added, "If you're worried about your motivations for recruiting Boone, I don't think you should be. He needs you as much as or more than you need him – it's a symbiotic relationship."

She gave him a blank look. "I don't know that word. Should I?"

"Symbiotic as opposed to parasitic. In nature, an organism that feeds off another organism without benefitting that organism is called a parasite; an example would be a leech or a mosquito. An example of a symbiotic pair in the animal kingdom is a bird which used to clean the teeth of a large reptile called a crocodile, eating the morsels it found there. The crocodile would get a clean, healthy mouth and the bird would get a meal. They'd both part ways better for the deal. Boone is an effective soldier who will help you survive, and you in turn are a human catalyst for change in his life. He needs change. As long as one of you doesn't get the other killed, it's a win-win arrangement."

"Yeah. I hope so. I just feel like I'm taking advantage of him sometimes. Like he only does what I ask because I caught him at a vulnerable time. I'd probably feel less guilty if I could actually remember doing him a favor before…though I'm sort of glad I don't remember luring a woman to her death. Even if she deserved it."

Boone's walking pace was uncomfortably fast for the courier, and she found herself jogging every few steps just to stay even with him.

"Are we in a hurry?" she panted.

"Yeah. I've got a bad feeling about something. Want to get there soon. Think you can keep up at a run?"

"I'll try. I've got some Buffout to take in a pinch, I guess…"

"No. No chems. Tell me when you need to walk."

Alternately running and walking, they made good time, even though they had to take a wide circle around a nuclear waste dump in their path. The sun was not yet at its zenith when they spied the NCR flag flying between two rocky hillsides ahead. As they approached, a man with a black beard and a full ranger's outfit stepped forward to meet them.

"Hold up, folks. Nelson's been taken over by the Legion. If you're looking for a nice picnic spot, this ain't it. If you're looking for work, however, I might have a job you can do."

Since he seemed to be mostly talking to Boone, Megan looked at him to see if he was going to take point in the conversation, but he was silent, focusing on the road behind the ranger and trying to look down into the town beyond the rise. She answered for them both, "We don't mind killing Legion, if
"No, honey, that's not the job. There's at least twenty-five of them down there, and they've got all the cover they need to kill a dozen little girls like you before you could reach them. What I really need is for your sniper friend here to take some headshots for me. They've got some of our troopers strung up on crosses in the middle of town, and it's making morale really bad around here. I need him to put those boys out of their misery so the men I have left won't have to worry about the hostages anymore. They're too broke up over their friends getting caught to do anything right now."

"You... want us to kill the hostages to improve morale? Are you crazy? If they're still alive, we should save them. To do anything else is dishonorable."

He sneered at her, scoffing, "Dishonorable,' that's a good one. If that's the way you feel about it, you can just turn around and head back toward Novac or wherever it is you came from and keep your pretty ideals to yourself. Me, I'm a realist, and if I know the kind of man your friend is, I can tell he's a realist too. Mercy killing's something these First Recon guys know all about, am I right?"

If Boone had been looking at her like he was at Ranger Milo just then, Megan would have run away in fright. But Milo didn't appear to notice and Boone only said, with deceptive composure, "We'll do what we can. Can you and your men at least give us some cover while we move closer?"

Creeping silently down the hill, almost crawling in places, she looked up at their reluctant back-up on the ridge above, too far away to be effective, and then at Boone, fearfully. She whispered, "We aren't really going to..."

"No. We aren't. Fuck mercy killing. Fuck that order. We're getting them out. I'm going to use that first shack as a sniping point and start taking shots at the ones I can see. I want you to stay hidden behind the shack until they try to come over here to swarm me. Then you take them with bullets or knives at close range. Watch out for dogs. When I stop being effective at range, I'll jump down to help you. Got it?"

"Yes."

"This is going to be fast and rough. Keep your guard up and remember what we've worked on. Let's go."

She watched him position himself, lying down flat on the shack's tin roof, using the stovepipe chimney as cover. She gripped her rifle, and made sure of her knife and machete. Her mouth had gone suddenly dry, and she wished she'd drunk some water first. Then Boone began shooting and she didn't worry about things like that for a while.

Within seconds of his first shot, they were returning fire, hitting only metal from the sound of it. A half-dozen red dots converged on their position, and she met them with bullets – men and dogs alike fell, whimpering and bleeding, at her feet. She'd emptied her clip and decided not to take the time to reload, drawing her machete instead. The next legionary to round that corner got a blade to the throat, but the second was luckier – it only sunk into his shoulder, sticking in his armor's padding. He screamed and dropped his two-handed rifle, but was still able to swing his uninjured left arm in an open-handed slap against the side of her head. Blinking away stars, she drew her knife and finished him off with a darting blow to his throat. The rhythmic staccato of Boone's gun above still hadn't stopped.

She bent down to tug her machete loose, and as she straightened up she heard the report of a different gun and felt something punch her hard in the lower back. A grinning legionary with a hunting rifle had surprised her by coming around the other corner – the side closer to the road – and
of course Milo and the others hadn't been near enough to take him out. She turned around and he shot at her twice more, still hitting only ceramic plates, but the impact was enough to send her reeling backward, stumbling over one of the bodies and falling to the ground. He stepped forward casually, and aimed his next shot at her face. She closed her eyes and waited, jerking reflexively when she heard the shot…and then opened her eyes to see Boone standing over his headless corpse.

"Can you still fight?" he asked, reloading.

"Yes. Thanks." She jumped up, adrenaline not yet letting her feel the bruises.

Boone peered around the corner. "They're getting smarter. I can see a group hiding behind the barracks over there." He looked uneasy. "If I give you covering fire, can you rush them? Are you up for that?"

"Yeah. Don't worry." She picked up her gun and jammed a new clip in. "Now?"

"On my third shot, run. Approach from the right side."

Bang. Bang. Bang. She ran, keeping her head low, expecting to die at every second. She reached the building and rounded the corner, shooting wildly at two men crouching there and hitting one of them in the arm. She danced back around the corner, trying to draw them out into the open so that Boone could shoot them. It worked. They came at her and their heads exploded. "Yes!" she shouted in triumph, and ran back around the building to ferret out the others. The next legionary she found was a terrified boy of 18 or so, and her finger hesitated on the trigger. His clumsy attempt to stab her with a spear made the decision easier, however, and she shot him in the head. Her gun was empty again and she dropped it, switching back to machete. Beginning to feel exhausted, she spun in a circle, looking wildly around for more targets. Seeing nothing, she let her aching arms drop to her sides.

A snarling sound behind her made her jump, and she turned just in time to see one of the Legion's brown, shaggy mutts leap at her, closing its jaws upon her lightly armored right forearm. She shook it and kicked it, trying to stab it with her left hand, but it hung on grimly, its sharp teeth finding the skin under the armguard. She tried to drag it over to her discarded, unloaded gun so she could club it to death, but before she'd gotten it to budge an inch in that direction, Boone's rifle cracked out one last shot from beside her and the dying dog relaxed its grip. He'd joined her on the far side of the barracks while she was distracted.

She held her arm to her chest, squeezing it tight and dancing with the pain. "God, that hurts. Thanks, Boone. Are there any more?"

"I don't know. I don't see any right now. Let's go get those men untied and we'll let Milo handle the clean-up work."

Two of the freed hostages were in relatively good shape, and were able to help support the third man, who'd suffered a serious injury to his leg. Megan and Boone flanked them, keeping watch for more of the enemy. Boone appeared to be uninjured, and she envied him a fighting style that kept him clear of the fray. Her arm was beginning to worry her, as she could feel that the fabric was already soaked with blood, and little rivulets had begun tricking out at the seams.

When they'd escorted the men past the shack at the edge of the town, Megan decided abruptly that she didn't care to talk to Milo anymore and sat down on the first convenient rock, peeling off the dripping armguard and using some of her water to rinse the blood away from the bite marks. Boone whistled, kneeling down next to her while she drank her canteen dry.

"You got any medical supplies?" he asked, an urgent note in his voice.
"Yeah. Big pocket on my right thigh." Any embarrassment that she would normally have felt over Boone going through her clothes was damped by a growing sense of lightheadedness.

"Hold on. This will hurt." After rubbing his hands briefly with the antiseptic, he poured the rest slowly out on all sides of her arm, trying to get some in every puncture.

Fighting the urge to snatch her arm away and trying not to scream, she whispered faintly, "Can…can we use the stimpak?"

"No. I wouldn't. You need to have a doctor do some work on this first – Gannon, not whatever two-bit medic they've got here. Otherwise the torn tendons and things might not find their spots when it speeds the healing up. Here, though, we need to get this under control..." He took the roll of gauze and wrapped it around and around her arm until the red stopped showing through and the gauze was gone. "That was good work back there. Thanks for agreeing that we had other options. I've…taken shots like he was asking for before, but I can't do that anymore. Not if there's any chance of saving them." He tapped her face. "Hey, open your eyes now. You okay?"

She shivered and looked at her hands, trying to blink the clouds away. "Yes, sorry. I was just thinking about one of the men I killed. He was really just a kid. I felt bad for whatever chain of events brought him here to die in this crappy town." Flinching at his dark expression, she turned away, "I know he was a legionary and I had to kill him, but I also know he's probably just a brainwashed tribal that Caesar first orphaned and then enslaved." Shaking her head, she stuck out her good arm, "Never mind. Help me up? We should start back."

Standing brought on a head rush that took a moment to clear, and she stood still while Boone steadied her. She smiled at him, taking the depleted med kit back from him and pocketing it again. "Thanks, I'm good for now. Though, if I start drifting off, I do have a Mentat in there..."

"No chems," he said again. "Let's go. I'll help you."

Now taking frequent breaks, the return trip to Novac took twice as long as before. By mid-afternoon, when the dinosaur came into view, Boone was half-supporting the courier, whose arm now felt like someone had wrapped a hot wire around it. Passing Arcade, who was reading at one of the restaurant's tables, she gave him a feeble wave. He sighed visibly, and closed his book, following them to their room, where Boone deposited her on the bed, briefly described what had happened, and left.

Megan relaxed with some Med-X, laying back on the bed, while Arcade gingerly unwrapped the now-sodden bandages. "I get why he didn't use a stimpak, but I probably would have and dealt with the more difficult surgery later. There's a lot of big veins on the inside of the arm. You could have bled out on the road." He applied a hemostatic to the wounds, and started probing around looking for the worst of the tissue damage. "Don't sleep yet. Talk to me. You don't have any idea what your blood type is, do you?"

"No. How do you even find that out?" Every word felt ponderous in her mouth. She was dreamy and comfortable, and supremely happy to be not walking anymore.

"We have a device to test people back at the Fort so we know what kind of transfusion to give them. You should find out your type and get it tattooed onto your forehead. With your lifestyle, it'll pay for itself in a month." She thought he was joking, but couldn't really tell.

"Wha...what happens if you put the wrong kind of blood in a person?" She was curious despite her fuzzy mind. To her, blood was blood, and she didn't understand why it mattered whose it was.
"Oh, lots of interesting stuff. Systemic immune reaction, organ failure, death. I saw it happen once, when I was in school. A gun-shot victim guessed at his own type, and acted confident enough that the supervising doctor gave him blood from what he assumed was a compatible donor. He lasted about a day after that. It was...not fun to watch." He was stitching delicately away at something, the skin peeled back to reveal a surprisingly complicated-looking system of things inside the arm. She gulped, feeling sick. He noticed her watching. "Don't look if this bothers you. Tell me about what happened at Nelson."

"Ranger wanted us – or Boone, anyway – to kill some guys the Legion had crucified, to put them out of their misery. I didn't want to. Boone didn't want to. So we killed all the Legion soldiers and saved them instead. Easy as pie."

"Very easy," he echoed mockingly. "Yes, 'mercy killing' is one...function...that snipers perform for the NCR. I'm not surprised Boone's had enough of that kind of work."

"I thought he was going to kill that ranger for asking. It seemed unusually personal to him."

"Now, what is this here?" Pausing a moment in his work, Arcade reached inside the arm with tweezers and pulled a tiny, oval-shaped object out of the muscle where it had been embedded. He held it briefly up to the light, then dropped it on the tray, where it clattered like metal or glass.

"Hm?" She tried to lift her head to see, marveling at how heavy it felt.

"I don't know. Shrapnel, or maybe something else. I'll examine it later. Hold still. How are you feeling?"

"Cold. Tired. Can I have a blanket?"

"Sorry, I can't touch anything without contaminating my hands. I should have had Boone stay as my nurse. Almost done now, though." He finished stitching, lightly taped the skin in place, and finally stimpaked the arm. She was still awake by that point, but drifting. He zipped her up in her bed roll and made her drink some juice before leaving her alone to sleep.

After washing his hands and instruments, he fished out a portable magnifier from his bag, moved the lantern to the desk, and examined the mysterious object under the lens. It was a smooth ellipsoid of clear, hardened silicone, approximately three-quarters of a centimeter long. On one side, he could see the gleaming edges of a microchip, but ignored that part, focusing instead on the miniscule letters and numbers etched upon the tiny sheet of metal embedded inside the object. Straining his eyes to read it at only 100x magnification, he transcribed what he saw, character by character, onto a sheet of notebook paper, and sat looking at the completed document for a long time, in shock, but really not all that surprised at what it said.

Well, that explains an awful lot.
Arcade awoke the next morning still sitting at the desk, a crumpled piece of paper clenched tightly in his hand. The courier still slept deeply, even though the sun was high in the sky. Twice, he had scrunched the message into a ball and thrown it into the wastebasket, each time retrieving it and smoothing it out again. The fatal pellet still sat innocuously on the magnifier's slide. Every time he looked at it, he was seized by the urge to take it and the paper and wash them down the toilet to wherever Novac's sewage went, so that there would be no evidence left.

Fear and anger ruled in his heart. He cursed the events that had brought an Enclave soldier into his life, the girl for being the infuriating enigma that she was, and himself for being curious enough to examine what he could have left well enough alone. If he had discovered the message even a few weeks ago, he might have suspected an elaborate and baffling conspiracy on the part of a well-hidden Enclave sleeper agent, but he quickly dismissed that as impossible. Coincidence – sheer, insane, Dickensian coincidence – was more likely than the notion that he had completely misread his companion. No, she didn't know. She was the person without a past that he believed her to be. And maybe, he thought, she shouldn't know at all. The past could stay buried. This option had been running through his head all night – the idea that he should withhold the information he'd found, for the sake of her happiness and safety. He had secrets already – what was one more? He would gladly carry that secret to the grave for her, give her the chance at guileless relationships and unfettered honesty that he'd never had. And why shouldn't he make this choice for her?

Because it's unethical, a small voice reminded him. You believe in giving people autonomy over their own lives and decisions. This knowledge belongs to her. It's only by accident that you are even in a position to decide if she knows or not. Tell her and let her choose what to do with the information. Don't pretend you're being unselfish. You're trying to hide your own fears and insecurities inside concern for her. You don't want to be friends with a next-generation Enclave soldier, and you'll go against your own principles and lie to yourself to prevent that end.

A soft knock at the door interrupted his guilty musings. Expecting Daisy, he found Boone instead, standing outside and fidgeting with his beret. "I figured we weren't leaving today after all, but I just wanted to make sure she was okay. She looked bad yesterday. I was worried."

Staring a moment longer than was necessary, Arcade assured him that Megan would make a full recovery and added that he'd come tell him or send her down in person when she woke up. Closing the door again, he thought to himself, There's one good reason not to tell her. She wears her heart on her sleeve and is way too open. Boone – or whatever person walks into her life next – might not believe or accept her innocence. And she'll have to tell them eventually, because that's the kind of person she is.

This thought pushed him to make a snap decision. He laid the paper down, placed the tiny capsule in the middle, and folded it up into a tiny square envelope, which he tucked safely into a zippered
pocket on his binder of research notes. He justified his actions to himself, thinking, I can always tell her later, when I know she's grown careful enough. I can't untell her once the cat is out of the bag. He had only just replaced his documents in the bag when he heard Megan stirring.

She yawned and sat up, cradling her right arm close to her and wincing a little. "Oh, hey Arcade, did I miss dinner? Have you already eaten? I'm starving."

Forcing a smile to his face, he turned around in his chair, "I'm not surprised. You missed dinner, breakfast, and, if you wait much longer, you'll miss lunch. You feel like going downstairs for a meal? I think Boone would like an invitation if you do. He stopped by a little while ago to check on you."

After getting clean and dressed, she asked both men to join her at the restaurant. Frequently talking with her mouth full, she ate an enormous meal, chattering animatedly at Boone and Arcade, neither of whom were inclined to respond, each for their own reasons.

"...and that's why I want to climb Black Mountain. If that distress signal is for real, someone might need help. And whatever's up there is sure to be interesting." She ate another stuffed jalapeño and washed it down with lukewarm beer. "Arcade, are you okay? You're very quiet today."

Rousing himself from his reverie, he shrugged, "Sorry. I was up late reading last night."

"You and your books," she said affectionately. "Don't get me wrong. If I could read, I would totally sacrifice sleep and socialization for them, at least sometimes. But you're always reading."

"In omnibus requiem quaesivi, et nusquam inveni nisi in angulo cum libro. 'Everywhere I have searched for peace and nowhere found it, except in a corner with a book.' Thomas à Kempis. Books have always been the most consistent companions in my life."

Arcade heard a growl and looked up to see Boone glaring murderously across the table at him. "Where did you learn that?"

"I didn't learn it from the Legion, if that's what you're getting at," he answered crossly, not willing to take any crap from Boone today. "Books, music, holovids...studying the history of ancient cultures was a hobby of mine in my youth, long before the Legion had become what it is now. My father had two books of Latin speeches, and I inherited my love of the language from him. Even my name is from a Latin proverb."

"I didn't know that." The courier leaned in, eyes shining with interest. "I thought you just had a really weird name. What is it?"

"Et in Arcadia ego. 'Even in Arcadia, there I am.' It's a memento mori, a reminder that death comes for everybody, even the residents of Arcadia, a utopian land where everybody is happy."

"That's an interesting name to give to a baby. 'Remember you will die.' Kind of depressing."

"Well, it's also an English word referring to a pre-war game room for kids. Which is more cheerful, if not any less weird."

"No. So, guys, early start tomorrow? For real this time? My arm's feeling okay. I might not be up for melee combat by tomorrow, but I can probably shoot." A sudden thought struck her. "Arcade, what was that thing you found in my arm last night?"

"Oh, that? Just a little piece of glass. You probably got too close to an explosion once." Internally, he groaned. Great job, Arcade. Now you've officially lied to her, and not just by omission. Now you can either sit on that for the rest of your life or admit that you've broken her trust. Out loud he said
only, "Yes, we'll go."

That night, Arcade pled a headache and retired early. Rolling his thoughts over and over again, he realized he'd made a mistake, and resolved to tell her and apologize as soon as possible. Finally at peace with himself, he fell asleep and didn't hear her come back to the room.

Someone poked him. He squinted. It was still dark in the room, with only the dimmest light of dawn coming through the window. "Wake up, Arcade. It's time to go. Boone is waiting for us downstairs." Rousing himself, he saw her intimidating figure, already in full armor, standing by the bed. "I've got all my stuff packed already. Boone and I are going to go stretch a bit. See you out there soon?" She turned to leave.

"Ughhh. Okay, I'm awake." He tried to remember why he felt so nervous. Oh, that's why. "Wait, Megan…there was something I needed to tell you."

"Is it important or can it wait?" Her hand was already on the doorknob, and she looked impatient to go.

Blinking slowly and rubbing his eyes, he took the temporary reprieve she'd unknowingly offered him, "It can wait. Go ahead. I'll be down after I finish packing."

It was hard, he realized as they marched through the early morning, past the Gibson garage and Helios One, to have sensitive conversations with Boone along for the ride. He wondered what the ex-soldier would say if he knew he was travelling with a former Enclave soldier and the son of an Enclave officer. It's possible he wouldn't know or care about the significance – all that had happened years before he was born, and the only enemy he really cared about was the Legion. Arcade was not willing to take that risk, however. He'd draw her aside in private when they stopped for the night, hopefully at the Followers Outpost – he really didn't want to make camp in the wild.

The road was uneventful and they reached the 188 Trading Post by mid-afternoon and stopped for a meal. Other than the traders, there weren't many people to be seen, other than a young woman in a brown robe, with whom Megan was talking happily. As he brought his own food over to their table, he overheard their conversation:

"…yes, I've heard they can shoot lasers from their eyes. Wild, huh?"

She looked taken aback. "Wow. My initial estimation of you was off…way off. Laser eyes. I'll try to remember that."

Megan laughed. "Sorry, I kid, I kid. I know who the Brotherhood of Steel are. Tech-savvy isolationists, right? Holed up somewhere around Hidden Valley? I'd like to meet them someday."

"You're very…forthcoming with that interest. You might want to be careful, especially around soldier types like that guy." She pointed at Boone, who had eaten in about twenty seconds and was now cleaning his gun fifty feet away from the others. "I don't think the Brotherhood is all that bad, but the NCR has it out for them."

Megan glanced in the indicated direction. "Oh, that's just Boone. He's my friend. He knows I don't mean any harm. Oh, sorry. Arcade, this is Veronica Santangelo. Veronica, this is Arcade Gannon. He's–"

The stranger - Veronica - gasped and broke in, "Oh, are you with the Followers of the Apocalypse? I have so wanted to meet one of you. Tell me, do you really share tech with people? Freely?"

Nonplussed by her enthusiasm, Arcade responded cautiously, "Yes, we share and teach what we
can, mainly what's useful to people in their day-to-day lives. We offer our medical expertise, and use what influence and resources we have to spread literacy and preserve and disperse pre-war knowledge."

"You don't think that some pre-war knowledge is dangerous in the wrong hands? That it's irresponsible just to give it out?" He could tell Veronica wasn't arguing so much as asking, waiting thoughtfully for his answer, and he obliged, warming to the subject despite his mood.

"It's better that people know about the dangers and be prepared to handle them safely, than to just wait until they reinvent or stumble upon the secrets that destroyed human civilization before. We're committed to preventing another apocalypse, and believe that knowledge is a better shield than ignorance against that possibility." That's right, you fucking hypocrite, he thought miserably at himself. Aloud, he added, "And it's not like we're handing out the blueprints for a nuclear bomb. We apply science to the practical problems of agriculture, water purification, construction, and medicine, and try to give people what they need to survive."

She fixed him her with her eyes, boring into his soul with her stare, "But you do have those blueprints, right? And you're obviously not sharing them, so you are making decisions on some level about what people should and shouldn't know."

He hesitated to answer. It wasn't a secret exactly, but it wasn't common knowledge either, "We do have a library of more dangerous knowledge that only our most trusted scientists have access to. They might study bomb blueprints, for instance, in order to learn how to safely disarm a live nuclear warhead that they find buried in the desert. We would never lift a finger to build such a thing, or use it if we found it. We would rather destroy it than see it fall into the wrong hands."

He went on, "I'm a medical doctor, not a physicist or someone who spends a lot of time with material tech. But in my view, the Followers' most important role is that of the historian – we are committed to remembering the mistakes humanity has made in the past so that we don't have to make them again."

Veronica looked wistful, "I wish I could join the Followers. I'm very good at reverse-engineering old world gadgets and I'd love to see technology doing some good for once. But my family would never let me."

Megan asked, "Why wouldn't they let you? You're what, twenty-five? You're old enough to make your own decisions."

Veronica looked sad, "Twenty-seven. It's not that easy, unfortunately. My family is…suspicious…of outsiders. When people try to leave, they often track them down and force them to return." Seeing their shocked expressions, she elaborated: "Ah, see…since you seemed okay with them before, you might as well know: my 'family' is actually the Mojave chapter of the Brotherhood of Steel. I'm a scribe and a forager for them."

Even though Arcade felt like nothing could surprise him anymore, he felt himself tense up automatically in atavistic dread. The women noticed. Megan drawled sardonically, "Oh, come on Arcade. A person can't help what they're born into. Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto. 'I am human, and therefore I consider nothing that is human alien to me.' You taught me that."

He took a deep breath, and released it, looking Veronica in the eye as he did so, "I'm sorry. I can't pretend otherwise – I do have an intense, personal problem with the Brotherhood of Steel. However, I can respect that you, as an individual, have nothing to do with that problem. I will tell you, however, that there is almost no chance that the Followers will let a former Brotherhood scribe into their ranks. Your faction stands for things that we find repellant and dangerous and I'm afraid that our
leaders would be unlikely to risk trusting you." Watching her face fall, he sighed. "Maybe…and that's a big 'maybe'…if you were to earn our trust by association, someone like me could vouch for you. It'd still be up to our regional administrators, and they'd likely be as afraid as I am that your Paladins would come breaking down our doors to reclaim you. I'm sorry, truly." Having entirely lost his appetite, stomach tied up in knots, he offered the rest of his meal to Megan, and drew away to read, leaving the two women talking together in subdued voices.

Twenty minutes later, after he'd read the same page over and over without comprehending it, he felt someone sit down next to him. "Are you okay? You seem distant today."

"I'm just not good with people. I don't do conversations with more than one person very well." He wanted to tell her then, but thought better of it, with Boone and Veronica so near. "There is something I've been needing to let you know. When we get to Freeside…I'll show you around town as much as you want and all, but I would prefer to stay behind at the Fort when you're ready to leave. I want to stay there for a while. I've gathered a lot of good data lately, and there's things I can only work on in a more clinical setting. I figure you can probably make it without me for a while, especially since you have Boone now."

She looked sad, but unsurprised, "And Veronica. She wants to come too. I told her 'yes,' conditional upon yours and Boone's approval."

He shrugged. "Makes sense. She seems intelligent and nice, and probably wouldn't mind travelling with a little flying robot."

She laughed, darting in impulsively to hug him tightly, "No, probably not. I'll miss you, though. Thank you for staying with me as long as you have." She wiped a tear from her eye. "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Veronica asked if I was Dorothy's friend, and then laughed when I said I didn't even know who that was. Do you know what that was about?"

Arcade snorted with amusement. "Yes. A 'friend of Dorothy' is slang – fairly obscure, twentieth-century slang at that – for a homosexual. She was asking if you're sexually interested in women."

She colored with embarrassment, but giggled a little. "Oh. Hm. Where will I be without you to help me navigate these things, Arcade?"

"Just make a mental list and I'll answer all your questions when you come back." He swallowed, feeling choked up. "We need to get back on the road now, but when we're at the Outpost tonight, I really have to talk to you in private about something else, okay?"

"It's a date. Let me go see if I can talk Boone around to having another girl on the team."

Boone must have acquiesced, because soon their group of four was on the road, with the girls leading the way, talking about…dresses? Arcade figured he must have heard them wrong. He and Boone both trailed behind today, but he couldn't think of a word to say to the other man. To his surprise and relief, Boone broke the awkward silence.

"At least this way, she won't talk to me all the time. I don't mind, exactly, but it is exhausting to keep up with." Arcade hummed in agreement, and Boone looked seriously at him, "She said you're going back to Freeside."

"Yes. I've been gone a long time. I have work I need to do there."
"I'll stay with her until she tells me to leave. Keep her alive."

"Thank you."

"I'm not doing it for you. I don't even like you. But I figured you should know." With that, Boone walked away to take up a position at the rear.

"Um…okay?" Arcade didn't understand the sniper's motivations for most of his actions, but he did believe that he was a good ally for the courier to have on her side. Feeling ridiculous walking by himself, he jogged to catch up with the others.

"Dr. Gannon, why do you have a plasma defender?" Veronica was just as curious about it as Megan had been at the beginning, but knew a good deal more about energy weapons – enough to know that it was an unusual choice of armament for a doctor and a notional pacifist.

"Please call me Arcade, Veronica. To answer your question, this was my father's gun; I inherited it from him."

"Okay, where did he get it, then? Those only saw a limited release in the years before the War. Strictly military-issue, really. I've only seen one, once, in our weapons lab."

Feeling too beleaguered to think of a creative lie, he said only, "I don't know. He died when I was a baby. I never asked him."

Trying to redirect the conversation, Megan asked quickly, "You know, Veronica, it's a little weird that you're so lightly-armed. Do you even have a gun with you?"

"I have a sweet LAER back at the bunker, but it's broken and I haven't scavved the parts to fix it yet. I'm more about punching things anyway." She drew her hands out of her sleeves and showed them a pair of ballistic fists.

"That does sound like a lot of fun. Do they work on opponents that are heavier than you are?"

Clearly happy to embark upon her favorite subject, Veronica launched into a highly-technical lecture on the physical science behind the fists, of which Arcade only understood a little, and Megan probably not at all, although she listened attentively. With the women exchanging stories and discussing plans, the last five-mile stretch passed quickly, and they reached the tower of the Follower's Outpost at sunset. They claimed beds, ate dinner with the regular staff, and, leaving Boone on his bunk and Veronica talking enthusiastically to one of the doctors, Arcade and Megan climbed down to the base of the tower and sat leaning against one of the pylons, elbow to elbow, gazing up at the starry night sky.

"I'm sorry for what I'm about to tell you. I made a mistake and almost kept this information from you, but you deserve to know. I was wrong to consider any other course of action." His mouth was dry with fear and he took a drink of water.

She smiled nervously at him. "You're scaring me a little, Arcade. Just spit it out."

"Your real name is Megan Martus, not Martin. You were born on November 8th, 2260 – you'll be twenty-one in two months – and your blood type is A-positive. Your serial number is Eden191936. You were, at some point in your past, enlisted into armed service at a place known as 'Enclave Recruitment Center 6.'"

She wasn't smiling anymore. "M-Martus? Enclave? H-how do you know all this?"
He drew out the tiny envelope and unfolded it to show her the silicone pellet. He read the information aloud again and handed both items to her carefully. He explained how he’d discovered what it was on the night she was hurt, and why he chose to suppress it. He apologized again for lying to her and fell silent.

She looked white in the dim starlight and she stared at the paper uncomprehendingly, squeezing the tiny pellet in her other hand.

"You...you…thought about not giving me this? Not ever telling me my real name? My birthday? How could you do that to me?" Her voice had risen and there was a current of anger in it that he hadn't heard since Ranger Station Charlie.

"I…I was afraid that finding out you'd been Enclave would change who you were, make you vulnerable…" His excuses sounded feeble even to himself, and he faltered.

She cut him off. "No. Don't lie to me again, Arcade. You are so fucked-up when it comes to the motherfucking Enclave that you couldn't stand to learn that I was a part of something you can't deal with in your own identity." She laughed coldly. "You're always telling me that I need to talk to a therapist. Let me tell you, 'friend': you are the one who needs help. Pretend it's about being gay, or single, or insufferable if you can't say the E-word, but talk to someone about your problem. Because this is utterly fucked." Shaking with anger, she refolded the paper around the pellet and jammed it into her pocket.

"Megan, please let me…"

"Not now. Go away. Go upstairs, or just away. I got to...

Feeling wretched, he walked out into the scrub until he couldn't hear her sobs behind him anymore. He stood out in the warm night air for an hour or more, turning over this disaster of a decision in his head. When he finally turned back to go inside, the pylon was vacant. Inside, Megan was asleep, or pretending to sleep, on her cot, and Veronica frowned at him when he walked in. He ignored her, took off his shoes, and lay down, stewing in guilt and regret for what seemed like hours.

The next day was awful. Picking up on the general vibe, Boone glared at him more than usual. Veronica grabbed him with one of her ballistic hands, bruising his arm, and gave him sharp tongue-lashing for hurting Megan, although it was obvious she had no knowledge of the details. For her part, Megan was hollow-eyed and calm, speaking to him only when it was absolutely necessary. The group dragged its way to Freeside, with Arcade walking alone in front this time. He could hear the women making plans to go dancing and drinking at the Wrangler that night, and overheard Boone's request to visit his old battalion at McCarran the following day. Feeling left out, he led them through the east gate and toward the Old Mormon Fort, which seemed smaller to him after his long absence. He stopped at the gate and turned around to find Megan standing by herself, Boone and Veronica waiting a stone's throw away, watching.

"This is you?" Her voice was cold and detached.

"This is me." He tried again to explain. "Megan…"

She shook her head and held out a jingling bag to him. "Here. Half the caps from our pooled account. It's only about 100." She turned to go. "Thanks, Arcade. Take care and good-bye."

"You too. Good-bye, Megan." What else could he say? He watched them pass through the blue gate into the next district and disappear.
It was more than four months before he saw her again, and by then everything had changed.
Absence Makes the Heart Grow Fonder

The Courier…the Courier…the Courier…almost overnight, it seemed, she became the talk of Vegas. Never as Megan Martin or even Megan Martus, but only by the title of her former profession. The Courier had killed the deathclaws pinning down the trade routes and terrorizing Sloan. The Courier had stopped the insane radio signal coming out from Black Mountain. The Courier had prevented a Legion saboteur from destroying McCarren's monorail. The Courier had crept through an irradiated vault and somehow purified the water source for the farms outside of the city. The Courier had defended the Bittersprings refugees against a horde of Legion slavers. The Courier had become the first person to enter the Lucky 38 in years, had killed a chairman at the Tops, and had something to do with the strange behavior of the securitrons on the Strip. The Courier had defied Caesar and spit in his eye, yet somehow escaped alive. Sometimes the stories mentioned a hooded girl with a powerful punch and a sweet smile, others a silent sniper with a red beret, and still others a spiky little robot. One even claimed that her partner in the fight for justice was a Mexican cowboy, but as the story-teller was a shell-shocked junky, no one believed it. Arcade listened for these stories and talked to people who'd met her, but she never came to the Old Mormon Fort, even though she must have come close sometimes. He found himself walking the streets of the city, hoping to catch a glimpse of her or one of her companions. Then, one day in late January, the stories dried up. He heard nothing else, good or bad, for weeks. Even the Legion was quiet and rumors of raids settled down. It was as if the whole region were waiting for something to happen.

Then, one day, she was back. He'd returned late in the day from a surgical teaching stint at Usanagi's clinic, electing not to bring any guards with him as he preferred solitude to safety these days, and there she was, sitting on a crate beside his workbench as if she'd always belonged there. She was alone, dressed in the same old ranger armor that had now seen better days. A combat shotgun sat on her knees.

"Hi Arcade. Long time no see." She wasn't smiling, but at least she sounded happy to see him.

He sat down on his bunk and addressed her warmly. "Megan. Or should I say, Courier? You've been busy. I've heard a lot of things about you – mostly good, some neutral-ish. How are you? Where is everybody?"

"I dropped ED off at the Brotherhood bunker for the scribes to study for a while. I, er, kind of helped Veronica stage a coup there a few months ago, and I'm not comfortable with what their new leader wants me to do to prove my loyalty, so I've been avoiding the place. Raul – whom you don't know, I guess – decided to stay on his farm for at least a few months this spring to grow some maize. Boone…well, Boone left a few weeks ago. Stayed behind in Novac." Something was missing from her voice. The tone and diction was the same as it had always been, but there was a lifeless quality to it now.

"Is something wrong between you two? Did he–"

"Oh, it was all me. Mea culpa. Shocking, I know. I said some things calculated to make him hate me. It worked. He wanted to kill me, but left instead. Nice of him. Before then, we were actually doing alright. I thought for a little bit after the fight at Bittersprings…that I might love him and he might love me. But I guess I didn't, since I was able to hurt him like that."

"I'm sorry. Are you okay?" He leaned in, examining her more closely. Her face was thinner, and she'd acquired a new scar that ran from the base of her jaw to her ear lobe. There were shadows under her eyes and the eyes themselves were bloodshot.
She saw him looking, and averted her gaze, answering glibly, "Sí, estoy muy bien. Y ahora hablo español porque es más fácil que el latín."

"I don't speak Spanish, but I think I understood you. So, the stories of you travelling with a Mexican cowboy are true?"

She laughed. "Yeah. Raul is a pre-war ghoul I freed from the super mutants on Black Mountain. A real vaquero, hat and chaps and all. He's really grumpy and sarcastic, but actually very sweet if he likes you." She caught his eye and stared steadily at him for a moment. "I came to let you know that I forgive you for what you did with that goddamned pellet and for lying to me about it. I can kind of understand what you were thinking and why you did it – even if it was wrong – and I've learned lately that there are worst things in life than paternalistic, condescending doctors." She scrunched up her face and suppressed some intense emotion with a shudder. "I missed you. There were a couple of times I thought I was going to die out there, and my main regret was that we'd parted on bad terms." Her eyes were shining with unshed tears, and she tried to wipe them away with her gloved hands. "I want to make things okay before I go out again."

His heart feeling lighter than it had for a while, Arcade said, "Thank you. I'm so sorry for what I did. It was stupid, short-sighted, and unethical…I'm sorry for causing such a rift between us. I missed you too."

Setting the shotgun down on a different crate, she fidgeted with her hands. "Since we're apologizing…I'm sorry for not being able to have this conversation with you that night by the Outpost. I was angry, of course, but mostly I was heartbroken. You threw two emotional grenades at me at the same time – a chunk of disturbing personal history and the realization that I couldn't totally trust you anymore. Honestly, the latter was and is the worst disorienting moment of my life, much worse than the former, I think just because I held you in such high regard. I still do, but I see more clearly now how human you are." She looked up at him hopefully, "Can we start fresh, please? Clean slate? Travel with me again sometime?"

"Oh, I'm very human, always have been. It's a huge failing of mine. And yes, absolutely. I want to be friends again." As happy as he was to be talking to her again, her appearance and dialogue were setting off some alarms, and Arcade had shifted subtly into his professional mode, searching her face for hints of whatever was troubling his friend. Not seeing anything obvious, however, he only said agreeably, "I would love to travel with you again, but would you like to rest here for a while first? You look absolutely exhausted. And you've lost weight you didn't need to lose."

"Ah, it's nothing." She waved a hand dismissively. "I've been camping in the wild a lot and don't sleep well out there. And I do eat, I promise, but I also get a fuck-ton of exercise. So you'll come? I'm actually about to head out on a new job. I need to head out for Vault 22 tomorrow morning and will probably need to spend at least one night out there. If that doesn't sound like your cup of tea, I can swing back afterwards and we can do something more routine, like running errands for the NCR. No pressure."

"Vault-crawling. Sounds like your usual Tuesday. But I'm definitely in. Want to have dinner with me and spend the night here first? This bunk isn't much, but it's more comfortable than a bedroll on the ground."

"Thanks, but I've got a little hidey-hole in the hills southwest of McCarran. I need to go there to resupply. I'll stay there tonight and come back for you tomorrow." She brightened, remembering something. "My 'neighbor' up there fought alongside your father, apparently. He said his name was Cannibal Johnson, but he doesn't seem much like a cannibal to me."

Arcade was elated. "Johnson's still alive? That's great news! I hadn't heard from him for so long that
I feared the worst. Hey, can I just come with you now? I'm in between projects right now and I can be ready to go in a few minutes."

A shadow of reluctance passed over her face, but was gone in an instant. "Sure, that's fine. It'll save a trip into town in the morning. It would be good if you could stay with Johnson, though – my cave is very small and barely has room for me to lie down in. He'll probably offer to feed us. If not, I have supplies there." She checked the time on her Pip-Boy. "I gotta run over to Mick and Ralph's for some ammo. Meet you back here in thirty minutes?"

As Arcade was assembling his travel kit, trying to decide how many fission batteries he might need for his lantern, Julie poked her head in the tent. "Off again?"

"Yes. Probably not for as long this time. My friend wants some back-up for a vault expedition."

"Don't die. And try not to make her mad again – the Courier is someone we could use in our corner. She just donated a whole bunch of Fixer and Radaway; you might mention that we could use Med-X too."

Shaking his head at Julie's lack of sensitivity, he grabbed a slew of medicinal chems and bandages for his bag. Fully packed, he left the tent to find Megan talking with Beatrix, the lone ghoul among the Followers guards: "...and when I say escort, I mean prostitute. Someone who doesn't mind digging the spurs in a little, if you get my drift."

The ghoul demurred. "Weirdos into bullwhips and necrosis, eh? Doesn't sound half-bad...nah, what am I thinking? I'm no whore, and I ain't about to hand my ass over to some penny-ante hustler like he owns me."

"You can set your terms with Garret. And one of the perks is an employee discount..."

"Now you're talking. I suppose I could sleaze it up a bit for their customers if it means I have a non-stop supply of drink. Thanks!"

Walking over to Megan, he commented quietly, "So, in addition to being the 'Hero of the Wastes,' you're a procurer for the Garrets now, huh? I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"Ah, life wouldn't be the same without you judging me. Caps are caps, Arcade, and what two consenting adults do in the dark is no one's business but their own. Let's go."

They headed for the southern gate, walking briskly to try and beat the sunset to their destination. She stayed close to him and appeared ill-at-ease among the ruffians and vagrants of Freeside. One drunkard lurched too near, putting a grimy hand on her arm to steady himself, and she cuffe him roughly across the side of the head, sending him sprawling. Recognizing the man, Arcade went to help him up, but he twisted away and ran, cursing and holding his ear. The doctor rounded on the Courier, "That was Bill Ronte, an engineer who used to work for us before he got pulled down into alcoholism. He's not a bad man and he didn't mean to bother you. You didn't have to hit him."

She responded flatly, "I didn't kill him, did I? And he shouldn't have grabbed my arm." Arcade could think of nothing to say to this, but felt uneasy as they continued walking.

She relaxed noticeably once they'd left the city, looking almost like her old self – if her old self had had a permanently wary expression on her face. Arcade wanted to ask her what was wrong, but settled on being less confrontational: "So, you're kind of on edge, huh?"

"A little. Too much duck-and-cover stuff lately, I suppose. It is not a good idea to surprise me right now, Arcade. Don't even touch me suddenly. I broke an NCR corporal's nose for that yesterday, and
not even on purpose. Just reflex. She slapped me on the ass."

"I won't do that, I promise. Did that get you into some trouble at McCarran?"

She sighed. "No, not really. I've done jobs for them and I had good intel on recent Legion troop movements to deliver. Major Dhatri was irritated with me for sending one of his snipers to the hospital, but was mostly just apologetic. His officer's dealing with her personal trauma by coming on aggressively to every woman she sees, and it's getting her into trouble a lot." She reflected. "If she'd just talked to me, that would have been fine. I may go find her when we get back, just to apologize and explain."

"You're not using Jet, are you? That stuff can make you nervous."

"No. I mean sometimes, sure, but not habitually. Jet can be the difference between life and death in a fight, but I save it for the big battles." Looking wistful, she went on, "Boone never liked it when I used chems in front of him. He said female soldiers in particular tend to lean too much on the boost from Jet, Buffout, and Psycho to overcome their strength and speed deficit. He said that it backfired when it was time to pay the piper, and deal with all the side-effects."

"He was right. And, for the love of God, don't use Psycho at all. The Fiends are the way they are largely because of Psycho – it erodes higher brain function with repeated use."

She actually smiled, looking more like the girl he'd known in Goodsprings, "Don't worry, Arcade. I've got plenty of built-in aggression. I don't need any more. Once was enough with Psycho. So, enough about my flirtations with chem use. How is your research going?"

He told her about the homemade stimpaks they'd begun testing – distilled essence of broc flower and xander root, packed into a syringe. "It's only 50-75% as effective as a Pre-War stimpak, but it's a hell of a lot better than nothing." He admitted that Ruby's rad-scorpion venom casserole hadn't really led to anything substantial yet. "Well, that's not entirely true. We did discover that we can effectively inoculate someone against rad-scorpion venom, but we're not sure how long the protection is good for and almost no one's going to pay fifty caps for a shot just in case they get stung in the next year."

"I actually might pay that fee if you have any that's for sale. I got stung by one out by Hidden Valley a couple of months ago, and it was pretty damn horrible. That antivenin you gave me saved my life, since it would have been too late by the time Veronica got me to the Brotherhood doctor."

"I made several functional prototypes. I don't mind giving you one when we get back. What was the Brotherhood bunker like?"

"Undermanned. Kind of depressing. Not many kids. They've become so isolationist that they don't even let most of their people leave the bunker unless they have aboveground duties. They resemble more of a doomsday cult than I expected from their reputation – it's like they're waiting for everybody else to die off so that they can emerge as the one true light of human civilization. You would like their library, though; they have a huge amount of valuable information stored down there, including databases copied from pre-war universities."

"It does sound great, not that I'll ever get to see it. What was it that the Brotherhood leader wanted you to do?"

"Elder Hardin asked me to wipe out the Van Graffs. It's a tall order to begin with, and while I haven't heard many good things about their operation, I don't really feel like killing a dozen people just because the Brotherhood has laser envy. In exchange, he'd offered me full membership and my own suit of T-45 power armor with training, but I didn't really want to join, even for the sake of"
appearances. I'm going east in a year or two, and I don't think he'd accept 'looking for the Enclave' as a good explanation for leaving."

Arcade's heart sank. "You want to…find the Enclave? Why? Where will you start?"

"I mostly just want to find my family, if I have one, and all I have to go on is the record of my Enclave enlistment. I went to Sloan a while ago and tracked down the person I delivered my second-to-last package to – it was a part to repair their mining machinery or something. The cook there said that I raved drunkenly about the "soft-shelled mirelurks of Bangor" being my favorite food. Anyway, according to a sympathetic scribe I talked to, 'Bangor' is the name of a large city in a northeastern state called Maine. So, when this business with the Legion is resolved to my satisfaction, that is where I'll go. If I'm still alive..."

"You didn't tell the Brotherhood what you were actually looking for, did you?"

"Do you think I'd be talking to you if I had?" she bit back acerbically. "Regardless of what you might think, Arcade, I'm not stupid. I didn't even tell Veronica, mostly because I didn't want to put her in a difficult position. I don't think she would actually betray me."

"You know, if you find them, they'll either shoot you as a deserter or re-conscript you, and that's a best-case scenario. Also, Maine is incredibly far away. Almost three thousand miles, I would think."

"I did it once, so I can do it again," she said mulishly. Voice dropping, she added matter-of-factly, "Arcade, I probably won't even make it there, so don't worry about what the Enclave will do to me. The pessimist – the realist – in me says that I'm going to die here in the desert, probably within thirty miles of this spot, within six months of this moment. I'm okay with that, but I still like to have a goal that stretches further."

Troubled by what he was hearing, Arcade finally asked, "Megan, what happened to you? You've changed so much in four months. You're almost a different person."

Sounding slightly accusing, but most just weary, she answered, "You left. In broad terms, shit happened. Boone left. The girl I was before was weak, even though she didn't know it at the time. She wasn't strong enough to survive, so she became someone else. Not necessarily a better person, but someone who might actually have a shot at not falling apart. Ultimately, I'm trying to rediscover that tough girl who walked into the Mojave Express for the first time, and all I have to go on is little fragments from other people." She grimaced. "It's good to see you again, Arcade, but I'm not actually sure I should spend a lot more time with you after all. I think you make me weak. I didn't realize that until now. You're too nice, and you make me want to be nice. Nice people get ground up out here."

She clenched her teeth, as if in pain, and spoke again, words tumbling out like broken blocks of ice, "You should know. The Legion hit Novac." Seeing his expression, she reassured him. "Daisy's okay. Anybody who was in the hotel compound is okay. But…Nellie is dead. Her husband Martin is too. Strauss. Her guards, Damon and Scott, were killed trying to protect her. The McBrides came out to see what the noise was and were both slaughtered on the spot." She stuttered a moment, trying to get the words out, "I-w-was on w-watch. B-Boone was at Nelson for a few days, but Andy wanted a night off. The Legion kept to the outskirts, too far away for me to shoot without hitting innocent people. I'm not that accurate and I can't see as well as Boone or Manny, especially in the dark. I raised the alarm, but it was too late. We didn't have the manpower to defend that town. Not really."

Hands shaking, she drew a flask out of her hip pocket and took a long drink, visibly repressing a gag reflex. She offered some to Arcade, but he shook his head numbly, shocked and saddened by the news.

"Can I give you a hug? You look like you need it." That, and about a thousand hours of therapy, he
thought in dismay. And maybe rehab. Jesus.

She laughed, a brittle, humorless sound. "No, no thanks. I'm good now. Sorry, that's depressing stuff. It's just more shit on the pile. I still can't believe Nellie's gone – she and Martin were both so happy about that baby, and now they're all dead. It's hard to take."

"It really is. How long ago did that happen?"

"It's been almost a month. Boone left three weeks ago," she added morosely.

"He didn't…blame you for what happened, did he?"

"No. He didn't. He did get even scarier about the Legion, though. If that's possible. He was worried about me and kept trying to help – imagine, if you can, Boone volunteering to be touchy-feely! I felt guilty and wanted to be alone to suffer, and so I was deliberately cruel to him to make him back off. It worked. I regret it deeply now, because he really didn't deserve that." She rubbed her temples.

"This subject is giving me a headache. Let's talk about something else. Vault 22, for example."

Reluctantly moving on, Arcade asked, "Who hired you and for what?"

"Dr. Hildern, a researcher at McCarran. He wants me to grab a dump of whatever information the vault computers have on their botany experiments. He thinks the unusual plant growth observed outside of the vault may have significance for agriculture. He's an ambitious prick. Apparently, he's a former Follower, though I suspect he's a persona non grata with y'all these days. His assistant, Dr. Williams, warned me that he's already sent several mercenaries to the vault, but none have come back. She asked me specifically to look for the most recent hire: Keely, a two-hundred-year-old ghoulscientist." It was beginning to grow dark, and she clicked on her Pip-Boy light as they rounded the boundary of Camp Golf, staying well clear of the lake and the creatures there.

"A dangerous mission, then. Are you sure you want to deliver research to this guy? He sounds like he might misuse it to advance his own agenda." The name wasn't ringing a bell for Arcade, but that didn't mean much. The Followers had been the Mojave much longer than he had, and sometimes it seemed like they had more former members than current. A lot of them ended up working for the NCR in some capacity.

"Well, I'd like to get paid, obviously, but that's negotiable. My moral compass needs recalibrating, so I'll follow your lead on what we should do with what we find. If you think we shouldn't hand the research over to the NCR, we can give it to the Followers instead or just destroy it. Whatever you think is best. I abnegate the responsibility to you." Pointing to the rocky hillside ahead, she warned. "Let's be careful here. Geckos love to hunt in this area, and the ones up here are radioactive."

They climbed the slope for a while, Arcade puffing slightly with exertion. Megan pointed to a rusty grate over a dark opening, a combination lock holding it shut. "That one's me. Johnson's is a little farther up." Tapping on a reinforced door stuck between two rocky outcroppings, she shouted, "Johnson, it's me, Martin. I brought a friend. Can we come in?"

A pause, and then they heard rattling on the other side of the door. It opened outward, revealing an old man standing on the threshold, illuminated by a small cook-fire behind him. He waved them inside, securing the door tightly behind them before turning and eyeing them both. "Hey kid. It's been a while. You look like hell, do you know that? Arcade, it's good to see you, too. You look so much like Israel nowadays. Come in, both of you, come sit down by the fire." They accepted the sawn-off stumps he offered as stools. Arcade looked around the small, dry cave, noting a vent in the roof for the smoke and larders full of dried goods, hides, and other accoutrements. Megan sat down beside him, bulky in her armor.
He offered them each a haunch of rabbit on a skewer, which they accepted with thanks. "Where's Mr. Strong and Silent, honey? You two seemed pretty cozy last time you were here."

"Didn't work out," she said shortly with her mouth full, having already gnawed her rabbit to the bone.

"I'm sorry to hear that. He didn't talk much, but he seemed to care about you an awful lot." He grabbed his own chunk of meat and sat down on the dwelling's one real chair with a tired groan. "You two need something in particular from me, or are you just here to eat all my food? On that note, take what you want, girl. You're too skinny."

Megan took another piece of rabbit and offered him a half-smile. "We're heading north to the cliffs tomorrow. I was wondering if Arcade could stay here tonight, since I don't have room."

"Sure, sure, not a problem. You can stay here too, if you want. It's a lot nicer than that hole you got."

"No, thank you. I prefer privacy to comfort."

Arcade surprised them both with his own question, "The Legion's going to march on the Dam and Vegas, sooner or later, Johnson. Do you think you and the others could throw some weight behind the NCR in the battle?"

"Well, now, Arcade, I don't know. Sure, we've all got our power armor and Daisy could probably get that old vertibird running again with a week's notice, but I'm not sure you could get the others on board with helping the NCR, especially Moreno. I ran into him a year ago, and you can tell Navarro's still an open wound for him."

"Daisy's willing. Kreger's on board if you are. If I…we…could convince the other two, would you come? I'm not the biggest fan of the NCR either, but any alternative is better than a Legion victory."

Megan spoke up, sounding interested, "My intelligence on the Legion says they're putting off an assault on the Dam until the summer. Something about training with new weapons and artillery. We have several months to work on a plan."

"Hm." Johnson thought about it, frowning. "Maybe. Arcade, what made you tell this girl all about us, anyway?"

"She half-guessed, so I told her the rest, bit by bit. Besides…” he looked at her, not sure if she was comfortable with him sharing her secret. She completed the thought for him.

"I don't remember it, but apparently I used to be an Enclave soldier out east somewhere. Arcade found an identity chip in my arm a while back. Your secrets are my secrets, and betraying you would expose me as well."

Johnson looked worried at this, and stared at the girl as if he'd never seen her before. "Wow. That's…not good. Downright troubling actually. And yeah, I got one of those in my own arm-meat somewheres. We all do, except the boy here of course. Would you wear your dad's armor, Arcade?"

He'd been expecting the question. "I've been wondering about that. Probably not. I'm a better doctor than a soldier. With a little training Megan could wear it if she wants to, though."

"You ever wear power armor, kid?" he asked her gruffly.

"Not as far as I remember, but maybe. I'd have to see if muscle-memory kicks in. It's helped out with a lot of other skills. If not, I can learn. I like the idea of facing the Legion in power armor, especially
"If they do get that howitzer working…"

"It can't save you from a direct shelling, you know. The armor might come out looking okay, but the squishy stuff inside – bones, organs, that sort of thing – doesn't do so good with that kind of shockwave."

She shrugged. "No worries. Guess my problems would be over at that point anyway." She sounded hopeful and it made Arcade's blood run cold with dread.

"How old are you, kid?" The old soldier's voice sounded tired.

"Twenty-one back in November. I feel older most of the time, though."

"If I were your C. O., I'd pull you from active duty, like yesterday, and assign you to a shrink, not send you off to war."

She seemed unimpressed by this threat. "Well, you're not. I'm okay, really. I'm focused and staying busy. There's not much in my sights right now except for getting ready to fight the Legion." She stood up abruptly, wiping her hands on her thighs. "Goodnight gentlemen, I'm going to bed. Can you please try to be ready at 7:00, Arcade? I'll come get you then. Thanks for dinner, Johnson." And she was gone, door slamming behind her.

The two men sat in frozen silence for a minute, before Johnson moved to poke the fire with a stick and spoke aloud, "Just how far gone is she, boy?"

Arcade answered glumly, "I don't know. Today was the first I'd seen of her for months, and I'm still trying to connect the dots. I don't know what all's in her head right now, but I really don't like what she's volunteered. I'll try to coax it out of her on the road tomorrow."

"Careful. I've seen expressions like that on men that were a day away from painting the wall with their brains. I've seen that look in the mirror, Arcade. She's carrying something she can't handle by herself right now, mark my words. She needs help."
Alone in her chilly cave – it was more of a den, really – Megan crawled out of her armor for the first time all day, briefly considered changing clothes, and then decided it didn't matter for now. She did what she needed to get warm and fall asleep, but no precaution could prevent the nightmares. Those had become regular visitors, and by and large these days they were populated with ghosts. She'd be standing in Novac, walking down the road to Nipton again, or buying ammo from the Gun Runners, and there they'd be – Strauss trying to speak to her through a slashed throat, eyes accusing her. Nellie handing her an armful of bloody baby clothes, saying that she wouldn't be needing them anymore. There was nothing she could do to make them stop, and nothing she was allowed to say in her dream except that she was sorry, so sorry. Others, people she knew (Boone, Arcade, Veronica, and others) as well as faceless men and women she'd never met, lay strewn in the streets, trampled underfoot, condemning her silently. She saw the Legion, too, of course, but could never lift an arm to stop them, couldn't do anything but stand frozen in place, watching and waiting for them to come for her too.

If she could have gotten by without sleeping, she would have done so by whatever means were necessary, but she was so tired already that it was a challenge to focus from moment to moment. And anyway, after forcing herself to stay awake for a couple of days, the ghosts would start to visit her in the real world, and then she really would be in serious trouble. As it was, she slept in short fits, waking several times before dawn showed through the gaps in her door. Taking a moment to wrap herself in safe numbness and hiding in her armor, she stalked out to gather thorn bushes for a fire and hunt for breakfast, letting the cool air jolt her out of the wash of sleepiness that threatened to slow her down. By the time she had a young gecko cooking over a small fire, she felt awake and normal enough that she figured she could sell "okay" to Arcade. If you had asked her just then why it was so important to convince him, she couldn't have answered; she only knew that once she let the cracks show, they would grow until her whole façade had crumbled, and that seemed untenable to her. If only with Arcade, if only for a few days, she wanted to pretend, to live in a safe lie. At 6:55, she picked up the remaining chunks of cooked meat on her one tin plate and carried them over to Johnson's cave.

Arcade had also gotten up early, and had spent an hour privately mourning Novac's dead, even Strauss, whom he'd disliked strongly. He especially regretted the deaths of the young family he'd befriended, and indulged a moment of intense hate – an emotion constitutionally foreign to him – for Caesar and all that he'd wrought. By the time the Courier knocked, he was ready to go, although Johnson still snored on his mattress.

She walked in, laughed quietly, and tipped the meat onto one of Johnson's plates before stuffing her own back into her pack. "A thank-you for the rabbit last night," she explained to Arcade. "Hopefully he'll wake up before it gets cold. You can have some too if you want, of course," she added as an afterthought. "You ready to go?"

"Lead the way." Stepping outside into the slanting rays of sunrise, he studied her surreptitiously by their light. She looked no less tired for the sleep, but her face was a smooth, bland mask that revealed nothing.

She sounded more-or-less alright today, at least, cheerful and interested in conversation. She asked about Freeside and told him that she was interested in spending more time there over the next few months, even as she did odd jobs out of McCarran. "Someone said it'd be worth my while to get to know the King if I want to effect change in Freeside. Figured I'd go pay him a visit soon."

"Ask after that robot dog of his. If Rex is still sick, I actually have a person in mind who could help."
That person also happens to be one of the remaining Enclave remnants, so we can kill two birds with one stone."

She nodded, yawning hugely and covering her mouth. "Cool. Sorry, tired. Arcade, do you have anything in that bag that's good for bad dreams? I'm having a hard time staying asleep lately."

"No, sorry. The causes of nightmares, and sleep disorders in general, are more complicated than a pill can fix, including but not limited to alcohol and other drugs, traumatic memories, and stress. How much are you drinking these days, anyway?" He tried to sound merely curious, and not judgmental.

"Not that much," she said quickly. Seeing his skepticism, she continued, "Like, some, obviously. I usually go through a fifth every four or five days. Sometimes more, sometimes less. I don't really ever get drunk anymore, just take sips throughout the day to get past rough patches."

"So, three or four drinks a day? That's a lot for a woman. And any person who drinks literally all day purely to cope with 'rough patches' has a problem in the making."

"Oh, I have problems, but I'm not an alcoholic. Promise." She sounded bored and irritable. "Never mind about the sleep thing, I'm sorry I asked." They walked in silence for a while, with the Courier examining the map on her Pip-Boy. "We need to divert west a in bit. There's a Fiend camp by the Poseidon service station that I don't want to deal with today. Maybe on the way back, though. If we go too far over, however, we'll get into fire gecko territory." Apropos of nothing, she added, "I met Caesar. Talked to him. He sent Vulpes himself to the Strip to deliver an invitation, glorified errand boy that he is. He's lucky Boone wasn't with me, because he would absolutely have killed him, crowds of tourists notwithstanding. The invitation offered me safe passage to and from the Legion Fort."

"I heard rumors about your meeting. Did you really spit in his eye?"

She giggled. "No, that would have been suicide. I was unarmed, unarmored, and alone, and he had four praetorians and a displacer glove. I just declined to do a job for him, politely even. I had already pretended to do one thing because he asked, so he thought I was amenable to helping the Legion. Crazy sot. Why would any woman want to help him?"

"What had you already done for him?"

"He told me to use the Platinum Chip to destroy Mr. House's secret bunker under the Fort, yet for some reason he didn't send any men with me to make sure I actually did that. Instead, I remotely upgraded the securitrons on the Strip."

"Uh…so you gave Mr. House bigger guns? That doesn't seem like a good idea to me…"

"Oh no, Mr. House is dead. Didn't you hear his obituary on the radio? An obsequious AI named Yes Man controls the security now. He's prepared to help keep order in the whole city if it experiences instability as a result of the war. I don't think he has an ego or ambitions of his own, but it would probably be good if someone who understands programming could take a look at him. Even better if it's someone who doesn't have dreams of world domination themselves."

"The Followers have two people that fit the bill," Arcade said automatically, thoughts churning. "We can talk to them when we get back. Megan, no offense, but do you have any idea what you're doing? What your eventual goal here is?"

She gave a would-be casual shrug. "Honestly? I'm playing this tune by ear, and taking things one decision at a time. I'm going to support an NCR victory at the Dam, of course, and I don't actually
want them to withdraw from the Mojave altogether. But I did think that maybe the local factions' show of independent strength could be a leverage point in bargaining for greater autonomy and representation in government. But these things are complicated and stuff, which is why I need a smart person like you telling me where I'm wrong. Veronica always goes along with whatever I decide, Boone never gave a thought to any details beyond 'kill a lot of Legion,' although he's consistently pro-NCR, and Raul actually thinks the Legion is an improvement over the anarchy and lawlessness he saw in Arizona, so he's neutral about the whole situation. I need you advising me, because for some reason I'm wielding a lot of power right now, and – between you and me – I've barely got my own shit together. I can't show weakness to the NCR, the Khans, the Brotherhood, the Kings or the Boomers when I go to convince them of my plans and gain their support, but the truth is that I'm cracking up." She said this placidly, but with a wild look in her eye that made his heart lurch. She continued her detached analysis, as if she were talking about someone else's fate: "The worst part is that there's no one who can step up to take on my role if I die or break down." "Don't you think some self-care is in order, then? For the greater good of the southwest, of course." His tone was sarcastic, but he hoped he was communicating his genuine concern. "Take a few days off from saving the world after this trip. Come hang out with me in Freeside. Talk robots with April Martimer and Emily Ortal."

She smiled noncommittally and changed the subject. "I'll think about it. Maybe after I visit Nellis. So, in reference to our conversation months ago, I did ask Caesar why he made the Legion what it is."

"And? What did he say?"

"I'm afraid I didn't follow him very well. He talked a lot about the NCR being hopelessly corrupt, that their so-called democracy was a sham. He went off on something called 'Hegelian dialectics,' and said that the Legion was an inevitable answer to the NCR's existence, and that the collision of the two would yield a more perfect synthesis in a true empire built along the lines of Rome. I wish you'd been there to answer him – he went out of his way to make me feel stupid." She paused for breath. "There's something wrong with Caesar. I think he's sick."

"What makes you think that? Beside his cruelty and flair for the grandiose, I mean."

"When he walked across the room, I could tell his foot was dragging. He had what looked like an absence seizure while we were talking. And, finally, he ended our first conversation abruptly, complaining of a headache. He reminded me of me, right after I got shot."

"It could be a tumor putting pressure on his brain," Arcade mused. "Or, depending how or when the symptoms started, it could be a head injury. Either way, it doesn't bode well for him making decisions comprehensible from a sane person's point of view. I almost think I should go offer him my services, if only to spare us the chance a short reign by 'probably crazy Caesar,' followed by a long stretch of 'definitely crazy Legate Lanius.'"

"You're joking, right?" She actually looked worried that he might volunteer as Caesar's personal physician, and he laughed.

"Yes, of course. I've no desire to play the fool to his Lear."

"I actually think you would actually enjoy arguing with him, at least for a while. He's really intelligent and y'all kind of speak the same language. Literally with the Latin, obviously, but also figuratively. You're both very philosophical." Smiling a little, she added lightly, "Well, if you do decide you want to serve in the court of the mighty Caesar, let me know, and I'll hand you over myself. Might as well get my thirty pieces of silver for it."
"A biblical allusion. Fancy. I never read you any of that."

"I got laid-up for a while recently. Sally, the woman taking care of me, only had one book: a New Testament missing everything except the Gospel of Matthew and Revelation, and by God, she read the hell out of it. I forced myself to get out of bed on the third day just so I didn't have to listen anymore."

He chuckled, but asked seriously, "Are you okay? You don't seem injured…"

In response, she reached around and touched her armored back, apparently unconsciously, "Yeah. It was just some cuts that turned bad, made me feverish. The rangers had a good supply of antibiotics and fixed me up."

"Want me to take a look, later? If they're still tender, I have an ointment that can help reduce pain and scarring…"

"No," she said sharply. More calmly, she clarified, "It's fine now, really." Looking away, she took a quick drink from her flask and washed it down with water from her canteen.

"Well, I'm convinced," he said, but very quietly. She didn't respond.

"Abbati, medico, patronoque intima pande. 'Don't keep secrets from your priest, your doctor, or your patron.' If you would just tell me–"

"You are here in your capacity as my friend, Arcade. Not my confessor, not my doctor, and not my patron, whatever that is. Friends don't badger friends. I'll tell you what I want you to know, when I want you to know it. Please, just respect that for now, and stop thinking so much. Thanks."

He gave up in defeat. "Okay. Just remember that I'm here when you're ready to talk. As far as my opinion of the current situation goes – I like that you're committed to rallying resources beyond the NCR to fight the Legion. You're correct in that this direction could lead to greater autonomy for this region, as well as a healthy sense of fear and respect from the NCR for the people living here. I do wish you were at least considering advocating for a truly independent Vegas free of external controls, but I can appreciate how that doesn't look realistic or even ideal to most people. A compromise, with empowered, democratically-elected local leadership working with the Californian senate, might be an achievable goal to work toward. I don't mind helping you work toward that end, and I will do what I can to add what's left of the western Enclave to your list of allies in the fight."

"Good. I'm going to try for the Boomers next. NCR wants me to open the conversation with them. It'd be nice to have their big guns on our side."

"How are you going to get past their welcoming barrage of missiles?" What Arcade knew about the Boomers – what anybody knew about the Boomers – was limited to their dislike of outsiders and their love of explosives.

"Oh, I have a plan. It's a good one, too." The old, maddening cockiness had crept back into her voice.

"Is your plan to run really fast in between the shells?" Arcade asked drily.

"No, that was only Plan A. It didn't perform well in the simulations I ran in my head. Plan B involves running really fast…with a stealth boy. It's foolproof. I just need some caps for the stealth boy first – that's why we're doing this thing for Dr. Hildern. That, and to improve my reputation with the NCR."
As the miles fell behind, the two friends continued their trek, successfully avoiding enemies from either side. They fell into their old, comfortable rhythm of banter and discussion, speculating about the future and rehashing the past. If Megan trailed off into silence from time to time, Arcade pretended not to notice, just as she ignored his subtle attempts to examine her. Finally, the cliffs drew near, and even from a distance they could see a hazy green aura surrounding a niche in the rock, a carpet of grass spreading out on the sand nearby.

"Stay alert. People I've talked to say that cazadors can be a real problem up here." She had drawn her shotgun and was looking around anxiously.

"Yes. There's a Followers safehouse less than a mile away, and we've had problems with them there. There's some nests up on the cliff, I think."

There were insects to contend with, but not wasps: giant, flying mantises, their scything forearms surprisingly sharp, came rushing out of the broken vault entrance to meet them as they approached. Luckily, these specimens were on the small side and they fell easily to a kick, an armored punch, and even a glancing hit from a gun.

The mantises vanquished, they rested a moment in the lush shade of the trees overhanging the entrance. "What does that sign say, Arcade?" The Courier pointed to the graffiti slashed in red over the entrance.

"It says 'Stay Out. The Plants Kill.' Very ominous. You know, I'm no botanist, but I think this may not be entirely natural. Are you sure about going in here?"

"No, but I'm curious now. How bad could plants be, really?"

The vault corridors were dimly lit by a few functioning emergency lights, although many of the rooms they passed still had functioning UV lamps. It was very humid inside, and they could hear water dripping off the ceiling in every direction. They descended one stairwell and then another, turning and cutting through fern-carpeted labs looking for a functional terminal. Megan had a sudden misgiving, "Maybe we should have left breadcrumbs. Or drawn a map or something. Neither of us has the best sense of direction. I got lost trying to get out of the last vault I explored. It sucked, because it was really radioactive."

"I've seen two floorplans on the walls, even though they're mostly covered up by moss. We can find one of those if we need directions for getting out of here. So far, it's not so bad though, right?"

"No. It– wait, what was that?"

"My Pip-Boy flagged a hostile. Something very, very close. But now it's gone." She strained her eyes into the dark corners of the hallway, trying to peer through the leaves of the low shrubs that had grown up between the cracked floor tiles. Before either of them could say anything else, a heavy, green figure sprung out of the foliage and charged at them. Megan instinctually pushed Arcade out of the way, and let the thing's momentum glance harmlessly off her armored shoulder. It floundered on the floor a moment, hissing, and crouched on all fours to spring again. Her shotgun blast caught it in the chest, sending green ichor splattering over the walls. It writhed briefly, then stiffened.

"Are you okay, Arcade?" She offered him a hand up. "I'm sorry if I pushed you too hard."

"Fine, thanks. Nice reflexes." He straightened his glasses, which had been knocked crooked, and bent to examine the dead creature. A green humanoid with mottled green skin, it had no obviously
differentiated tissues, only tough, stem-like fibers running through its torso. "This is very strange."

"No kidding. Is it a plant or an animal?"

"I'd have to examine it on a cellular level to give you a good answer, but it appears to have properties of both. On a disturbing note, I can say that the only reason it would have this humanlike shape would be if it began life as a human being. It looks like a person was taken over by a chlorophyll-based parasite, which gradually replaced their organs and nervous system with its own functional equivalents." He took tweezers and a small, air-tight box from his kit and took a sample of the green flesh.

"So, it could be one of the former vault dwellers?"

"Yes. Or one of Doctor Hildern's hires, if whatever contagion caused this is this still active and works in days or weeks instead of years. If that's what happened to them, we could already be infected."

She gulped nervously, "Is there anything we can do to stop it if we are?"

"I can't say without knowing more. Maybe a course of anti-viral or anti-fungal treatment. Until we learn more, however, we need to quarantine ourselves so we don't risk spreading a plague to the general population." He looked at her seriously, "Regardless of what we discover, I'm already leaning toward the 'destroy everything' side of the argument on this vault's secrets. I wish we'd known about this place years ago – we would have sent a trained team in here with hazmat suits."

They continued more cautiously, Megan in the lead, taking the time to kick at every thick patch of greenery they passed. She surprised three more of the green men by doing this, but dispatched them handily. A fourth, larger than the others, ambushed her, jumping down from an exposed crawl space onto her back and knocking her down. Fortunately, her pack protected her from its attempts to claw her, and Arcade was able to shoot it. The plasma charge had an interestingly explosive effect on it, and they were both coated in its slime.

"Ouch. I think I'll feel that in the morning." She sat up, rubbing her neck, and climbed stiffly to her feet. "Also, it's going to take me forever to get all this green stuff off of me. It's in my hair now."

"At least you're not wearing white," said Arcade mournfully, trying to clean his gooey lenses with the relatively clean underside of his lab coat. She looked at him – his green-streaked hair, skin, and clothes – and doubled over with mirth.

"You should see yourself," he said indignantly, but he chuckled as well. "Next one's going to assume you're one of them and leave you alone." When she continued laughing, he crossed his arms and adopted a stern look. "Whenever you're ready. Really, it's not that humorous."

Gasping and hiccupping, she wiped tears of hilarity from her eyes, "Ha..ha…ha…oh, hm. Sorry, Arcade. I just found that really funny. Let's go."

Still giggling, she led the way around a corner and into an enormous room which Arcade identified as a large hydroponics lab. It was relatively well-lit, with many working lamps supporting a rich carpet of white flowers on thorny vines. "Strange choice for this lab, flowers. You would think that food would have been the first priority," he observed out loud, scanning the corners of the room for danger. It seemed peaceful, almost comforting after their tangle with the monsters. When she didn't respond, he turned to look for her. "Megan?"

She was sitting down on the edge of a tank that had once held water but now burst with thick leaves
and flowers, and was shaking her head. He tripped through the snaky vines toward her, and tapped her on the shoulder. "What's up? You okay?"

Her pupils looked huge, and she sounded drunk. "I feel... really odd. Happy, actually. Totally disarmed. Specific... pacific... pacified. I think we should get out..." Instead of getting up, however, she fell backwards onto a thick mattress of the vines and closed her eyes. Alarmed, he reached for her, and found himself dizzy and off-balance, falling forward on his knees and plunging his arm up to the shoulder into the tank of plants.

It seemed to him that the vines clung to his arm and legs more tightly than they should, their prickly tendrils becoming entangled with his clothing immediately. The thorns didn't really hurt, though, and a deep sense of calm and acceptance urged him to relax, rest, stop fighting...

"Arcade..." Megan's eyes fluttered open and she whispered his name. She had sunk a few inches into her green bed, and one arm had already been enveloped entirely. "Help."

He stood up, freeing his shoulder with what felt like a herculean effort, and grabbed her other arm to pull her back to a seated position. This proved difficult, as the vines clung to her, but by bracing his foot against the side of the tank, he was able to pull her out. Limp and unresponsive, she fell forward and pulled him down to the floor too, where the vines were less thick, but still everywhere.

By now, the stalwartly rational part of Arcade's brain had told him -- screamed at him, really -- that he was under the influence of a narcotic, probably related to the sweet smell in the room. He tried to breathe through the filter of his filthy sleeve while fumbling for the hand-towel he kept at the top of his pack. Reciting Latin verb declensions under his breath to focus, he managed to tie it around his head, covering his mouth and nose tightly. The cloth was threadbare and dusty, but would hopefully buy him a little time to get out. Deciding that standing was out, he drew his gun and fired it repeatedly, low and parallel to the floor, trying to burn a path through for him to crawl, dragging Megan. The smoky smell of burning leaves made him cough, but also cleared his head a little. Pulling his friend by the foot, he inched toward the entrance, the hallway seeming miles away. It felt like he was moving through molasses, and the vines on either side were slowly moving to fill his path again -- he supposed it could have been a trick of the light or the influence of the drug, but it really looked like they were moving. When the entrance was only a few feet away, an blurry figure stepped into view and stood in the doorway, looking down on him.

"Hm. Oz flowers caught some live 'uns. C'mon then, you. Almost there." The figure, whose voice suggested a twenty-year chain smoker, dragged them both unceremoniously into the hallway, then slammed the door shut. Unable to move or speak yet, he watched her -- a ghoul woman with a tank top and dreadlocks -- spray-paint a crude, red "O" on the door. She turned around to study them both. "It'll wear off soon. Aren't those flowers pretty? At least two of Hildern's mercenaries are being digested by them, somewhere downstairs. Poor saps. That man really has no respect for human life, especially if he sent you two as well."

"Keely?" He managed a single word without slurring.

"That's me. So, did he send you? To retrieve the data? Because I won't allow that to happen. What I've found in this vault is too dangerous to survive."

"Destroy it. Okay. With. Me." Arcade looked at Megan, lying beside him, and was relieved to see her breathing, albeit slowly. "Oz flowers?"

"Yeah, you know, like in that old vid, the Wizard of Oz? It's a classic. This chick falls asleep in a field of poppies, almost gets trapped by the wicked witch."
"Never saw it. Heard of it, though."

"Oh well. So, you've obviously have some run-ins with the spore carriers already." Seeing his blank look, she explained. "Aggressive green people? They're what's left of the original vault dwellers. They had a lot of crazy experiments going on here, but what finally killed them off was a toxic fungus whose spores have mutagenic properties on humans. It's not as flashy as the ten-foot Venus fly traps they made for some reason, but it's the real reason why this vault needs to be quarantined and destroyed."

"Infected us yet?" He felt the lethargy letting go of his limbs, and he sat up, shaking out his arms. Whatever gas those plants were emitting, it was a very effective soporific. He privately wondered if was worth the risk to grab a cutting for cultivation. There were surely medical applications to be discovered there.

"Possibly, but it took years for the spores to take effect on the populace here, and the notes I've found on the terminals suggest that it doesn't spread well in direct sunlight or open air. As long as you don't live here for the next ten years, you both should be fine." She looked around apprehensively. "See if you can wake her up now. I'd rather finish this conversation in a secure place."

Megan proved difficult to rouse, and it took several more minutes for her to recover enough to follow Keely. By then, he felt absolutely normal, and was able to carry her pack as well as his own. Arcade supposed her lighter weight and state of exhaustion was behind her greater susceptibility. When they reached Keely's base camp – a plant-free, single-entrance room that may once have been an office – she sat down and started nodding off again before Arcade shook her back into wakefulness.

"So, what did Dr. Hildern tell you?" the ghoul asked, directing the question at Arcade.

"I haven't actually met him…he hired my friend, here." He nudged her again.

"Oh, hm, what?" She lifted her head, blinking. "Oh yeah. Dr. Hildern thought that whatever's in this vault would give the NCR the ability to grow food better. He's really ambitious, and doesn't seem to care what he has to do to rise above his position."

"He hired you? I assumed that Dr. Gannon here was the brains behind your expedition."

"Well, you're not wrong. But yes, I took the job and brought Arcade along for moral support. If he thinks we should destroy the research, we'll destroy the research. I'll spin some lie for Dr. Hildern so he'll stop sending people to their deaths. At least I'll still get paid. Dr. Williams hired me too – she was worried about you."

"Aw, she's a sweetie who deserves a better boss. Fine, I'm glad I won't have to fight you to do the right thing. I'm been avoiding the area, but I know that the main terminal is guarded by a bunch of spore carriers and at least two large carnivorous plants. Once we make our way there and destroy the archives, my plan is to open the gas jets on the bottom floor, let it flood those bottom corridors, ignite it to burn up the spores in the ventilation system and stop the air exchange with the outside, and then take the stairwell back up to the top. I've got dynamite and some long fuses, and I'll blow the entrance once we're all out."

Arcade objected. "Can we revisit the 'ignite the flammable gas' part? That sounds pretty dangerous."

"For an old lady like me, sure. But a quick young mercenary shouldn't have any trouble with throwing a grenade and running away." She looked meaningfully at Megan.

"Okay, whatever. I can do that. Let's go get the computer. And when you say carnivorous plants…"
"They're big enough to eat you alive, and some of them shoot poisoned projectiles. However, unlike the spore carriers, they can't move from their spot, so with enough fire power, we shouldn't have a problem destroying them."

After they'd left their heavy, nonessential things behind, she led them down another flight of stairs, and right up to the entrance into a huge atrium, full of plants and shadows, with the windows of an important-looking lab visible on the upper level. "Guns at the ready. We should keep our backs to the wall and work around to the staircase leading up there. Maybe we don't have to kick up any trouble."

They had made it halfway around before a dozen red dots appeared at once and the foliage all around began to rustle. The first spore carrier was bold – too bold – it leapt at chest-height and impaled itself on Megan's waiting knife. She jerked the blade free expertly, and dispatched another creeping in with a blow to its brain stem (or where the brain stem would have been on a human), before switching to her shotgun, stepping into the room, well away from the others, to avoid hitting them with the spread from her weapon. What she had assumed to be an inert tree in the middle of the room proved to be the plant Keely had warned them about. Only an agile skip to her left saved her from being caught up in its bivalve mouth. Though thick, its trunk was no match for a series of point-blank blasts and the plant fell, keening shrilly. Trusting that the others were holding their own, she strode purposefully across to the other wall, methodically destroying any green men that saw her as an easy target.

Just as she turned to head back to the others, something clattered harmlessly against her armor and fell to the ground. It looked like a dart or a short arrow, fletched with leaves. Another narrowly missed her face, and she saw this time that it was coming from another monster plant on the level above. She immediately sprinted up the stairs, and closed the distance quickly, zig-zagging to avoid its missiles. This one had a better reach than the last, and she hung back, trying to wound it from behind a pillar while it snapped at her. Arcade must have noticed her predicament, because his plasma bursts soon inflicted enough damage to distract it, and she moved in close to finish it off.

Keely and Arcade joined her on the upper level, looking filthy but uninjured. They broke into the lab, and she took the opportunity to rest and eat a snack while the two scientists sifted through the data and the samples, deciding what to keep and what had to be destroyed. This took a couple of hours and, according to her Pip-Boy, it was already three in the afternoon when they finally announced that they were done. It felt strange to be underground and away from the sun for so long, and she wondered how long-term vault dwellers could stand it, though she supposed she'd spent the first years of her life doing just that. It still seemed unreal to her that she could ever have lived in such a way and not have any memories of it at all.

All too soon, it was time for the final stage in their plan. They retrieved their things, Arcade having pocketed a few samples of the Oz flowers that Keely deemed safe for export, and took the stairs all the way down to the fifth level, avoiding the unreliable elevator. This level was more cluttered than the others, with medical equipment and machinery strewn through the corridors, but at least it had fewer plants and no sign of the spore carriers. First equipping her with a visored helmet as a precaution, Keely walked her through the escape route she'd be taking – throw the grenade at the most concentrated part of the gas at the end of the hall, turn and sprint, duck into a supply room on the left, this one stuffed with extra desks and chairs, and seal the door. After five minutes, the heat from the explosion would be over, and she could rejoin the others in the stairwell. She ran through two trials of this plan, shifting debris if it looked like it was going to get in the way. Breathing deeply, she rejoined Arcade while Keely went to turn the gas on, enjoying her last taste of clean air for a minute.

It all worked very well until it didn't. Passing Keely on her way to the target point, she waited a
moment to allow her time to retreat all the way back to where Arcade was, disliking the smell of the gas, which now distorted the air ahead. Hefting the grenade, she pulled the pin and threw it, straight and hard toward the vents. Not sparing a moment to watch its trajectory, she spun, ran as fast as she ever had into the designated room, and confidently slammed her hand on the "close door" button. Nothing happened. Panicking, she pressed it harder, which again had zero effect. She didn't have a chance to press it a third time or to do the sensible thing and move before an inexorable force caught her and threw her backwards into darkness.

The lights in the corridor had gone out with the explosion – or at least she hoped they had, as she could see only blackness – and she had ended up draped uncomfortably over someone's desk, an intense pressure transfixing her left shoulder. Nothing hurt very much, but her body's unresponsiveness and the steady flow of warm liquid under her armor was alarming her. Her ears were ringing from the blast, and she could hear nothing beside that steady chime. Blind and deaf, she struggled to slide off the desk to a seated position on the floor, and eventually managed it, although the effort made something shift nauseatingly in her shoulder and sent a fresh gush of blood trickling down her side. Sweaty and breathing fast, she fumbled with her Pip-Boy for a moment, and clicked on the light. A green glow bathed the area and she felt dizzy with relief. At least until she looked down. A jagged piece of metal – part of an oxygen tank, maybe? – stuck out from under her left collarbone, jammed in between two ceramic plates.

"Ah, shit," she whispered. Where were Keely and Arcade? Had it been more than five minutes yet? The explosion could possibly have blocked off their access to her, and it could also have had unintended consequences in some other part of the vault. She took comfort by reminding herself that Arcade would come looking for her soon…if he was still alive. She got her right hand up and managed to push the helmet off, feeling thankful that her face wasn't even singed and she hadn't hit her head hard.

She tried to call for help, but felt lazy and giddy, and her voice had no force behind it. Some part of her recognized that she was probably spiraling down into shock, but she had no idea how to counter it. Unhooking her armor to get to the wound seemed beyond her ability at the moment, even if it wasn't pinned to her chest. She was incredibly thirsty, but her water was back with the others. Arcade had all the real medical supplies, except for the tiny kit on her leg, for what good it would do her. Unless…if this wasn't a good time to try her first Mentat, she didn't know what was. It might at least clear her mind enough to stay awake. It took a long minute to access the kit, open it, and unscrew the tiny bottle one-handed, and darkness was beginning to creep in from the outside of her vision by the time she pushed the pill through numb lips with a trembling hand.

The effect was immediate. It banished the clouds and sharpened her senses, but invited pain that had heretofore been hiding. Crying out, she clawed at her armor, but only succeeded in jarring the shrapnel and making her vision flare white for a moment. She thought briefly of the secret stash in her left leg pocket, but knew that accessing it without passing out was unlikely at the moment. Unable to move, she sat slumped in the dark, feeling alert now, but desperately lonely. But was it really so dark anymore? Lights danced on the walls just out of sight, and voices jarred through the ringing still invading her ears. She opened her eyes, which had half-closed, and got a confused impression of two people, a lantern, and a headlamp glaring out of the darkness.

"Arcade?" She knew it was him, but wanted to hear him talk so she could calm down. Her breathing had gotten fast and shallow and despite the drug she felt anxious and dizzy. She tried to reach out and touch him to see if he was real, but her hand only got a few inches before it faltered.

"In the flesh. Hold still and take some slow, deep breaths for me. That looks painful, but I think it missed your lung. Have you taken anything recently? Alcohol or chems?"
"Just a Mentat. No alcohol for a while. Is it just me, or is it getting hard to breathe in here?" Every breath felt stale and unsatisfying and tasted like smoke and burning fuel.

"You just destroyed the ventilation system and the fire burned up a lot of oxygen. Don't worry. We'll be gone long before we suffocate. First things first. Despite the risks of mixing uppers and downers, I'm going to give you some Med-X for the pain and after that kicks in I'm going to have to destroy this armor you're so fond of. Sorry." She felt a sting on the side of her neck and enjoyed the familiar sensation of warm relief, dampened only a little by the lingering wakefulness from the Mentat. She giggled involuntarily, thinking to herself, Who knew Arcade would give me my next fix? Oops. Hope I didn't say that out loud…

"Say what out loud?" He was holding a sharp pair of scissors and was looking at her oddly.

"Nothing. Oh no, he'll see…everything. "Arcade, do you really have to remove my chest piece?"

He had already begun cutting through the webbing, working straight up from the bottom, and didn't even look up. "Yes. The shirt too. Once I pull that thing out, you're going to bleed a lot, and I need the area to be completely clear." A little louder, he said, "Keely, can you please give Megan a bottle of water from my pack? I also need you to stand right there and give me more light. And you, drink it slowly," he warned her.

She made herself sip it, holding the bottle in her good hand. She was beginning to feel nauseous, whether from the chems or the blood-loss, she wasn't certain, and she was afraid she was going to throw up. Arcade removed the front of the vest-like armor, leaving the back piece between her and the desk she was leaning on, exposing her blood-soaked shirt. She felt suddenly embarrassed as he began cutting this away as well, leaving only a small scrap of fabric that was trapped between the embedded object and her skin. "Uh…I'm not wearing a bra. I've gotten so thin I don't really need one…"

"Yeah, about that – please eat more. I could count every rib if I wanted to. And try not to feel embarrassed. I'll find you a clean shirt when I'm done here."

She found herself shaking as she sat, exposed from the waist up except for her arm guards, while he prodded at her shoulder. He misinterpreted this, and said kindly but distractedly, "Are you cold? I'm sorry. Almost ready to pull." She bit down on a wad of her former shirt when he asked, and tried not to flinch when he braced his hand against her bare sternum and seized the object with the other. After that, things got dark for a while. When she came to again, she was lying on the floor, her shoulder lightly bandaged and tingling from a stimpak, a towel draped over her chest. He had removed her arm guards as well. Keely was still standing by, tapping her toe impatiently.

"Sorry, but we need to move. Get her up, now."

Arcade helped her sit up, putting one gentle hand on her back to push her forward, and pulled one of his own clean shirts over her head. He made her drink more water and pulled her slowly to her feet. Carrying her stuff as well as his, he led her to the stairs, where Keely offered support in climbing the four flights, stopping for rest on every landing. At least the air got better as they got higher, but by the time they reached the top, she could barely stand unaided. Keely stayed just inside to study how best to arrange her dynamite, while Arcade half-carried Megan a safe distance away and helped her sit against the cliff in a narrow band of shade.

She felt achy and utterly drained. "I'm not up for much more fun today. Why wouldn't that fucking door shut…"

"I don't know. Don't worry, though. We'll be at the safehouse soon. Keely will probably help. She
owes us." He looked troubled. "While we're waiting…can I ask you about some things?"

"Fine, whatever." It didn't seem worth fighting the inevitable anymore.

"I saw the needle marks on your arms and legs. What kind of chem habit have you picked up?"

"Med-X. A couple times a day for a little over three weeks."

He let out a long breath. "If I'd known that was what you were hiding, I wouldn't have let you leave the Fort yesterday."

"You really couldn't have stopped me."

"I would have tried. And…those scars on your back?" He looked angry, but not at her.

"Do I have to talk about that now?"

He sighed. "Not if you don't want to."

"Good. I don't." Then, without warning, she burst into tears.

"Hey, hey, it's okay, it's going to be okay." She recoiled when he put his arms around her, and he withdrew hurriedly and moved away a little. "Sorry, I forgot…"

"It's okay," she sniffed. "I'm not afraid of you. Arcade, I killed Strauss. Nellie died because of me."

"No, the Legion did that. It's not your fault."

"Fuck it, listen. I personally killed Strauss. With a machete." She looked up, angry tears in her brown eyes. "That night in Novac…they killed the men they saw, and Mrs. McBride because she was old, I guess, but they kidnapped Strauss and Nellie. After I raised the alarm, I ran after them and the women they'd taken. I didn't have back-up, didn't even have my armor on, but I thought I could pick them off in the dark. I was wrong. There were too many. They caught me too. They took the three of us to Cottonwood."

"Oh no…"

"Yeah. I wasn't a very good slave. When I killed one of the men who raped me, they whipped me. When I killed another, I thought they would just execute me. No. Instead, they dragged me, Nellie, Strauss, and this other woman there, Sally Weathers, outside. They left my feet hobbled with chains, but freed my hands and gave me a machete. Told me that I had to choose one to kill or they would kill two of them in front of me. Said that if I killed myself or any more of their men, they'd still do it. What was I supposed to do? I chose Strauss. She begged me not to. I…I…tried to be fast…" She bit down on her own fist to keep from crying again.

"Megan, listen to me. No one is responsible for Strauss's death except the Legion. It's not your fault."

"I chose her," she whispered. "I couldn't have picked, Nellie, of course – she was young and pregnant. I liked her. I didn't know Sally that well, but I knew she had two children in the slave pens. That left Strauss. But I should have just taken that machete and killed as many of the guards as I could. They would have just killed me and probably wouldn't have killed any more valuable slaves just to prove a point. But I believed their threats at the time."

"What happened to Nellie?" His voice was gentle.

"She miscarried on the trip from Cottonwood to Nelson. Boone had brought the cavalry – a mix of
troopers, rangers, and able-bodied people from Novac. They tried to set an easy pace, but she was in rough shape already. She hung herself a couple of days later. I should have stayed on guard or told somebody to watch her...that's on me too."

"It's really not. From what I've heard, you did everything you could to save her."

"No. If I'd been smarter, if I'd been properly equipped for my watch, then she'd be alive." She wiped her eyes and tried to regain a sense of composure. "Anyway, that's the story of why I'm so fucked-up right now. Sorry for dragging you into my drama. I just thought if I could...pass as alright with you, then it would be true. At least a little bit. Or something, I don't know. It was a bad idea. I could have gotten you killed just because I don't have my shit together. I'm so fucking tired that I'm actually seeing and hearing things that aren't there – just whispers and shadows in my peripheral vision, but still."

He sighed. "I'm so sorry for what you've been through. Thank you for telling me. Can I tell you what I believe you should do now, or do you want to save that for later?"

"I'm guessing something along the lines of 'stop taking Med-X.' I can't stop, though – it's literally the only thing keeping me semi-functional these days. Without it, I'd be a wreck all the time instead of only half the time. It gets me to sleep at night and out of bed in the morning. Can we just skip to the end of the lecture, where I tell you I'll be careful and you'll drop the subject? I'm not ready to quit and I don't really need to yet. My basic problem isn't the chems – it's the nightmares, flash-backs, and guilt."

He looked at the sky. "Let me say this, and then I'll shut up for a while. I worry that I'm going to lose you to addiction – either because you'll die from an overdose or other preventable accident, or because addiction changes people, makes them unrecognizable, makes them do things they never could have imagined doing, just to get that almighty next fix. Right now, you're in okay shape, all things considered: you're healthy enough to do jobs like this, you haven't torpedoed your reputation yet, and your habit is still financially manageable. Once those dominoes start falling down, once the habit inches up from two to six hits-a-day, then drug-abusers inevitably go from functional to not. It's a slippery slope. You need to realize, too, that while opiates do seem to help in the short-term with the anxiety and bad memories from trauma, you get diminishing returns as time goes on, and the way it affects your brain actually makes it harder to cope emotionally during all those pesky hours you're not high. That's when people start snacking in between meals, so to speak. You're already slipping in little ways, like when you hit that NCR officer when you could have just reported her behavior; things like that will mount up as time goes on, making it more difficult to maintain the fiction that you're doing okay.

"Finally, my personal feelings of affection for you aside, I'm frankly alarmed at the fact that so much weighty responsibility currently rests in the hands of an addict with PTSD. So, yes, I think you should put everything else on a back-burner for a while, get some long-overdue therapy, and let me help you get clean."

"Are you done?"

"Yes."

"I appreciate your concerns and I'll keep them in mind going forward. Promise. If I'm honest with myself, I know I can't do this forever, I just don't want to cut the cord yet. Let me accomplish a few more things before I resign myself to being useless for a while. Then I'll talk to someone, I'll cut back, whatever you want. Just not yet."

He didn't say anything, but they both turned to listen to the sound of explosions and watched as
clouds of dust billowed out from the collapsed vault.

Wearily, she stood up and hoisted the pack onto her uninjured shoulder. "It looks like Keely's done. I'm rested. Let's go."
Keely had no desire to linger and bid them farewell at the door, thanking them for their help in the vault. Because it was late when they arrived and her shoulder needed time to heal, their stay at the Followers’ safehouse ate up two nights and what remained of Megan's stash, even though she tried to make it last by splitting her last dose in half. She knew that he knew what she was doing in the privacy of the bathroom, but he said nothing more about it. A youngish woman named Dr. Luria came and went, restocking the food and water, and Megan wanted very much to buy Med-X from her, but couldn’t quite bring herself to do it, feeling ashamed and suspecting that Arcade would intervene if she did try. There were medical supplies in storage, but she wasn't feeling quite low enough to steal just yet, at least not from the Followers, and in any case it was all under lock and key. Irritable and twitchy, she had to bite her tongue to keep from snapping at him, especially when he was being nosy. Which was often.

"There's one thing I don't understand. What did you say to Boone the last time you saw him?"

"It's really none of your business."

"He should have understood that you were lashing out because you were feeling self-destructive. *Anybody* should have understood that."

"I took the biggest, sharpest stick I could find and poked an open wound, okay? After that, it wouldn't matter who I was or what we'd had together. I threw the secrets that he'd entrusted to me right back in his face with the intent of hurting him. Before you ask, yes, I'm deeply ashamed and if and when I find him again, I'll apologize. If he'll listen to me. I really hope he's okay…he's incredibly fragile in some ways…"

"You still care about him."

"Of course I do! Oh, I know our relationship would never have worked out in the long-term – it was all wrapped up in the dubious bonding point of bloodlust and constantly overshadowed by his sense of fatalism, but I enjoyed being with him. The physical aspect was new and interesting for me, of course, but mostly I enjoyed the exercise in mutual trust – fighting together, talking afterwards, learning more about him. Those were good times. I really think he would have followed me anywhere, as long as their were Legion in that path. But that was all over after Cottonwood – I wouldn't really talk to him or let him touch me, period; every time he looked at me, he saw a reminder of his failure to protect his wife. All I really wanted to do the first week I was up and around afterwards was to kill myself or stay absolutely numb with drugs and alcohol, and he kept trying to get me to get back on track with all the sensitivity of a sledgehammer. Funny thing is, he probably did save my life, just by always being there to…hide the knives away, keep me awake when I snuck a triple dose of Med-X, stop me from walking out of the camp barefoot in a daze. But it only made me resent him at the time."

"Do you want to talk about it? The good and the bad?"

"No, Arcade. What I *want* is for my hands to stop shaking."

"I'm not going to give you drugs unless you get shot, and even then I'll have to think about it. Go ahead. Tell me about your dream team with Boone – I'm imagining it was pretty much a couple's murdering spree."

"Yeah, alright. I guess we didn't really hit our stride until a few weeks after we left you behind…not
coincidentally, that was also when I said good-bye to Veronica for a while…while you or she was around, it was hard not to see him as a third wheel...

"We running more errands for the Brotherhood of Steel now? Where's Veronica?" Boone was tired of waiting, having spent the better part of two days in one of the abandoned aboveground structures in Hidden Valley. The Paladin in charge of security had flatly denied him entrance to the bunker, not that he wanted to go in anyway. Veronica was nice enough, but the Brotherhood as a whole was an enemy of the NCR and he wanted nothing to do with them. Megan had successfully convinced him of the need to, if not actually recruit the Brotherhood to fight the Legion, at least persuade them to stay in their bunker for the duration of the war. She thought she'd found an ally for this goal in the would-be Elder Hardin, and she, Veronica, and (by association) Boone had spent almost two weeks paving the way for his succession into the role of leader and currying favor with him. It had involved a lot of walking, a lot of sneaking, and an uncomfortable amount of radiation exposure.

"No, we're done. Veronica's staying here for a while to try to see if the new power structure has a place for her to fit in. She isn't optimistic. Honestly, it's not all that different now than it was before. Hardin is almost as insular as McNamara was, but at least he owes me a favor and has a more practical mindset on things. He recognizes that the Brotherhood is dependent on stability in this region for food and supplies, and doesn't want the Legion to disrupt that."

"Good, I guess. I'm tired of waiting. What now?"

"So, I know you want to help the NCR and kill Legion. And we will do that soon, I promise. But first I want to deal with the problem that is the Powder Gangers. They're making it harder and harder for caravans to get north to Vegas and they're an unwelcome distraction to the ranger patrols in the south. I want us to hit the NCR Correctional Facility, wipe them out there, and allow what's left of them to be scattered to the four winds."

Boone didn't need much persuasion to kill criminals, even though they'd probably be outnumbered 20 to 1. "Okay. We're close. Let's go."

They approached from the elevation across from Sloan, wary lest a deathclaw wander over from the quarry. Boone spent a long time sighting his highest priority targets – the men on the guard towers closest to them, who presumably had the best range and accuracy. Before he started shooting, he made the girl lie flat, cradling a nest of grenades in her arms. "If they have a real sniper, you can bet they'll be firing at anything that moves up here in a minute. Wait until they come close, then start throwing at them. Stay low until you absolutely have to. Watch out for dynamite."

The massacre which followed confirmed what Boone had felt on that day in Nelson: when it was just the two of them, with him taking the long shots and her protecting him, they made an effective team. Even though she wasted time and breath and thought-space on useless deliberations in the slow moments (a habit she'd picked up from Gannon, no doubt), she was teachable and focused when it came to fighting. He had discovered, pretty quickly, that she was absolutely useless as a spotter – that she couldn't even see what he was aiming at most of the time, let alone whether he'd hit it or not. Despite this, she was solid back-up – fearless, effective, single-minded back-up – who let him do what he did best. If she had been with him at that sniper's nest, so many months before, Carla might have lived…but she wasn't, and she didn't, and that was the way it was.

Mopping up the battlefield, finishing off the few who hadn't died or fled, and collecting ammo, caps, and valuable explosives took time, and when it was done they ate a meal of the convicts' provisions in one of the watchtowers. She was uncharacteristically quiet and alert, scanning the view all around them for more of the enemy. There was none of her girlish silliness showing now, only grim triumph at their victory mixed with a hint of regret over all the dead.
"Thanks for doing this with me, Boone. I hope it was enough to eliminate the Gangers as a threat here."

"Those last few holed up in the main building were the ring-leaders." That had been close-work, in the dark, and far and away the most dangerous part of the day's exertions. "With them gone, any organization they had is broken. I've got a rough count of the bodies – we'll take the report to McCarran next time we're up that way. They might even pay us."

"Are you glad you came with me yet?" she asked, real curiosity in her tone.

"Yeah. Anything's better than staying in Novac, waiting for I-don't-know-what. Remembering Carla."

"What was she like?"

"I met Carla while I was at the Strip on leave. She said I looked lost. She talked a lot. Suited me fine – I never know what to say. And listening to her, it could...make you forget. She stuck out, pretty much everywhere we went. Like she was from a different time. A better time. I never met anyone like her." He hadn't talked about his wife much since the night she died, and it hurt to think back upon that time in his life. How stupid he'd been to think he should have another chance…

"If the Legion only kidnapped her, how do you know for sure that she's dead?" Quailing at his expression, she apologized, touching his shoulder gently: "I'm sorry for asking. I just sense that I'm missing an important part of what's bothering you."

"Fine. I guess you've earned an answer. I saw her one more time, alive. She...I tracked her down. Southeast, near the river. They were selling her. Saw it through my scope. Whole place swarming with Legion. Hundreds of them. Bidding for things no man has a right to. I just had my rifle with me. Just me, against all of them, so...I took the shot." His hand twitched at the memory, and he sensed the girl beside him recoil, whether in shock or disgust, he didn't know.

"You killed her? Just like that?" Her eyes were wide and horrified and she withdrew the hand she'd extended to comfort him.

"Yeah. What they do to women...that's worse than death. There was no choice in what I did. It was more like...being forced to watch something you can't stop. All this was only ever going to play out one way. It still is. I don't have any say. All I can do is wait for it to be done with me."

Some internal struggle flickered briefly over her face, but when she spoke it was with heartfelt sympathy. "Jesus. I'm sorry that happened. All of it. That's really fucked up." She cocked her head. "Wasn't there any other option?"

"No one would come with me. Everybody thought she'd hightailed it back to the city and I was in denial over it. There was too many for me to kill by myself. There was no saving her. They'd have taken her where I couldn't follow. What I did...that was the only rescue. There was no decision. I was meant to pull that trigger. It was a mistake to think I could escape it. You take out a debt, it's only a matter of time before someone comes collecting. Things just finally caught up with me. It was gonna be something. If I'd never met Carla, it would've been something else. I should've never gotten close to her. I've got bad things coming to me and I deserve all the punishment I get. You'd better keep your distance too, if you know what's good for you."

"Why–"

"It doesn't matter. I don't want to talk about it right now. Let's just keep things professional from now on."
"Poor man. That's an incredibly messed-up story. No wonder he's so troubled."

"I know, right? It gets worse before it gets better, and then it abruptly turns bad again. Cottonwood Cove, take two, was an incredibly bitter pill for him to swallow, even though it was a relative success – scores of Legion dead, most slaves saved. Anyway, we left the prison, spent a couple of days in Sloan, picking off that nest of deathclaws from a safe vantage point (actually, that was mostly Boone), paid a visit to Doc in Goodsprings, and reclaimed ED-E in Primm. Boone doesn't mind robots. He doesn't really like 'em, either, but they don't plunge him into an existential crisis. He's simpler that way."

"Yeah, yeah, he's an open book. Go on. Where did you head next?"

"McCarran. We needed a truckload of caps to get access to the Strip. There's a lot of good-paying work for an enterprising pair of mercenaries on base…"

"Stay here, ED. Be quiet. Don't attack, no matter what happens in there."

Swallowing nervously, having stored all of her weapons in the locker, Megan exchanged places with Boyd in the interrogation room, thankful that Boone had lingered out in the training yard. He didn't have much impulse control where the Legion were concerned. Making her face a blank wall, she paced deliberately around the captured centurion, ignoring his jibes for a full five minutes. Finally, pulling a chair over, keeping her back to the door, she sat down in front of Silus and began trimming her nails with her holdout weapon – a finger-length straight razor. Every few moments, she looked up to examine the man, letting a slight frown show.

Covering his nervousness with a laugh, the centurion scoffed, "The strong and silent act won't get you anywhere, profligate. Knife or not, I could break you with one hand."

"Tell me what secrets you've spilled already. Dice mihi.* Perhaps I will allow you to keep your balls a little longer."

He laughed. "Empty threats. Any anyway, even a jackdaw – or a woman – can learn to gabble in tongues. It means nothing."

"Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori,* don't you think so, Silus? Or is your grasp on Latin as feeble as your loyalty to Lord Caesar? Tell me what you've told the NCR, and perhaps I can be merciful. Let you live out this war as a prisoner – at least until we come in force to punish the cowardly and the treacherous."

He seemed flustered for the first time, "I have told them nothing. I will tell you nothing. This is a trick."

She leaned forward conspiratorially, allowing just a little cold anger to show, and whispered, "We know there is a traitor here, Silus. The NCR has anticipated our movements too easily for a week now. When we learned from our spies that a centurion – a centurion! – had been captured alive, well, you can imagine what Caesar assumed…" A tap on the door interrupted them. "Ah, the lieutenant wants you again. I'll be watching, though, Silus. Make sure you keep quiet."

Boone was waiting outside the mirrored glass, glaring at the man inside. "What the hell are you doing?" he demanded.
"What does it look like? Hey, I need you to do something in a minute..." Quickly, she outlined her plan for him. Inside the room, Boyd was playing the stupid cop with Silus.

"...who was that woman? Not one of your NCR dogs, that's for sure."

"Oh, her? Just some mercenary I found outside. Never seen her before in my life. She volunteered for the job, and who am I to turn down help? Now, Silus, would you like to talk to boring ol' me, or should I bring in Miss Unknown Variable again?" At this, Megan tapped smartly on the glass. "Oh, never mind. Looks like she wants another turn."

"Wait, Boyd…I…oh, forget it. One woman is as good as another."

Instead of sitting this time, Megan stood in front of him, relaxed and ready, letting Silus see the glint of the razor tucked under her right middle finger. She whispered, soft enough that only he could hear, "Now's when I provoke you into swinging at me, Silus. We'll fight, I'll slip this blade into your brainstem, and I'll stop the leak. Lord Caesar will reward me as he does all his successful assassins."

There was fear on the centurion's face now, along with credulity: "That old man with his headaches? If this is how he treats his best soldiers, then he deserves to lose my service and you're a fool to trust in him. Kill me, do whatever, but know that you're making a mistake."

She slapped him across the face, letting the razor slice a small cut just below his eye. He leapt up with shocking speed and kicked his chair at her, sending it clattering against the opposite wall. She headbutted him in the face and sucker-punched him, sending him gasping to the ground. She kicked him while he was down, careful not to do fatal damage, and that's when Boone and Boyd rushed into the room and dragged her off of him. Even though Silus was beyond paying attention, nursing a broken nose and a bleeding mouth, she put up a good show of struggling until they were out of the room with the door shut tight.

Breathing hard and putting a hand to a cut on her hairline from the centurion's teeth, Megan nodded at Boyd and said, "Go on. Now's the right time."

With an admiring look, the lieutenant went back in and addressed the hapless prisoner, "Silus, so sorry. My mercenary friend doesn't know all those pesky rules about how we treat our prisoners. We'll get her calmed down, fix up that nose for you, and let her try again."

Sounding congested and thick, his nose smashed flat, Silus moaned, "No, no…you idiot. She's not what you think she is. I'll take my chances with you over some jumped-up Legion bitch. I'll talk."

Boyd stepped out to summon two privates and a medic to restrain him and patch him up, and prepared to head in to take his statement, clipboard in hand. She turned to the Courier, "That was well done. I'm not even mad that you roughed him up. Here you go – it's twice the normal fee for a contract like this. I'll tell Colonel Hsu that you have my full confidence for any other jobs he needs done." She pointed across the atrium to a wide set of doors, "Go to the concourse and get Kemp to slap some stitches on that cut. Tell him I sent you."

They headed in the indicated direction, Megan trying to keep blood from running into her eyes with just her hand. ED bobbed obediently after them, beeping in concern.

"That was…smart. Not what I would have done at all, but probably more effective than beating him to death. Here, use this." He handed her an oil-soaked gun-cleaning rag, which she folded gingerly before pressing it to the cut.

"Thanks. I don't think you have a future in interrogation tactics, Boone. It's okay. We all have our
strengths. Mine is talking, and yours are being quiet and shooting things."

Dr. Kemp proved to be a pleasant, older man who was happy to fix her up. "I've heard of you, missy. All good things, all good things. You should join up, make your partnership with the NCR a formal one."

She smiled at him. "I don't think I'd like taking orders. I'm pretty sure that's required of a soldier." Boone actually laughed at that.

"Just a bit." He tied off his thread and clipped it short. "Alright, all done. Don't be using your head as a weapon any more."

"What do you want to do with your life, long-term?" Boone asked her later, while they were eating a lousy meal in the concourse dining area. It was such an unusually personal question for him to ask that she took a sip of water to conceal her surprise, thinking of how to answer without getting into dangerous territory. She decided to go with the truth.

"I want to track down my past as much as I can. I don't have much to go on – my name, the name of a city that I've probably been to, a dream I had once, and what little you and others have told me about who I was. When my business in the Mojave is done, and preferably when the Legion's strength is broken, I'm going to head east. Whether I find answers or not, I don't know if I'll ever come back here."

"Did you ever figure out who you fought for before? Or if you even were a soldier or not? It actually doesn't seem unlikely, at least when I watch you fight."

She spent a long time chewing her last bite of almost inedible stew, hesitating. "In the interest of being honest with you, Boone, yes, I did. In the interest of keeping things simpler between us, however, I'm not going to tell you who it was. It doesn't really matter, as I don't remember it and it was very, very far away from anything that concerns us, but it's better that you don't know for now."

He stared at her for a moment, apparently thinking. It was hard to guess at his thoughts behind those sunglasses. Finally, he shrugged. "Whatever. I have secrets like that too. Sometimes it's better to keep it all to yourself. As long as you're a friend to the NCR and not helping the Legion, I don't care what you were before."

"You implicitly told Boone what you were. A smart man would have connected the dots immediately, and even he'll eventually figure it out…"

"No, I explicitly told him, a little later, to get him to tell me his secret. Quid pro quo. Don't worry, I left you out of it, and he wouldn't do anything with that knowledge anyway."

"A man who might hate you now knows something about you that would get you executed. By the government he used to work for and is still loyal to. That's not something that worries you?"

"No. You don't know him. He's not the sort to start pointing fingers at people, unless he thinks they're Legion spies. That's the only enemy he really cares about. Anyway, I'm not good at lying to people I like, Arcade. Which is not to say I don't do it, but it's obvious when I am. If he and I were going to have a chance, I had to be open with him."

"Hmph. You frustrate me, but at the same time I'm a little jealous. Maybe you're too foolhardy to survive, but then again maybe I'm too risk-averse to be happy. So anyway, the interrogation – and your discovery of the saboteur and a half-dozen other little jobs – got you up to the 2000 caps needed to pass the credit check at the gate?"
"It did. Only took me six months to get there from that grave in Goodsprings. Boone reckons I didn't really want to kill that guy, if I was able to let my revenge play second fiddle for so long. I think I was just afraid about how it would go down and what I would learn. I went in alone, leaving Boone at McCarran for a while, seeing as we didn't have 4000 caps for two people, but Benny was no match for me, especially once I got the other chairmen on my side. It was hard to accept that that smarmy little man in a loud coat was the one who took my life away, but easy enough to kill him and reclaim my package. Mostly, I just felt angry that his second-rate plan with the Chip, and robots, and Mr. House's downfall led him to think that he had the right to kill six innocent people."

"Indeed. So, that's when you went and used the Chip the way he wanted, but didn't have the chance?"

"At Caesar's invitation, no less. I went alone to his Fort, afraid that his promise wasn't good for my companions too. Just brought ED with me. He's great at sensing danger and is actually pretty good company: agrees with everything I say – the perfect conversation partner."

"You do know that it's programmed to beep affirmatively after every question and every third declarative statement, right?"

"Hey, I will anthropomorphize my robot as much as I want, okay? Anyway, after that I went back to the Strip, confronted Mr. House, killed Mr. House, and installed Yes Man in the mainframe. Then I picked up Veronica and we liberated Raul from Black Mountain. Ran into a lot of super-mutants and nightkin, and earned more points with the Brotherhood for eliminating a threat on their doorstep. After Veronica went back to the bunker, Raul and I took an extremely indirect route to his house, helping some folks along the way. But that's a story for another day. When I went back to get Boone, he had decided to share what was really bothering him…"

The smoke from the burning tents was in his eyes as he staggered blindly back into the camp, looking wildly around for more of them. There was no more red, no more gunfire, only the screams of the wounded and the dying. His heart sinking, he searched for Megan, knowing that he was still paying for his crimes here and that she had paid the price, just like Carla had. He found a dead NCR trooper, an old woman clutching a broken leg, and terrified children screaming for their parents, but he didn't see his partner. The sun was finally rising over the carnage, and he was about to run back out toward their camping spot on Coyote Tail Ridge to see if she was lying out there somewhere, when he spotted her helping a soldier carry an injured woman to an impromptu second hospital tent up on the plateau, the robot hovering loyally nearby. She'd shucked off her armor and had a crude bandage wrapped around her upper arm, but looked otherwise unharmed.

After depositing her burden inside, she stuck her head out again, "Boone! Hey, you're alive. Great. Can you please help Sanchez here bring the wounded in? ED will help you find them in the dark. Markland needs me inside. Thanks."

For the next several hours, he provided what practical assistance he could while Megan and Lt. Markland wrapped bandages, set bones, and treated burns. After the injured were accounted for, he and the private took care of the dead – soldiers' bodies behind HQ up on the hill, the Legion dumped unceremoniously in a pile by the water for lake-lurks to eat, and refugees side-by-side in the camp's graveyard in an adjoining canyon, to await identification and burial. Not wanting to face the living just yet, Boone set himself to digging fresh graves, managing four – only half of what were needed – before he had to stop, exhausted. For once in his life, he wanted to talk, but the person he wanted to talk to wasn't there. Even the robot had wandered away at some point.

"Are you okay, Boone?"
He turned around, finding Megan standing behind him holding two plates of food, clothes speckled with other peoples' blood. She looked very tired, but satisfied.

"Here. The camp cook is in bed with a concussion, but one of the women made a lot of… something…for everyone to eat. It smells okay. Here's some water too." She sat beside him in the shade of the cliff overhang. "Markland told me to take a break. I'm to relieve him in an hour. I wish Arcade were here – things are pretty desperate when I'm the second most-qualified medic around." She ate mechanically for a while, then repeated , "Are you okay? It must be hard for you to be here, seeing these people hurt all over again."

"Yeah, but at least I was on the right side of the fight this time. Some of these graves here are here because of me – because, when the orders came to shoot, I answered automatically, killing whoever ran into my line of sight. Even old people. Even the wounded. Kids. When we saw that raiding party coming last night, I thought I was finally getting what I deserved. For a minute there everything made sense. I could feel the end coming. I was ready for it."

"We could have died here, true, but it would have been because we didn't duck when we should've, or because some Legion grunt put in some hours at the target range. Not because someone, somewhere wants to punish you. We survived because we are both lucky and awesome, not because God – if there is a God – is capricious. We were here, at the right place and the right time, ready to defend these people from slavery, entirely because of your regrets. Let them motivate you to do better from this point onward."

"You're right. I guess they did bring us here. One less Legion raiding party running loose now. Never a bad thing. Still feels like I'm living on borrowed time, but you got a point. There's still some things I can do before all this is over. And maybe having to live with what I did is my punishment."

She shrugged, "Yeah, emphasis on the word 'live.' Don't throw your life away. You don't have to be miserable for the next fifty years, either. No one except you is asking for that."

"That's easy for you to say – you haven't done anything you need to feel guilty about, at least not that you remember. You wouldn't have been there on that ridge that night, and I have trouble imagining you following that order, regardless of conditioning. Manny faked being sick to stay behind at Camp Golf rather than go to Bitter Springs, did you know that? I hate him for it sometimes, but he did the right thing. I didn't."

She surprised both him and herself by wrapping her arms carefully around him and holding him for a minute. "I know. I'm sorry. You can feel whatever you need to feel. Just…talk to somebody about it from now on. Talk to me. Don't take it out on yourself all the time." She let him go, checked the time, and stood up with a groan. "I got to go. Markland's dead on his feet. Talk later?"

"Yeah." He watched her go, wishing that he had told Carla about Bitter Springs, sometime between their meeting and their marriage. He had owed her more than he had given. Maybe the courier was more than a signpost to a worthwhile death – maybe she could be his redemption.

"So, he was at the Bitter Springs massacre. A shame what happened there, both for the people who died and the soldiers who have to live with what they did. It sounds like the two of you did the right thing there this time, though."

"Well, we tried. Definitely prevented some suffering by showing up that night. Boone seemed amazed to be alive at the end of the battle. I tried to convince him that the future was what mattered as far as his actions were concerned – that no divine agency was out to get him for his sins or anything like that. I'm not sure how much sunk in, though he looked he wanted to believe it."
"When was this again? I only heard about the battle about a month ago, from one of the refugees who ended up at Aerotech afterwards."

"Six weeks ago, I think? It was only two weeks before that world-ending night in Novac. We'd gone back there to rest a little and think about what to do next. We also stopped at Raul's place on the way back from Bitter Springs, just to break the trip up a little. That was a pleasant evening. The two of them actually got along surprisingly well despite the massive cultural distance, or maybe it was just because Boone had let down his guard a little. We began dating – I guess you'd call it that – shortly after getting back to Novac." She stopped to drink some water and hesitated before picking up the thread of the tale again. "There's only one important story left now…"

The sun beat down, but the early spring breeze felt chilly on her exposed skin, stinging her flayed back. They'd taken the last of her clothes and deprived her of sleep, water, and food for the day since her last punishment. She shivered, tried to swallow through an aching throat that craved moisture, and tried to straighten her legs again. Her guards had finally learned from their deadly mistakes before, and had chained her to a railroad tie, forcing her to stand bent over or crouch, arms tethered close to the wood. Sitting or kneeling to rest her legs earned her an indiscriminant swat from a riding crop. One week ago, she could have briefly lofted the log's weight to use as a weapon, or jerked the manacle free from the half-rotted wood, but she was drained now – feverish and dehydrated. More than that, she was beaten and cowed, half-choked by the slave collar, and completely dispirited. Most of the other women in the pen had shunned her after what she'd done to Strauss, and she blamed herself as much as they did for what had happened. Now she was alone and isolated on the auctioneer's platform, an item of particular interest to the wealthier Legion officers assembled below.

"Gentlemen, she isn't pretty, but this profligate has the potential for good sport. Give her the illusion of escape, and she'll lead you and your friends a merry chase while you run her down. Caveat emptor,* though – if she kills you in the course of the game, you'll not get a refund."

One man in front yelled out, "Who are you trying to kid, Cinna? That slave's half-dead, with festering wounds to boot. I'd not feed her to my dogs."

"She's been a hard one to keep in captivity. She killed two of ours and one of the other women. A little tender love and care – food, water, a turpentine bath, and some psycho – and she'll be a regular terror. I'll start the bidding at 200 denarii."

An cruel-looking man in a plumed helmet waved a lazy hand. "225."

Another voice she didn't care to pinpoint: "250."

The first man topped that, looking around severely as if forbidding anybody to raise the price again: "300." This seemed to end the bidding. There were no more offers. She locked her knees to stay standing, head hanging down, feeling as if she were about to faint. The noise of the crowd faded in and out.

"Going once…going twice…sold." The crack of his gavel seemed far too loud and, as if they'd been waiting for that signal, her knees finally unhinged and she fell across the beam, wrenching her wrists in the process. She lay there, waiting for someone to kick her awake, but only heard more loud banging – louder than the pounding in her head. She closed her eyes and sought oblivion, trying to drift away despite the suddenly tumultuous clamor all around her. Something heavy and warm fell across her, making it more difficult to draw breath and pinning her against the rough wood. She tried to push it off, but her arms were too weak. The banging continued – sharp and close. All conversation had turned to screaming and shouting. After an uncertain amount of time, most of the noise stopped, and someone pulled the weight off of her back and started fiddling with the release on
her cuffs. She opened one eye, looking for a sight of her new owner – Mr. 300 Denarii – and wondered if she had the strength to bite him. The stranger was all blurry brown and red…but not much red.

Water she tried to say, but couldn't unstick her dry tongue from the roof of her mouth. He must have been a mind reader, though, because the next thing she felt was water on her tongue, just a trickle. He let her swallow, then tipped some more in, very slowly. He took it away before she was done and she groaned in protest.

"No more until that settles. Your hands are free now. I'm going to carry you inside."

"If you touch me, you'll be sorry." She was proud of herself for getting the sentence out, but knew it was an empty threat. She was through.

"I'm not going to hurt you. It's Manny Vargas – we talked once or twice, when I wasn't on duty. Boone is making sure the perimeter guard is dead. He'll be here soon." The tone was gentle, coaxing. She had trouble believing it.

"I…thought…he was gonna shoot me, if he came at all. Mercy-shot. That's what he does." She barely reacted when he scooped her up, even though it hurt her back and broke open some of the fresh scabs.

He was carrying her somewhere, staggering a little under the weight. "He wouldn't do that. He loves you."

"No, he loved Carla. Carla was here. He came alone, found her. He killed her to save her." She felt dim and dizzy, and didn't know why she was arguing.

"God. That's why– Jesus, Boone. Girl…Megan…all I know is that he got us all on the road to Cottonwood Cove as soon as he could – civilians, rangers, and grunts. He wanted to save you, for real. He was scarily single-minded on the subject, actually. He would have brought us here at gunpoint if he had to…"

She lost track of time and thought after that, and when the color faded back into the world, she was lying on her side on something soft but firm, clothed and clean, covered with a thin blanket. She shivered, teeth chattering, and tried to sit up but fell back, head aching and heavy. She felt horribly thirsty, and couldn't hold any other thought in her head. She last thing that she remembered was collapsing on the auctioneer's platform, and she wondered what their play was now. Keeping her alive, she supposed. Preserving valuable property. At least they'd taken the explosive collar off. That was one less thing to worry about.

A male voice belonging to a blurry shape addressed her: "The doc said you were supposed to drink this when you woke up. It's got a straw, so you don't have to move."

It had a medicinal, salty taste, but it was liquid and she drank it greedily. Whatever it was, there wasn't enough and it only whet her thirst. "More."

"Not yet. That had something for the infection and something for the fever mixed in. Just focus on keeping it down for a while."

"Cold." As long as he was pretending to be nice, she'd take advantage of that.

"I'll find another blanket."

She listened to heavy footsteps fade away and rolled as hard as she could, straight off the edge of
whatever they'd laid her on. Hitting the floor hurt, but helped wake her up a little. The floor was smooth and cool, and the room she was in – a grubby little office – was lit only dimly and she could see disorganized furniture, boxes, and a dead terminal, but no other people. Her vision spun and twisted sickeningly, and she tried to ground herself by holding on to the nice, solid floor, feeling around for a weapon, any weapon. She got to her hands and knees and forced herself to move to the desk holding the terminal and hide under there, making herself small, clutching a broken ashtray to herself as a useless talisman against more abuse.

The footsteps returned, making her trembling. "Hey! Where'd you go?" Her chattering teeth gave her away, and he stooped down to look at her with large, black insect-like eyes…no, sunglasses, she told herself. You're losing it. In a feeble act of defiance, she threw the ashtray at him, but there was no force or accuracy behind it and it only clattered to the floor.

She whimpered, cringing against the wall, "Please don't hurt me. I'll be good now." She hated how weak she sounded, but knew that most of the legion soldiers liked a show of submission.

"Megan…don't you know me? It's Boone. I won't hurt you." He sounded scared, and his voice was both alien and familiar. She shook her head, and regretted it, the motion making her feel nauseous.

"I don't believe you. It's a trick. You drugged me and made me think you were being nice."

"We haven't given you anything that would make you confused. You're just sick and disoriented. Come out and lie back down on the couch."

She shook her head, making it hurt worse. "I want to stay in here until I feel better. If you really are my friend, you'll leave me alone."

He sighed, pushed a thick, scratchy blanket toward her, and left, only to come back a minute later with a bottle of water and a syringe of Med-X. "Doc says you can probably handle this now. You can have some food if the liquids stay down for a few hours. Is there anything else you need, other than space?"

"No."

She stayed curled up in her cramped corner until her fever broke, mostly sleeping, accepting medicine, food, and water, but not allowing anybody to touch her. There was always someone in the room. Boone came and sat for hours every day, attempting to talk to her, although she responded only occasionally, and even then only with one-word answers. Sally Weathers sat with her during the nights, reading patiently from the same thin volume of archaic theology for hours on end. In a rare lucid moment, Megan asked about the other freed slaves, and learned that Nellie wasn't doing well at all.

The NCR had sent reinforcements to try to keep Cottonwood Cove out of Legion control, but they were still anxious to move the civilians to a more secure location. A day after she had gotten back on her feet, a small contingency of soldiers began the long, dreary trek toward Nelson, pushing near-catatonic people to move, damn it. It was frustrating for Megan to see the weakest of them struggle to put one foot in front of the other, but she wasn't in a place where she could help anybody: other than her Pip-Boy, which Boone had found in some officer's trunk, and a few personal items, she could carry nothing substantial. No one wanted to risk arming her, not that she could take the weight, and she did little more than trudge along behind the others, stopping when they stopped, and eating and drinking when she was ordered. She could talk, but didn't want to most of the time. Thinking too hard brought on feelings she couldn't handle, and made her retreat into herself. The medic was becoming more and more reluctant to give her more Med-X, but only its influence allowed her any waking peace. And the dreams weren't any better.
The Nelson barracks were musty and over-crowded, and after Nellie died one night, silently strangling, hanging from a bathroom fixture, she didn't want to sleep there any longer. Instead, she set up her bedroll on the tin roof of the outbuilding where she and Boone had once launched their attack to free the NCR soldiers. That day seemed years ago now.

A creaking told her that someone was climbing up the stove-pipe on the back of the shed. There weren't many people left in camp who would volitionally seek out her company, especially now that the Weathers family had left for Freeside. "Boone?"

"Yeah. Is it alright if I come up?"

"It's a free country." Silence. He hesitated at the edge of the roof. She sighed. "Sorry, that was rude. Fine. Just, please – keep your distance. I'm...literally crazy right now. All I have is hurt and anger, and I don't know how or when it's going to come out. I wish I could act right, but I can't even think how to begin."

He sat on the edge, his back to her, facing the camp. "Don't worry about hurting my feelings. How are you doing?"

"I've decided to live, so you can stop worrying about me now." She hadn't decided any such thing until that moment, but it felt true when she said it. "I'm leaving tomorrow for Novac. Got to get ED, my armor and caps, and that shotgun from our--...your room. I heard the surviving soldiers by Searchlight have a job that needs doing, so I'm heading there next."

"Okay. Do you want company?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I want to travel by myself for a while." Dragging the words out, she said reluctantly, "Thanks for saving me."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. I know I should be grateful, but I'm not. Sorry. I wish they had just killed me a week ago."

"I'm glad they didn't, and I hope you will be too, someday. Can I come with you as far as Novac, at least? Since you don't have a gun?"

"Yes. Thanks. Can you go away now, please?"

"Yeah."

Walking back the next day was painful. It was hard to be out in the open again, unarmed, defenseless, and without any Med-X to take the edge of anxiety off. Her back still pulled at every step, and she hadn't regained all her strength or weight. Every five minutes, she had to bite her tongue to keep from snapping at the man beside her – for walking too fast or too close, for being whole and stable when she wasn't, and for being someone she wanted to love, but couldn't any more. At least he was being quiet today. Until the end of the trip, when the T-rex was large on the horizon...

"What if I just take you back to Freeside tomorrow instead? Whatever happened between you and Gannon, I'm sure he and his friends would help you deal..."
"I don't fucking need help."

"Yeah, you do. You're not sleeping, you're living hit-to-hit on those chems, and you're not yourself at all. Help, professional help, might…help with those things." She almost laughed at him trying to give her advice, but a swirl of rage twisted it into something vicious.

"Oh, and I should listen to Craig Boone, paragon of mental health, why? You are the worst mess of a human being I've ever met." Stop, just stop, she pleaded with herself. Don't say it. But the new, spiteful persona won out. "I felt sorry for you when we first met, did you know that? Thought maybe all you needed was a gentle touch and a job to do. Nothing that required much intelligence, just shoot through anything so her child could live? But you just had to assert your ownership and preserve your fucking honor…"

"That's enough." He turned on her, clutching his rifle like he wanted to use it. She shrank away, suddenly terrified of him and appalled at the things that she had said. She tried to move her lips to apologize, but she was frozen. He spoke again, voice trembling with grief and anger, "Go. Get your stuff. Leave the key on the dresser. I don't want to see you again." He strode away, making a beeline for the bar, leaving her shaking on the road.

Oh my God, what have I done.

By the end of this narrative, Megan was crying, and Arcade sat beside her and hugged her, very slowly and gently, murmuring empty comforts. "Shh…shh…it's alright. You made a mistake, but it's not entirely your fault. You can make it better."

"I can't," she sobbed. "I don't know if he's even still alive. And you didn't see his face, Arcade. He hated me. I hate myself." She disentangled herself from him, and groped around in her bag for a fresh bottle of liquor. She was still fumbling with the top, when Arcade took it away.

"That's mine. Give it back, or else..."

"Or what, you'll fight me? C'mon. I'll give it back to you in a minute, but first I want you to listen to something. A parable. Let's say you go out tomorrow and make a new friend. It doesn't seem likely, but miracles happen. A nice kid, naïve and idealistic, plucked straight from some vault maybe, out on walkabout in the wasteland. Maybe you find her refreshing, maybe she helps you think about other things, maybe you just like having someone around who looks up to you. Well, after a few months of traveling together, your friend gets kidnapped and spends days being raped and tortured. You find her and save her, because that's the kind of person you are, but your friend is messed up now. She snaps at everybody who comes near, she's terrified of you because you remind her of one of her captors, and all the affection she had for you is twisted up with anger and fear that doesn't have an accessible target. Oh, and she's either high or wanting to be high all the time, because sometimes undertrained medics find it easier to keep trauma victims quiet than to actually help them."

"I don't like this story, Arcade," she said dully.

"Bear with me a little longer. So, say you go to talk to your friend, brush her hair for her, and get her to eat. Things seem to be going okay, until she gets triggered by something and bites your little finger..."
off. What do you do next?"

"Other than screaming and flailing around? I guess go deal with the sudden reality of having nine fingers. Stop the bleeding. Wish that I'd worn gloves or something, because damn. But your analogy is wrong. I'm not Boone. Biting off someone's finger is not like goading someone with unresolved trauma. Plus, the kid you describe is feral, not intentionally cruel."

"Would you be mad at her?"

"Would I be mad at a wounded animal who did the same? Sure. I'm still down a finger, no matter what. But I'd eventually accept that they didn't really do it on purpose." She paused to wipe her eyes on her sleeve. "The analogy is bad again. I deliberately chose what to say to Boone because I wanted to hurt him. I have a clear memory of doing that. It wasn't like hitting or biting someone because they surprised me."

"Would you say those things today?"

"No! I'm still a fucking mess, but I don't have it in me to hurt people I care about. I've regained at least a little bit of self-control. Not enough not to take a swing at someone, but enough not to form complex sentences that I'll regret later."

"So, take some real steps to improve on that in the future, so you don't accidentally hurt anybody else. That's all you can do. Apologize to Boone if and when you find him again, but accept that he may not forgive you. You don't have any control over or responsibility for his feelings or behavior, just yours."

"Alright, thanks. I get your point. Can I get drunk now?"

"Only if you pour me a drink of that whiskey first. A double, please."

"You don't drink."

"Just for tonight, I do. I guess we'll be leaving for McCarran tomorrow?"

"Yes. We need to hit a bounty first, but it's on the way. Some crazy junkie bitch, lives by herself with a pack of dogs. Keeps 'em fed on unsuspecting travelers." She filled his tin cup halfway up and handed it to him, taking her first sip straight from the bottle.

"And she just might have some chems in her possession. That's a nice bonus." He looked tired and a little disgusted. She felt a stab of shame, but ignored it, working on making the whiskey disappear. Pretty soon she didn't care about anything anymore, and Arcade had retreated to the far corner with his book. Her last conscious thought before passing out was the realization that, sooner or later, she'd probably have to choose between addiction and Arcade's companionship. It made her sad – in an abstract, dreamy sort of way – that she didn't know which she would choose.
"You do remember that you're not wearing much armor right now, right?" Expecting another flare of temper from the Courier, Arcade spoke cautiously, hoping that she would see reason and defer this bounty for another time. She had blown up at him twice for no reason already that morning; although she had apologized and promised to keep a lid on it, the doctor didn't expect much from her. A junkie, some 15 hours after their last half-fix, was very poor company.

"I know. It'll be fine, though. It's so early she's probably not awake yet. We'll surprise her." She was pale, sweating profusely, and looked to the untrained eye like someone coming down with the flu. "Give me a minute…I need to focus."

"It's early because you were jonesing too much to sleep and woke me up at five." Okay, so he was irritable too. "And even if she isn't awake, her dogs are going to change that really fast."

"Well, at least we'll catch her before she takes her morning Jet. Keep your distance, Arcade. Take the long shots if you can. This really shouldn't be that hard. One Fiend, some dogs, and two of us. Let's go."

She ran toward the rickety structure ringed by trailers and ragged fencing. The barking began almost immediately, and three furry shapes converged on her. Running along behind, Arcade aimed for one of them, but relaxed when three quick shots from the girl's shotgun dropped them in their tracks. He caught up with her, and they both took shelter behind a trailer, waiting for the clamor to draw more enemies out.

"More dogs. You watch left, I'll watch right." Sure enough, a snarling sound announced the arrival of a massive police dog with a spiked collar. Without a second's delay, it leapt at him, and his panicked shot only caught one of its legs. That was enough to disable it, however, and he swiftly finished off the suffering animal. Megan seemed to have handled hers just as easily. Leaning against the trailer, she checked her Pip-Boy. "I only see one red dot left, moving quickly around toward us from my side. Be wary. She's a wild one to begin with, and by all accounts she was really attached to these animals. Let me…agh…" Stopping in mid-sentence, she doubled over and vomited what little she had eaten for breakfast. Trying to straighten up, she groaned and dropped to her knees, curling up against the cramps.

As if completing this pathetic drama, a half-naked woman wielding not one but two machetes came screaming incoherently around the corner. Without hesitating, Arcade shot her twice in the chest, not particularly caring if he vaporized the Courier's chance at collecting her bounty. She fell, her heart and lungs a smoking ruin, head intact, and he knelt to check on his friend.

"…sorry," she whispered to him, looking up. "It hurts."

"I know. Wait a minute. It should pass." He sat down in a spot clear of vomit or dog's blood, and remarked conversationally, "There's one thing I don't understand. Why didn't you bring more drugs with you? You didn't leave much room for error, even if we hadn't spent the extra night out there."

"Reason one: I'm broke, and could only afford to buy three in Freeside the other day, two of which I took the night and morning we spent at the caves. Reason two: I've never actually gotten this far into withdrawal before. I didn't know it would be this bad."

"Hey, since you're half a day into quitting already, why not just keep it up?"
She actually looked like she was considering his suggestion. "Is it going to get worse?"

Arcade chose the honest approach. "Yes. It'll keep getting worse for two or three days. At that 72-hour peak, we consider it cost-effective to use a dose of Fixer to help an addict weather the side-effects better and get over that hurdle. After it peaks, it plateaus off for a day or two and gradually tapers off to become more psychological than physical."

She pushed herself up and stood on trembling legs. "Okay. If she doesn't have any Med-X, then we'll go straight to the Old Mormon Fort after dropping off Violet's head at McCarran. If she does, then I'll defer that experience until later."

"Hm. Addicts usually don't honor their wagers. You promise?"

"Yes."

"Okay, I'm going to hold you to it."

They climbed up to the Fiend's fort-like living space and he watched her rifling desperately through shelves and boxes, even overturning her filthy mattress, looking for drugs. "Jet, jet, jet, psycho, psycho, buffout, jet. Jesus, Violet, diversify, why don't you? Jet. Jet. Psycho. Aha, what's this…?"

As a last resort, Megan had opened an actual first aid kit that the woman had been keeping on the top shelf of her pantry. "Some stuff you might want here, Arcade. Looks pretty clean, considering. Antiseptic and so forth. And…mysterious pills. What is this?"

"Let me see the label." He hesitated. "Well, it's not Med-X. You could have guessed as much, seeing as that always comes in syringe form."

"Well, what is it then?" She had already unscrewed the top and had tipped four of the small, white pills into her hand.

He sighed. "It's oxycodone, an opioid used for pain relief. Wait, don't–" But she had already taken all four, crunching them between her teeth.

He glared at her, unsurprised but still disappointed. "I take it our deal, such as it was, is off? You have no pride left at all, do you?"

She frowned back, "I found what I was looking for. Or close enough for now. And no, I don't. Let me go get that head. You take what you want there." She tucked the remaining pills into her pocket, swept the other recreational chems into her pack, and went down, leaving him to pick dispiritedly over the remains of the first aid kit. Descending the ramp again, he found her looking down at the corpse, looking as if she wanted to be sick again.

"Just use one of her machetes," he said tiredly. "It'll be hard to get through the spinal cord, but you can do it. I believe in you."

She looked at the blade at her feet like it was a snake. She answered tonelessly, "The last time I touched a machete – and that was to help someone butcher a dead Brahmin in exchange for a piece of meat – I had a goddamned awful flashback. Dreamed that night that I snapped and killed every man, woman, and child on the farm where I was staying. That's why I've been sticking with a combat knife lately." He didn't know what to say. She considered a moment, then took her shotgun and pressed the muzzle deep into the hollow of the dead woman's throat, turned her head away, and pulled the trigger, messily separating the head from the body. Still looking green, she found a bucket that had seen service as a dog's water bowl, and dropped the head with its ragged neck in with a dull thud.
Trudging in the general direction of Freeside, the bucket an awkward burden in one hand, she acted like she wanted to say something, but kept thinking better of it. Twice, cramps stopped her in her tracks, but those stopped as the drugs kicked in. Perhaps feeling better, she finally said what was on her mind: "Thanks for coming with me. I know this hasn't been the best trip, but I really do feel more clarity when I'm with you than I have for a while. Solitude hasn't been doing me any favors lately. I needed a break from that, at least for a few days."

"You're welcome. That last part sounded final – are you leaving me behind, then?"

"Yeah, at least for now. I gotta approach Nellis on my own, I think. It might be asking the Boomers too much to accept two outsiders. I'll be gone a week, maybe less. Or I might not come back at all, if they decide to shoot me at the gate, or if whatever crappy stealthboy Contreras sells me fails. If I get a chance, though, I'll come back to check in when I'm done."

"You think we really need those people?"

"Yes, I do. Them and their artillery. It's worth the risk. I'll try to show them that opposing the Legion is in their own best self-interest."

"I hope it works."

At the gate of McCarran, Megan shook herself, trying to psych herself up. "Okay, I can do this," she muttered, more to herself, pushing the door open nervously, eyes darting around as they walked into the training yard.

Arcade looked at her, "Are you alright?"

"Fine. There's just a lot of men here. A lot of soldiers. I hate being here. Please stay close to me."

Trying to keep her from panicking, he joked, "I'm not sure how I should feel about not counting as a man as far as you're concerned."

Momentarily distracted, she looked apologetically at him and smiled, "I didn't mean any offense. I trust you, that's all. Anyway, Major Dhatri's usually over by those trucks. Dr. Hildern's inside. After I get paid, I have to go and get some new armor and supplies for my trip from Contreras, all the way on the other side of the building. He gives me a discount because I ran some slightly shady jobs for him when Boone and I were spending a lot of time here."

"Sounds good. I've got some business I want to talk over with Dr. Kemp while you're shopping. The Followers actually have a good relationship with him – we've saved a couple of troopers after drunken knife-fights in the city, and in return he diverts some of the rarer medical supplies our way every now and then. For a price, of course."

Walking up to a portly figure standing and smoking by the entrance, Megan said hesitantly, "Major Dhatri? I've got that first bounty for you. Violet is dead." She handed him the bucket.

"Well, I'll be. That's Violet, all right. You've made me one happy son of a bitch, you know that? Here's the 400 caps we agreed on." He gave her a long, questioning look at her, and went on doubtfully. "I do have two more bounties, but I don't feel good about asking you to go after them. You look sick, girl. Maybe you should go back to Freeside and take in some R&R with all those caps."

"Don't worry about me, Major. Tell me which one you want dead – hell, tell me both of them, and maybe I'll take them out the next time I'm in Fiend territory."
"Driver Nephi – he's kind of south-southeast of Violet's place, pretty near that old rock crushing plant and Cook-Cook hangs out northeast of the Poseidon station. Both are bad news, but Cook-Cook's a monster I've got a personal grudge against. He raped one of my officers and it would do her a lot of good to see him dead. Don't underestimate either of them. And mind what I said before – you're someone we like having around, so take care of yourself."

Megan flinched at his description of Cook-Cook, but only nodded and thanked him before turning toward the nearest set of doors.

"You're not doing that right away, are you?" Arcade was beginning to understand how the Courier had built her reputation so quickly – it seemed that she accepted literally every job that came her way, whether it was convenient and healthy or not.

"I don't know. It's officially on my to-do list now, but I'm not sure when I'll go after them. I guess I could do that before going to see the Boomers. Sure wish I had a sniper to take along, though."

Someone tapped her on the shoulder, "Hey girl, maybe I could help you out."

She whirled, fist half-raised to strike the woman who'd come up behind her. A tall First Recon sniper with a buzz cut and shades, Betsy still had the bruises on her face from the last time they met. This time, she stepped back and held up her hands, trying to defuse the situation.

"Whoa, whoa…I don't want to fight. Just talk. You got a minute?"

"Betsy. Hi. Sure, whatever." She nodded to Arcade. "Go inside and talk to Kemp. I'll catch up later." Facing the other woman, she crossed her arms over her chest, and said sternly, "You shouldn't surprise me. I would have thought you'd've learned that last time. I'm sorry I punched you, by the way. I'm on edge right now."

"That's okay; it was my fault. And I think it was a good thing. That was the last straw for Lt. Gorobets. He put me on medical leave on the condition that I go to the doc at the New Vegas clinic for mental treatment."

"I'm glad. How is it so far?"

"Eh, it's annoying to talk straight with that chirpy little doctor, but helpful to let it out, I guess. Made me face how bad I'd gotten lately. My homework was to go try to make amends with some of the people I'd hurt, so I was glad to run into you. I also said I'd go back for group therapy tonight. It's just for women who've survived sexual assault – the men's group is on a different day."

"Uh-huh. Sounds nice."

"Would you like to go with me? I won't come on to you anymore, honest."

She scowled. "Why would you think I'd want to go that group?"

"Little things. The way you walk, talk, and act. Stuff like that. Snipers are observant, you know, and I'm not stupid."

She rubbed her temple. It might get Arcade off her back…and there was something else she needed to ask Dr. Usanagi. "What time?"

"6:00. They send guards over to the east gate at 5:30 to escort women over, but you and I don't need that. We can just walk over together from here."
"Alright...thanks. You're right. I should probably do something like that."

"Yeah. So, what do you need a sniper for? I'm going fucking nuts in here. I'd love to go do something with a crazy chick like you, even if it's not sex."

"I told Dhatri I'd go after Nephi and Cook-Cook. It would have been a great job for me and my old partner, but we're quits now. I won't ask you to face the Fiends if you're not ready for that, though. I can do it alone. My doctor friend doesn't like killing people for caps, so I don't want to ask him again."

Betsy's face blanched. "Fuck. Didn't know what I expected, but not that. Okay. I don't know if I can get within 100 feet of Cook-Cook without falling apart, but Driver Nephi I can deal with, I guess. You really think that's a job for two people?"

"Sure. Me and B—…my old partner used to take on odds like that all the time. I'd engage people at close range, and he'd shoot them off of me. If you really want to, we can go kill Nephi and his men after lunch today. Split the bounty, fifty-fifty."

"If you say so. I'll be out here when you're ready. What's your name, by the way? People around here mostly only know you as 'The Courier.' You're a woman of mystery."

"Megan Martin. See you later."

As predicted, Dr. Hildern was unhappy to learn that the mission had been a failure, even though Megan tried to make it sound like the data had just happened to destroy itself and the vault had collapsed on its own, despite hers and Keely's best efforts. As she was walking away in the middle of his tirade, Dr. Williams met her in the hallway with whispered thanks and a bag of caps – another 200. Rejoicing silently, she jogged upstairs and into the wide open concourse, passing Arcade and Dr. Kemp deep in conversation, and on down to Contreras' lonely little station at the end of the down-ramp.

Trading in Violet's recreational chems for an extra 200 caps in credit, she bought a leather chest-piece for 200, all eight syringes of Med-X in his inventory for 30 apiece, four stimpaks (160 altogether), a stealth-boy (100), and some food and water, exhausting her funds.

He grinned at her knowingly, "Yeah, sure, buy my whole stash. You never know when you might need to kill yourself twice over."

"Stuff it, Contreras. You don't have any fucking moral high ground."

Walking back up halfway, safely out of sight, she topped herself off with half a shot and buckled the armor on. Feeling secure and comfortable for the first time all day, she strolled, whistling, toward the medical center to find Arcade.

Over lunch – mess hall food as lousy as ever, made palatable by a nuka-cola and whiskey – she told him about her plans with Betsy.

"Just to be clear, this is the person whose nose you broke a few days ago, right?"

"Right."

"Well, far be it from me to get in the way of reconciliation. I'm very glad you're going to that group, too." He had been watching her throughout the meal, and after he cleaned his plate he said. "Hey, so, you're sick of lectures. I'm sick of lectures. But you have to be careful mixing pills, intravenous drugs, and alcohol. Or, better yet, just don't. About a third of the OD deaths I've seen come from
some combination of those, and most of them didn't actually wake up that morning planning to kill themselves."

"I know what I can and can't handle."

He shook his head, pushed back from the table, and stood up, "I'm going back to Freeside now. You'll come see me when you finish at Nellis?"

"I will. Good-bye, Arcade."

"So, what sniper would you rather be doing this with? Anyone I know?"

Megan sighed. "Probably. Craig Boone. We were on base together for a while a couple months ago. I'm surprised you didn't see us."

"I was on assignment at Golf then, training the greenies there. But I do know Boone. He's alright, for a man. Never said much, never put his hands where he shouldn't. A shame he didn't reenlist when his service was up, but I always figured he was one of the people we lost at Bitter Springs."

"Yes. Were you there?"

"No, that was before my time in First Recon, thankfully. So, what happened between you two? Lovers' quarrel turn ugly?"

"Legion slavers happened. He saved me and all, but I…I wasn't good company anymore. I hated to be close to him, and in the end I made sure he felt the same way. It sucks."

"Oh God, I'm sorry."

"Me too, but what can you do? Only thing that helps is having something to do, something big to work toward."

"Does it actually help? My job's so boring most of the time that I end up thinking too much. Maybe if I was always busy it'd be different."

"Yeah, I guess. Staying busy…and staying numb with chems and alcohol, which I don't recommend. If I was in the military, I'd already be in deep shit. But I've only been accountable to myself for most of the time since it happened. It's easier to lie to yourself that way."

"Wait. Are you high right now?" Betsy stopped, looking incredulous and angry.

"Well, yeah. I'm almost never totally sober, but I'm more functional this way than I would be in withdrawal."

"Girl, you are dumb. That shit'll fuck you up, get you and the idiots travelling with you killed. I didn't sign up to fight Fiends with a fucking junkie."

Megan shrugged. "Fine. Go back. I didn't twist your arm to get you to come out here." She checked her map and kept walking. "Better head back now. We're getting close to the ruins."

"And let a stupid civvie get killed taking on eight people at once? I'd feel bad." She added wonderingly, "You hide it well."

Megan didn't say anything and they continued on, becoming more cautious as they drew near to the gang's last-known hangout spot. When they were close enough to see the men walking around, they
both crouched behind what remained of a crumbling, cinderblock wall.

"How's this for shooting distance?"

"It's fine. I could do with more space, even."

"You have better eyes than I do. I can barely see those people at all. Okay, I'm going to lay three mines in a fan pattern about thirty feet out in front of you, just in case some of them pass me. Don't forget they're there, please. Then, I'm going to crawl up to that cover-point halfway between us and them and wait until you start shooting. Then, when they pass me, I'll take the fight close with my shotgun. I won't let them get close to you if I can help it, but I might retreat if I get into trouble. Don't shoot me."

"Be careful, especially with Nephi. He's a tough son of a bitch and I've seen him shrug off direct hits like it was nothing. He's beaten a dozen of our men to death with that fucking golf club of his."

Staying low, Megan set the mines, and made her way slowly to her ambush point. She checked her gun and her knife, and flashed a thumbs-up to Betsy. The sharp staccato of her shooting brought back bittersweet memories of doing this exact sort of thing with Boone, and Megan sighed, feeling wistful despite the imminent danger. Within the first four shots, she saw two of the men fall, and the others galvanized into action. When the fastest, clutching what looked like a laser rifle, ran very near to her, she stuck out a leg to trip him, shot him in the back, then ducked back behind her shelter as one of the others shot at her. Three rushed her position at once, one falling with a leg-wound courtesy of Betsy, the other two rounding the corner wielding a lead pipe and – oh God – a Ripper respectively.

"Say goodbye to your arms, bitch!" With no finesse or hesitation at all, Mr. Ripper swung a vicious circle at her right shoulder, an attack that almost certainly would have cost her the limb, armor and all, if it had landed. She skipped nimbly to the side, obliterating his face with her next shot. This was effective, but it left her vulnerable to Mr. Lead Pipe, who took advantage of her distraction to bring his weapon down in a haymaker at her head. Caught off balance, she let her right leg drop and took the hit as a glancing blow on her left collarbone. Her left arm went numb at once, and she lost control of her gun. Drawing the knife in her right, however, she lunged forward and cut deep into the poorly-protected inside of his thigh, ending his will to hit her again, and ensuring the end of his life.

A quick wipe on her sleeve, and the knife was back in its sheath. She hoisted the shotgun one-handed, but couldn't get her left high enough to stabilize for a shot – it didn't hurt, but it wouldn't respond either. A quick glance around the edge of the wall showed two enemies still standing – the others were all dead or dying. These last two were smarter, it seemed, and were using the other side of her cover to approach her position away from Betsy's line of sight.

She moved to keep the ruined building between her and them, bantering to buy her time. "Hi guys, you're a little late to the party, doncha think? Most of the others are already worn out from the fun."

Focused only on these two, her lack of attention almost cost of her life – something grabbed her around the ankle and sent her sprawling backwards to the ground. The dying fiend she'd tripped and shot still had something to contribute, it seemed. Fantastic. The other two gave up their cover to take advantage of her helplessness – one was a tall, lean man with a plasma pistol, and the other was Driver Nephi himself.

She flinched as the first one pointed the plasma pistol at her face, but as he pulled the trigger, Betsy did as well, sending his shot wide and mutilating his head. Disregarding his dead companion as well as the threat of the sniper in the background, Nephi stepped forward and brought the club down like a man chopping wood for a fire. Megan threw her right arm up in a desperate block to defend her head, but the blow slammed down all the same, leaving her dazed by her own now-useless arm. She
waited for the killing blow, but he'd apparently moved on to the real threat.

"Betsy…" Feeling sluggish and useless, she nevertheless forced herself to stand and stagger toward her, watching in fascinated horror as Betsy put two shots into the center mass of the charging Fiend, who barely seemed to slow. Until…he hit the rightmost mine. While he was moving so fast this didn't kill him outright, the blast did disrupt his momentum enough to knock him over, and the sniper was finally able to get the fatal head shot.

"Ah, good." She sat down abruptly, trying to access the damage without moving anything. Her right forearm was all shocking, bright pain and, while the feeling was coming back to her left, moving it hurt her bruised or broken collarbone too much to try anything.

"What do you need me to do? You have a bump coming up on your head, you know." Betsy had sauntered over, looking triumphant but concerned.

"Um…in a box on my left leg, there's a bunch of syringes. Hit me with the one that's only halfway full."

"Jesus, you're prepared, ain't ya?" She did as requested, and the pain retreated, except for her arm, which ached sickeningly despite the drug.

"Okay. Thanks. This arm is probably broken, and the left isn't up to much either. I can walk and carry my shotgun if you hand it to me, but any action on the way home and you're the one stuck taking care of it. Good shooting, by the way. That Driver Nephi was tough."

"Yeah. That was something. Glad I let you bring me along after all. You may be a mess and a half, but you do make things happen – good things – for the NCR. C'mon, up you go."

With Nephi's head destroyed, they decided just to take his signature golf club as proof of his death. Besides, as Betsy pointed out, Dhatri would probably take her word for it – it wasn't like she was an itinerant mercenary.

"You still want to come with me to that meeting tonight?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Just to listen. Actually, can we go early, like right after we collect our bounty? I'd rather be checked over by a female doctor than Dr. Kemp."

"Sure, I don't mind. Kemp's not a bad guy though. He's got a sweet, grandfatherly vibe. Really watches out for us."

"I know he's nice, it's just one of my things right now."

Luckily, the return trip was uneventful, and they returned to McCarran at a little before 4 o'clock. If Major Dhatri was surprised to see the two of them together, he didn't say anything. "So this was his club, huh? Alright, that's good enough for me. Here you go, kids. Don't spend it all in one place." He gave the bag to Betsy. "Corporal, you don't have to worry about Cook-Cook anymore. Another bounty-hunter just brought his head in, about half an hour ago. It's right over there in that bag if you want to see for yourself." She paled, but walked over to examine the indicated object, and returned, face set but relieved. "Thank you, sir. Who killed him?"

"One of ours. Craig Boone. Said he's getting ready for a caravan trip to New Canaan and needed the caps…"

Megan broke in breathlessly, jarring her arm in her excitement, "Ouch! Major – sorry for interrupting – but is Boone still here? I need to talk to him."
"No, he's not. Left right away. Didn't say where he was stopping next. Sorry. No more jobs for you right now, civilian. Get yourself to medical. You look like Nephi's been practicing his swing on you."

As they walked the lonely stretch around the walls toward the clinic, Betsy was quiet. Megan couldn't help but scan the surrounding area for a flash of Boone's red beret, hoping to catch sight of him. Going to New Canaan...he'd never mentioned any plans to travel before. She was surprised he'd leave the Mojave on the brink of war – would give up a shot at all the legionaries he could hit in exchange for a caravan guard's life. Had he really changed all that much, or was there some other reason? Damn it, she wanted to see him...

Betsy's voice broke into her useless thoughts, "I'm glad Cook-Cook's dead since that means he can't hurt anybody else now. I wish I could have been the one to pull the trigger – could have if we'd gone today when you asked, I guess – but dead is dead, and good riddance." She flashed the younger woman a look behind sunglasses. "Did the ones who raped you...pay? Or are they still out there?"

"Oh, they're dead. All of them. Boone, Manny, and the men they brought with them did for every soldier in Cottonwood. All their faces run together for me, though, so that just a generic Legion soldier – even a generic man, sometimes – makes me feel just as scared and angry. I don't think I'll feel better until the Legion is absolutely gone, and even then I don't know."

Neither of them said much else until they arrived at the clinic. Dr. Usanagi, a pretty, businesslike Asian woman greeted Betsy warmly by name, accepted 100 caps from the bounty bag, and guided Megan into an exam room, with instructions to remove her upper armor while she went to get her doctor's bag. This was easier said than done, especially since her right arm had swollen under the guard, but they eventually managed it without damaging the traces. She felt cold and naked without it on, and flushed with shame when she noticed Betsy frowning at the striped scars running down her back under her thin tank top. The outside of her right ulna now had a livid bruise on the point of impact, and her left shoulder was all one indiscriminate ache now.

The doctor bustled back in, carrying a tray of tools, all professional cheer. "Alright. Before I begin, how's the pain?"

"Not too bad. I've already hit my limit on painkillers today, so don't worry about that."

She frowned, but didn't say anything. "Any dizziness? Double-vision? Nausea?" She prodded the bump on her head gently.

"Kind of dizzy and nauseous, but that could be due to any number of things. I've spent all day trying to rebound from some intense withdrawal symptoms this morning, and might have over-compensated a little. Anyway, my head doesn't feel that bad – the arm took the worst of the hit."

"You're an addict?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what you've taken today." She pulled the shirt strap down and felt down the length of the collarbone, searching for a break. Megan shivered at the touch, but tried to focus.

"Four hydrocodone pills, one full dose of Med-X, and some alcohol. Not sure how much. As needed, I guess."

"Okay." Her cheerful expression was gone. "Have you eaten recently?"

"It's been…several hours, but yes."
"I'm going to use a stimpak on this shoulder. It looks like the trapezius muscle protected the bone, but it's going to be very tender for a while. Even if you can't feel the soreness under all the chems, you should still take it easy for a day or two." She moved to the arm, turning it slightly to look at the dark red marks. "I need to look at this with my portable x-ray to be sure, but I'm positive there's a break to set. Do you want to lie down? This is going to hurt."

She drifted a little bit, closing her eyes, as Dr. Usanagi maneuvered, squeezed, wrapped, and finally stabbed her arm, then stimpaked the shoulder as well, before helping her sit up and drink some water. "Alright. Two stimpaks at once are going to hit you like a ton of bricks. We can let you spend the night in our recovery room, if you want, as long as you don't cause any trouble."

Betsy chimed in, "Is it okay if she comes to group, Doc? She's been through the wars too."

"That's…fine. I normally like to meet one-on-one with people first, though Would you please give us some privacy, Corporal? We still have half an hour before the meeting."

Yawning, Megan outlined the basic elements of the last month again, feeling like a broken record, focusing on the most debilitating consequences of her experience: fear, addiction, and sleeping troubles. The other woman listened closely and asked a few clarifying questions about the timing and her current state of mind.

"Almost done, I promise. Have you had a physical exam since you were raped?"

When she shook her head, a guarded look in her eyes, Usanagi sighed and pressed on. "Any unusual vaginal discharge, itchiness, or pain? Any disruption with your menstrual period?"

"I bled for a few days. It hurt to pee at first, but that stopped after a while. I haven't had a real period since before it happened, just a little spotting. I'm pretty irregular though, so I haven't thought much of it."

"Is it alright if I take a blood sample? I'd like to test it for diseases and pregnancy."

"If you think it's necessary. I did take a course of antibiotics right after, and I think I'd know if I was pregnant. How long does it take? I have a job to leave for tomorrow morning."

She drew blood from a relatively intact vein on her arm. "Two days, give or take. Our machine is slow, and we have several other samples queued up to test." She set the syringe on her tray. "There, all done. Group will begin shortly – attendance is free and open, so long as you treat the other participants and me with respect, and don't come when you're obviously drunk or high. A lot of the women are in some stage of recovery from addiction, and they don't need to be around that. Please go put your things by one of the beds in the side-room and go wait with Betsy in the meeting room. I need to make some notes on your file."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." Her detached, professional manner slipped for moment. "I've heard of you, of course. You're not at all what I expected from your reputation, but I know that the wrong circumstances can drag anybody down, no matter who they are. I hope we can help you find your way back."

Exhaustion hit hard over the next hour, so much so that her first group meeting was a little blurry in retrospect – later, she remembered a circle of women and girls sharing anger, hope, and grief, encouraging one another, and sometimes crying. The doctor asked her to introduce herself at the beginning, but that was all she contributed. The couch was so comfortable and she was so tired…at
some point, her eyes closed and when she opened them, everyone was getting up to leave and her head was resting on Betsy's shoulder.

"Hm? Oh, sorry," she muttered, pulling away with embarrassment.

"I ain't complaining. You want me to stay with you? Those beds aren't too bad, and they're plenty big enough for two."

"Um, I'm not…I don't…"

"Oh, I know you're not up for anything frisky, but it seems like a little cuddling might do you good. Help you sleep better, for tonight at least. No sex, no commitments, no strings attached. See, I can be nice."

She felt a rush of gratitude for the other woman, but felt obliged to warn her. "I'll wake you up like ten times. I scream myself awake."

"I'll risk it. Maybe you'll surprise yourself. C'mon, kid, let's go." Nodding to Usanagi, she gently pushed Megan out of the room. "'Night, doc. Thanks for your help today."

Seconds after lying down, pressed against a warm body for the first time in weeks, she fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. Wakefulness came back slowly, many hours later, and for a moment she forgot everything except the peace and comfort of lying in bed next to someone, despite the soreness that never seemed to go away between fights anymore. The red beret on the nightstand and the long gun leaning next to it further muddled her sense of the past and present and for an instant she was content, waking up with Boone in Novac again. The memory came rushing back a second later, and she sighed, closing her eyes against dawning realization.

She sat up slowly, not wanting to wake her companion, and padded off barefoot to find a toilet and a private place to get a fix. When she got back, Betsy was awake, looking softer without her sunglasses and trademark cap than Megan would have thought possible. "Hey girl."

"Good morning. Did I disturb you last night? I can't remember. I also can't remember the last time I slept so well."

"Not too much. You talked in your sleep a little, but I couldn't tell what you were saying."

"Thanks for staying. I really have missed being touched. I used to be affectionate, believe it or not." She laughed, a little bitterly. "And the sleep-talking isn't new. Boone mentioned it once."

"Was he the first guy – or first person, I'm guessing – you ever had sex with? No offense, but you seem pretty innocent in the ways of love, all things considered."

"Yeah, he was. We only did it four times, too. He's pretty straightforward, I think, but it was all new to me."

"Well, if you ever get yourself clean and decide you want to try women for a change, then you know where to find me. I would love to show you some things, if you know what I mean."

Smiling in spite of herself, she laughed and shot back, "I thought you liked them…what was it you said yesterday? 'Tall and blonde,' right?"

"Eh, I can make an exception for sweet little brunettes who don't know what the hell they're doing. The teaching part's kind of fun for me." Growing serious, she added, "I don't have room in my life for an addict, though. That's just heartbreak waiting to happen. I won't go there again."
Her smile faded, "I know. I don't like it either." Trying to sound optimistic, she expanded, "I can't imagine ever wanting to have sex with anyone, man or woman, again, but if and when I do get unhooked, I'll come tell you, okay? We can go get non-alcoholic drinks and play Caravan like adults who don't have to go bounty-hunting to bond."

"Ugh. Sounds boring. But yeah, you do that. I want to know that you made it. And keep coming here on Friday nights when you're in the neighborhood. Try to stay awake next time. You could learn something."

It was remarkable, she considered on the road to Nellis an hour later, how amazingly good it felt to get some decent sleep for once. She might be favoring a broken arm and facing a mad scramble for her life, but at least she would die happy and well-rested. The full hit of Med-X percolating in her system didn't hurt either, she reminded herself sharply – yes, the certain knowledge that she'd be a puking mess without it definitely put a dampener on the party.

"I'm going to quit," she assured the world around – the sand, the rocks, the cactus, and one curious bird, anything that might or might not be listening. "Just let me survive this, and I'll get right on that. Promise."
Two Old Men and a Baby

*Author's Note: I don't do many notes, but here is one: this is an extremely dialogue-heavy chapter with very little on-screen action. If you love dialogue, then this is for you. If not, then skim it for some Courier back story and some Orion Moreno-hating at the end, and come back next week. There's also a not-too-subtle Dark Tower reference that will pair with a one-shot crossover fic I'll be writing one of these days.*

Taking a restless circuit around the courtyard to stretch his legs, thankful that the morning sun was already dismissing the chill of the night, Arcade was the first to notice the Courier stumble through the gate. She leaned heavily on the weathered wood for support, and only reluctantly let go of the stanchions to walk toward the tents in the back, moving like every step hurt. One of the younger doctors moved to help, but Arcade waved him away with a word and a gesture, trotting to intercept his friend before she collapsed.

"You're injured. Where?" He bent his knees to get her arm over his shoulder, and looked her over anxiously for the blood and bullet holes he expected to find.

She shook her head, scars standing out lividly on a face that had gone too pale. "Not…hurt. Just need to sit. Help me..."

Walking her to his tent, he moved a stack of books off of his one chair, and eased her onto it, beginning to undo the straps on her armor as he did so. She didn't complain, but only sat, swaying as he pulled her arm and leg guards off, followed by the heavy, protective vest on her torso. He plucked her left arm off of her lap, and ran through the vitals the device on her wrist showed. "Blood pressure...high. Pulse...rapid. Rads...effectively zero. Temperature...normal. Withdrawal symptoms...low-to-moderate. Those don't seem unusual for her. Then what..." The device seemed to think her body was in some state of physical shock, but she really didn't appear injured.

"What happened, Megan?" Not getting an answer, he transferred her as gently as he could to the lower bunk of his bed, noting that she was thinner even than she'd been the last time he'd seen her, a week before, all bone and lean muscle.

Being horizontal seemed to help clear her head and she roused herself enough to offer him an unconvincing smile, face strained with pain, "Hi Arcade. Thanks. I didn't know if I was going to make it here. I shouldn't have tried to walk so far today, I just really wanted to see you..."

"Where did you come from?"

"The New Vegas Clinic. Turns out I was pregnant. I let...I asked Dr. Usanagi to perform an abortion. She gave me something that started it last night and finished the job this morning. She, uh, 'strongly recommended' recovering there for a day, but I didn't want to."

He brushed her sweaty hair out of her face, and reached for some water. "She was right. But it doesn't matter now. Drink." He propped her up and gave her the whole bottle, stopping twice to let her breathe. "Did she use any kind of anesthesia?"

"Just a local numbing agent. She told me not to use any drugs or alcohol for twelve hours before, so I decided I might as well start quitting both last night. I have a little over two weeks to get clean, so I can go meet the Boomers by Lake Mead. I didn't want to waste any more time."

"Take it easy. Rome wasn't built in a day, or two weeks for that matter. If you're going to quit,
then good, but quitting and dealing with your underlying problems is going to be a full-time job for a while. You need to give recovery your full attention."

She looked at him steadily, a fanatical glint in her weary eyes, "No. I have sixteen days, Arcade. Then I go back to my real job. There's a World War Two airplane at the bottom of the lake. The Boomers have pledged their support if I can help them raise it to the surface using their fancy equipment. Now, I don't think that B-29 is going to fly again, but I trust them to honor their side of the bargain with a cadre of missile-launchers at the Dam."

"What? An airplane? What are you talking about?"

"It's...like a vertibird. Big machine that flies." She was drifting off now, curled up against the pain in her abdomen.

"I know what an airplane is. It's just...you...need to take a break to deal with this. All of this. And...you're asleep now. Not that you listen to me when you're awake." He stuffed her gear under the bed, out of the way, muttering, "Why, yes, I'd love to put you back together so you can break yourself down again and die in an optimal time and place. It's moments like this that I live for as a doctor. You poor kid."

Having seen her in withdrawal before, Arcade was apprehensive about how Megan would behave in the Followers' informal rehab program, especially when it came to interacting with the other doctors. He needn't have worried. A Courier committed to quitting was very different from a Courier scheming for her next fix. She chewed her nails, hands, and clothes with nervous tension and paced until she dropped from exhaustion, but he never saw her snap or lash out at anybody or refuse to participate in an exercise. During her third and worst day in residence, she stuffed herself under his bed, whimpering, but didn't complain. Didn't say anything at all, really, except a whispered "Thank you," when he gave her a tablet of Fixer. On day four, she did little beside sit, huddled in the tent corner, shaking and sweating. At noontide on day five, however, she sat down to a bland meal with him and abruptly initiated her first real conversation since her arrival, still pale and sweaty, but speaking coherently and calmly.

"I don't ever want to do this again. If you see me drinking or using drugs again, just shoot me, okay? It would be a kindness."

"I would have to go check, but I'm pretty sure that would violate my oath to 'do no harm.' Primum non nocere." He took a spoonful of their cook's unspeakable cram-and-maize soup and shuddered. "In all seriousness, though, I'm very proud of you for following through. I've missed the person you were without chems. What made you take this step?"

"A lot of factors, really. In the end, it seemed marginally less painful to live with sobriety than with all the downsides of the alternative. I've questioned that premise a lot these past few days, but I'd definitely rather earn my status as a social pariah by being a misanthrope than by being an addict whom nobody trusts." Pushing her half-eaten soup away, she pulled a crumpled piece of paper out of her pants pocket and put it on the table in front of him. "About a week ago, I hit a low point coming back to Vegas from surveying the plane crash site. Physically, I was feeling pretty wobbly and on top of that I was really depressed and lonely...anyway, I started snacking on the last of those pills, not really keeping track of how many I had taken. Just as they started to kick in, I happened to run into this weird group of pilgrims who were camped out in the middle of nowhere, looking for a place I'd never heard of...a black tower or something. I didn't catch their names: there was a scary old cowboy with heavy pistols, a young guy, a legless woman in a wheelchair, and a kid, maybe twelve years old. They talked about a lot of things that made no sense to me, and kept asking me about the year and the war and other stuff. Anyway, my memory is fuzzy – I passed out mid-conversation,
and they kept my miserable bones warm and safe by their fire all night. Before they left in the morning, the younger man woke me up and handed me this paper and told me that if I read it and took it to heart, it would convince me to kick the habit."

Arcade had attended doubtfully to this story, wondering privately if the group she described even existed outside of a drug-fueled fantasy, but the paper was certainly real. "Well, what does it say?"

Megan laughed. "I don't know. I can't read, remember? I just told myself it was going to be the most unimaginably persuasive document ever written, and that I had as well go ahead and assume that it had already convinced me to quit. Took my last hit that morning to get on my feet again, and dragged myself the rest of the way to the clinic."

He paused in smoothing out the sheet – ballpoint pen on lined paper torn from a composition book, from the look of it – and asked, "Do you want me to read it to you, or would you rather live in the mystery?"

She thought for a moment. "Hm. I guess it might be safer to let it stay better than life. You can read it if you like – just tell me what name he signed, please."

He obliged, reading it silently with a slight frown creasing his brow. Refolding it carefully, he handed it back to her. "Eddie Dean. From Brooklyn. That ring any bells?"

"Nope. I'll thank him if I run into him again, though."

"You should. So, after that is when you went to see Usanagi?"

"Yes. She had taken a blood sample before I went to Nellis, and the results confirmed a first-trimester pregnancy. I assumed it was one of the legionaries', but I guess it's technically possible that it was Boone's, even though we used protection each time. Either way, I wasn't going to keep it, especially since I'd probably already damaged it with the way I'd been carrying on. It was an easy choice to make and, as much guilt as I feel for things both within and beyond my control, I don't feel any for this." She sounded defensive, as if she expected judgment from him. He rushed to reassure her.

"No, you did the right thing. I'm sorry I didn't push you harder to get examined sooner – it's just that every time I brought it up you zoned out on me or changed the subject."

"I guess I did zone out, since I don't remember you saying anything about that. Sorry. But I like Dr. Usanagi pretty well, and feel comfortable talking with her about a variety of things. I'll go on seeing her from time to time."

"Great. Whenever you're fit for the walk, I'll escort you over."

As she regained her strength and composure, the worst of the physical withdrawal symptoms fading away, leaving only a persistent itch and anxiety, Megan began to accompany Arcade in his practice, first within the compound only and then, as she got her sea legs back, beyond its walls. She would hand him tools, observe procedures, and talk to patients and their families – an area that she had to admit he could stand to improve on. He almost never lost the constant undertone of sarcasm, and when it wasn't tempered with affection, it could come off as abrasive. He also tended to give people the impression that he was rubbing his cultured vocabulary in their faces, when in reality he didn't know any other way to speak. She tried to address this with him.

"You know, you probably shouldn't say 'apply topically' when you mean 'rub the ointment on the rash.' That last woman asked for clarification, but some people might be too shy or embarrassed to press for understanding. If communication fails to happen between you and a patient, then that could
be dangerous for them."

"You sound like Julie. And you're both right. I've only recently resumed some of the duties of a
general practitioner, and I am not, never have been, and never will be a 'people person.' I also don't
have a good sense of what the average person will and will not understand."

"Underestimate them, then. Or say it both ways. If you're not careful, you're going to have someone
drinking their lotion, or worse. Is it alright if I translate for you if I notice you being egregiously
erudite?"

"Only if you use words like 'egregiously' in your translation," he teased. "But yes, that's a good idea.
Please do that. For my part, I'll try harder to communicate more clearly."

They visited poor families on the city's edge to inoculate their children, tracked down lapsed addicts
and tried to convince them to come back, and received a constant stream of patients in the Fort itself.
It was while engaged in this latter task, only two days before the Courier's appointment at Lake
Mead, that they met the woman with the baby.

Actually, she had two babies – infant boys as unlike as twin boys could be, one plump and robust,
the other thin and listless – as well as a four-year-old girl clinging to her mother's skirt. The mother, a
stout, tired woman with a red face and strong arms, handed the larger baby abruptly to Megan, who
took it reflexively, trying to figure out how to hold the squalling, wiggling baby while Arcade
examined the smaller one on a table in the shade of his tent.

The mother explained, 'He eats – God, he eats like he's starvin' – but he don't gain no weight. His
shit comes out all funny, bright green and greasy-lookin'. Coughs all night and keeps us all up.' The
infant wheezed as she spoke, the thin chest rising and falling with the effort.

Megan had finally wrestled the healthy baby into submission, rocking him awkwardly while
watching her friend study his brother. The doctor examined him gently from head to toe, peeked
inside his filthy diaper, and finally, hesitating, touched the tip of his tongue to the baby's forehead
before nodding in silent confirmation and cleaning the spot carefully. Head bowed, face inscrutable,
he wrapped the sick baby up again and handed him back to his mother.

"I'm very sorry to tell you this, but your son won't thrive or gain weight. That cough won't get any
better. He was born with an incurable genetic disease and there's nothing we can do for him here. All
you can do is take care of him until he dies, probably well before his first birthday. We can show you
a way to relieve the mucus build-up in his lungs to make his breathing a little clearer, but that won't
actually cure his condition."

The woman stiffened, looking down at the baby in her arms with mingled grief and resentment. "The
other two – are they okay?"

"Yes. It's not contagious – they can't catch it from him. The symptoms would have been obvious
from birth if they had it. His fraternal twin brother is fine." He paused. "If you have any more
children with the same father as the boys, they'll have a one-in-four chance of being born with it
too."

She snorted. "Small chance of that. He was just some soldier slumming it on the bad side of town.
Haven't seen him for more than six months." Reaching out for her other son, she took him from
Megan, who relinquished her burden gratefully. Without another word, she set the doomed baby
back on the examining table and marched toward the gate, dragging the little girl – who was trying to
turn her head to look back – behind her.
Megan froze with shock and anger, but recovered quickly, running after her. "Ma'am, you're not leaving him here? We can't feed him – you can! He'll starve to death without you." The woman ignored her, soldiering on through the gate without sparing her a look. Megan ran ahead again and stood directly in her way, pleading.

"Please. Take him with you. Let him die with his family."

"Do you have children, missy?" Her voice was hostile, but her eyes were sad. When she shook her head, the woman continued, "Wait until you have two hungry, healthy ones to feed with no man to help, and then come tell me that I need to waste time and milk and sorrow on one that'll never grow up. Now, get out of my way."

Voice shaking with anger, she shouted at the woman's back, "At least tell me his name!"

"Adam!" With that last shout, she was gone, having turned a corner, out of sight.

Running back to the compound, she found Arcade in conversation with Julie Farkas, both looking at the baby sadly.

Feeling lost and confused, she stood at the door of the tent and looked at the baby again. Adam was crying as if he knew his mother was gone, a thin, feeble wail that was lost in the hubbub around them. Without thinking about it, she picked him up to comfort him, grimacing at the smell of dirty, unwashed infant and mourning how light he was compared to his brother.

Arcade looked at her sharply. "Megan…be careful. We don't have a way to feed him appropriately. All the wet-nurses we know – and there aren't many – have all the babies they can take, and most are trying to feed too many already."

"But…but…Brahmin milk and agave syrup. We can give him something like that." She looked up hopefully, searching for agreement or a willingness to put her idea to the test.

"Nothing but human breast milk will work for long. Homemade formula will raise his blood sugar enough to satisfy his hunger, and we probably will give him something like you suggested to make these last few days bearable for him, but it does not have the nutrients he needs to survive, even if his lifespan wasn't already cut down to nothing. He is going to die, very soon. I'm sorry."

Julie had stepped away quietly and now came back with a man in his early twenties, an intern whom Megan had seen, but never spoken to. "Courier, give the baby to Stephen here. He'll clean him up and try some sugar-water on him while someone else goes to find a little Brahmin milk. We'll keep him comfortable, as long as we can."

Head whirling, she reluctantly handed the baby over, telling the man his name, before walking past Arcade to sit down in the tent, feeling bewildered. The urge to blot everything out with alcohol and chems had risen up in her chest stronger than it had since those first few sober days. She also had a strong desire to run after that woman again and drag her back here to rub her nose in her crime. Arcade must have read some of this on her face, and sat next to her, equally ready to talk or intercept her if she broke for the door.

"Why did you tell her it was hopeless, Arcade?" Some of the anger she hadn't gotten to express before came out now. "If you had left recovery as a possibility, she might have kept feeding him until he died."

"I told her it was hopeless because it was hopeless. I'm not going to lie to someone about a diagnosis to manipulate them into doing the right thing." He looked so beaten himself, that Megan didn't have
Standing up, itching her arms with nervous tension, she said, "I'm going to go for a walk. Clear my head a little."

He stood up too. "No, you're not."

"What do you mean, 'no'? I'm not a prisoner here. In three days, I'll be gone again, doing whatever the hell I want, when I want to do it. And I'm just going to walk around Freeside."

"That route will take you by Dixon and the Wrangler. I'm not going to let you throw away the last two weeks over a sick baby, especially since you destroying your life all over again won't benefit him at all."

"I'm not going to--" she began indignantly. He cut her off.

"You say that now. You might even believe it. But I don't trust a recovering addict to weather the first big loss of their sobriety alone. I'm staying close to you for right now."

"Okay," she growled, trying to master her anger. "Will you come with me, Arcade? I just want to walk around, maybe beat up some thugs, maybe shoot a mole-rat for dinner. Throw rocks. Destroy stuff."

"Not yet," he said firmly. "Maybe you've noticed – it's quite busy here today. I need to work for another hour or so, and after that we can go out. I could still use your help, if you can keep your temper in check." He spoke calmly, studying her reaction.

She paced, biting at the skin between finger and thumb to keep from screaming. "Fine, alright. I can wait. How can you do this, though? How can anybody here deal with this, day in and day out?"

"Because we have to. It's our job. And everybody has their own coping mechanism, some healthier than others. Mine is sarcasm and deflection and it makes me a jerk. Empathetic people don't make it very long here without losing some of their vulnerability, walling off some of their feelings. There aren't many chem addicts among the Followers doctors, because that's hard to hide for long, but there are more than a few closet alcoholics. Some days, this job is brutal."

"Jesus." She rubbed her face and shook out her hands. "Okay, I'm sorry, Arcade. I feel like exploding, but I guess I can compartmentalize this if you can. Let's go see who's next."

One non-compliant Jet addict, two cases of radiation sickness, and a domestic abuse victim later, and they were on the road to the wastes northeast of the city, Megan wearing her armor for the first time in two weeks and enjoying the heft of her shotgun in her hand, already feeling better outside of the city's walls.

"What does Adam have?"

"It's a rare genetic disease called cystic fibrosis – it prevents the digestive system from absorbing nutrients correctly and eventually destroys the lungs. At the height of human medical advancement, before the Great War, it was not only treatable, but curable in some cases. Now, we're in the same position as humanity was before the mid-twentieth century – calling it a childhood illness only, waiting for the patients to die."

"The mother back there was a carrier. She has half the genetic information for the disease, but none of the symptoms. The father of the child is also a carrier. When two carriers have a child together, they run the risk of having children with two halves of the mutation, and thus the disease itself.
There's also a fifty percent chance of them having a child who's a carrier as well, so it gets passed down to future generations."

"How do you know if you're a carrier?"

"You don't, unless you have a child with the disease. A non-trivial percentage of people with European ancestry probably do carry it, but these days we don't have the means to examine our DNA for those mutations. All we can do is recognize it when we see it and warn people about the probability for future births."

"That's really sad. Why did you lick the baby?"

"Doctors have known for centuries that infants with cystic fibrosis have extremely salty skin. That, plus colorful stools, plus failure to thrive, is our current gold standard for a diagnosis." He looked thoughtful. "I can't find a consensus on the subject in our books, but there's some evidence that CF carriers have an inborn resistance to diseases like cholera, typhoid, and tuberculosis, which could explain why the mutation has survived and spread so well."

"Ah, you know so much stuff, Arcade."

"Yes, much good it does me and my patients. Hey, we're close to the Clinic – do you want to go talk to Dr. Usanagi for a few minutes? You've only been to see her twice since you've been back, and today was unusually stressful."

"Hm, nah, I'd rather talk to you if that's okay. Don't get me wrong. She's been really helpful, and has given me some good strategies for not losing my mind when I get scared or angry. I feel like I'm constantly counting to ten or measuring my breaths these days. She's even got me meditating, if you can believe it. Of course, I've been pretty insulated lately, spending most of my time in the Fort, or with you." She looked worried. "Are you tired of having me around all the time, Arcade? I've gotten self-aware enough lately to realize that I haven't always been the best friend to yo."

"To be completely honest, sometimes you do wear me out and I need a break. I don't mind telling you when that happens, though, and you're pretty good about respecting my need for space. All in all, I enjoy the time I spend with sober-you, and you've had a net positive effect on my life." He blinked. "Sorry, that sounded clinical."

"Aw, no, you're all heart. Hey, look, a mole-rat!" Running after the animal, a juvenile on the small side, she clubbed it over the head with the stock of her gun when it rounded on her. Carrying it back, smiling a little, she put it down and started searching the area for burnable brushwood. "Let's cook it here. I'm starving."

An hour later, stomachs full of meat and the xander root Arcade had found to roast, they watched the sun setting, feeling content. As they packed up to leave, leaving behind all that remained of the animal – the head, paws, and a ragged pelt, Megan asked, "Do you think it would be okay if I took care of Adam tonight? I sleep pretty lightly these days, and I think I could keep him safely next to me in bed."

"If you think you can handle the job emotionally, then Stephen or whatever other intern Julie taps for the task would probably appreciate the help. Just…don't get hurt over this. He really can't survive more than a week on the diet we'll give him. Possibly less, if his breathing takes a turn for the worse or if he can't tolerate the proteins in Brahmin milk."

"I have to leave – not tomorrow, but the next morning for the rendezvous point. I don't mind comforting him for a couple of nights before then."
"Okay. Do what you want to do. On the subject of the bomber in Lake Mead – do you actually know how to swim?"

"I don't know. I've never tried. How hard could it be?"

"How hard indeed. Did they mention how deep it was?"

"No. This one guy, Jack, said he'd try to work up a mask to let me breathe underwater. He didn't seem too confident, though. I'm to swim down, place ballasts under both of the wings, and then Loyal will activate them remotely from the shore to float it to the surface. They have a plan to transport it to Nellis, but I don't know or care about the details. All I want is the two-way radio they promised so that the NCR can coordinate with their fire support."

Back at the Fort, Stephen demonstrated how to change the tiny baby's diaper and showed her where he was keeping a supply of his sweetened milk cool in the cistern. Carrying him to Arcade's tent, he pushed the bunk flush against the canvas wall so he couldn't roll off and laid him next to her, covering him with the blanket. He whimpered, moving his arms and legs against the swaddling, and she put a hand out to comfort him.

Looking up at her friend, who was reading at his desk, she asked, "Arcade, do you think he's sad? Because his mother abandoned him?"

"No, he's less than two months old. He doesn't know where he is or who you are. Have you ever even held a baby before today?"

"Not that I can remember. I avoid children as a rule."

Even a sick baby could make a lot of noise, she decided by midnight, and she ended up holding him on her chest to keep him warm and happy and lay dozing with him like that until dawn, when he began to cry lustily in between coughs. Warming the last of the milk against her skin, she fed it to him by the embers of the guards' fire and decided that it was worth trying again to reason with his mother. Maybe, by now, she would have regretted her decision and would take him back.

Slipping her sheathed knife into her belt and tucking Adam into a blanket sling in front of her, she stole out into the grey morning streets, striking for the shanty-town on the outer edge of the wall. A few gaunt-faced men were already up and talking to them eventually got her directions to "the hut with the brawling brats." She was apprehensive about waking the woman up, and was relieved to find her awake, feeding her remaining son in the threshold of her shack.

"You again." There was no rancor there, only weariness. "I haven't changed my mind, girl. If you leave him here, I'll just kill him and bury him in the ruins. I didn't think you Followers encouraged that sort of thing."

Megan put her hands protectively around the warm lump on her chest. "That would be murder. I'd report you."

"What good would that do my other children, assuming the NCR cared enough to do anything at all about it? News flash: they wouldn't. Face it, honey. There ain't enough for the ones who have half a chance at life, let alone the ones who don't. Go back to your vault, or maybe the real NCR if you want civilization and civilized people. You won't find that here." She ducked back inside her house and let the blanket which served as their door fall back, leaving the girl and the infant out in the cold.

Megan took the long way back to the Fort, passing the bars that never closed and the chem dealers already lounging indolently in their corners, but spent the last of her caps on another bottle of
Brahmin milk from a street merchant instead. Delivering the baby and the milk to Stephen, she went back to the tent to find Arcade awake and anxious.

"Where did you go?"

"Outskirts. I wanted to try again to talk some sense into Adam's mother. It was a bad idea and a waste of time, but before you ask – no, I didn't fall off the wagon, I swear. I don't have enough money left to do that anyway."

"There's a silver lining if I ever heard one." The relief was audible in his voice. "Anyway, I was thinking about going to Westside today to check on a couple of long-term patients there and to see an old friend. Maybe two, if I can track the other one down. Would you like to come?"

"Sure."

The Courier didn't say much for a while as they traversed the long way around the city to Westside, hoping to avoid Fiends. She was sleepy from her restless night and mulling over problems that didn't seem to have an easy answer.

"Arcade, is infanticide illegal? It has to be, right?"

"A thing isn't 'illegal' until someone in power is prepared to enforce the law. By that rule, almost nothing is illegal out here, except actions that go against the NCR's interests. The Followers won't euthanize children though, unless they're both suffering horribly and have no chance of recovery. Even then, a lot of us would be reluctant to take that step, myself included."

"Adam's mother said she'd kill him if I left him with her this morning."

He shook his head. "That happens, probably more often than we realize. Chronically ill and developmentally disabled children die of natural causes, obviously, but more often than not, they just...disappear from one day to the next. It's not good, right, or beautiful, but that is the world we live in now. Before the War, things were different, but now the law of scarcity forces people to make hard decisions. A lot of people in Freeside are living on the edge of starvation, and it's hard for mercy to get much of a foothold in a situation like that."

"You're defending her?"

"Not so much, but even an idealist has to work with things the way they are, even as they try to work toward something better."

"Hmph. I wish I could've been born at a different time. Back in the 20th century, maybe, before everything went to hell. I could be in college right now."

"You and me both, Miniver Cheevy."

She was befuddled. "What did you call me?"

"It's the name of a twisted little poem about a guy who can't stand the window dressing of the present and spends his life hankering for the past. Mind you, it was written in the 20th century, in your 'good old days.' Remind me next time we're at the Fort and I'll read it to you. I can't do it justice from memory."

Westside was a rough, slummy sort of place and Megan found herself keeping a hand on the handle of her knife constantly, watching roughly-dressed people (and one super-mutant) out of the corner of her eye and sticking closely to her companion, who, oddly for him, seemed perfectly comfortable.
Arcade led her straight down the main thoroughfare, directly to an old man with white hair and skin like aged wood. A chessboard lay on the table in front of him, but he didn't have a opponent.

"Judah. Hello."

"Lo Arcade. Up for a game? Not that you'll be much of a challenge for me, heh."

"I actually have some house calls to make. I did want to introduce you to a friend of mine, Megan Martin. She's the Courier you've probably been hearing about." To her, he said quietly, "This is Judah Kreger. He was the officer in charge of my father's old unit."

The old man nodded to her, looking at them both with sharp eyes bright with keen intelligence. "Would you like to play while the boy does his rounds, Courier? I'm always looking for new competition."

She sat down across from him, but shook her head self-consciously. "You won't find that in me. I don't know how to play chess."

"I can teach you. Go on, Arcade, I want to get the measure of your friend here."

He showed her how the pieces moved and explained the conditions of victory, before pushing one of his white pawns two spaces forward. Not knowing anything about strategy, she moved one of the pawns trapping her castles out two spaces. He snorted, and made his own move, lightning-swift, pushing a bishop out along a diagonal. "So, what is Gannon's boy doing with a wannabe legend like you?"

She jumped one of her horses out, just because she liked its L-shaped maneuver, and considered her answer. Settling on blunt honesty, she told him, "Arcade thinks the Enclave remnants should assist the NCR against the Legion at the Dam. We've already gotten conditional agreement from Daisy and Johnson, and haven't yet asked Dr. Henry or Moreno."

"There's a lot to unpack in what you just said, Courier. Arcade did mention something like this a month ago, but he was unclear on the details. He does realize that we're all very old, right? I'll be 75 this year. What does he expect us to do?" He moved the tall piece whose name she had already forgotten out using the same gap as he had for the bishop.

"We don't expect you to make a last stand in the middle of the battle or anything. Just an aerial strike and some fire support to turn the tide in our favor." She moved her other horse out for symmetry, admiring the neatness of the board.

"I don't know if you've actually met Moreno yet, but he is nothing like Johnson or Whitman. Those two have mellowed a lot with age, and were never as committed ideologically as Moreno. He doesn't have much left in him but bitterness, and most of that is aimed straight at the NCR. I have trouble imagining him going along with this venture, and I'd be reluctant to mobilize my team without his heavy guns." He moved the tall piece in, taking her front pawn. "Checkmate."

"Why can't I take it with my king…oh, I see. The bishop is protecting it. I might be able to talk Moreno around – I tend to be good at that sort of thing, and I have the dubious credential of being a member of the Enclave myself. Technically. I'm AWOL, but I would probably avoid mentioning that fact to Moreno."

He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, betraying no surprise. "You from Chicago, then? I'd heard some of them made it there."

"No. Maine. In the northeast."
"Hm. That's far. What are you doing here?"

"I keep asking myself the same question."

"Alright, keep your secrets, girl. And fine, I don't mind leading the group into battle if you can assure me that the NCR won't try to blow us out of the sky. Just get the others on board and tell me when it's time to start making our way to the bunker."

"Thank you. It'll be a few more months. Arcade or I will let you know when."

"Sounds good. Now, let me show you why you lost that game…"

Six games later, Arcade returned to collect her. After watching her lose in twenty-two moves (an improvement over four, but still a poor showing), he bid farewell to Kreger and they began the long walk around the circumference of Vegas to the house where Moreno was last known to be living, according to Kreger.

"What did you think of him?"

"I liked him. He's patient and not nosy. Really enjoys chess, doesn't he?"

"He does. I've been playing with him for years and still lose almost every time. Judah Kreger…is the glue that's kept us all together over the years, and with good reason. Anyone who can command Moreno and Johnson in the same unit without somebody getting fragged is one hell of a leader."

"All of you have been worried about what Moreno will do, and now I'm worried too. What do you think he'll find persuasive?"

"Appeal to his pride – that he can show the NCR a thing or two about how the real fighting's done. Try to impress upon him that the NCR looks a hell of a lot more like the Pre-War government than the Legion does. If nothing else works, bring out your ace-in-the-hole and appeal to him as a fellow Enclave member. Maybe don't let on that you don't remember a thing about it, or that you're actually pretty nice and shockingly gentle underneath all the bloodthirstiness."

"Remind me again why I'm a better ambassador to the Remnants than you are?"

"They all still think of me as a kid. Plus, they look at me and see a doctor and pacifist, not a soldier."

"I can sell 'soldier,' I guess, but as for you being a kid, you're almost twenty years older than me, remember?"

"Ugh, don't remind me. But you're the Courier. Everyone knows who you are. That title is a lot more powerful than you are."

"Hm. Now I feel like a charlatan, because I am absolutely faking it. All the biggest things I've accomplished I've done with help, lots and lots of help. Do you think it was me who killed those deathclaws on the I-15? Nah, that was all Boone. I was there for little more than moral support and for carrying all of his extra ammo – I only killed one that wandered too close for comfort. I literally can't hit the broadside of a barn if it's more than fifty feet away."

"Even so, if it weren't for you, those deathclaws would still be there. And it wouldn't matter if you never even fired your weapon on any of your adventures – you still got people to go along with you. That's power. Take responsibility for it and use it as a resource that you just happen to control."

"Alright, I'll try. But I reserve the right to take a long vacation after the Legion is gone. This is all too
They paused just south of the NCR farms for lunch, Arcade buying a few roasted cassava roots off of a cheerful settler. Chewing the starchy, potato-like vegetable, Megan looked at the house they believed to be their target and commented aloud, "Wish I was still drinking. It'd be nice to take the edge off right about now."
"It'll be alright. I'm not going to leave you alone with him. He's a poisonous old bastard, but he's still a man in his seventies and we can subdue him if we have to. Ideally, it won't come to that, though."

"When's the last time you talked to him?"

"Five years ago, at our last reunion. It was...not pleasant. I remember no gracious or redeeming remark from him."

Feeling apprehensive, she and Arcade approached the door and knocked, stepping back to await a response. When there was no reply, they tried again, and, when that didn't work, they finally just opened the door and walked in, cautiously exploring the dimly-lit hallways for signs of life.

"Maybe he's moved since Kreger saw him last."

"Maybe. Or perhaps he's not at home. I can leave a message."

"Alright. Maybe we can set up a meeting at a neutral--"

A familiar and deafening noise and a heavy punch to her chest cut her off. Knocked flat to the dusty, 200-year-old carpet, she struggled to breathe, wondering how much of the scattershot had gotten through her leather armor, and whether she was dying. Angry men's voices clamored above her, and she strained to follow them.

"Serves you right, you troopers always barging in, trying to drive an old man out of his home. Oh, stop being so dramatic and get up and out of here. It was only a pair of rock salt shells. You'll be fine...unless I put the next one in your face..."

"Moreno, stop. She's not NCR. We just came to talk to you, you maniac. It's Gannon..."

Only some of this information seemed to register. "Israel, what the hell are you doing here with this trooper? Leading them right to my doorstep, that's what you're doing."

Arcade helped her up, brushing salt off of her armor, looking relieved. "It's Arcade, Moreno. Israel has been dead for almost forty years, remember? Let's all go sit down and cool off."

When they were all seated in his living room, Megan wincing as Arcade cleaned the few places where the salt had slipped through the seams and bit into her skin, her whole breastbone one big bruise, Moreno leered nastily at her, admiring his handiwork, "Be glad I grabbed the shotgun and not the Gauss, little miss NCR. That would have put a hole through ten of you, armor and all."

"For the last time, I'm not with the NCR. And stop looking at me, seriously."

"Oh, don't worry. I don't like what I see. Women used to have some meat on their bones, not like you skinny things running around now. Now, Miriam, she was a hot piece--"

"Stop. Now." There was a dangerous edge to Arcade's voice. He replaced Megan's armor, helping her to reattach the traces.

"Oh, that's right. You don't want to talk about beautiful women, or even the scarecrow here. You only..."

"Yes, I'm gay. That's the only reason I don't want you to objectify my friend in front of her and reminisce about my mother's curves. Again. Jesus, Moreno, do you even hear yourself? Kreger wouldn't have tolerated this kind of behavior in the old days, and I won't tolerate it now."
"Well, boy, if you didn't come here for my charm or my stories, what the fuck are you here for? For
myself, I was okay living the rest of my life without running into you or Johnson again. Couple of
pantywaists…"

Megan broke in. "I want you to come fly out with the other Remnants and fight at Hoover Dam." Her
voice sounded strong to her ears, and she seasoned it with some of the anger and disgust she felt
for the old man.

"Oh? And who are we going to be fighting there?"

"The Legion. They're poised on the other side of the river, and they have heavy weapons this time.
We need to prevent them from taking the Dam to have any hope of holding the Mojave against
them."

"Who's 'we'? The day I fight for the NCR is a cold day in hell."

"If not the NCR, then the people in this region, of which you are one. Do you think the Legion will
care about one hateful old man squatting in the burning remains of what used to be outer New
Vegas? You'll be a bug under a boot. But put on your armor again, take up that Gauss rifle or a
Gatling laser, or whatever else you have, and show the NCR how it's done, driving the barbarians
out of what passes for civilization in the west these days. Even if you're just killing their enemies,
they'll know to fear the reputation of the Enclave again."

"And who the fuck are you to think you can command the Enclave?"

"Unlike you, old-timer, I'm an active-duty soldier in the United States Army. Serial number E-D-E-
N-1-9-1-9-3-6. Here on long-range recon, the last survivor from a team of six out of Adams Air
Force Base."

"That's a likely story, and probably one that Gannon Junior helped you dream up. Prove it."

"How? Do you want me to go digging around in my arm with a knife to find my chip or what?
Because I guess I can do that, but only if we get to hunt around for yours first." She sighed. "Look, I
don't want to be here in the middle of the desert, thousands of miles away from the best hope for this
country. I have to get back to make my report, and I'd rather there not be a horde of crazy tribals
playing dress-up between me and home."

His voice dropped, trembling with emotion. "But the NCR…have you seen Navarro, what they did
to us there?"

Megan felt like someone else was speaking through her and her tongue stumbled through the words,
"I…have been to Navarro. There was something…I…we were supposed to retrieve there. We were
successful." She shook her head, trying to throw off the hijacking ghost. "The details of my mission
are need-to-know, of course, and I'd appreciate you not mentioning it to the others – I'm not sure
how committed they are to the Enclave anymore. But the destruction was awful. I'm sorry, soldier.
But, even so, I'd rather let the NCR build useful infrastructure for another ten years or so than see the
Legion bring California back to the Stone Age. That's why we need you all to fight for us."

"Alright, girl. Fine. I'll head to the bunker when you say the word. We'll give them Hell."

She nodded, and stood, gesturing to Arcade to follow her, leaving Moreno pensive and silent on his
couch. Once the front door closed behind her, she dropped to her knees and held her head, trying to
tap into the memories she had brushed against inside, but they were gone. She growled with
frustration.
"Megan! Are you okay?"

"Yeah." She stood up, still thinking, and continued walking. "I was starting to remember back there, but I cut it off to stay on track. Now it's gone."

"So…that wasn't all lies." There was a strange look on his face now. She almost thought it was fear.

"No, it wasn't. It was a real and honest answer to his question, but I don't know where it came from. Have you ever heard of Adams Air Force base?"

"Yes. It was just outside of what used to be America's capital – Washington, D.C. That's hundreds of miles south of Maine, by the way."

"Interesting. Maybe I should go there first, then."

He looked at her for a long moment, before sighing and dropping his gaze. "Maybe."

"Let's go home. Tomorrow's going to be a long day, and I told Stephen I'd babysit again tonight."
There were two old friends waiting for the Courier at the Old Mormon Fort when they returned there in the late afternoon - a woman in a familiar hooded robe speaking with one of the Followers scientists and a little bot hovering loyally around her head.

Looking happier than Arcade had seen her in weeks, Megan whistled a short, three-note tune and summoned the robot to her side, where it bobbed and beeped in apparent recognition.

"Aw...buddy...I missed you too. Was the Brotherhood kind to you? They cleaned you up really well And is that new armored plating? Very nice." She patted the little robot the way another person would pat a dog, beaming with satisfaction. "Look Arcade, he missed me!"

"It...he...never mind. I'm glad you're happy. If you need me, I'll be over there, away from the twitchy Eyebot." He withdrew to his workstation, making some notes on the patients he'd seen in Westside, glancing up now and then to the two women, who had climbed the ancient tower at the corner of the compound, and sat, perched on the rampart, heads bowed deep in conversation for well over an hour. By the time they descended and walked toward his tent, Veronica's arm wrapped around her friend, it was almost dark.

Alternately eating and offering a bottle to Adam, who seemed to have grown weaker even since the morning, Megan interrogated Veronica about what the Brotherhood had copied off of ED's hard-drive, with April Martimer listening in closely.

"So, it's for sure from the East - not some relic from forty years ago?"

"Yes. It shows maintenance logs from as recently as five years ago, in both Chicago and DC. Along with a record of the Enclave's activities in the old capital, there's a missive generally addressed to possible survivors, along with some weapons and energy tech, with instructions to rejoin them if possible." Veronica shook her head. "The records describe an ongoing conflict with the Brotherhood of Steel in the old Capital. It's weird reading about them from the Enclave's perspective - it almost makes us seem like the bad guys."

Arcade couldn't restrain himself from muttering sarcastically, "Almost."

Ignoring him, the scribe continued, "We don't have the mojo or the means to send people there, but I kind of do want to go by myself someday - maybe there'd be more scope for my interests in the DC chapter. They sound less isolationist, and I'd like to see what they've done with the Pentagon. The Citadel, as they call it."

Megan looked up from the baby, eyes shining with eagerness, "Ooh, I want to go there too. Maybe we could travel together, Veronica."

Beside her, Arcade choked on his squirrel-on-a-stick, effectively derailing the conversation for a minute.
Giving her sputtering colleague an odd look, April addressed the Courier directly, "May we have a turn with the Eyebot now? If the Brotherhood has left us anything to find, that is..."

Veronica looked offended. "She asked us not to delete anything, and we haven't. It's all still there. I watched them strip it down." She handed Megan a small data-storage device, indicating that she should plug it in to her Pip-Boy. "You can have a copy, too."

Megan accepted the gift with thanks, wondering what exactly she would do with it. Giving ED a pat, she let out a longsuffering sigh. "Nobody wants me to have my robot for very long. But fine, April, take it."

A hour later, when the Courier lay in the bunk below, trying to settle the whimpering baby, Arcade whispered to her, "Do you really think making cross-country travel plans with Veronica is a good idea?"

She responded dully, "Maybe not? It just slipped out. Go ahead, Arcade, tell me I'm too stupid to live. I just want to leave this godforsaken place and get some breathing room. A long trip through the wilderness with a friend sounds like heaven right now. But you're probably right, as usual. Good night."

"I don't think you're stupid, I just think you're dangerously open and trusting and that you're bucking for death by firing squad."

"So...basically, I'm stupid? Unlike you, I can't live as a stranger to my friends for my entire life."

"You would tell Veronica that the reason you want to go to DC is to look up your old service record? Escort her to the Brotherhood, only to seek out the Enclave? Don't you understand that this can't end well, for either of you?"

"Well, I'd certainly tell her long before we left for the east coast. It wouldn't do to spring that on her mid-transit. I really don't know how she would take it...I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. Good night."

It look longer than expected to reach the rendezvous point the following morning and noon had come and gone before they spotted the Boomer's bivouac on the shore of Lake Mead. Their plan, they explained, was to tow the floating plane using long poles stuck out from the shore until they were as close as possible to their base, before hoisting it onto a specially-built wheeled platform by means of pulleys. As skeptical as she was about this mission, she was impressed by their resourcefulness.

Unfortunately, Jack's rebreather had not panned out as intended, but he reassured her somewhat by showing her a rope harness with a power-driven winch. He explained, "Whenever we feel you tugging - or whenever we get tired of waiting for your bloated body to surface - we can haul you up in less than ten seconds." He'd also found a tight-fitting divers mask that would allow her to see underwater.

Waiting for Loyal to inspect the ballasts one last time, the Courier stripped down to cut-offs and a tank-top, which was as naked as she wanted to get around all these men, picking gingerly across the beach on bare feet to poke at the murky water, feeling the first stirrings of fear for what lay ahead. About ten yards away, there was a pile of dead lake-lurks the Boomers had taken care of earlier in the day, but this didn't really make her feel better - where there were four monsters to kill, there were doubtless more left alive, hidden somewhere in the depths. She made certain of the sheathed knife strapped to her right thigh, but had no great confidence in its efficacy against a water-monster in its
Veronica was getting chummy with the engineers, showing off some of her technical expertise. Megan suspected that she was buying herself a ticket to the front row of their salvage operation and felt her first real flash of optimism for the airplane's chances of flying. Arcade glared at the Boomers, muttering under his breath to her, "You don't have to do this, you know. Let them risk one of their own for their pet project."

"I said I'd do it, and I will, Arcade. This is how I pay for their assistance. It won't be so bad."

Finally, when all the preparations were complete, she stepped up to the edge, a ballast under her left arm and a large rock in the other hand, Pip-Boy light already engaged. She turned to Veronica, who'd volunteered to man the winch, speaking nasally under the mask: "Are you going to give me plenty of slack? I'll be sinking pretty fast."

"Yep, yep."

Double-checking the marker on her Pip-Boy one last time and hyperventilating briefly to lower her carbon dioxide levels, she grabbed a lungful of air, sprang forward, and dove into the water, plunging down the steep incline of the lake-bottom, using her legs to propel herself horizontally and allowing the rock to pull her down. Swimming - or controlled sinking - wasn't that bad, she decided, although she shivered as the water grew colder and darker around her. Her eardrums felt ready to burst almost immediately, but she was able to depressurize them with a method Arcade had shown her. She couldn't, however, do anything about her bursting chest and fear-quick heartbeat. Hitting a level plateau, she took a few sluggish steps through the silty mire, spotting the unmistakable shape of the airplane just ahead, illumined by the greenish light from her Pip-Boy.

At least the B-29 appeared to be in one piece, she thought, noticing that it lay on its belly, one wing tilted upward and the other slightly buried in sand, gravel, and mud. Without hesitation, she dropped the rock and strapped the ballast to the underside of the accessible wing, doing the diligence of double-checking the buckles before she tugged on the rope and kicked off the bottom. As fast as she rose, the surface seemed much too far away, and she had to quash the crazy urge to take a breath before her head was clear of the water.

Surfacing was all splashing, spluttering confusion as they pulled her in and let her crawl halfway out, hugging the warm gravel like it was her salvation and panting like a shipwreck victim. She'd barely recovered before something jostled her arm. It was the second ballast, wielded by an impatient Loyal. "Ready for round two? We don't have all day."

She groaned and spit some nasty-tasting water out. "Yeah. Give me one more minute." She sat up and took the ballast. "I'll take that down with me next time, but it's going to take at least two more dives, maybe more to get it attached. The other wing is half-buried."

Diving a second time, she made it to the plane quicker and secured the ballast carefully under her second rock, and held onto the wing to prevent the air in her lungs from dragging her upward. She dug for as long as she could before she had to surface, getting grit under her fingernails and scratching her hands on debris. The third dive was much the same, but she did succeed in hollowing out a sufficiently-large cave under the wing. Before she could retrieve the ballast and lay it in place, however, a frightening swarm of black dots on her vision and a wash of giddiness drove her to abandon the task abruptly.

Recovery took longer this time, and there was a minute where she was totally insensible of the others around her, caring only for the wonder of breathing and the relative warmth of the beach. Some busybody was unwilling to let her rest, however, and made her roll over and sit up.
"Your nose is bleeding. Hold your head up and pinch it." Arcade looked as mad as he ever did, and kept glaring at Loyal as if daring him to say something. "Rest longer this time. I think you were close to losing consciousness underwater."

Twenty minutes later, she was ready for her fourth and final dive. As she jumped off, she felt something - a shell or a sharp rock - cut into her right heel. It stung at first, but her feet were soon so numb with cold that it didn't affect her ability to kick. Reaching the plane, noticing little swirls of blood staining the water by her feet, black in the green light, she retrieved the ballast and secured it in place, admiring the completed job briefly before tugging confidently on the rope.

She realized at once that something was wrong as her lifeline to the surface came loose in her hand, frayed and cut at the end - probably related to the *something* that had just moved between her and the surface, a man-sized creature with freakishly long limbs, likely attracted by the trickle of blood in the water. She fumbled for the knife on her thigh and jumped up toward the surface - toward the creature, terrified but determined. A stunning, forceful push accompanied by a screeching sound came rippling through the water at her, momentarily scrambling her senses and causing her to gasp reflexively, allowing lake-water into her lungs and losing what air she had left.

She had only just time to think, "This is what drowning feels like," before an iron-grip seized her upper left arm and she was face-to-face with a lake-lurk. Even though no part of her felt strong or focused, her right arm did its best, almost of its own accord, and drove the knife - which she fortunately hadn't dropped after the sonic attack - into the monstrous turtle's eye. She felt her body beginning to shut down, and tried feebly to kick anyway. It was no good - even if she hadn't been deprived of oxygen, she was still stuck in a heavy creature's death-grip - and she began to sink. Looking up one last time to the surface, she just missed getting tapped by a large hammer with a wicked claw, which plunked slowly past her, trailing a rope. Getting it in her hand somehow, she shoved the hooked claw under the rope strap across her chest and pulled once. That was all she could do and the last thing she remembered for a while before darkness took over.

Coming back to the surface of consciousness wasn't all that pleasant, and she resisted it for a while, appreciating the dry land under her side, but wanting to die from the pounding in her head and the choking sogginess of her lungs.

"Is she alive?" That was Veronica, her high, fearful voice stabbing through her head.

"Yes. Shh, give her space." Arcade sounded calm. That was good.

Another voice, gravelly and businesslike. "Ask her if both ballasts are in place. We need to get going before sundown."

Arcade swore at Loyal, using words that Megan had never heard him use. This shocked her so much that she opened her eyes and put out a hand to restrain him.

"S'okay...tell'm...iz...done." Coughing, she turned her head and vomited what felt like a quart of water. "Ugh...lake-lurk water." Teeth chattering, she reprimanded him, "D-don't c-curse, Arcade. I'ts b-beneath you."

"What? You are literally the most foul-mouthed person I'm on speaking terms with." While he spoke, his voice thick with relief, he pulled off her clammy top and replaced it with a dry shirt, doing the same with her shorts while Veronica held a blanket up for privacy. He wrapped her up, making her sit, and held some hot, bitter tea to her lips.

"Ew, that's nasty stuff. I d-didn't say it was beneath me." She tried to smile, but coughed instead, making her head feel like it was going to split open. "My head..."
"The tea has willow-bark in it and should help a little. If you can keep it down, I'll give you some acetaminophin later." He handed her the tea, and began to bandage the cuts on her foot and arm.

She took the cup and made herself drink it, slowly, appreciating how it warmed her from the inside. "How close was that? Did I lose any brain cells?"

"Once we got you out, it took about thirty seconds to get you breathing again. It was the longest thirty seconds I can remember, but a couple minutes without oxygen isn't that significant for brain damage. It's not something to make a habit out of, either."

"Hm. Well, thank you. That was a good idea with the hammer, too."

"You're welcome. Don't do that again. And the hammer was all Veronica. She reacts quickly in an emergency."

They both watched the scribe as she observed the controlled surfacing of the airplane, gesticulating and conversing with Loyal, who was nodding appreciatively.

"I think Veronica might be going to Nellis for a while," Megan commented. "She's been fascinated with them - and other factions in general - since I first met her. And if the Brotherhood does catch wind of it...well, the Boomers don't have much to fear from them." She cocked her head and looked at Arcade questioningly. "When we get back to Freeside, I'm going to seek an audience with the King, see if I can curry enough favor with him to work out some of the kinks between them and the NCR in Freeside, to lend to stability in the community, particularly in a siege situation. Rex's care will probably take us to Jacobstown. Would you want to come, or do you trust me to talk to Dr. Henry by myself?"

"I'd like to come, if you can put up with me. I think Henry will be willing, unless you catch him at a bad point in his research, in which case my skills might come in handy. I don't particularly enjoy his company, but he does set himself some interesting problems to solve."

Megan nodded, then laid back on her blanket and closed her eyes. "Pre'y tired now. Think we should leave soon. Can you go ask Veronica what she's going to do, please?"

When Veronica did return, grinning widely, she had to nudge the Courier awake to deliver her message, "Hey, I'm going with them. Arcade's getting a two-way radio from Jack that you can use to coordinate with Mother Pearl about the battle. He says to remind you that it'll take a couple of days for their ground troops to get into position, but that the plane will be able to get there in under an hour."

Without opening her eyes, she responded, as heartily as she could manage, "Alright, have fun. Do you really think it can work, then?"

"Oh, anything's possible. They have the original blueprints and the means to fabricate almost any part they want. They've even trained on flight simulators with vintage aircraft like this one. They're fascinating, resourceful people. I'm quite looking forward to this."

"With you on the case, I'm actually feeling hopeful. Help me up, please?"

Veronica pulled her up and wrapped her in a gentle hug. "You're going to be okay, you know? You're the strongest person I know."

She reciprocated the gesture, comforted by the touch. "I wish that were true." Casually, as if as an afterthought, she added, "Oh, hey, tell the Boomers they won't be the only thing in the sky. There'll be at least one vertibird on the scene that they need to work around...and more if Kimball mobilizes
the NCR's limited air force."

"Sure. Uh...whose is the other one, then?"

Megan glanced at Arcade, who was still talking to Jack, presumably about the radio. "Some Enclave remnants I've recruited. They'll be dropping what explosives they have on the main force of the Legion, then deploying a handful of people in power armor on the ground."

Veronica's eyes grew big. "Does the NCR know about this?"

"Not yet. I'm hoping 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' will be a compelling enough reason to accept their help without questioning it, and not pursue them after the battle. I...uh...will probably be wearing an extra set of their armor too, so I really hope the negotiation goes well."

She looked at her with an expression of dumbfounded dread, "You...how...what have you gotten yourself into, Megan? Don't tell any of my brothers and sisters about this. Maybe you should just avoid the bunker from now on."

Not wanting to meet her gaze, she turned away, looking around for the discarded pieces of her mismatched armor. "It's a long story, Veronica. Just know that while I don't belong to any faction, I won't hesitate to throw any available resource against the Legion."

"But...the Enclave...how did you even know where to find them? We thought they were gone. Wiped out decades ago." The scribe now sounded suspicious and almost hostile.

Megan shook her head. "I can't tell you that. Please, just trust me on this."

"Does he know? Does he trust you?" Veronica jerked her head in Arcade's direction. "I wouldn't have thought a Follower would put up with someone who was cozy with the Enclave, especially if he dislikes the Brotherhood so much."

This was getting uncomfortably close to dangerous territory, and Megan hastened to deflect. "Arcade has known me for longer than you have. He knows I'm not some fascist. I'm just an eminently practical mercenary whose main currency right now is 'opposing the Legion.'"

Veronica looked only slightly mollified. "Yeah...okay. I'm going to stop trying to convince Hardin to since any people to the Dam, though. I guess you understand why," She stalked away, shaking her head, just as Arcade returned to the Courier's side.

He helped her put her armor back on, and must have noticed that she looked upset. "What was that? Did you tell Veronica...something?"

"Just that the Enclave would be joining in at the Dam. She didn't take it well."

"No."

She growled and rubbed her eyes, which were teary with frustration and weariness. "This is all so fucking complicated."

"It is. Most things in life are, for those who bother to notice."

"I'm too tired to make it to Freeside tonight. Can we go to Raul's shack, instead? It's maybe half as far." The pain in her head made her voice sound pitiful and whiny.

"Assuming you can lead the way, let's go."
Thankfully, the Courier had remembered to set a marker for the shack on a previous visit, and navigation was a matter of following the Pip-Boy blindly, while Arcade kept watch for hostile people or animals, making conversation to keep his friend alert and awake.

"So, you can swim. I wonder where you learned? Almost no one around here swims voluntarily, obviously, what with the radiation and the creatures."

"Vault diving team? Routine Enclave training? I don't know. Today was one of those times when my intense self-confidence was actually justified. That lake-lurk sure threw a wrench in, though." She yawned, but broke off with a cough. "Do you know, I haven't gotten any closer to figuring out who Ulysses is? Benny could tell me nothing before he died and seemed puzzled by the question...or as puzzled as anybody can be with a bullet in the gut. House didn't have anything to add, either. It's like, whatever game that other courier was playing, it was irrelevant to House's and Benny's play."

"Maybe he just knew it was dangerous."

"Possibly, but there's something else - something Veronica told me last night. The Brotherhood pulled a radio message from ED's files - just a looped, three-second audio clip of a man's voice saying "Courier Six," accompanied by coordinates for a location several days journey to the northwest. Well, Veronica had a hunch, and checked transmissions received by my Pip-Boy and found the same message and information. It had been there for months, but I didn't know to access either copy. There's a lot I don't know how to use on this device, actually, and ED isn't all that good about volunteering to play audio files without specific prompts."

"That sounds a lot like a trap to me. That's why I'm sure you're going to want to check it out, sooner or later."

She seemed unperturbed by his jibe, "Of course, certainly before I go east. I want to look at some maps of southern California first, find out where I'm going. What really bothers me, though, is that someone - Ulysses or another person - is actively pursuing me, for reasons of their own, and I have no fucking clue why. Additionally, they probably don't know, don't believe, or don't care that I don't remember my past."

"What do you think they want?"

"I think someone wants to punish me - to kill me, if that's the solution that suggests itself, but preferably to toy with me a little before killing me. I want to talk to them, find out what I did, and try to plead my case if I have one."

"I suppose ignoring his summons is out of the question?"

"It is for me." She looked almost serene as she said this, and Arcade let the subject drop, even though he felt an unnamed dread for what lay for his friend at the end of that road.

She tripped over a rock in the growing darkness and almost fell. "Not much farther," she murmured. "Just around this hill...unless I made a mistake when I set this location in my map...it's hard when I can't read n' write, y'know..."

Sure enough, upon rounding the low elevation, they drew near to a scrubby little farm, with a few rows of young maize within a fence and a half-grown Brahmin calf browsing on the nearby brush. A ghoul dressed in boots, faded blue jeans, and a leather jacket sat smoking on the porch of a small, but well-constructed hut.

Megan called out to him, "Hola, Raúl. ¿Cómo estás? ¿Podemos dormir aquí esta noche, por favor?"
Tengo mucho cansada porque los 'lake-lurks' casi me han comido hoy.

He stood up, flipping his cigarette butt away, and walked toward them, limping a little. "Gracias a Dios, mija. Han pasado muchas semanas desde que te vi. Pensé...no es importante lo que pensaba. Estoy feliz porque estás viva. ¿Quien es este?" He gestured to Arcade.

"Se llama Arcade Gannon." She smiled sheepishly at the doctor. "Sorry, Arcade. This is Raul Tejada." She yawned again, swaying a little on the spot. "Excuse me, guys. If it's okay, Raul, I'm going to go to sleep right now. I'm 'bout beat..."

"Sí, sí...do you want dinner first? I have corn and beans, and don't mind sharing my meager supplies with voracious mercenaries."

She smiled and shook her head, disappearing into the house and leaving the two men standing outside.

Arcade felt awkward and apologetic. "She's very tired. And you don't need to share your food with us - we brought some, and don't want to impose."

"Eh, I complain because that's what I do, but I don't really mind. At least not for the boss and her friends." The old ghoul looked at him critically. "I suppose you're that doctor she wasn't talking you to the last time I saw her?"

"That's me."

"Hmph. Well, come on in. She better not have taken my bed..."

They ate spicy beans on crispy corn tortillas while the Courier slept, dead to the world, on the floor in a dark corner of the one-room house.

Wanting to say something, Arcade commented approvingly, "I'm really impressed at how much Spanish you've taught her in such a short time. I knew she had a good ear for languages, but you must be an excellent teacher."

Raul laughed. "No, hombre, I can't take credit for that one. She already knew it - somehow - and only needed a little coaxing to get it out. 'Spect she learned it somewhere before that bastard shot her. It's nice. I haven't met too many people who still speak my old language, even if she does pronounce it like a gringo who took a few years in high school." Fetching a dusty bottle down from his pantry, he poured himself a shot of tequila and offered one to Arcade, who shook his head. "Where'd Boone get to? I liked that guy."

"They had a falling out." he answered shortly. "Ask her about it if you want, but be aware it's a sensitive subject. And...please don't give her any alcohol. She has a problem with it."

"Hm. The girl I know drinks a lot, sure, but doesn't need a nursemaid."

"You haven't been around for the last couple of months. It's been bad."

"Alright doc, whatever you say." Raul sounded unconvinced. Conversation died away and, soon after, both men went to bed.

Though her body was safe and at rest, the Courier's mind was far away, once more walking on the bottom of the lake, looking for a plane that seemed to be missing. On and on, she walked, finding nothing and no one, only formless shapes at the edge of her light. She felt lonely, but not particularly scared this time.
I wish I had known that I could breathe water before, she thought to herself. It wasn't easy - it felt oppressive and uncomfortable to take into her lungs, but it was obviously working...And thank goodness I'm wearing boots this time. The surface under her feet had slowly transitioned from a plain of silt and gravel to a minefield of sharp rocks and sticks that shifted and crunched under her heavy soles. An accidental kick, and a round stone - no, not a stone - rolled over and grinned at her, baring white teeth under a charred pate. Not rocks, then, bones. An underwater graveyard. But how did they get here...

Megan began to question whether continuing forward was wise. The plane wasn't here, the skeletons were disturbing, and even the ballast she carried felt wrong - rather than a white, bulky package of folded canvass and compressed gas charges, it had somehow transformed into a thin, black box with buttons and a darkened display. Turning it over, she found an embossed stamp displaying the stars and stripes of Pre-War America. Confused, but curious, she decided to take it back to show Arcade. He could tell her what it was and Loyal would give her the real ballast.

She had only just turned back, however, when the surface high above brightened abruptly to the glorious orange of sunset, and the water became warmer and warmer...and soon felt uncomfortably hot. Unable to escape the heat all around, she covered her face, and stood hunched over, not noticing that her feet were sinking until she was stuck up to her knees in the mud. The water boiled down, steaming away until only cracked moonscape remained, with baked fish and putrid algae strewn amongst the bones. It didn't hurt as much as she would have thought, but her exposed skin looked red and scaly, like that of some ghouls. And still the air grew hotter, as the sun grew to fill the entire sky, forcing her to narrow her eyes to slits against the brightness.

"Megan, what have you done?" A familiar voice called out from behind her. Turning her head and trunk to see, as her legs were stuck fast, she saw Arcade, his hair and lab coat charred from the heat, his expression horrified.

"Nothing! It just got too hot. Help me, please! We need to get out of here..."

"Nothing? It was your package that did this." He gestured to the black box she still held. "Don't tell me you didn't know what it was. You're smarter than that."

She felt scared and angry. "Forget the package! I'm stuck and about to catch on fire. Help me!"

"No, there's only one thing to do with mass-murderers. Good-bye, Courier." He raised his plasma pistol and fired so quickly that she didn't have time for another breath before she became goo from the chin down, leaving only her helpless, dying head staring up at the hellish sky, skin baking and eyes unable to close...

"Agh!" Back in the shack, Megan awoke, feeling far too hot in her bedroll, discovering that the mid-morning sun from the one window had found her sleeping place, baking her while she slept. She crawled out, shaking a little and feeling sick at the memory of being melted.

"Morning! Bad dream? I thought those were getting better." Arcade, who'd been reading by the window, closed his book, and looked down at her with an expression of interested concern.

"Ah...they are. This one was new."

"What happened?"

"Oh, just your run-of-the-mill can't breathe, can't move nightmare. Thought I was underwater again. Boring stuff." She found her canteen and gulped it thirstily, despite a sore throat and a dull ache in her head, flopping into a seat across from the doctor..
Her was looking at her oddly. "It doesn't matter in this case, but you should know that I can tell when you're lying outright. Your tells are as plain as the nose on your face. It's why you're so very bad at poker."

She grimaced. "I do okay when I play with strangers. Alright. I was in the lake, but then there were bones, and then I burned up the world and you executed me. Happy?" She laid her head on her arms and tried to curb her irritation, which seemed ready to snap.

She flinched when he stood up and touched her forehead. He withdrew his hand and sat back down, saying authoritatively, "You're a little feverish and should probably just go back to bed." He added, more gently, "I wouldn't hurt you, you know, no matter what you'd done."

She didn't say anything to this, but pushed herself back up, mumbling without looking up, "I'm going to step outside for a minute, and then I'll get some more rest. Sorry I snapped at you. Everything hurts a little and that was an awful dream." Pulling on her boots, she went outside, joints feeling oddly loose and head feeling too heavy, with a steady pressure behind her sinuses. After a quick stop at Raul's outhouse, she went and stood next to Raul, who was leaning against a large stock tank under his windmill, watching some small fish move around beneath the surface.

"Hey."
"Hey chica."

"Thanks for letting us stay here. We might have to stay another night. I don't feel very good."

"It's fine. I try to hide it, but I like company. Stay as long as you want. Did you want to tell me what happened? I didn't need that busybody doctor friend of yours to tell me that you'd had some trouble."

She let out a shaky breath. "Fine. Can we sit, in the shade? My legs feel like soggy bread."

He sat silently, smoking, while she lay on the grey, weathered boards of his porch, eyes closed, telling him about Boone, the Legion camp, the chems...everything. When she'd talked herself into silence, she felt absolutely exhausted.

When he finally responded, his voice was dark, "The men who hurt you - they're dead?"

"They are. There's a lot more Legion where they came from though. That's why I have to do everything I can to fight them now. Boone and I would get along really well now if I hadn't sabotaged that. He always thought I was too soft - well, I'm not so soft anymore."

"I'm so sorry, mija."

"Thanks. Me too. It's like it's made another irreparable break in my life - there was that stranger who was me before-Benny, naive, happy me before-Cottonwood, and now there's just me. What's left of that person, anyway."

"You're still you - the same person who saved an old ghoul for no better reason than curiosity and kindness - you've just retreated a little. I know you need rest, but I just want to add my two cents - you might think that anger and callousness make you stronger, just like the chems made it harder for you to feel pain, but they really don't. Your strength is and has always been your willingness to help people, and to put their needs before your own. I hope that part of you is still there, because kindness is the only good thing left in this world. Anyway, up you go." With an effort, the creaky old cowboy pulled her up and hugged her, carefully and slowly. "Let's get you inside. You can have the bed if you promise to vacate it before nighttime. My old bones cannot take the floor."
With some acetaminophen, Megan slept fitfully for several more hours, the sound of forks finally awakening her to find the shack mostly dark, except for a lantern on the table. She dragged herself over and sat in the unoccupied chair, blinking sleepily at her friends.

Raul grinned at her. "What do you want to eat? There's beans., beans, or, if you're feeling adventuresome, more beans. I'm saving the last of the corn to make mole-rat tamales tomorrow."

She gulped queasily at the thought, and shook her head. "Just some water, please."

Arcade shook his head and handed her a bottle of a familiar-smelling drink. "Drink this, first. And nibble on a few beans if you can manage them."

She obediently drank the salty fruit juice and ate a few bites of beans before she laid the spoon down and pushed her plate away, stomach rumbling uneasily. Her throat didn't hurt as much as before, but she still didn't feel much like eating.

After dinner, while Raul cleaned up, the doctor sat her down and checked her over. "Temperature still elevated, but not too high. Radaway wouldn't be a bad idea, but I'd rather not kick your immune system while it's down. It can wait. Your throat's red and swollen and you sound slightly congested. Let me listen to those lungs..." She tensed while he pressed the cold knob of the stethoscope against the bare skin on her chest and back. "Okay. My diagnosis: opportunistic infection from the bacteria in the lake-water, aggravated by a poor physical beginning state. I can't tell if it's got a foothold in your lungs, but let's hope not."

She mumbled, "I'll show you 'a poor physical state','' but there was no venom in it, only weariness.

He shrugged. "You're tired, driving yourself hard, and you haven't fully recovered from the wringer you put yourself through last month. This is that bill coming due, and it could be worse. Cheer up! My recommendation: in the short-term, rest, fluids, and antibiotics if the fever persists or rises; in the long-term, gain more weight and get more rest. Avoid swimming in lakes." He cleared his throat, and went on, "Since it's hard to motivate you for your own sake, I will tell you - it's going to be hard for your to wear any kind of power armor the way you are right now. Good rule of thumb is that you need to weigh at least three times what your armor does, or it becomes hard to control, let alone carry around in between battles. My dad's Tesla armor is about 40 pounds, and it's on the light side of the spectrum. You aren't much more than 100 right now."

Chastened, she replied, "Thanks, Arcade. I'll try." She shivered. "Can I go lie down now?"

"Yes. Would you like me to come read to you for a little bit? We haven't been doing much of that lately."

"Sure, that'd be nice. Doesn't really matter what it is. I'll be asleep within a few pages, so it might as well be Kant or something else you like."

When she was comfortable, he obliged, picking up where he'd left off in the dense and dusty tome on universal ethics, "Since men in their endeavors do not act like animals merely according to instinct, nor like rational citizens of the world according to an agreed plan, no planned history seems to be possible (as in the case of bees and beavers). It is hard to suppress a certain disgust when contemplating men's action upon the world stage. For one finds, in spite of apparent wisdom in detail that everything, taken as a whole, is interwoven with stupidity, childish vanity, often with childish viciousness and destructiveness. In the end, one does not know what kind of conception one should have of our species which is so conceited about its superior qualities..."

Megan interrupted sleepily. "Hey! I understood that, sort of. He thinks men - people - are horrible,
random, short-sighted marauders, alone or in a group. He's right. Skip to the end: what's the answer?"

Arcade tried to distill an answer into something she would understand, "Kant saw potential in people ruled by the right kind of government. He thought reason would bring individuals - and thus society - to the conclusion that whatever principle they acted by, they needed to desire that principle applied to all people at all times, with no exceptions. Don't lie for gain if you'd prefer to hear only truth. Don't steal unless you want to live in a world where everybody steals. If everyone acted in accordance with moral duties all the time, and nurtured educated good intentions, the result would be peace."

"Ah, that's no good." She sounded disappointed. "The strong and powerful are always going to prefer a world that keeps them at the top. They're not going to subject themselves to standards like that if they don't have to."

"Not if they don't have to, no. His theory assumes a large, functional society holding its members in check through a combination of social pressure and threats. It's actually not too far off from Christian ethics - the Golden Rule and all that - but sets human reason and government in the place of God for authority."

"If you ask me, the people who actually follow that rule are the first ones to get shot or crucified when other people decide that rules are for chumps."

"Is that a good reason not to be a chump?" He wasn't being sarcastic, but was genuinely curious about her answer.

"It is if you actually want to survive, not end up dead or someone's slave. Even if it doesn't come to that, I think selfish people take advantage of unselfish people, taking all they have to give and asking for more. You're a Follower. Don't you think that's true?" She was wide awake now, interested and engaged despite the flush of fever in her cheeks.

"It's true," he agreed quietly. "But I'd still rather die as a good person than live as a bad one. I still believe in the Followers' work. Time for bed now, okay?"

She grumbled, rolling over so he could barely hear her, "Why not just do what all of us mediocre folk do - some good and some bad, a few pings on our conscience...and voila...normal human life..."

"Yes, because yours is the epitome of normal life," he wanted to fire back, but left her to sleep instead.

"Hi, Raul. How are you? Can we sleep here tonight, please? I am very tired because the lake-lurks have almost eaten me today."

"Thank God, honey. It's been many weeks since I saw you. I thought...it's not important what I was thinking. I'm happy because you're alive. Who is this?"
Christmas in February

*Author's Note: At the advice of another author, I've decided to tag this work with a 'Major Character Death' warning, so be prepared. I have finally drawn up an rough outline for the remaining content, and expect there to be about 25 chapters + an epilogue, so perhaps 40k-50k words to go. The epilogue will allow me to transition swiftly into a shorter sequel that includes The Divide and the Sierra Madre, and (if I'm still writing after that) then there'll be a third work set in and around Boston beginning in the mid-2080s.*

After sleeping another sixteen hours, Megan felt almost normal, if a little washed out - well enough, at any rate, to help Raul in butchering and slow-roasting two mole-rats worth of meat for tamales, a dish that was unfamiliar to her.

"So, you make a sort of dough with the ground maize...and then cook it in husks with the spiced meat?" The Courier wasn't picky - and indeed, she was beginning to feel like she could eat again - but this sounded peculiar to her.

"Just like mi madre used to make, every Christmas. Only back then we used pork, beef, or chicken, not mole-rat. You don't eat the husks - they're just a convenient shell to help the tamales keep their shape and lock the juice and flavors in."

"Hm. It's not Christmas. I think it's the middle of February." She still tired easily, and now sat at the table, grinding corn using a little hand-mill in between frequent breaks.

"You can eat tamales at any time. They just taste better at the holidays." Raul's cloudy eyes seemed far away as he rinsed and set the husks to soak.

"I was curious about something, Raul. Did you ever ride a horse when you were...before the War?" She loved hearing Raul talk about his pre-war life, but seldom asked, knowing it made him sad. As long as he'd brought it up, though...

"When I was human, you mean? Yes, I did. My family owned two of them and used them to drive the stock from pasture to pasture. I haven't seen a horse for more than 150 years - the few that I saw born after the bombs fell came out all wrong, too many legs, organs on the outside. That sort of thing. They didn't adapt like other animals did."

"Too bad. I've seen pictures - they were beautiful animals." She thought for a moment. "And your Brahmin - they only had one head, right?"

"Our vacas, cows, had one head, yes. It made delivering a calf a lot easier than it is now." He checked the heat in his wood-fired oven, and nodded with satisfaction. "Another hour and we'll shred the meat for the tamales. Where's the doctor disappear to this morning?"

"He said this was a good area for collecting medicinal herbs, so he went out to gather some."

Raul snorted. "This is no place for a city-dweller in a lab coat to go wandering around."

"Arcade really can take care of himself. He's much more capable in a fight than he looks."
"He would have to be," Raul muttered. "I wish you still had a soldier watching your back."

"You and me both, but I have no one to blame for that except myself. I hope he's okay, wherever he is..."

At that very moment, many miles away in Utah, the former NCR sniper was reluctantly accompanying a young tribal, a man with the unlikely name of Follows Chalk, sparing only a regretful glance for the fallen caravan hands behind him. The White Legs had struck hard and fast, and only his relatively high-quality armor and honed instincts had spared him the same fate as his companions. While he had never intended to betray or abandon Jed and the others, their deaths did make his personal mission simpler. He wouldn't have to slip away or make some excuse in order to carry out his self-appointed duty.

Once he had assured himself beyond a doubt that the legendary Burned Man was indeed the infamous Joshua Graham, the Malpais Legate wouldn't live out the day. First Recon would get their target after all. And then for Caesar, whose assassination would make a fitting end to the sniper's career and, most likely, his life. It was with the greatest relief that he had set upon this course of action, and he now felt like he was following a path beyond his choosing or control. It would be a good death.

With no-one and nothing left except ghosts, regrets, and vengeance, this was what passed for a vacation for Craig Boone.

"These are really good, Raul! Your mother would be proud of you." With Arcade returned from his foraging expedition, the three of them were enjoying a hearty repast of tamales. She had personally eaten three of them and was eying a fourth, but wasn't sure if her shrunken stomach could handle it.

Arcade agreed. "Yes. I like the way you've charred the peppers before added them to the meat mixture. It adds a nice, smoky flavor."

"Glad you both like them." The elderly ghoul seemed almost shy at the praise. "Merry Christmas, I guess. *Feliz Navidad*. Since I didn't have anybody to celebrate with on the holiday and spent the last several years as a prisoner of an insane mutant, I've really missed this sort of thing."

"I'm sorry I didn't get you anything, Raul. Boone and I were holed up Novac over Christmas and he gave me a gun. The same gun I'm using now, actually - he thought that I'd do well with a shotgun, and he was absolutely right. I'd forgotten that people give gifts to mark the day and I didn't buy a present for anybody." Her face fell with regret.

"It's alright, *mija*. You sprung me from captivity. Can't top that with a sweater or a novelty coffee mug. Though, on that note, remind me later - I do have something for you."

She beamed happily. "A coffee mug? Any coffee to go with? I'd love to pick up a new vice that won't kill me."

"You'll see." Turning idly to the doctor, the ghoul asked, "What about you, Gannon? Any family traditions you'd care to share about? Did you used to decorate a Christmas cactus or anything?"

"Er, well, no... my parents were Jewish, so what holidays we bothered to observe were quite different." He looked pensive. "There was one other family we knew on base that practiced. I remember going to a Seder service there when I was quite young. Reciting all these questions I didn't really understand."
Megan looked curiously at him. "I didn't know that, Arcade. I didn't think you were religious at all."

"Oh, I'm not. But, since tradition says one is Jewish if one's mother is, it's still technically a part of my identity, albeit one that I've never cared to examine. The old ways of dividing up the world by race and religion don't matter much anymore, and I don't feel any connection to Judaism's story."

Raul was nodding with understanding. "I don't think I've ever really believed in God either, but if you had grown up in my house, you would have been Catholic, for abuela's sake, anyway. Gone to mass once or twice a year, and occasionally to confession. It was a part of who we were as a family." He wrinkled his face, trying to recall something, "Bendiceme, Padre, porque he pecado. Han pasado doscientos años desde mi última confesión."* He laughed, sadly. "I suppose that's all over and done with now. I haven't seen anything but weird, faddish cults for a long time. Lot of doomsdayers made capital in the years right after the war, though."

This made them all a little somber and conversation lapsed for a minute, until Arcade broke the silence. "I've never heard the story of how you escaped," he remarked. "I've heard things about Black Mountain, of course, but don't know anything about what went on there."

"I've never heard the whole story either," Raul answered drily. "I only know the part where one crazy girl tore my door off its hinges and another one dragged me down the steep side of the mountain." They both looked to Megan expectantly, who looked a little embarrassed.

"It's not that great of a story, really. Mostly a testament to my foolhardy ways - mine and Veronica's fighting styles do not mesh, really. It's close range meets closer range and we're lucky I didn't get both of us killed. What happened was I left Boone at McCarran for a while, went solo for a while to pursue my revenge and meet Caesar, and finally went back to spring Veronica for a little jaunt in the wilderness..."

"What are we doing today, Megan?" Fresh from the confines of the Brotherhood bunker, Veronica was eager to discover new adventures with her fascinating new friend.

They had crossed the broken fence line of Hidden Valley, and began to ascend into the rocky foothills of Black Mountain. "The same thing we do every day, Veronica - try to save the world, one person at the time. Maybe get some cool loot, too. Bark scorpion at two o'clock!" Dispatching the overgrown arthropod with practiced ease, she addressed her companion with would-be nonchalance. "So, don't freak out...but I've got someone to introduce you to. Promise you won't go nuts."

She giggled. "That's a little worrisome. I promise. Who is it?"

"It's more of a what, I guess, but I've grown quite fond of it in recent weeks. You can come out now, ED!"

The little bot arose from the niche in the rock where it had been concealed, and beeped in recognition at its mistress's voice.

Megan beckoned him over and presented him proudly. "Veronica, meet ED."

The older woman eyed it uneasily. "Uh...that's cool and all, but why are you travelling with an Enclave Eyebot?"

"Because I need his help. Because I don't think he means any harm. Because he's awesome."

She circled ED, searching its surface for symbols and clues. "Where did you get it? I'm from California, and even I've never seen one outside of a laboratory."
"I fixed it up, ages ago, when I passed through Primm. The guy in charge of the Mojave Express, Johnson Nash, gave it to me as a reward for saving the town. Arcade has strong feelings about robots in general, and Eyebots in particular, so I left it there. Boone and I retrieved it a few weeks ago. Is it okay if it comes with us?"

"We-elllll...I'd rather hand it over to the other scribes to study. But I guess it doesn't bother me too much. I've got my eye on you, though, little bot." This last was addressed to ED, who only chirped agreeably, making Veronica smile. "Alright, it is pretty cute. For an instrument of the Enclave's nefarious purposes, anyway."

"What was the Enclave trying to do that was so bad, anyway? I haven't found anybody that would give me a straight answer on the subject, and I've learned not to sound too interested in them." She tried to sound merely curious, but her heart was pounding with anticipatory dread.

"Only unleash a 'purifying' plague with a modified form of the FEV virus, intended to kill everybody who was 'mutated' in some way - including ghouls and super-mutants, of course, but also humans who'd been exposed to a lot of radiation. It would have killed almost everybody except for them, the Brotherhood, and vault dwellers. Basically, people who lived in bunkers would have been okay, but most other people - and animals - would have died horribly, most of them without knowing what was happening to them."

"Jesus, that's terrible. Now I feel bad for being... curious about them. But even after the oil rig was destroyed and the threat was past, the NCR and the Brotherhood kept pursuing the survivors?"

"Well, yeah. It was before my time, but the Brotherhood leaders weren't about to let people like that get away, and the NCR was smart enough to work with us on the job... not that it meant anything a few years later. Even broken, they were still dangerous. Why, what would you have done?"

"I would have given the civilians at Navarro fair quarter. Other non-combatants too. Basically, what civilized people do after normal wars."

"It wasn't a normal war. They were fanatics. Murderers, a thousand times over. Terrorists, with the means and inclination to unleash a new apocalypse. Why are you acting as their advocate, anyway?" Veronica's tone had grown heated.

"No reason," she responded, a little too quickly. "As you pointed out, all of this happened long before we were born. I'm just trying to understand the causes and effects of the world as it is, and figure what I'll do if I ever have to make decisions that will affect thousands of people." Stopping a moment for air as the path sloped upward steeply, she countered, "You do realize that the NCR calls you guys the terrorists now, right?"

"We don't deserve it," Veronica said heavily. "We're not a potent force for good - I hate to admit it, but it's true - but we're not anywhere close to the same kind of bad as the Enclave was."

The Courier conceded the point. "I guess you're right. When I first woke up and was trying to figure these things out, I really thought the Brotherhood and the Enclave were two sides of the same coin, but I'm starting to appreciate the differences now."

The scribe looked at her with a flash of anger in her eyes, but only said, a little pityingly, "Sometimes it's like you're a space alien dropped in the middle of a war zone with only the vaguest instructions possible. Don't get me wrong - you're intuitive, capable, and kind - but you don't have the sense that God gave a bighorner. I hope you know better, but just in case: don't tell any other Brotherhood member you meet that you think we're basically the same as the Enclave."
"Don't worry, I won't." Changing the subject, she piped up again, "So, how do you feel about tracking down the source of that weird radio signal today? Some of those broadcasts sound like a cry for help, and I'd like to lend a hand if someone needs our assistance."

"Ooh... alright. We've lost patrols on Black Mountain and I'm a little apprehensive about all of the super-mutants and other abominations we might meet..."

Arcade interrupted irritably, "You introduced a Brotherhood scribe to your Eyebot and then asked multiple questions about the Enclave on the same day. I don't know why I'm surprised anymore, but you continue to alarm me with your lackadaisical approach to secrecy."

"Well, I can't believe you didn't tell me any specifics about what the Enclave actually did," she fumed back. "Seriously, that FEV thing is several orders of magnitude worse than the worst I suspected. Now that I've thought about it, I do understand why they didn't take any chances." She stopped, calmed herself, and shrugged. "Anyway, Veronica wouldn't hurt me. She's my friend."

Forgotten for the moment, Raul cleared his throat. "I... uh... don't have an educated opinion on the subject. But I didn't even know that we were on the brink of destruction forty years ago, so I'm glad that didn't happen. I also think I'm missing something here." He looked to Megan for an explanation.

"Ah. I forgot I never told you, Raul. Well... it's not something I would do now, but I used to be be in the Enclave. Before the amnesia, I mean. I would never annihilate you, Raul. Or hurt innocent people for no reason. That's not who I am. Anyway, do y'all want to hear this story or not?"

"What... were... those things?" The Courier gaped with horror at the blobby pink things that had attacked them, and tried to wipe their acidic saliva off of her armor with a handful of grass before it could eat through the ceramic. The horrid creatures had advanced on them as they circumscribed a small bomb crater, dragging themselves along on stubby, grotesque limbs of various shapes and sizes. A particularly awful feature of theirs was their long, whiplike tongue, extending almost two feet from a uncannily humanoid face.

"Centaurs. Chimerical FEV experiments. The super-mutants made them for watchdogs. Nasty, aren't they?"

"Ugh." Ignoring the clicking of her Geiger counter, she crept to the edge of the glowing crater and peered in. "Veronica, look. Brotherhood armor. One of your missing patrols?"

"Yes," she said sadly. "I think I know who they are... Paladins DeWitt and Turner. It's good to know what happened to them, but tragic that it had to end in this unspeakable place, and so close to home, too."

"Would you like me to retrieve their tags?" They had backed away from the crater, but Megan approached again, prepared to descend.

Veronica pulled her back. "God, no. That crater is hot. Now that we've cleared the centaurs, we can tell the other scouts about them - they can send someone down with the full protection of power armor to retrieve their gear and tags." As an afterthought, she added in a wondering tone of voice, "Thanks for offering, though."

Passing the crater by, they drew near to a chain link fence blocking the way through a narrow pass that opened to a winding mountain road. There was a gate, but it had a heavy padlock on it. A plank of wood leaned against the fence, with crude letters spelling out a message in bold, red strokes.
"Keep out. Very dangerous.' Well, that's not ambiguous, is it? I think I can tear through this chain, though, if you want to press on..."

"That won't be necessary, human." A deep, growling voice interrupted her as the bulky shape of a super-mutant wearing bombardier goggles shambled on up from the other side. "I locked the gate to protect unwary visitors, but I'm not going to prevent you if you have a death wish, especially if you mean to destroy my work. Give me a moment." He fished a key out of one of his pockets and undid the clasp with surprising delicacy, gesturing them through with a mock-courtly gesture.

Megan could only stare at the creature, but Veronica ventured a cautious comment, "Wow... you're... uh, friendly for a mutant."

His rough features twisted into a glare. "Keep saying things like that, and I won't be so friendly. Not every super-mutant is a brain-damaged brute. Many of us are just as intelligent as basic humans - and the rest don't really have any choice in the matter, do they?"

The Courier got over her shock and found her tongue, "Sorry, you're just the first mutant that hasn't immediately tried to kill us. We apologize for our rudeness. I'm Megan and this is Veronica."

"Neil. No offense taken... since you apologized. What are you doing here, humans? This place is very dangerous for your kind."

"We heard the broadcast and thought there was someone who needed rescuing."

He stared at her. "Yes... Tabitha, the nightkin in charge up there, kidnapped a ghoul mechanic a while back to repair her radio. He's certainly not staying there of his own accord."

"Are you Tabitha's gatekeeper, then?"

"No. I'm from Jacobstown, and came here to see what kind of community my brethren had established here, so close to the human settlements. All I want is to ameliorate the harm she does to mutants' reputation in the Mojave, but I've been unable to do anything substantial as yet."

"Do you have any recommendations for negotiating with her?"

He laughed, a deep, barking sound. "She's a nightkin, little girl. There's no accounting for sanity or logic when it comes to them. On one day, she might think you're her best friend because you presented her with a teddy bear; on another day, she might take it as a threat and tear your arms off. She's been particularly volatile since someone's malfunctioning stealth boy deactivated her Mr. Handy, Rhonda. I recommend turning back and leaving that poor ghoul to his fate."

"If we were going to attempt a rescue, what would you recommend?"

"Wait for cover of night, then sneak up the side of the mountain. The ghoul is being held in one of those buildings at the top - I'm not sure which. If you were to destroy some of the transmitting equipment while you were up there, it might end Tabitha's reign altogether." He hesitated. "You can stay in my shack until then, if you like. I don't mind the company. It gets lonely out here."

And so it happened that the Brotherhood scribe and the Courier spent a long day with a first-generation super-mutant, who shared stories about the Master's Army and his travels alone in the wasteland afterward. Even Veronica warmed to the conversation, and relaxed enough to ask several intelligent questions about the finer points of his history. A generous host, he shared his simple food with them and encouraged them to rest until after midnight, at which point he woke them.

"It's time, humans. Do you want to leave that bot here, or do you want to take it with you?"
"ED will come with us. He knows to be quiet."

"Very well. If you make it out alive, you can take refuge here until daylight, if you want. I'll do my best to deflect anyone who comes looking for you. Be careful."

"Thank you, Neil."

Leaving their bulky gear behind, they crept across the open space between the shack and the road and crouched in the ditch, listening for an alarm from the guards at the first checkpoint. Hearing nothing, they began to climb, stooped over, up the incline, with Veronica leading, using her enhanced strength to pull herself (and occasionally her companion) up the more difficult places. They crossed the spiraling road four times, each time holding their breath as they stole across the exposed surface, fearing the splutter of a minigun on every step. It was a difficult and nerve-wracking climb and the summit took almost two hours, by which point they were covered in sweat despite the chilly night air. The most direct route to the out-buildings was barred by a tall, barbwire fence, and they sidetracked 100 feet to the right before they found an opening, crawling until they reached the relative safety of a lean-to behind a wide, low building.

"It seems quiet up here," Megan whispered. "My Pip-Boy doesn't sense anything. Not that it's foolproof in that regard. Should we try this building first?"

The other woman's face looked pale and scared in the dim moonlight. "You first."

It turned out to be a storage building full of a hundred kinds of junk mixed in with some very valuable salvage. There was no one there, either prisoner or guard. Veronica weighed down her large pockets with some tools that caught her eye, including a wickedly-sharp pair of wire cutters. They were about to sneak out again when the scribe said aloud, "What's that there?"

The clawed, leggy machine she indicated had seen better days. The goofy lady's hat and crude lipstick that someone had applied to its metallic carapace did nothing to hide the fact that this Mr. Handy was broken. ED beeped sadly at the fate of its metallic cousin, then turned to the Courier with a questioning sort of warble.

"Yes, ED. This must be Rhonda. That nightkin's robot. Maybe if we fix it we could have a bargaining chip if this goes south. Let me take the chassis off and look at the mechanical components. Veronica, can you please try to get into the interface to check the programming?"

"I love to fix robots while I'm trespassing in mutant territory. It's like my favorite thing." Despite her grumbling, she obliged, using one of the many fission batteries lying around to deliver power to the small screen which Megan had exposed by opening the shell. They both worked in anxious silence for some time, glancing up every now and then at the door, expecting company.

Finally, Megan shook her head, replaced the last part she'd been examining - a large conductor - and reattached the wires. "There's nothing wrong here. All of the parts look like they've been replaced recently by someone who knew what they were doing. Everything is clean and the connections are good. Plenty of fuel. How is it on your end, Veronica?"

She was completely engrossed in the project, "Yes... here it is... I did a total reboot...retrieved the last back-up, from about four years ago, and now if I can just switch over to those routines... There we go. Let's switch you on, Rhonda."

As the machine shuddered and beeped through its startup sequence, she replaced the protective covering and stood back. The Mr. Handy ignited its thruster and achieved stability before it turned to them and asked, in its characteristically posh voice, "Excuse me, could you take me to Mistress
Tabitha, please? My records indicate that I am four years, two months, and fourteen days behind on her horoscope readings."

Megan smiled. "Sure, Rhonda. In a little bit. There is something Tabitha wants us to do first, however. She wants us to go, very quietly, to the radio station next door and find someone there. If you would lead the way?"

"Right away. Follow me, madam."

They followed the robot to the back side of the other building, a two-story construction whose entrance faced the fence on the sloping side of the mountain. With a meaningful look at Megan, Veronica stayed outside a moment longer, drawing out the stolen wire cutters and adapting the fence for a quick escape route while ED kept watch for signs of danger.

Upon entering the darkened chamber, Megan flipped on her Pip-Boy light and approached a second door across the room, leading to another room. Stepping up, she rapped sharply upon the metal surface, speaking low and earnestly to whoever lay within, "Hello, ghoul? Are you there? We've come to get you out. If you want to leave, that is."

Bedsprings squeaked and someone groaned on the other side of the door, "No, I think I'd rather stay on as the personal slave of a tyrannical maniac. What kind of question is that? Let me out!" It was definitely a ghoul's voice, tinged with an accent she hadn't heard before.

"Uh...is there a trick to this door? A key? A code for the number pad or something?"

A huffy sigh. "Tabitha has the only key. Go to the terminal, human. A child could hack it - although not most nightkin - and I've recorded the password in the file labeled, 'Raul's grocery list.'"

She stared at the glowing screen helplessly. "Er...can't you just tell me the code?"

"Oh sure, expect the old man to remember a 15-digit number."

"I can't do terminals. My friend can, though, and she'll be here in a moment. Or maybe Rhonda knows how?" This last was directed at the robot, who now floated patiently beside her.

"No, madam. I'm sorry, but that's not in my programming - I'm more of a personal companion than any sort of technical assistant."

When the door to the outside opened again behind her, she turned to ask Veronica, "Hey, can you hack-"

"No time. Their wind is up. We need to go. Now." Her voice was tense with urgency and even ED looked agitated.

"He's behind this door."

With one mighty wrench, Veronica tore the locking mechanism off the door and forced the bolts to release. "Come on, ghoul. If you want to be free, you'll need to run." Megan grabbed the surprised ghoul behind the door and dragged him outside, turning back to pitch a live grenade toward the broadcasting equipment before slamming the door behind them.

Their plunge down the mountain, with the shouts and growls of angered mutants ringing out behind took a fraction of the time as their ascent had, even with their startled and arthritic escapee in hand. Only Rhonda and ED had an easy time of it, floating easily down slopes that turned the others' ankles and barked their shins.
The prissy robot wasn't happy about the situation, though. "Oh. Dear me. Where is Mistress Tabitha?"

"Are we kidnapping the Handy now, Megan?" Veronica panted.

Shooting a look at Rhonda, she answered swiftly, "No! We're... er... looking for her owner. Maybe if we send her up the road from the bottom, the mutants will be so happy that they'll stop trying to chase us."

"No such luck. Look down there." The ghoul pointed a trembling hand to the road below, at a line of heavily-armed mutants, including both the green and purple variety, blocking their retreat to Neil's shack. The two flanking soldiers wielded miniguns. There was no possible escape.

Hands up in surrender, they stepped slowly forward toward the group.

The Courier muttered apologetically to her companions, "Sorry, Veronica. Sorry, guy. I didn't mean for it to end this way. What's your name, anyway?"

"Raul. As far as breakout attempts go, this couldn't be much worse. However, it's the thought that counts, and they'll probably just lock me up again while they're eating you. Thanks for trying." He slumped where he stood, looking depressed and angry.

"MISTRESS TABITHA!" Arms waving furiously, the Mr. Handy bobbed toward the largest of the nightkin, a scowling specimen adorned with a flowered bonnet and wielding a power sledge. "It's been so long! These humans repaired me and brought me to you."

"R-Rhonda? Is that you? Oh, thank you, thank you kind strangers."

Ever the diplomat, Megan responded graciously, trying not to stare at all the weapons all around them, "You're welcome. Does this mean you're not going to kill us?"

Tabitha laughed, sounding like she was gargling rocks in her massive throat. "No, of course not. I just don't know what I'm going to do now with Rhonda back. It's just such a shock to see her up and about again. I'm not sure what to do now."

"Can we leave with our friend Raul now?"

"Yes, yes, of course," the nightkin mumbled distractedly. "The others won't hurt you, will you, boys? Oh Rhonda - where should we go? What should we do?" Arm in claw, the mismatched couple walked away, having no further interest in anything else.

"And that's how we saved the day," Megan concluded redundantly, nibbling slowly at the last tamale on the plate, feeling full and happy.

"You left out something, boss. That one super-mutant who decided at the last minute that he'd rather eat humans than listen to his boss."

"Ah, well, Tabitha made short work of him. I'm glad she knew how to throw a power sledge so accurately. Seriously, an army of those creatures would be formidable. It's a good thing they're all so easily distracted."

Arcade had listened to this account with a bemused expression. "I'm glad I missed that whole adventure. What did you do then?"
"Veronica went home. Raul, ED, and I saved the dwellers in Vault 34 and stopped their reactor from contaminating the sharecroppers' water. We also helped the Bright Brotherhood launch a fucking rocket for reasons I'm still not entirely clear on... they probably all died in the vacuum of space, but at least they stopped spawning ferals by Novac, right?"

Raul grimaced. "That's not a mission I feel particularly good about, but you meant well. You usually do."

"Sure, but you know what they say about the road to hell."

"That it's full of well-intentioned people who freely risk life and limb for strangers? Nah. You're alright." Getting up from the table, he rummaged around under his bed, drawing out a small wooden chest. Opening that, he brought out something soft and fluffy, streaked with muted earth-tones. Handing it to the Courier, he said bashfully, "Happy Chr... er, Valentine's Day, I guess. There's rancher north of the city whose wife knits things out of bighorner wool. I commissioned a serape for you. Do you like it?"

"Oh, it's lovely. Thick and warm. And the green, brown, and tan are good camouflage. Thank you, Raul." She gave her friend a hug and a peck on the cheek before pulling the garment over her head and admiring the look.

"Looks nice. I always liked the brighter colors myself, but I knew you would prefer to blend in."

"Yes." She stroked the soft, striped wool. "I have so few clothes that are actually pretty. This is so nice. Thank you, my friend."

"De nada. Just... promise me you'll come back... to tell me how it wears."

A shadow flickered over her face, but she smiled anyway. "Of course, Raul. I'll visit again. It might not be until after the battle, though."

"Whenever you can." He went on, speaking softly, "I know I'm not the most capable or well-connected of your friends, but is there anything I can do to help?"

She met his eyes and answered immediately. "Yes. Freeside is going to need supplies and defenders to weather a siege soon. I'm going to be providing Julie Farkas, at the Old Mormon Fort, with a line of credit for purchasing food, for them and the Kings to distribute to the locals when it's needed. If you were to bring her any extra non-perishables you had - say, smoked meat or dried vegetables - you'd be paid and you'd be helping. It's something I'll be approaching other independent farmers about, so if you don't have any, don't worry about it. I still need to collect some debts and finish some jobs to actually provide the credit, so this wouldn't be needed for about two more months." She hesitated, but went on, "I don't want to put you in harm's way, Raul, but we will need all the guns we can get on the walls if the Legion's infantry reaches Vegas. Even if we do win at the Dam. It'll be dangerous, though."

He nodded earnestly. "If that's what you need from me, then I'll do it."

There's another domino in place, she mused abstractly, before dismissing the cynical thought. "Thank you. I don't fully trust the NCR to defend and feed the locals, so I want to empower the people of this region to take care of their own." She rubbed her eyes, feeling incredibly weary just thinking about the tasks ahead. "Even though it's only like 7:00 and I've done literally nothing today, I'm exhausted and I'm off to bed. We'll be leaving tomorrow morning, for Freeside and beyond. Goodnight Raul. Arcade."
"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been 200 years since my last confession."
The girl looked up at the dreary storefront and the garish sign with apprehension. "Do you want to stay out here? I'll only be in there for a moment if Garret has the caps ready."

"Yeah, that's probably best. Don't get derailed in there - Arcade would have my head if I went back without you."

On days when Arcade was busy with his work, Megan had taken to bringing along Bill Ronte on her frequent errands within Freeside, Westside, McCarran, and the surrounding areas. It wasn't so much for protection (the thugs of Freeside had taken to giving her a wide berth a long time ago) as for mutual accountability. A older man who shared little about himself, Ronte was soft-spoken and polite when sober, and she appreciated his silent company. Ever since they'd come back to Freeside a couple of weeks ago, her days had fallen into a dull slog of message-carrying between the Kings and the NCR, petty negotiations, and money-grubbing. The monotony had been broken only by baby Adam's death on the third night after their return; she, Stephen, and Arcade had buried him in Potter's Field, outside the walls of the city, on the following morning. Not all that long ago, she would have rejected this reality with all of the denial a bottle of booze could afford, but now there was only the thin veil of repression between her mind and caustic memories. Usanagi had drawn attention to her persistent tendency to escape from truths she didn't like, and had been helping her to deliberately choose times to be mindful of her grief and anger, when she felt safe and secure - generally, just before bed and when she woke up. Some days, though, she wanted a drink or a syringe very badly, and this day was no exception.

And now the two recovering addicts stood outside the Atomic Wrangler, both wanting the same thing but restrained by shame and one another's company. "I'll just be a minute," she said again, and pushed through the door into the dimly-lit interior.

At a little before noon, the bar hosted only the most desperate, strung-out alcoholics that Freeside had to offer. The smell of cheap beer and harsh liquor was almost intoxicating in and of itself, and she had to hold her breath to collect herself before approaching the bar. James was nowhere to be seen, but his sister Francine stood there, wiping out glasses with a sardonic smile.

"What'll it be, Courier? I got a three-cap well drink with your name on it." Her sneaky tone and her rather nasty smile said she knew exactly what kind of person she was tempting, but didn't care.

Megan ignored her. "Nothing, thanks. I'm here to collect on that sexbot I sent to y'all yesterday. James and I agreed on 200 caps, but I incurred unexpected expenses - 100 caps to Ralph for the holotape to make the damn thing work."

"Oh, I think we need to stick to the 200 originally-agreed upon. It's not our fault you didn't anticipate your own expenses when you made a bid for the job. But, hey, pull up a stool and let's talk about it. Have a drink on me." She poured a shot of vodka - not the good stuff but not the bottom-shelf poison either - and pushed it across the counter.

Megan's mouth started watering immediately, but she forced herself to look up. "Come on, Garret. With that, I'm barely breaking even, given all the bullets I had to waste in that fucking factory on rats and robots. 300, or I'm taking the holotape back, and we'll see what your 'clients' make of a sexbot that only knows 'drill mode.'"

"225, and that's just because I love my brother despite his nasty proclivities."
"275."

"250. If you have that drink."

"Really? You're going to play it that way?" Anger and defiance overrode caution, and she slammed the shot down, savoring the burn. "Fine. Pay up and I'm getting out of here."

She flashed a triumphant smile, and tutted patronizingly. "Patience and manners, my dear. I need to go count it out. Take some more of that missing fifty out of the bottle, if you want. I won't be long."

It somehow took twenty minutes for Francine Garret to find, count, and bag 250 caps, and by then Megan had moved twice to refill the shot before capping it firmly and pushing it back, feeling absurdly virtuous for her restraint, panic fluttering at the back of her mind. *It would be so easy to lose all control..."

"Pleasure doing business with you. Come back anytime."

Megan didn't trust herself to do anything but nod, taking the proffered payment and heading for the door, already feeling a little loose in her limbs. Stepping out into the bright sunlight, she was dazzled for a moment, then realized with a sickeningly lurch that Ronte was nowhere to be seen. Looking wildly about, she spotted Dixon leaning all-too-casually against the wall across the street. Without hesitating, she charged directly at him, pinning his throat with her right forearm and batting away his jackknife with her gauntleted left.

"You. Where's Bill Ronte?"

He grinned, smelling the liquor on her breath. "Oh, sweetheart, if you wanted a drink, all you had to do was ask. No need to buy the Garrets' overpriced swill. I'm always open..."

"Where. Is. He. Tell me, or lose the last of your teeth."

"I can't say for sure. I do know I sold some wino a pint of my special whiskey a few minutes ago. He can't have gone far."

She released him, slamming him against the wall once more for good measure, and went poking through the skeletal buildings on the sparsely-populated side of the street. She found Bill, leaning against a pile of rubble, already a third of the way into the bottle. She sat down beside him and reached for it, taking a long drink of her own before handing it back.

Ashamed - but already feeling pleasantly removed from all negative emotions - she said apologetically, "I'm sorry it took me so long in there. That Francine is a bitch. You know this is a really, fucking bad idea, right?"

"I know."

"You want me to knock that out of your hand and drag you to the Fort?"

"No. As long as we've started, we might as well enjoy it."

This logic seemed irrefutable. "Truly, I'm sorry. I'd been sober the longer of the two of us. I should have been the one to stop you, but I broke first. She just started giving me drinks." She accepted the bottle again and took another drink before handing it back.

He stared morosely at the small amount remaining. "I hate disappointing Julie like this. And I told Arcade I'd watch out for you. Should've just come in with you. We'd probably both be okay if we
had stayed together."

She nodded in agreement. "We can start over," she reminded him. "Another day one, tomorrow."

"Yeah." He seemed tired. "I feel like you only get so many of those in your life before they don't mean anything anymore. I mighta hit my limit with this one" He took one more drink, glared at the remaining ounce inside, and threw the bottle at the wall, sending glass shards and drops of amber liquid flying. "Come on. Let's go face the music."

"Can't we just... dry out for a while here..." With a lowered tolerance from a long break, her body was having trouble adjusting to the liquor. Her stomach churned and the cracked ceiling above seemed to be sliding along, willy-nilly.

"It's not safe, 'specially for you, all the enemies you got. And we're not going to try to hide this from our friends."

They made their walk of shame back to the Fort, staggering in to find the doctors at a lull in their work, making it impossible for them to slip by without the whole courtyard noticing.

Julie stalked over and led Bill away, shooting Megan a frosty glare and leaving the girl to make her own reeling way to her bed in Arcade's tent. Most unfortunately, he was there, bent over a microscope, studying some sample or another. His smile turned to a frown as she flopped down on the mattress, closing her eyes tightly against the world spinning around her. She felt him pulling her armor off and feeling her arms, and she slurred, "Whaterya doin', 'Cade?"

"Looking for fresh needle-marks, what do you think?" She couldn't see his face, but he sounded both afraid and furious.

"I din't do drugs. What kind of person do you think I am?"

He sighed, then left her alone. "An addict." When she started trying to protest, he cut her off severely, slamming something metallic down next to the bunk. "Not now. I'm too busy to have a conversation you won't remember. We'll talk later. Aim for the bucket if you get sick."

When she came to again, cotton-mouthed and still a little drunk, it was late in the evening, and the tent was dark and empty. Rather than go out to face the Followers, she pulled some jerky and dried fruit out of her pack and nibbled on it with some water. Lots of water. I definitely didn't miss this part, she thought ruefully.

She jumped when two people entered the tent, Arcade and Julie, both with serious expressions on their face.

"Do you want to tell us what happened today, Megan?" Julie Farkas was back to her usual impassive self, but with an undercurrent of ice in her tone.

Looking at a strip of dried meat as if it was the most interesting thing she'd ever seen, she told them, "I had business with the Garrets that I put off until this week. Today, I went to collect payment for a sexbot I fixed up for them, leaving Bill outside because I didn't think he should be in a bar. Francine was being her typically sadistic self and made me take a drink before she'd pay me. I ended up having three with her. When I got back out, maybe half an hour later, Bill had bought some of Dixon's whiskey and was drinking it. I helped him finish the bottle." When they said nothing, she added, "I'm sorry I left him, really. And that I didn't stop him when I found him. In retrospect, there were better ways to complete that job. Coming back later to talk to James directly, for example. He's a bastard too, but in no way as bad as his sister."
Arcade looked away in disgust, but Julie nodded, her scowl relaxing slightly, "It was a mistake to pair up two people in early recovery. We'll find another job for Bill with someone more stable and consistent. But you - you need to avoid dangerous situations like that obviously was. And be accountable to yourself. Unless someone ties you down and forces it on you, no one can make you use drugs or alcohol. Get that through your head. You, and only you, are responsible for your behavior." With that, she walked out, leaving her alone with Arcade.

He sat in his chair and crossed his arms in front of him. "Why did you do it?"

She refused to look at him. "Because I wanted a drink and she offered me a drink. It's not that complicated."

"No, I mean, why, specifically, did you feel the need to get blackout drunk in the middle of the day?"

"It didn't begin that way, but once I started I didn't want to stop. I've got a lot going on right now - I'm depressed about Adam and very stressed about my responsibilities on the whole. I could list several other good reasons to drink as well, but those are on top right now. I just needed an afternoon off, okay?"

"An afternoon off-!" He threw his hands up in frustration. "By all means, take a mental health day. God knows you need a break. Sleep. Go hunting. Make an appointment with Usanagi. Explore a cave. Tell me when you get low. Don't play with fire and drink yourself into a stupor in the name of giving yourself a break." He lowered his voice, which had become loud and sharp. "Don't do that again. You're a special case, but we don't allow people to stay here if they're not actively attempting to stay sober. For the record, since I think this actually does mean something to you, I'm disappointed that you've done this."

"That's harsh, man." She tried to be flippant, but her throat felt choked up and her eyes stung with tears.

He stared at her incredulously. "A month ago, you told me to shoot you if I ever caught you drinking again. Loving disapproval seems more effective."

She sniffed, head pounding unpleasantly, "Yeah. I'm sorry."

"I know you are, but that doesn't change the fact that Ronte's going to have a hard time of it now. Julie's right. He needs a partner who's less selfish and more committed to helping him, not so caught up in her own madcap agenda." He stood up to leave, brushing imaginary dirt off of his hands. "That's all I have to say. We'll revisit this tomorrow morning, when you're actually sober. Good night."

But by the time Arcade awoke, the bunk below him was empty, the serape-blanket folded neatly at the foot. Slightly worried and regretting his hard words the previous night, he hoped she hadn't tipped into a new self-destructive spiral, but couldn't justify the time to go look for her. Focusing on his patients and some mold cultures he'd been testing for antimicrobial properties, he put his concerns aside - at least until the explosions began, around four o'clock that afternoon.

Fireworks in Freeside almost always meant a conflict involving the Kings, an independent group that the Followers were on reasonably good terms with. They were also the faction that the Courier had spent her recent days courting, trying to resolve a longstanding conflict between them and the NCR MP. If there was violence to be found in Freeside, she was almost certainly involved - that was a maxim he'd come to take for granted. Without even waiting for Julie's nod, he packed up his doctor's
bag and grabbed two interns and two guards. He'd send one of them back for reinforcements if today's flare-up had caused more than a few casualties.

It wasn't hard to pinpoint the location - the column of smoke rising up led the team straight to old train station at the city limits. Arcade was relieved to find the Kings standing down, facing a tense knot of NCR soldiers, with Major Kieran, Colonel Moore, and the King himself engaged in tense negotiations well apart from their men. A few corpses in rocker's leather lay around the smoking remains of what had once been the stationmaster's tower - he ordered Stephen to do a perfunctory check for life-signs, but could tell at a distance that it was pointless. No one survived being on top of an explosion like that one.

Another King's man lay face down a good distance from the others, blood pooling under him. After turning him over, he wished he'd hadn't - Pacer, the King's second-in-command, had been shot at close range with a shotgun, and very little remained of his lower abdomen, although he still clutched a wicked straight razor in his right hand.

"Arcade, over here!" His other intern, Nadine, was crouched in the lee of the station entrance, where Megan sat hunched over, holding her head.

Looking up with a sick smile as he drew near at a run, she said in a too-loud voice, "It's no good lecturing me now, Arcade. I can't hear anything." He noticed a trickle of blood leaking from one ear and knelt down beside her. She flinched at his touch, but let him feel her head and neck for injuries. Her eyes seemed distant and she struggled to focus when he indicated for her to follow his finger for a moment, and then dropped her head back down on her knees.

Arcade put a firm hand on the back of her head and pulled her armor down to expose the back of the neck. "Alright, Nadine. We're going to use a single stimpak near the base of the skull. It can't hurt in cases of possible concussion, and it will heal the ruptured eardrums. You don't want to put the needle too deep, but it shouldn't be on the very surface either. Watch me."

Megan's face contorted with pain and she pressed her hands to her ears as the thin membranes and tiny bones inside began to knit themselves together. Mumbling distractedly through gritted teeth. "That fucker - Pacer - cut me a little too. Can you look at it, please? Right arm..."

By the time he was done with a row of stitches on her bicep, the King had finished his talk with the NCR officers, and strolled over to look down at the Courier with a conflicted expression on his smooth face. He sounded friendly enough when he spoke, though, drawling out his message, "Tell mah friend here that I ain't got no hard feelins' over Pacer. He did what he shouldn't ought to have done, and she did what she had to. When she's up to it, tell her to come see me at the school - I got one more job that needs doing."

Biting back a sharp response for diplomacy's sake, Arcade nodded to the man and glanced at his friend, who looked exhausted and ill, but roused herself enough to smile wanly at the gang-leader. Taking his departure as her cue, Kieran was the next to come over, and tried to address the girl directly, with brusque military formality, "Colonel Moore and I would like to extend our gratitude to you for defusing this situation with minimal casualties..."

"She can't hear you," the doctor broke in impatiently. "She got caught up in the blast."

"Oh. Tell her to report to Crocker when she's feeling better, then. He has another assignment for her." A little less confidently, she addressed Arcade instead, "Doctor..."

"Gannon."
"Doctor Gannon, would you and your people mind taking a look at some of our men, please? We exchanged fire before a stray shot hit their munitions, and others were hit by wooden fragments. We'll pay the usual rate, of course, and provide supplies to replace whatever you use."

Goodwill with the NCR in Freeside was not something the Followers could afford to pass up on, and Arcade followed her to the NCR's Freeside office across from the station, taking the assistants with him and leaving both guards standing by the Courier, who was still seated, snapping her fingers impatiently by both ears and shaking her head. He caught her eye and gestured for her to stay, hoping that she'd listen to him for once, and not go off half-cocked in her current state. She nodded wearily, looking lost.

None of the soldiers had dangerous injuries, but the process of treating a few glancing gunshot wounds and yanking splinters took an annoyingly long time, and by the time the last soldier was treated, at least an hour had passed. Returning to the station, he was frustrated - but unsurprised - to find the guards relaxed and joking, and Megan nowhere in sight.

"Did she say where she was going?" He addressed his query to the senior guard, a steady man named Brandon.

"No. Some of her hearing was coming back, and when a friend of hers stopped by for a chat, it didn't take much persuading for her to go with him. I don't know where they went, although I heard him mention the Fort. This was about ten minutes ago, I'd guess. Not long, anyways."

"Who was this friend?" He wished some of her 'friends' would stop giving her new things to do. Getting blown up was enough fun for the day, wasn't it?

"She introduced him as 'Mr. Fox.' Well-dressed fellow, one of them suave Strip sorts, I'm guessing. They went off arm-in-arm, so I figured they're pretty close. He even carried that monster of a gun for her." He added, a little defensively, "It's not like I can stop that girl from doing what she wants to do. Me and Sammy here weren't going to get in her way, were we boy?"

Arcade didn't hear the younger guard's response. His mind had already reached the worst possible conclusion - her old tormentor, Vulpes Inculta, had caught up with her at a weak moment to yank her out of the relative safety of the city. Barking out an order to them to escort the interns back to the compound, he ran toward the nearest exit to the wasteland, hoping he wasn't too late to catch them.

She wouldn't be a prisoner of the Legion again. He wouldn't allow it.

An already rough day had taken a hellish turn. Still feeling the effects of whatever the explosion had done to her head and sense of balance, not to mention a hangover, she'd been forced to take Vulpes' arm to stay upright, compelled to smile and act normally to spare the guards' lives. The subtle flash of a mini-nuke grenade in his suit pocket was enough of a caution to keep her trying to raise an alarm, as long as there were people around, and she was in no shape to try to overpower him safely.

"My dear! I'm so glad I've found you, at last. It's been too long. What has it been - almost six months since we met in Nipton? Your reputation has grown by leaps and bounds. Would you be willing to come listen to a proposition of mine over a drink?" He stood, beaming, in front of her, thumbs in his belt loops, and accidentally-on-purpose let her see the jury-rigged bomb he was carrying, its tiny firing pin secured to a button on his waistcoat, needing very little to jostle it into detonation.

"Hello, Mr. Fox," she answered as bravely as possible, sparing a glance to the guards looking on curiously. "Certainly we can talk. Where did you have in mind?"
"Oh, nowhere you're not comfortable," he responded seriously, a laughing glint in his eye. "The Fort would be fine."

One of the guards interjected, "Miss Martin, Dr. Gannon wanted you to rest until-

"Thank you, Brandon," she said imperiously, "but I'd as soon rest at the Fort as here. I appreciate your diligence, but you two had as well go wait at the NCR office for the others to be done. See you later."

It was with some difficulty that she got her legs under her again, the muscles trembling like those of a newborn calf, and a full minute before the stars in her vision cleared. By then, Vulpes had her shotgun slung casually over his left shoulder and was half-supporting her on his right, walking with casual swiftness in the general direction of the eastern gate.

"You've become a much better actress since we last met. Your sheep's clothing hasn't gotten any more convincing, however." He tutted disapprovingly. "I have heard so many stories about you - I hardly believed that those lazy slavers down at Cottonwood had really managed to clip your wings."

She couldn't think of a response or an escape from her predicament. Either Vulpes and his men in the wastes would drag her all the way to Caesar's Fort for interrogation and crucifixion, or they'd simply interrogate her and kill her in some secluded spot in the foothills east of the city. She was already regretting calling him "Mr. Fox" - yes, Arcade would understand the reference if the guards relayed that information, but if he tried to rush them, to gun Vulpes down in the middle of Freeside, then innocent people would probably die as well as the frumentarius, including she herself and possibly Arcade. She decided that the best thing was to try to keep him talking, distracted, just in case her friend made a move.

"Well, they weren't as gentlemanly as you, Vulpes," she snapped back sarcastically. She didn't know why, but she did feel a twisted sense of gratitude toward this man. Yes, he'd hurt her, but he hadn't raped her. She wasn't sure what that meant about him, exactly - it probably was more sexual preference than pity or moral restraint that stopped him - but she still felt some emotion that wasn't entirely negative about him. Partly because of him, Boone had been her first, not some rough, slobbering barbarian. She had that small comfort, at least.

He was still talking. ".and you! Such behavior afterwards. Our spies almost thought you'd turned Fiend. It's very disappointing to see a strong person demean themselves with chems."

"Just how closely have you lot been watching me then?"

"We lose track of you in the Wastes," he admitted reluctantly. "But every time you've set foot in McCarran or the City for the past four or five months, we've known about it."

They were rounding a deserted corner, with no people nearby, when she faltered, a dark mist filtering down over her eyes while her knees buckled. "I... I... can't..."

He pushed her down roughly, stepping back with suspicion, "No tricks, now." He looked at her face, and that seemed to convince him that her faint was genuine. "I see what the problem is. You're wearing this grotty old armor and it's weighing you down. Let me help you take it off..." Stripped of her armor, she was twenty pounds less encumbered and much cooler, and was able to get to her feet again with Vulpes' help.

Leaving what remained of her Ranger armor set and her leather chestpiece behind on the sidewalk, she couldn't help murmuring reluctantly, "Some scavver's going to nab that within the hour, y'know..."
He laughed incredulously, "You won't need armor where you're going, little wolf."

"Killing me won't make a difference, Vulpes. I'm one mercenary, but the NCR has strong allies in the fight because of me. We will keep the Dam. We will keep the Mojave."

"You can tell us all about it later. I've got a man who's good at getting to the details of a story. You'll meet him later."

The city gate was just ahead. They passed Mick and Ralph's, and Megan resisted the crazy urge to shout for help from the body guards. They were mere feet from the exit when one of the most inopportune people possible stepped in just ahead of them.

"Martin!" The old man beamed at her, his smile lighting up his weathered old face.

She struggled to compose her features and smiled back at Cannibal Johnson. "Hey Johnson. I've been meaning to come see you, catch you up on the news. Sorry. Arcade and I have been pretty busy."

"Oh, that's alright. I was nearby and thought I'd bring dinner. D'you like mole-rat?" He held up the fresh corpse of the rodent for her investigation.

"Yes, of course." She felt Vulpes elbow her warningly in the ribs, and she tried to get rid of Johnson. "Why don't you take it to Arcade? He's at the Old Mormon Fort. I'll join y'all when my friend and I have finished our business for the day."

"Sure, sure... should you be up and about, though? You don't look so good."

"Well, yes. Mr. Fox here is taking me to the clinic, actually, because... um... I forgot..."

"She fell off a ladder building the orphanage," Vulpes interrupted silkily. "The clinic has an x-ray that the Freeside doctors do not. I'm seeing that she gets there safely. The orphans do love her so."

"Okay, then." He still looked uncertain, but Vulpes took this as farewell, and marched her through the gate and into the open.

"Who was that?"

"A friend."

"The next 'friend' that slows us down like that is going to die with my blade in his eye. Maybe give them a good glare next time so they leave us alone. Move faster now, or I'm going to start encouraging you with my knife." He was clearly uneasy in the open space, and kept looking around, pushing her to the limits of her endurance further and further away from the city.

"Would anything convince you to let me go?" She let a note of pleading slip into her voice, and tried to look innocent, wide-eyed, and afraid. "I have money... well, some anyway. I do have connections. I could set you up in a life far away from the Legion, if you want a fresh start."

"Oh, sweetheart... no. I don't need money, and I'm doing exactly what I want to do."

"Killing people for Caesar is what you want to do with your life? Serving a Legion that makes tribes like yours a drop in an undifferentiated bucket?"

"The tribe I was born into was a worthless pack of wild dogs, grubbing at the dirt for sustenance and praying to every bush and tree for help. The Legion is civilization reborn. Our culture is based on
virtues such as martial excellence, loyalty, and justice. I am proud to be a part of it, even if my duties
do keep me in the shadows more than the light."

Too tired and too dispirited to try to argue with fanaticism, Megan looked down at her Pip-Boy,
which Vulpes had thankfully left her when he took her armor off. What she saw there made her
frown and look around, searching the scrub in the dimming light for the threat it indicated.

Vulpes saw her start. "What is it?"

"Something... two somethings... non-human hostiles. Nearby and moving towards us from our right,
fast. Big, if my Pip-Boy's showing me the right thing."

"My men are close. We're running now. Come on." He pulled on her arm with extreme force and
she strained to move her weary legs fast enough to keep from dragging them both down. A terrifying
growl from less than fifty feet away made her try even harder. _Deathclaws._

"We're dead. We're dead." She babbled to him, almost feeling like her arm had been torn from its
socket.

"Shut up and stay down. Good-bye, little wolf." He pushed her deep into a creosote bush, the
branches scratching at her skin and grabbing at her hair. Eyes closed tightly, she waited for the
serrated claws to reach in and tear her out, but only heard a confused scuffling, shouting, and finally
the boom and heat of the mini-nuke, close, but not close enough to do more than give her a healthy
dose of radiation.

When no claws came, she wiggled backwards out of the bush, but could nothing else but flop
bonelessly on her back, staring at the pale sky above and searching for early stars. There was
shouting, there was shooting, and there were an _awful_ lot of energy bursts, green and red mixed...
dazzled by the laser show and thoroughly done with the day, she closed her eyes and drifted away.
The thought that turned out the lights seemed irrelevant compared to everything else, but still made
her sad: her shotgun - the gun Boone had given her - had almost certainly been blown up along with
Vulpes.

While it seemed like only a moment had passed, it must have been some time before she opened her
eyes again, as night had fully fallen, with tiny white lights now piercing the velvety sky above.

Urgent, familiar male voices conferred somewhere nearby, unseen from her poor vantage point
among the desert grasses.

"...need a light to search... could open the lizards up..."

"...she can't have been eaten!"

"Hey." Her voice cracked, bone-dry and inaudible. She thought for a moment about trying to sit up,
but felt too tired and lazy to be bothered. She reached one hand over and clicked the Pip-Boy light
on, hoping that would be enough. Worn out from this tiny effort, she closed her eyes again.

Someone touched her neck and patted her cheek. "Hey, Arcade, here she is, under this damned
bush! C'mon kid, open your eyes..."

Her eyelids were too heavy to budge. "Too tired, Johnson. Lemme 'lone. We'll talk t'morrow. Don'
wan' mole-rat."

A second set of footsteps walked briskly over, and she heard the swish of Arcade's coat against the
shrub. "She could be hurt, but I can't examine her here. But I'm not sure that I can carry her to the
"We could build a fire here."

"No. Think. Where there are six legionaries and two deathclaws, there might be more of either."

Now Arcade was bothering her, trying to get her to sit up and look at him. "Wake up, Megan. We need at least a little help from you. Other than your head, are you hurt anywhere?"

She blinked at him curiously, honestly confused, "No, I'm not. Help you with what, Arcade?"

"To walk to the New Vegas Clinic."

This seemed hilarious to her, and she laughed until her head hurt and her friends looked worried and confused. "See... ha... it's funny because that's what Vulpes told Johnson. That he was taking me to the clinic because I fell off a ladder buildin' a fucking orphanage." She giggled some more, and then shivered, her teeth chattering madly.

Arcade wrapped his coat around her and she hugged it to herself gratefully, but looked at his bare arms with concern. "Hey, no! You'll be cold now." She tried to hand it back to him.

"I'll live. C'mon, just a little longer and then you can rest."

They told her the next day that she walked most of the way to the clinic, but she didn't remember arriving, only a slowly descending blackness that didn't lift until the following morning. When she awoke in the recovery room, sore from head to toe, there was no one nearby, only water for drinking and washing and clean clothing laid out beside her cot. Her neck felt incredibly stiff and the arm Vulpes had wrenched was next to useless, so pulling on and buttoning a shirt took a frustratingly long time. Hobbling out into the lobby, she found Dr. Usanagi frowning over paperwork at her desk, but she looked up with a smile.

"Good morning, Megan! We all thought you'd sleep longer. Dr. Gannon and Mr. Johnson went out about an hour ago, said they were going to find you a gun and some new armor." A slightly puzzled look crossed her face. "Dr. Gannon is... significantly more adventurous that I thought he was. I always saw him as a perennial bookworm."

"I've been a bad influence on him."

"Apparently. Would you like to have breakfast with me?"

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry."

"Tea, then? Juice? Arcade mentioned no specifics, but he heavily implied you had some things you might need to process aloud."

With a resigned sigh, Megan surrendered, sitting down across from the doctor with a nuka-cola in hand, talking about everything she wasn't coping with well - the doomed baby she'd assumed responsibility for, the weight of obligation she felt every minute of every dayy, her lapse in sobriety, and finally her encounter with Vulpes Inculta.

"You've mentioned him before. He assaulted you last year, right?"

"Yes. For some reason, I don't hold it against him anymore, though. This is going to sound pretty twisted..." She trailed off, feeling ridiculous and embarrassed.

"You don't have to feel a particular way about anything. Any number of reactions are normal."
"I don't like the Legion. I would kill every one of them if I could. But Vulpes Inculta - he was my favorite among them. He's the only one of them who ever treated me like a real person, and talked to me like he was interested in the response. I think, in a different life, we could have been friends. He also saved my life last night. I mean, sure, he did kidnap me, threaten my life and the lives of my friends, and dragged me into the wastes with the intent of torturing me, but he also charged headlong at two deathclaws with no intention of surviving at all. That took courage."

Dr. Usanagi regarded her calmly, with no sign of surprise or disgust. "If Vulpes were sitting at this table with us right now, what would you do or say?"

"Oh, I'd brain him with your paperweight," she answered readily. "But if he had me at his mercy again, then I'd be looking for the best in him, trying to talk him down from his course of action. It's fucked up, but that's how I feel right now. I'm even a little sad that he's dead."

She listened to Usanagi describe something called "Stockholm syndrome," but she still felt ashamed for feeling the way she did. Nevertheless, it was good to get it off her chest. Afterwards she asked Usanagi to look at her injured arm, and doctor gave her a stimpak and a sling, with instructions not to use it for at least a day. After that, with nothing better to do, she chewed some jerky and went back to sleep.

When she awoke, Arcade and Johnson were talking quietly on the other side of the room. When the doctor noticed she was awake, he walked over, looking fairly cheerful, "Hi! Sorry we weren't here earlier. We went to pick up a... family heirloom of mine. Left it at Johnson's cave for obvious reasons. You can have these right now, though." He handed her a folded piece of stiff, dull green clothing, with a small, high-tech pistol resting on top.

"Thanks. Is this something I can wear... anywhere?"

"Yes. It's a nondescript flight suit made of a tough ballistic weave. Nothing about it screams paramilitary fascist organization at all." He helped her put it on over her clothing, zipping it up and standing back to examine the fit. It was wearable, but obviously intended for a much taller person. She had to double up the sleeves and pant cuffs several times, and it was all pretty baggy.

"Protection is protection, and I appreciate the gift, but I look like a kid playing dress-up."

Behind Arcade, Johnson laughed. "Israel was well over six feet tall. Even taller than the boy here. You're a respectable height for a wastelander woman, but he still would've had about ten inches and fifty pounds on you."

Arcade shrugged. "It'll work until you find something better. It's not combat armor. Don't get shot for the fun of it."

"Thank you. Really."

"You're welcome. Now, I need to get back to the Fort to tell Julie I'm not dead. You can come or rest here if you need to."

"Oh, I'll come with you as far as the Fort. I've got a lot to do today. I need to go talk to Crocker, probably about the Great Khans, and then I need to go pick up Rex from the King, and then go ask Anderson a bunch of questions, and, oh, buy a dog from that one guy by Miguel's Pawn Shop while I'm there so we can take it to Henry for... spare parts..."

Arcade looked skeptical. "Hm. Wow, that is a long list of things. How about you put off the Westside stuff until tomorrow? Then we can all go together, and you won't collapse halfway there."
"Okay. Will you be ready to go to Jacobstown the day after tomorrow?"

"I can be."

The three of them began a slow walk back to the city, with Megan trying out the laser pistol on a few stumps and grass clumps to get the feel of it, the red bursts scorching and blackening their targets.

She sighed. "It doesn't feel like a gun if there's no recoil."

"Some would consider that a feature. It is lethal. It is accurate. And it's bit faster than my plasma defender - you don't have to lead your target as much as I do. Take it, trade it in if you like - I just want you to be able to defend yourself."

"Thanks." She was quiet for a little while, then blurted out, "I'm sorry I let Vulpes get the upper hand yesterday, Arcade. If I had reacted at just the right time, if I hadn't been so stunned, we could have avoided this whole stupid episode. You wouldn't have had to rush out and save me... I feel so pathetic right now."

"It's not your fault. You were hurt and he knew just how to manipulate the situation. Are you... okay about seeing him again?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Vulpes wasn't so bad. Why would I be afraid of a fox bite after being mauled by wolves?"

He winced at the analogy, but nodded. "Good. Will you tell me if you...stop being okay?" He lowered his voice, glancing at Johnson behind them, who was humming and deliberately minding his own business.

"You mean if I decide to go on a bender because I can't deal with things?"

"Well, preferably before then, but yes."

"I'll try. I know I need to keep it together. There's no time for me to waste, and so much more to do."

"That's not what I was talking about," he retorted earnestly. "Your military campaign wasn't even on my mind. I care about you."

"Look, I'm doing everything you told me - I'm eating and sleeping, I'm not taking unusual risks, and I'm not trying to hide a life built around addiction anymore." She was impatient with him. He didn't understand. "I don't have time to fuss over every personal problem."

He fell silent, looking away. She turned away from the city just ahead, and gave voice to her latest thought, addressing Johnson as well. "I just thought of another thing I have to do, y'all. I've been putting it off, but it probably should be a high priority, especially since we're going to go see Dr. Henry soon. I need to go tell Colonel Hsu to expect us - well, the Enclave, anyway - at the Dam. You two go ahead to Freeside. I'm going to go to McCarran first. From there, I'll take the monorail to the Strip."

"You trust this Colonel, then?" Johnson looked uneasy.

"I trust him to give me the benefit of the doubt, yes. And my reputation with the NCR can't be much better than it is right now. I trust him to know how to approach Colonel Moore, and, eventually, General Oliver about it. He certainly owes me a favor by now."

"Vir sapiens, pauca loquitur. 'A wise person says as little as possible.' Protect yourself and him by
telling him only what's necessary - give him as much deniability as you can." Arcade searched her face worriedly. "Are you sure you're up for this right now? Physically, anyway, since I'm not allowed to ask after your emotional state?"

She nodded, ignoring this jab. "Of course. And yes, I'm fine. I'll come straight back after my visit with Ambassador Crocker and save all the other stuff for tomorrow."

It was late afternoon before she stepped into the shadowy, cavernous space of McCarran. Feeling nervous and out-of-sorts with her poorly-fitting gear, she walked softly to Hsu's door and rapped firmly on it.

"Come in, whoever you are..." His normally calm voice sounded strained, and she hesitated.

"Colonel? Is this a bad time?" She pushed open the door and peered in at him.

"Courier. I suppose not. Come in, please. Is this about the Motor-Head bounty?" He asked this question hopefully, but she shook her head.

"No sir, I'm sorry. I haven't yet figured out how to handle any kind of assault on Vault 3 without dying."

"Nor have we, Martin. Nor have we. Have a seat, please." A handsome man of Asian descent in his early middle years, James Hsu looked steadily back at her as she stood before him.

"May I close this, sir? I have a sensitive issue to discuss with you." At his nod, she shut the door behind her and accepted the chair.

"Before I begin, I would like to report the death of an infamous frumentarius, Vulpes Inculta. He was responsible for the destruction of Nipton and a hundred other atrocities. Yesterday, he attempted to kidnap me from the city, but was killed by deathclaws before delivering me into his soldiers' hands."

Hsu nodded, making a neat record of the incident in the notebook that lay in front of him on the desk. "I'm glad to see you alive and well after all that, though it seems you didn't escape unscathed." His eyes trailed over her arm in its sling.

"Oh, I'm fine. Thanks." She shifted nervously in her seat, fiddling with the zipper on her ridiculous flight-suit. "I found an unlooked-for ally for the upcoming battle at the Dam."

"That's good news," he said slowly. "Who is it?"

Ignoring his question, she pushed on, "They have a vertibird, power armor, and heavy guns. They are willing to make an aerial strike and deploy five ground troops at a critical point in the fight against the Legion. All they ask is that the NCR not attack them, nor pursue them afterwards."

"Is it the Brotherhood of Steel? I didn't think they had that kind of force behind them." He broke off, seeing her shake her head.

"No. Negotiations with the Brotherhood have not gone well. The most I'm gotten from them is the promise that they won't attack the NCR while it's busy with the Legion. And now I really, really hope that they don't show up at the Dam."

A crease appeared between his brows. "Who is it then?"

In response, she took his notebook and borrowed a pencil, forming a large, capital 'E' with a ring of
stars around it before pushing it toward him. Made by a hand unaccustomed to writing, the symbol was crudely made, but unmistakable. "You know what this represents." It wasn't a question.

He nodded, staring at her, and she erased her light drawing, leaving a smear of graphite and eraser rubbings behind, before handing him his writing instruments back.

"They want to help. They've offered me some power armor of my own to wear as well - I'd like to use it against the Legion infantry in close quarters the Dam. In return, I'm only asking for the NCR to guarantee my safety and theirs."

"'Only.' You may not think that's much to ask for, Courier. But even so, I'm not sure I can grant it. Or, rather, I'm not sure my superiors will grant it." His dark eyes were troubled as he examined her, thinking. "These people. Who- where are they from?"

"Not the East. They haven't gotten all that far from their roots. None is younger than 70. They're only a few retirees, with a bit of quality tech on their hands. Wait another five or ten years, and there won't be anybody left to worry about."

"A bit of quality tech," echoed Hsu. "How old are you, Martin? Twenty?"

"Twenty-one, sir."

"Fifty years is a very long time to spend as a political prisoner in the Boneyard penitentiary. Twenty-one is also very young to be executed for the decades-old crimes of others."

"I haven't done anything to deserve that kind of sentence."

"No. I don't believe you have." He was looking at the ceiling now, apparently thinking aloud. "A vertibird - now that could make all the difference in the world. And trained storm troopers in power armor... we can't pass that up, not when the Legion has such a numbers advantage over us. The decisions of a commander in wartime - and it will be up to Moore and Oliver, not me, obviously - do not necessarily correspond with their decisions in peacetime. They will say 'yes' to your offer of help, and will appear to acquiesce to your conditions, but there almost certainly will be consequences afterwards regardless. For you, and anyone else who happens to be unmasked in the aftermath. Whether we win or lose at the Dam."

"If that's what it takes, Hsu, then I'll try to carry the burden of those consequences myself, knowing the risks. I appreciate you being straight with me. I am sorry for putting you into what may be a difficult situation someday soon - you just happen to be the highest-ranking NCR officer I have any kind of relationship with."

He nodded, and she stood, wincing as she jogged her sore arm. "If there's nothing else..."

"Be careful, Megan. Truly. Some... people would find it much more convenient if a case like yours never went to trial. One more war hero or war criminal dead in the confusion after the battle would be much easier to deal with." He covered his face with his hands. "I have a daughter your age back in the NCR Hub. I pray that her life is never as interesting as yours, and I wish I could spare you as well." He composed himself with an effort. "Thank you for your exemplary service, Martin. I'll arrange a meeting between you, Oliver, and Moore at the Dam. Give me a few weeks."

Hand on the doorknob, she turned back, "Colonel?" She looked very young and uncertain at that moment.

"Yes?"
"Whatever you hear about me after all this, whatever they say I've done - I want you to know that I had good intentions for everything I've done in the Mojave. I only wanted to help innocent people. Honestly. I'm not really En-... I'm not like that, at all." She shook her head and straightened her back in resolve. "Sorry. I'll let you know if I figure out the Vault 3 problem. Good-bye."

The door swung back in place, and Colonel James Hsu was alone in his office again, staring down at the faint image of the Enclave flag on the open page of his notebook. He tore this page out and put a lighter to it, dropping it into an empty wastebin, where it crisped at once into a little heap of black ashes. It was only 4:30, but the Colonel broke a personal rule that day and reached for the whiskey in his bottom drawer.

What kind of man could bear to kill the lamb that offered its neck so readily to the butcher's knife? Colonel Hsu was not that sort of man at all - and that, right there, was why he would never attain the rank of general.
"Pull up a chair, Martin. You've been rushing around all day. Sit a spell with us," Cannibal Johnson gestured to the stool beside him with a friendly smile, while Arcade and Judah Kreger bent intently over their game, oblivious to the world around them, moving only occasionally, after long deliberation, to push a piece forward. "I'll play you a match next, if you like. I'm not that good - not like these two - but I enjoy the game."

Leaving the Remnants to their games and fellowship, the Courier had elected to pursue her interests in Westside alone, primarily seeking out Anderson to hear his side of the story that had ended in an NCR corporal's murder, but also purchasing supplies for the journey to Jacobstown and a dog of similar size and build to the King's pet. Julie Farkas had advised the purchase, knowing that Rex's treatment would likely include surgery, and Megan did not know if there were dogs to be bought in the mutant community up north. She declined Johnson's offer of a game, shaking her head impatiently and bending over to tie the new dog's lead to the table, beneath which Rex already lay sprawled, tongue lolling out in the heat. "Thanks, but I have to run to McCarran and back today to finish this up before we leave tomorrow. If I don't, Lieutenant Boyd might send someone else to pursue this investigation and take it in a direction that wouldn't be... optimal... for the people here."

Proving that he was not as oblivious as he appeared, Arcade looked up sharply at this, glasses glinting in the sunlight, "What have you decided to do about Anderson?"

"He can live and continue his water-grifting," she said ungraciously. "I'll set the blame for White's death on the Scorpions. The Rangers will be here within a week to take care of them."

"Interesting way of handling things. Very sub rosa. I don't know if the Scorpions deserve to be wiped out for something they didn't do, but that's one less problem Westside has to deal with."

"It was Anderson's idea, so if you don't like it, you can take it up with him. Tell your colleague not to murder any more NCR officers while you're at it. And that gang is guilty of so many real crimes that one fake one on their record won't matter."

"O-kay..." Excusing himself from the game, he drew the Courier aside, out of earshot of the others. "You seem unusually hostile. Is something wrong?"

Biting her tongue to keep from snapping at him again, she muttered, "Fine. Really. I'm just so fucking tired of playing at politics. Sorry. I know you don't endorse Anderson's more extreme
actions. And I know he's trying to help people here - that's why I'm trying to keep him alive."

"Do you want me to come with you to McCarran?"

"God, no. I mean... no, I'm going to run. I need the exercise and I want the solitude." She crossed her arms over her chest and looked away, drawing a circle in the dust with the toe of her boot. "And... I think you need to stop being seen in my company when we're around NCR people. I should probably stop looking so chummy with the Followers as a whole, too."

"Because of what Colonel Hsu told you yesterday." She had given him only a skeletal account of that meeting before falling asleep the previous evening, but he had gotten the gist. "He succeeded in scaring you where I failed to do so."

She nodded, looking trapped and miserable. "I don't want you to be tarred with the same brush as me. Or anybody else, for that matter." She looked over at Johnson and Kreger. "Was this the right choice, Arcade? Is it worth it?"

_It had better be_, he thought. Aloud, he only said, "I hope so. And it may yet end well for you. You're a high-profile person, Megan, with a lot of popularity among the locals and individuals in the NCR. They can't 'disappear' you without a fuss. You're innocent and that should be obvious to whatever civilian jury they slap together. If it comes to that at all." He hoped he wasn't lying to her.

"I'm not sure I'm actually innocent..." she mumbled. "Unfortunately, I'm not just some crazy waster who happened to hire some high-tech mercenaries, even though that's the story I'm going with. For all I know, I'm guilty of every charge they might think to lay on me. Or worse. I. Don't. Remember. And I'm also not that good at lying. If I don't believe in my own innocence, why should they?"

Her expression reminded Arcade of a patient he'd once treated - a young gang member who had been fatally stabbed in a scuffle with the Khans. When told he was going to die, he only looked puzzled, as if he couldn't believe or accept the verdict, or understand how it could happen to him. He had died an hour later, that look of confusion never leaving his face. There was no begging, pleading, or bargaining from him, but no comprehension either. It was as if he hadn't accepted, even at the very end, that he was mortal. Like that boy, the girl standing before him now had the bewildered, frightened look of an animal stuck in a trap.

She broke him out of his reverie, handing him a rusty key. "I got us a shitty room in that hotel down the street. Number 18, upstairs. Supplies and stuff are already there. I wouldn't touch that bed with a ten-foot pole, but you're welcome to it if you dare. I'll eat at McCarran and be back late. Take care of the dogs, will you?"

_It was_ late - almost midnight - before Arcade heard a knock on the door. Irritated from the long, anxious wait, he set his book down and took a second to compose himself before opening the door and letting the Courier in. She walked in without a word and set her weapons down on the dresser, while he locked the door again. He frowned as he noticed a dark splash on the arm of her flight suit.

"Are you hurt?"

She looked where he was pointing. "What? Oh, no. That's not mine. A pair of thugs thought they'd try to mug me on the way back. Big mistake. They didn't even have a gun between them." Peeling off the suit, she put a little water and soap into the rusty sink and set the sleeve to soak, before lying down with a painful grunt. "One of 'em broke a rotten fence post across my back, but that's the only hit they got in. Idiots. They paid for it, obviously."
"What took you so long?"

"I had dinner with that sniper, Betsy, and we got to talking afterwards. She and the rest of First Recon are about to move out to one of those camps by the river - Forlorn Hope, I think. She invited me to spend the night with her - McCarran's got a lot of little hideaways for rendezvous like that - but I told her I couldn't stay."

Arcade dimmed his lantern to its lowest setting and put it aside, lying down on his own sleeping bag. "Did you want to?"

"Yes and no. I miss being physically close to someone and it probably would have been... educational. But I'm afraid I would freak out and embarrass myself. Never mind the fact that despite the fact that they all terrify me, I think I'm actually more interested in men than women. Women definitely feel safer to me, though, even terrifyingly tough women like Betsy, but I'll probably die as celibate as a monk."

"As long as you're open with a potential partner about your reservations, it's okay to experiment. When you're ready to, anyway." He felt uncomfortable giving advice on this subject to a woman half his age, but felt like he should say something positive.

"Oh? Have you ever 'experimented' with women, Arcade?" She was being sarcastic, but still sounded slightly curious.

"No."

"Okay then." He heard her roll over in the dark. "Enough awkward conversation. Good-night."

Arcade had only been to Jacobstown once, as a part of a cordial delegation to the mutants there. There was very little the Followers had to offer Marcus's community, and vice-versa, but Julie believed in touching base with all potential allies, even non-humans. Before having his life turned upside-down, first by the Legion and then by the Courier, he had been considering taking a sabbatical year to work with Dr. Henry - not because he was particularly interested in the scientist's narrow and peculiar applications of his speciality, but because he respected the man's brilliance and wanted a change of scenery. Alone among his father's former comrades, Henry had left the Enclave voluntarily, choosing to pursue his research in exile even before the oil rig was destroyed. To Arcade, this stood as a good reminder that a person's choices were more important than any so-called birthright.

He remembered from painful experience that the mountainous road had been quite cold at night, even during the summertime, and he had packed accordingly, encouraging the Courier do the same. She had chosen to wear her serape as a cloak, which, in combination with her cowboy hat, made her look the part of a vengeful desperado from some old holovid. All she needed was a six-shooter in place of the laser pistol and the look would be complete. He chose not to pass this observation on, though; he wasn't sure how she'd take the comparison.

It was hard to keep up with his friend's mood lately. She was almost never her old, carefree self anymore, and when she broke her brooding silence to talk, to was to grill him with serious, direct questions about medicine, military strategy, and history rather than proposing open-ended ethical discussions or light-hearted hypothetical scenarios. If he suggested a chapter of a novel before bed, she only shook her head and said that she was too tired. It was like living with an intense, demanding student who always seemed angry and impatient about something or another. She rejected speculation about the non-immediate future, and every off-topic conversation came back to, "I don't have time to think about that right now" or "What does that have to do with fighting the Legion?" It
was as if the easy-going, happy girl he'd eaten tamales with the previous month had remained back at the ghoul's house, while a driven stranger had come back to Freeside with him. It wasn't that simple - he certainly saw traces of her old self from time to time - but it was clear the affectation, whether deliberate or unconscious, was her way of coping with the stress she was under.

Now, though, six hours out from Westside and only just beginning the two-day climb through the mountains, the woman beside him seemed to be relaxing slightly for the first time in weeks, especially in the days since her latest encounter with the Legion and Vulpes Inculta. As if she was reading his thoughts, she voiced his own concerns aloud to him. "I've been a bit of a monomaniac lately, haven't I Arcade? I'm sorry I've been rude to you. Really. I care about you more than anybody else, but feelings - mine or yours - don't really have a role to play in the mode I'm in right now."

"You've become pretty single-minded," he agreed. "I can't exactly blame you for doing whatever you need to get through the day, but it is frustrating being frozen out of whatever's going on in that head of yours."

"Sorry," she said again, adjusting her pack and her hold on the dogs' leads and looking away into the stunted trees just off the road. "I don't really have an excuse. I'll try not to act like that so much, at least when it's just you and me. How are you doing?"

"Me?" He wasn't sure how to respond. "Good, I guess. My life has changed a lot in the last year. I'm playing a more active role in events than I ever expected I would... believe it or not, I used to do everything I could to stay below everyone's radar. For a guy who used to spend twelve hours a day in a tent telling people to go away, this feels strange. I also walk a hell of a lot more than I used to."

"Do you wish you hadn't got involved...?" With me. The unspoken ending to her question was clear, and she looked at him pleadingly.

"No. It may not be clean, comfortable, or easy, but it's right for theorists like me to finally take an active role and responsibility for the res realia we're always speculating about. Besides, it's kind of nice that someone besides Daisy would notice if I stepped off the earth tomorrow. It's like having family."

"I like to pretend you're my dad," she said, looking away self-consciously. "I'd like to have a father... brother... uncle... or whatever, instead of being nobody from nowhere and no-one."

He was touched, but didn't know how to respond. "Well, you're the closest thing I'll ever have to a daughter, though that feels strange to say aloud."

"Yeah, it does. Sorry," she said, for the third time in five minutes. "And I'm sorry if I screw things up around here. Or if your association with me endangers you. Or if I'm actually a terrible person behind the amnesia. I'm... really... afraid that I am. My worst nightmares cast me as a murderer, and I'm scared that they're telling the truth."

"That's a lot of apologies."

"I feel a lot of guilt. I don't even know why."

"Don't. You're giving your all, and you're using the best resources at your disposal to make decisions and move forward. And you're not a terrible person, full stop. I never met the person who had your face a year ago," And I'm glad I didn't, he thought but didn't say, "but I know that the person you are now is someone who tries their best to help people and generally puts others before herself. With the hand you've been dealt, the future is all that matters."
She smiled wearily, still looking uncertain. "Thanks, Arcade. I hope you're right. I do keep expecting my old self to demand her body back, but I guess it probably won't work like that. Can we rest a little bit by those trees? I'm tired and Rexie's dragging. Poor old boy. I really hope this doctor can fix him, and not just because I want a favor from the King. Feel bad for the spare, though. He seems like a nice dog."

"A break sounds good. Might as well let both dogs run free. They're not going to go anywhere."

"It does seem pretty safe here. No other people on the road, anyway."

Pulling off the road, the humans unshouldered their burdens, a great deal of which was the weight of their water vessels, and poured a drink into a shallow pan for the dogs to lap from, before laying down in the shade while the animals explored a meadow between the treeline and the cliffs beyond.

"You go ahead and take a nap, if you want, and I'll keep an eye out for danger. I brought a new-to-me book of Oscar Wilde's short stories that I'd like to read."

"Thanks." She made sure of her laser pistol, then leaned against the roots of a majestic tree, chin tucked to her chest and hat pulled low. Before long, her breathing was slow and even, her face gentle and calm in sleep.

It was a peaceful scene, flavored by the periodic rustle of the pages, the piney scent of the trees, and the distant drone of insects. Arcade soon became so engrossed in his book that he didn't immediately notice when the dogs' playful barking turned to pained yelps. When the buzzing sound became five times louder, however, he started, looking up to see the dogs pursued by a half-dozen enraged cazadores.

Dropping the fragile anthology, he reached for his gun, shouting, "Megan, wake up! Wake up! Cazadores!"

Her reaction time really was impressive, he thought abstractly. Her transition from sleep to shooting took place in less than five seconds, by which point the wasps were upon them, the dogs cowering at their backs. The insects wove in and out among the trees, striking again and again, one landing a hit on his shooting arm and another swooping low and injecting its venom into his thigh. After that, he was down and out, with only Megan shooting, stabbing, and even kicking at the creatures around her. It was too much for her, he realized with deep regret, vision already narrowing to a dark tunnel - she'd been stung at least once and was still standing only from sheer determination. She'd blown away or crippled all but two of them, but these last two drove her to her knees.

Arcade didn't expect the crack of another gun, nor the shimmer of a super-sonic projectile striking the larger cazador with extreme force, pinning it to a tree. A second shot dispatched the other one before it could sting Megan again, tearing away its golden wings like scraps of paper. His vision was almost gone and his lungs felt like overfilled balloons when he felt rather than saw her crawl to his side, fumbling with a syringe, the sharp sting of the hypodermic in his neck piercing through his dwindling consciousness.

She was talking, but not to him. "Help me... please... the dogs. Give 'em each half of this."

"The dogs? You already take some then?" Oh. Oh no. That voice meant unpleasant things and memories.

"I don't need it. I've been stung by these things so many times before... well, three times. I don't need any antivenin this time."
"Uh-huh. Whatever you say. C'mere, pooch."

No. Don't be stupid. Give it to her. Arcade tried to shout through, but his throat was half-constricted and he could only groan. Some of the pain was easing, though he could feel the puncture wounds on his arm and leg bleeding. The antivenin itself was making him woozy, and his thoughts spiraled away from him, drawing him down into darkness.

When he awoke, day had changed to night, and he lay in his sleeping roll, arm's length from a small campfire. His head ached horribly, and he could feel bulky bandages on the puncture wounds.

"Hey, you're awake. How do you feel?" The Courier's disembodied voice came from behind him and, though he was grateful that she was alive and apparently well, he couldn't be bothered to lift his head to see her.

"Mmmph. Water."

"Moreno, can you... I can't really move yet..."

"Here you go, boy." A sinewy arm pulled him up and tilted the canteen clumsily into his mouth. He choked, but drank as much as he thought his stomach could handle.

"Megan... okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. She's a hell of a lot tougher than you are. Both of you are in pretty sorry shape, though. Lucky I happened to be trailing you today."

Ignoring the implications of that last statement, Arcade mumbled, "Good. Can you please help me sit up? And hand me my bag?"

"Take it easy, Arcade. You got stung twice by those things, and I bet you don't run into cazadores very often." Megan sounded calm and concerned. It was a strange reversal for their dynamic. "Did you know that 'cazador' is Spanish for 'hunter'?"

"I did not know that." His world spun and his stomach lurched as Moreno pulled him up and pushed him against a tree. With a rustle and a thump, the old man located and set his bag down within easy reach. Fumbling around, the doctor took one heavy painkiller as well as an antihistamine, noticing as he did so that he still had two syringes of antivenin in his stores. He lifted his heavy head up and looked at Megan, who was sitting against a tree to his left, looking puffy and flushed, crude bandages visible on her extremities as well.

"Did you really not take any antivenin?" he asked incredulously. "I have some. Extra. You could have helped yourself. You still can."

She shrugged dismissively, wincing with the movement. "That shit's expensive. I used two of my own on you and the dogs, and I really didn't need any for myself. Better to save it for a rad-scorpion or something than waste it to relieve a little discomfort. If you get stung by those things a lot, you build up an immunity."

"At least take these." With an effort, he leaned over and poured three white pills into her hand.

"Antihistamine for the swelling, acetaminophen for the pain. Going off of how I feel, you've got to be hurting."

She smiled affectionately at him and accepted the medicine. "Thanks. Trust you to try to take care of me when you're the one who's incapacitated." She swallowed the pills with a gulp of water from her own canteen. "Moreno was telling me that he's on his way to the bunker. Thinks he knows the
whole pass phrase and wants to wait there for the others instead of at his house. I wouldn't mind checking it out tomorrow, as long as we're going in that direction too. I'd like to see what kind of stores a vertibird refueling station has."

"Weapons, ammo, armor, you name it, girl. And we're the only ones left to inherit it." Moreno's grin was wolfish and frightening in the dark.

"I would like a different gun. This laser pistol is not doing it for me. I actually prefer ballistic weapons..."

"How about a coilgun or a railgun? Here, feel the heft of the Gauss here." He handed his rifle to Megan, who examined it delicately despite the lingering effects of the wasp stings on her swollen fingers.

"I like the feel of it," she admitted. "However, it would be a mistake for me to fire it outside of Power Armor. The recoil would knock me back way too much." She handed it back. "I want some kind of heavy revolver. Or another shotgun. I loved my shotgun."

"We'll see what we can find." Moreno sounded distinctly unenthusiastic, but then brightened. "We should get you some armor and let you try out the Gauss properly tomorrow. You can borrow Whitman's suit. She never uses it when she pilots."

Arcade felt strange. Listening to Megan and Moreno discuss weapons by firelight, combined with all the different chemicals in his blood, made the whole tableau feel like a fever dream. He was surprised to notice that the girl and the old man actually did seem to have a genuine connection. More than that: Moreno acted like he respected the Courier as a fellow soldier. It was all very odd and he was very tired. Megan noticed him yawning.

"Go to sleep, Arcade. The two of us will split the watch tonight and we'll all rest well at the bunker tomorrow."
the right people in the fight? It'd be a big downer if he started shooting the NCR troopers just because he forgets where and when he is. I'd be responsible for it, too."

"I don't know. I can ask Kreger to get a feel for him, and stay close to him when they mobilize. Unfortunately, there's not much that can be done to reverse the effects of dementia - after the battle, if there is an afterwards to this mess, I should probably start checking on him periodically. Maybe try to convince him to move to Westside."

Finally, Moreno got the door open ("Dear old friends, remember Navarro") and waved them inside. The emergency lights came on automatically, and somewhere, deep inside, a long-unused ventilation system kicked on, freshening the stale air. Arcade wasn't up to the effort of unpacking or exploring just then, and instead stretched out on a dusty old cot in the first side-room he tried and fell asleep.

When he woke up, some time later, it was to the sound of conversation in the room next door, and the occasional clink of eating utensils.

"That wasn't bad for a skinny chick with a cracked skull. Good to see that the Enclave hasn't lost its touch. You're a credit to whoever trained you."

"Thank you. I'd hoped it would come back to me. I wish I could remember everything clearly - all I know is that I know what to do when I suit up or pick up a weapon, not how I know it. It's frustrating."

"You should get Henry to look at that head-wound. He mostly works on dogs and super-mutants, but he'd make an exception for you, I'm sure."

"Eh, I don't know. Right now, I can still walk and talk, but it could be worse. From what I can tell, brain injuries are tricky things...Hey!" There was the sound of a slap and a curse, and Megan's voice, cold and angry, "Hands off, Moreno. Seriously. I warned you before. I will hurt you if you keep that up."

"Oh, just take it as a compliment, girl. It's not like you've got much to squeeze."

"It's assault, Moreno. Don't touch me again."

Arcade had heard enough, and pushed himself up and stormed into the common room where Megan stood, her arms crossed in front of her, and Moreno was rubbing his cheek. The unnamed dog slept obliviously in a corner, but Rex was tense, tail raised, the barest sign of a snarl lifting his muzzle as he stood protectively between the girl and the old man. Two half-eaten plates of food and two sarsaparillas sat forgotten on the table beside them. Megan glanced over when he entered, discomfort and irritation showing on her face.

"Sorry, Arcade. We didn't mean to wake you. Things are... okay... in here."

"It didn't sound that way. What the hell, Moreno? You can't touch an unwilling woman. I have trouble believing that your fellow soldiers would have tolerated it if you had treated a subordinate like that in the old days."

"We were just talking, Gannon... and she smiled at me... oh, fuck this." Red with anger or shame, he stormed out, bumping the doctor's shoulder roughly as he did so.

Megan shook herself and sat back down to her lunch. "There's a ton of food in the cabinets, Arcade. Nasty pre-war stuff. MREs and shit." She chewed a bite. "Thanks for that, I guess, but you didn't need to say or do anything. I can handle the likes of him."
"You shouldn't have to tolerate that, from him or anybody. Are you really okay?"

"Actually, yes. I think I'm getting better. There's at least a half second between stimulus and response where I can think, 'Hm, maybe I shouldn't punch the dirty old man in the throat.' The fight-or-flight response is still there, ready to come out, but I have some control now. At least in situations where I feel a certain amount of self-confidence." She wrinkled her face in disgust. "Was he always like that?"

Arcade helped himself to a bottle of water from the shelf and sat down with her. "He was always a womanizer - a successful one, I guess, even though he never married - but I never heard of him forcing himself on anyone. Inappropriate words, yes, but not actually grabbing. I'd chalk it up to senility, but I'm not making excuses for him. I'll stay close to you for the rest of our time here."

She shrugged. "It's okay. In a twisted way, he probably did mean it affectionately. We had a surprisingly good afternoon here - took some fancy energy weapons down to the range downstairs and practiced with those, then beat each other up in power armor in the unoccupied hangar for a while. It was fun. I suppose he mistook the comradery for intimacy. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," he said distractedly. "So, you do know how to use Power Armor?"

"Oh, absolutely. Certainly had training with it, along with most of the weapons around here. No surprises there, just more confirmation of what I already knew. I can see what you meant about needing to gain weight to wear that effectively, though. Wish I was taller, too - it's easy to let the augmented kinetic forces send you spinning out of control when you're kind of small. You have to work harder to start and stop the motions. I can do it, but it IS tiring."

"The standard suit is meant for people between 66 and 78 inches in height. I'd guess you're right around 65 inches."

"All of you Enclave people are tall. I'm taller than the average person born and raised in the Wasteland, but you guys - and Daisy, for that matter - make me feel short."

"We got enough to eat when we were young. That's the difference. Vault-dwellers usually have the same advantage. Your mother wasn't hungry during her pregnancy. You didn't spend your early years starving."

"I wonder what happened to my vault. Why would I leave and join the Enclave if things were pretty much okay in there?"

"Knowing you, you would have been bored living in a bunker your whole life. I have wondered if the Enclave didn't conscript some of the promising young people out of your vault in exchange for something - protection, goods, tech, whatever. A vault would be a good source for the kind of humans they Enclave always wanted - well-fed, radiation-free people with a pre-war-esque education and mentality."

She digested this new thought, chewing her food slowly. "So, it could still be there? They could still be alive. My family... wondering where I am... I could actually go home, if I could just figure out how to get there. My parents wouldn't have to be that old. I might have brothers or sisters too. They could tell me who I am." She looked excited, eyes filled with longing and joy.

Arcade tried to be realistic without dashing cold water on her hopes. "You can't know until you get there. Yes, it could still be a functioning vault, but it could just as easily be gone."

"Yeah, yeah... but they might be okay. That's enough reason for me to make the trip."
"Alright. What will you do if it doesn't work out the way you hope?"

"I don't know. Probably still wouldn't come back - the Mojave's got too many bad memories for me to stay here forever. You and Raul are about the only people that'll care when I'm gone, anyway. I'm not sure Veronica's still going to be speaking to me when all's said and done. I don't suppose you..." she trailed off, looking embarrassed.

Anticipating what she'd meant to say and answering the question he'd been expecting ever since she'd mentioned her desire to travel, Arcade said gently, "I'm sorry, but I'm not going to join you on a three thousand mile journey of no return. Not while there's still work for me to do in Freeside. I may not have many ties left here, but this is my home, for better or for worse"

She backtracked so fast that she stuttered, her voice high. "Oh, right, no of course not. I wasn't going to ask that. That'd be ridiculous, right? St-stupid, stupid to ask. I'll c-come back someday to see you instead, when you're old and wise and I'm just old." Red-faced, she stood up, knocking over her chair. "I'm going to g-go... look at the vertibird. I haven't seen one before. 'Scuse me."

He gave her a ten minute headstart, finishing his water and wondering when his life had gotten so emotionally complicated, and then went to find her. It took him a little while because the hangar was only dimly lit, but he eventually found her in the cockpit, sitting gloomily in the copilot's seat. He took the pilot's, looking out through the dingy windshield, waiting patiently for her to speak first.

"Sorry about that outburst. It was unfair of me to ask you to drop everything and come with me. I mean, you kinda already do that. but a week's lark is not six months-to-life, obviously. I didn't really expect... I just hoped... it's just that I have trouble imagining leaving you behind permanently. I'm kind of codependent that way. Usanagi taught me that word."

"There's something to that," he admitted. "But you are slowly growing in autonomy and self-reliance. If you hadn't, you wouldn't be juggling everything as well as you are. For my part, I'd hoped that you'd eventually give up the idea of going east and join the Followers instead. But I can understand that turning your back on your past and the hope of a family is not something you can do. If it helps, I think that you do have the skills to physically keep yourself alive wherever you go, unless the eastern seaboard is significantly harsher an environment than Nevada, which seems hard to imagine."

She nodded glumly. "It's mostly an emotional inadequacy. I know I can survive on my own - even if the only time I actually did that was right in the middle of the worst chapter of my life. But I did make it, so that's something. And maybe I can stay grounded if I take ED with me to talk to. I actually think Raul would like to come, but I know his knees can't take the journey."

"You don't have to leave immediately," he reminded her. "You could stay in the Mojave for another year or two. Lie low in one of the settlements on the fringe like Goodsprings. Try to avoid the fallout from the Enclave showing up at your invitation by falling off the radar."

She gave him a sad smile. "I was actually thinking about disappearing pretty much right after the fighting's done. Save the NCR brass the trouble of trying to figure out how to punish me. I got a stash of radaway and other meds in my cave. Besides ammo and a good gun and all the water I can carry, I don't need much else for a long trip."

A painful flash of grief stabbed through Arcade's chest. He hadn't anticipated saying good-bye to her just yet. "You're not going to check out that mysterious message or its source first? The thing you thought might be connected to Ulysses? You seemed set on going not all that long ago. I remember because I tried to talk you out of it."
"And now you're trying to talk me into it? Nah. Screw him and his weird vendetta. I checked those coordinates against an NCR map in the Strip embassy a couple days ago, and they point to the middle of the Divide. According to Crocker, it's an irradiated hellhole and I really don't want to go there."

"It may be now, but it wasn't always like that. Last I'd heard, it was a thriving community on the outskirts of the NCR, and a part of a major supply route for Vegas. I wonder what--"

She interrupted him. "I still don't want to go. I don't care what he has to say. I know enough to be going on for my own purposes without some crazy courier trying to hunt me down." She was avoiding his gaze now and chewing on her thumbnail anxiously, some unspoken fear in her eyes. Recognizing a sensitive subject, Arcade backed off, but made a mental note to ask Ignacio if a Followers team had been dispatched to investigate the area yet. There was definitely some mystery there, and very likely dangerous Old World tech at play. An earthquake wouldn't have caused that kind of damage - not by itself, anyway.

Climbing down from the aircraft, they decided to raid the armory. While Megan poked through the various weapons stores, looking for the sort of guns she preferred, Arcade stocked up on energy cells and sat down at a workbench to do some maintenance on his plasma defender, cleaning the interior and double-checking the mechanism. Ten minutes later, the girl joined him, carrying over a stout, scoped revolver, a large sheathed knife, and several boxes of ammo.

"I like the Gauss, I really do, but it's just not practical me to lug around a 15-pound-gun, plus a ton of cells, plus a bunch of those little iron bars, especially since I can't use it effectively out of armor anyway. Besides, the spectacular range is wasted on me - that's a sniper's weapon. This hunting revolver is more my style. The .45-70's are rare, but the Gun Runners have 'em sometimes, if I go through the 300 I feel like carrying out of here."

"I see you also found a enormous Bowie knife." Almost a full cubit long from handle to tip, the blade looked comically big in her hand.

"Yeah. I wanted something with a little more reach than my old combat knife. This thing's a monster. I almost went for one of those glowing blue axes, but I think I would feel a little conspicuous carrying that around for the next month. I've never seen anything like those." She quieted down for a few minutes while she broke the new gun down and cleaned it, piece by piece, before reassembling it, slowly and carefully. "Mm-kay. I'm going to go waste some more ammo at the range. I've done almost none of that since the early days with Boone, ever since he gave up on me ever being a good shot. As long as I have bullets to burn, though..."

"Okay. Give me a minute and I'll come with you."

Wearing ear protection, more because of his companion's revolver than for his own, quieter weapon, and firing at the silhouettes on the distant wall, Arcade slipped into the comfortable rhythm of shooting, watching the green bursts smack against the cutouts they'd hung up on the wall opposite. The tiny range only had four lanes and allowed for a maximum distance of 15 yards - no great challenge for him with the wide splash of the plasma defender's hits. When both of his targets were blackened and crisp, he set the pistol down, mindful not to touch its scorching barrel, and watched Megan from a safe distance for a while. She was training the way she'd inevitably use it in combat, firing one-handed; it was clear, however, why she favored the close-range weapons - only one hit in five actually touched the target at all, as far as he could tell.

Finally, she set the gun down and pulled off the ear coverings, shaking her head. "Alright, that was bad, even for a handgun, but about par for my course. Ceasefire!" She stepped over the safety barrier to examine her targets, unpinning them and carrying them back, while Arcade swept what remained
of his into a nearby waste-barrel.

Privately wondering how someone so inaccurate had become one of the most feared people in the land, he tried to say something constructive. "You're closing one eye, aren't you? That could account for... some of your problem."

"Well, yeah. My vision's doubled a little when I have both open. Everything's got a fuzzy halo." She said this casually, as if it was obvious and expected.

"Really? Has it always been like that? Here, close your left eye. How many fingers?" He stepped backwards, testing her vision to the end of the corridor.

"Two. Seven. Five. Three. My right eye is fine, Arcade. The left is the bad one."

"Close it, then. Now how many do you see?"

She shook her head. "You're a white blur and I can't even see your hand."

He was only six feet in front of her at that point, and stared at her, mouth agape. "How did I not know this... Alright, without moving your head or opening your right eye, tell me when you stop seeing my fingers."

After a few more tests, she stood looking curiously at him, a puzzled smile on her face. "I don't know how I didn't notice this before, but you're almost blind in your left eye. You effectively don't have any peripheral vision on that side."

She shrugged. "Well, I could have told you that, but just never thought it was worth mentioning. It's been like that as long as I can remember. No biggie. I know my left side is vulnerable and I compensate accordingly. Always have."

"Humor me and try these on for a second, alright?" He handed her his glasses.

She looked around, wincing at the effect. "Oof. That hurts my right eye and makes me feel dizzy. I guess it helps the left a little, though - it's still distorted, but sharper somehow." She gave them back.

"Nothing in current reach can fix the totally blind spots in your field, but my recommendation would be to try on any glasses you find, looking for something that corrects the fuzziness that you do see on the left. I can extract the useless right lens without damaging it - the Followers keep a kind of library of corrective lenses at our more sophisticated facilities back west. It might help your abysmal aim."

"Okay. Thanks for the suggestion. It's the brain damage again, isn't it?"

"I need to review the relevant texts - I've forgotten what little I ever knew about the effect of traumatic brain injuries on eyesight - but yes, it's related to you getting shot. The eye itself looks clear and undamaged, at least on the outside."

"Fucking Benny. He's the gift that keeps on giving." She didn't seem mad, just resigned, and turned back to peel some fresh targets off of a shelf. "I'm going to do one more round with some fresh targets. Then we should probably find Moreno and try to make nice with him."

"I'll go talk to him. See how aware he is of his condition. I know how to administer a few cognitive tests, if he'll stand for them."

"Good luck. Tell him I've got no hard feelings, but also that I have a huge knife and a short fuse. That's not a threat. It's a friendly warning."
"I'll convey the substance of your message. Might add some friendly warnings of my own."

As the Courier and her companions rested in the old Enclave safehouse, a certain sniper was running for his life through Zion canyon. By depriving the friendly tribals of their military leader, he had tipped the scales in favor of the warlike White Legs tribe, who then routed the Sorrrows and the Dead Horses from their homes, slaughtering those who fell behind and those few remaining fighters who opposed them. Feeling somewhat responsible for their plight, he had done his best to defend the group led by the New Canaanite preacher, Daniel, stalking the band that pursued them from afar and ultimately drawing the White Legs' primary attention to himself. In the days following, he had played the part of a ghost, picking off his pursuers before fading away again, making the more superstitious White Legs fearful of his supposedly magical powers, even as they continued to search for him.

Having done all that he could for the Sorrrows, with no way of knowing if their women and children had escaped from Zion, Craig Boone fled Utah, with Joshua Graham's bloodstained map as his only guide on the path back to the Mojave. He had only ever played one role successfully - that of a killer - and he would play it to the end. He would prepare himself, choose his spot carefully, and put one last hurt on his enemies before he was finished. He knew that Caesar was no longer the true leader of the Legion, that Legate Lanius had eclipsed that role in recent months, but he still wanted to destroy the man who had indirectly taken everything good in his life away from him.

"Nope. Can't." Doctor Henry didn't even look up from the petri dish he was examining under his microscope. He stuck out a hand to his ghoul-assistant, Calamity, and she placed an eyedropper in it, which he used on the dish before bustling across the room to fiddle with something else.

"I haven't told you why we're here. There's this dog, and-"

"Doesn't matter, Arcade. I'm at a very delicate stage in my research right now. To leave it now would be to waste years of progress. I'm so close to the cure for the nightkins' schizophrenia now..."

Even though she had agreed to let the doctor do the talking, Megan stepped up at this point, "Is there anything we can do to expedite your work, Dr. Henry?"

"Do you, perhaps, have advanced training in neuroscience, young lady? Detailed knowledge of nightkin physiology and psychology?"

"Erm, no..."

"Didn't think so. However... since you asked... you do look like a good gopher."

"What's a 'gopher'?"

"My little joke. I mean that you look like you could go for something that I need. Fetch and retrieve. Probably some killing, too. That's right up your alley, isn't it?"

"That's the sort of thing I do, yes," she admitted.

"Then it's settled. Investigate the nightstalker dens in the hills above the community, find out why they've been going invisible when they haven't got stealth boys, and retrieve any relevant evidence you find, including an intact nightstalker head, if at all possible. Once you've done that, I'll be closer to a stopping point in my work. The boy stays here with me, of course. He can help me prepare a neuropeptide solution for the brain samples you bring back."

"Okay, consider it done." She dropped her bedroll and pack in a cluttered corner of the room, taking
only her weapons, med-kit, and canteen with her. "Arcade, can I have one of those syringes of antivenin from your stores, please? I've never been bit by one of those things, but I've seen the after-effects. Didn't look fun."

"Yes." He handed her the medicine, looking uneasy. "As far as I'm concerned, the neuropeptide solution can wait if you don't want to do this alone."

"The day I can't take down a bunch of nightstalkers, even invisible ones, is the day I quit this business. Or die. I'm not worried about this job."

Doctor Henry waved a careless hand in her direction. "Take Lily if you want company, child. She loves young humans, and hates nightstalkers. You'll find her among the herd outside. She's a nightkin with a big straw hat and sunglasses - you can't miss her."

"Thanks. I will."

"Word of warning: do not be on the receiving end of one of her hugs. She broke a bighorner's back last week, purely by accident. Squeezed that creature to death, and then wailed about killing it for days afterwards. She's your senile old granny, but with all the strength and self-control of a deathclaw."

Trying not to imagine a hug that could accidentally kill a bighorner, she nodded cautiously, and went outside to find this not-so-gentle-giant.
Regrets, I've Had a Few

Doctor Henry had written the book about the chemical imbalances plaguing a nightkin's brain and had discovered how to ameliorate the problem with medication, but he didn't - couldn't - understand what it was like to be Lily Bowen.

Her mind was a puzzling warren of dark, largely irretrievable connections and memories spanning her two centuries of life. The long-forgotten human she had been, born just months after the bombs fell, had been in charge of the hydroponics lab and tilapia tanks in Vault 81. She had lived and worked and cared for her family underground for seventy-five years before the Master's Army overran their tunnels, dragging the survivors of the attack to the surface and allowing her a brief glimpse of the sky with her old woman's eyes before they turned her into a soldier. That was when Leo had first awoken - the violent, primal impulses locked deep in every human's DNA, now given physical form by the FEV virus. For a long time, Lily slept in a corner of her own mind, dreaming of her children and grandchildren, all dead or beyond saving, while Leo did the Master's will as one of his elite.

Now, more than a hundred years later, her gentler half had won back a share of its own, partly by the help of Doctor Henry's medicine, but also because the woman she had been wasn't weak, only resting from a long life that had ended in sorrow. Now, she spent most of her time awake to the world, enjoying the sun and the wind and the purpose Marcus' community had given her. She remembered her grandchildren - not their faces nor their names but only their voices and the love she had felt for them. A degraded holotape of their laughter and play was the only proof she had that they had ever existed outside of her own memory.

Thoroughly unmoored from its origins, her mind had largely stopped respecting temporal sequence and reasonable expectations, and had begun to look for the children again. Perhaps they would visit her today, hiding amongst the bighorner kids, giggling and playing; the older ones, now teenagers, would come to see her after school, sharing their losses and victories, or perhaps their results on the GOAT exam. Gone past hoping, she now expected them at every moment, looking forward to their visit with great pleasure, but never really being disappointed when they failed to appear. Time was nothing to her. She could always wait one more day, for as long as it took.

Such powerful hope as Lily had is seldom disappointed - delusion sees what it wants to see. And so it was with the first human, apart from Henry, that Lily had laid eyes on since she came to Jacobstown, years ago. Her granddaughter - a little older than she expected, but still obviously her, was a tiny little thing compared to her, with nervous brown eyes and hair that desperately wanted cutting. Lily didn't see the grimy flight-suit, but instead the blue and gold of a vault uniform, complimented by the ever-present Pip-Boy, much like the one she had worn for her entire human life. She didn't see the fear in the girl's eyes as she approached, but only love and warm acceptance reflected back.

The child's voice, trembling a little, was just as she remembered it. "Hi, are you Lily? Doctor Henry said I could find you here."

"Jamie! Grandma is so happy to see you. Come and give grandma a hug!" She held out her arms, unconscious of the sharp shearing scissors she still held in her right hand. When the girl didn't move - shy, Lily thought - the nightkin stepped forward. The girl stepped backward.

"I'm sorry. I'm not your granddaughter. My name is Megan Martin and I was wondering if you could help me with something."
Very little of that sentence had sunk in through the joy and hope. "Martin?" The mutant boomed. "I'd
forgotten that my daughter married a Martin. She must have, though! There's only so many names
that an old lady can remember, you know. What do you need help with, Maggie?"

"It's Megan. Doctor Henry wants me to go find out what's wrong with the nightstalkers around here
and bring one back for him. A dead one, that is, without a squashed head. I'd really appreciate it if
you would come with me and help me with them."

The eight-foot-tall, purple giant hooted with fiendish joy, making the human take another involuntary
step back. "Yes, yes, the nightstalkers. Lily hates them. Leo hates them even more. Grandma will
help. Let me get my whacker."

Night had fallen by the time a solitary human being skirted Keene and his temperamental cronies to
deliver an intact nightstalker to Dr. Henry. She carried it gingerly by its scaly tail, avoiding the sharp
teeth bared in death, and laid it distastefully on the only clear table-space available in the lab.

"You might have told me what she was like," she told the scientist, not even trying to be polite.
"That was fucking heart-breaking."

"I thought I did warn you. About the danger, anyway," he replied with a scowl. "Heart-breaking
how?"

"She thinks I'm one of her grandchildren now and I can't persuade her otherwise. I just spent the last
two hours being asked about school, boyfriends, career aspirations, and my family by a mutant who
can't even keep my name straight."

"Humor her or don't, she'll only remember what she wants to remember a week from now."

"That's incredibly sad, though. Her family's long-dead and she doesn't even know it."

"It's so nice to see that the famous Courier - and secret Enclave grunt, apparently - has a soft spot for
walking tragedies like Lily. Now, if you're done crying over things that were lost before your own
grandparents were born, maybe you'd like to get out of my way, so that I can actually help creatures
like her?"

Stung by his sarcasm, and not seeing Arcade anywhere in the room, she grabbed a few things out of
her bag and went back out to the pasture. Lily was stargazing, using a tolerant old bellwether as a
pillow. She was still gnawing on a haunch of nightstalker that she'd torn from an unfortunate animal
back at the cave.

"Hello again, Lily. Do you mind if I join you out here? It's stuffy inside."

"Sure, sweetheart! Grandma always likes company. Want some meat?"

"No, thanks. I have food of my own." She spread out a sheet of canvas over the cold, dewy grass
and sat near - but not too near - the mutant, looking up to try to see what Lily saw in the sky. Eating
because she knew she should, not because she wanted it, she ate one of the MRE's she'd taken from
the bunker, cracking open a nuka-cola to make the two-hundred-year-old rations edible. The
packaged meals still had the calories and - presumably - the other nutrients a soldier needed to keep
them going, but they were absolutely tasteless and textureless.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to stay inside on a lovely night like this. You know, I didn't see
the sky until I was an old woman. It's still beautiful to me, even after all these years. You know what
it's like - you were born in the vault too."
"Yes, I was." Only the brightest stars were visible to her, the rest of the sky made up of indiscriminate, pale, swirls of light, but it was still gorgeous. "What was it like, living underground? I don't remember."

"It's all so fuzzy now. I remember that it felt safe. Everything and everybody was familiar. Nothing ever changed, until the monsters came and we had to leave."

"I'm sorry about what happened to you. Grandma. No one should be forced to leave their home like that." She shivered, tucking her hands under her cloak to keep warm. It was too cold for her to stay out here very long, but she didn't want to go back to the lodge just yet. Part of her wanted to give in to Lily's fantasy and play along, but she felt more than a little for feeding her delusions, especially in the service of her own craving for family.

"Thank you, dear. Grandma has seen so much, though. Things I never would have imagined if the Master hadn't come for us." Noticing that she was cold, she said solicitously, "Come sit next to me, Marcy. You haven't even got your Christmas scarf on."

"It's Megan. I'm afraid... that you'll hurt me, Lily. Like you hurt that big ho - nker, last week." There was silence from the nightkin, and she felt ashamed for bringing it up. The old creature had been terrifying - berserk, even - in the caves, but she was nothing but gentle now. She moved the canvas closer and lay down beside Lily, resting her own head again the old big ho - nker's haunch and appreciating the heat radiating off of her newest companion.

That was how Arcade found her, a half-hour later, fast asleep, tucked securely under a nightkin's arm. Only after much nudging and hushed argument could he persuade the Courier to come back inside with him, leaving Lily alone with the stars and the animals and the reawoken dreams of her family.

After hours of answering the brusque demands of the mercurial old man, Arcade had remembered exactly why he had never felt comfortable with Dr. Henry, for all that he was the most intellectual of his Enclave associates, and a fellow doctor of a sort. Patients (whether humans, mutants, or dogs) were never individuals to Henry, only specimens that would respond either positively or negatively to his carefully-considered treatments. More often than not, his specimens lived, but this brought neither joy nor triumph to the doctor's heart; quite the contrary, when the "problem" (whatever it was) was solved, he would fall into a sullen stupor until a new puzzle presented itself.

He had absolutely no interest in people except as a means to an end, Megan, as a non-scientist, was utterly beneath notice. Arcade was only a pair of skilled hands. His long-suffering lab assistant, Calamity, was immured within an unshakeable attitude of tolerance - there was no telling what she had endured to stay and learn from Doctor Henry. And yet, he did get results. Arcade realized with amazement that the old man's self-appointed task of curing the nightkins' schizophrenia would soon reach fruition, and that was enough reason for him to do whatever he asked. There was Rex to think about, for one, and the Dam for another - although he personally thought that the Remnants would do just as well without Henry's help in the fight, Megan had been adamant about fulfilling the King's request.

Whether it was Henry's rudeness or a mutual craving for family, something had driven Megan to the nightkin's side. On the second day of their stay in Jacobstown, she spent the entire day with Lily, helping her to groom and shear the animals, and then card the wool until it was free of debris. On his infrequent breaks, he watched them talking from afar, slightly anxious to see them so close, but fairly confidant that Lily at least meant no harm, and that Megan could take care of herself. Late that afternoon, Henry looked up from the modified stealthboy he'd been tinkering with and ordered Arcade to bring Megan inside to talk about using Lily as their test subject. Arcade obliged, but the
ensuing conversation was predictably tense.

"It could damage her mind further?"

"Yes, it could."

"Why does it have to be her?" The Courier looked at the stealth boy as if it was a live grenade. "Why can't it be someone else? She's good… or good-ish… already. This could disrupt the balance she's found."

"I need a nightkin to test it. Lily's the easiest to work with, and she's close to her baseline most of the time. More importantly, she volunteered to help in any way that she could. If I go out there and ask her right now, she'll do it. Who are you - who've known her for all of one day - to try to stop her?" When she looked down, biting her lip, he pressed the point, "If you think she's 'good,' you must not have met Leo yet."

She conceded the point. "I have, in the caves. That side of her is terrifying. But she is - most of the time - really sweet. And, as long as she's among her own kind most of the time, she can't really hurt anyone."

"Her current stability is the result of the medication I provide for her. My work could prove a more permanent fix for her - and mutants like her. It's an acceptable risk, and a necessary one."

She relented, turning away. "Fine. I'll go ask her. But please - stop the test if it starts to go wrong."

Lily endured the tests with no apparent damage, allowing Henry to improve the Mark II stealthboy model and hand over the remaining steps of the project to Calamity. Megan had successfully talked the hostile nightkin Keene down from outright violence and convinced him to leave the humans be, in exchange for a copy of the doctor's research notes. If Henry was impressed by this act of diplomacy, he didn't mention it, but only grumbled about the deal she had struck. Nevertheless, he was willing to operate on Rex the following morning, replacing his degrading brain with the brain of the unfortunate dog they had brought along.

Megan sat beside the cyberdog as the anaesthesia wore off, stroking the few patches of fur in between the metal bands. "Will he still be the same dog at all? Since you replaced his brain?"

Doctor Henry was in a good mood after being invited to tinker with a cyberdog again. "Only a part of his memories and personality were contained in his biological brain. Most were - and are still - in the robotic part. He'll have a divided sense of self for a while as the memories merge, but since he's a dog, he shouldn't have a crisis of identity. A similar process was attempted with humans in the robobrain line, but, alas, those performed poorly." He turned a clinical eye on the girl. "Who fixed that head wound for you, Martin? I wouldn't have expected any wasteland doctor to even attempt that surgery, let alone do it successfully. Was it the boy here?"

"No, it was a former vault-dweller in Goodsprings. Mitchell. He's a general practitioner who has spent most of the last 30 years treating gecko bites. To be honest, I think he was surprised when I woke up. He got lucky - or I did, anyway."

"Very lucky. Retrograde amnesia, alexia, agraphia… could be worse. Any seizures or motor difficulties?"

"Early on, yes, but no seizures for many months, and my left side WAS weak, but feels pretty normal now. 'Course, I don't really know what normal is," she admitted glumly.
"I have a treatment that I developed for brain injuries, a long time ago. I mainly tested it on soldiers who'd had their helmets smashed and the shrapnel introduced into their skulls. If you want, I can try it on you. It might help get some of those language centers firing again, and stay off the effects of early-onset dementia - that's a persistent problem with people who survive head injuries like that. It probably wouldn't do anything for the memory loss, though."

"I don't know… the thing is, I'm functional and fighting fit now. It feels selfish to risk that for hypothetical benefits that only affect me, you know?"

"No, I don't understand that mentality at all. But it's no skin off my teeth. Just let me know if you change your mind." With that, the old man walked away, leaving her with the unconscious dog and her own thoughts.

"Do you think I should let him do it, Arcade?" The doctor - lately demoted to lab assistant - had observed their conversation with mind apprehension. Not being a specialist, he would never have suggested brain surgery except as a last resort and had never even put it in her mind. Henry, on the other hand, was probably the most qualified person anywhere to do anything like what he was recommending.

He considered his words carefully. "I don't think you'll ever meet another neurologist close to his caliber. Anything could happen at the Dam. This may be your only chance to take advantage of his skills."

"He was careful with Rex. I watched him. There's no… warmth or anything there, but he does seem capable and brilliant and all. I'm just afraid."

"You should at least let him scan your brain. That part is harmless, and it would be good to know just how many fragments are in there and how far the dead areas go."

Having finished the hard part of his nightkin research, Doctor Henry was delighted to find a new subject for study. He scanned the Courier's brain, showing her the results afterwards: a dark region of degrading connections and the culprit behind part of the damage - a tiny, foreign object. Part of Benny's slug. He expressed concern about the location and possible long-term effects of the fragment, and even Arcade, inclined to caution because of his emotional investment, conceded the validity of the point. If the little chunk of lead could be removed, it should be. The Courier had questions, however, and she felt more comfortable bringing them to him than Henry.

"Will he have to take off part of my skull?"

"Not exactly. By drilling a small hole through the already compromised bone under the original wound, he should be able to go through only the fluid-filled vacuum left by the path of the bullet, so as not to damage any healthy tissue. He has a small, discreet titanium plate he'll screw to your skull over the hole afterward."

"Yeesh. I might end up worse than I am now."

"You might."

"If I do end up a vegetable, will you just kill me, please? I don't want to be a braindead guinea pig for that man."

"Yes, if it comes to that. I won't let him experiment on you."

"Both radios are back at Johnson's caves. Last I heard from the Boomers is that their repairs are ahead of schedule, so we can probably count on them. You'll go to the Dam and coordinate our
allies' attacks if I can't?"

"For you, I'll even wear that damned armor. Everyone will think I'm you. Maybe that'll let me off the
hook." His tone was light, but he looked serious.

There was no reason to delay. Already it was late March, and they had things to do beyond
Jacobstown. Megan let Calamity shave her head, glad to have done with the untidy mess it had
become, and watched Arcade and Henry modify the surgery table for use on humans. They had
decided that the skin and bone would be locally numbed and her head immobilized rather than using
full anaesthesia - Henry would be injecting small amounts of hydra fluid into her damaged language-
centers in an attempt to repair some of the damage, and would be asking her questions to pinpoint
these areas.

While she wasn't particularly afraid of dying, terror hit hard as she lay back, head in a padded vise,
arms and legs strapped down firmly. It was too much like being tied down to a filthy bed in a Legion
officer's room. She tensed and found herself panicking despite Calamity's calming hand.

"We haven't even started drilling yet, honey. Calm down." The ghoul stood by, eyes on her vital
signs as she administered the numbing agents to the tissues around the old impact site. Henry had
prepared the plate, along with tiny screws to secure it to the healthy skull, and this lay nearby on a
tray. Afterwards, they'd stretch the skin over the plate and use stimpaks to secure the patch.

"I… don't… like… being restrained," she hissed back between gritted teeth. "This is literally one of
my worst nightmares."

Arcade called over from scrubbing his hands. "It's alright. I'll be here the whole time. Would a
blanket covering your arms and legs help?"

She tried to nod, but her head wouldn't move. "Yes, please."

Calamity covered her up, from her neck to her toes, and it did help - out of sight, out of mind. She
told herself she was safe, safe, safe. She might die, but Arcade wouldn't hurt her or let anybody else
hurt her. She wished she could see him, instead of the dingy ceiling above. The drill that came down
didn't hurt, exactly, but it was damned uncomfortable. She could smell her own bone burning under
the whir of the bit, and prayed that the old man's hands were steady.

"We're in. Only fluid here at the front. Mop it up, Arcade. Good. Now extending the microsyringe,
injecting 1 mL at regular intervals."

Different parts of her body felt tingly and strange. She couldn't feel the tool inside her brain, but it
was having an effect where it brushed against the intact tissues, spreading the drug as it went.
Calamity began her questioning.

"Megan, how old are you?"

"21."

"What color is grass?"

"Brown."

"What animal has two heads and horns?"

"Brahmin."
Henry cut off his assistant, muttering aloud. "Now leading the probe down the tunnel to the fragment. Another inch and an half… and there! Extending the pincers. Keep her talking, Calamity."

"What's something you sit in?"

"A… bed. On. You can sit on it."

"What does a bird use to fly?"

"Arms. No, sorry, wings."

"What do you call something you wear on your head?"

"Uh… I can’t… hair. Hat. She felt stupid and tongue-tied. The correct words were there, but she kept grabbing at the wrong ones. Calamity spoke up, sounding a little sharp.."

"Answers are becoming irregular, Doctor. Retrieve and retreat."

"Almost got it. Keep talking."

"How many things are in a dozen, Megan?"

She thought, but couldn't find a meaningful referent for that word. "I don't know, sorry."

The ghoul said loudly, "She knew earlier. You need to get out of there, Henry."

"Got it. Pulling it into the tube. We're coming out."

A shudder rippled through her body and she felt her jaw clench as white lights exploded in her brain. When she came up again, Arcade was stitching her forehead, looking grim."

When he saw her eyes open, he smiled. "Welcome back. What's your name?"

Her tongue felt like a limp piece of dead meat. "Ngh?"

"Try again," he said patiently.

"Mm. Meh." She felt scared now, helpless and mute. "Cand…"

"Don't be afraid. Some confusion and difficulty is to be expected. You had a series of seizures, and it could take a while for you to feel better."

"Ze?!" Her internal processes seemed okay - or at least no worse than they were when she was drunk - but nothing else seemed right. She suddenly became compelled by a new fear - that Arcade would think she was all gone inside, and kill her, as per her request.

"Dn…Dun…kee. Dun kee me."

"What?"

"Don. Keel. Me."

He sounded shocked. "I'm NOT going to kill you. Now, can you tell me your name again?"

She wasn't sure how long she spent drifting in and out, answering inane questions, but at some point he let her sleep. In the morning, she felt shaky and absurdly tired, but was able to walk to and from the toilet and drink fluids. Her head ached and the strangely-textured skin above the plate itched and
stung as the stimpaks did their work. Both sides of her body still worked properly and by the
morning her tongue had awoken from its stupor and she was able to respond without any delay or
difficulty. Doctor Henry told her to rest for two more days before leaving Jacobstown, and to be
mindful of any neurological events.

"For example…?"

"Seizure, psychosis, confusion. Stroke. If you survive something like that, take two aspirin and call
me in the morning." He actually laughed. "All kidding aside, DO take those aspirin I gave you for at
least the next month."

"That's a blood thinner, right?"

"Yes. That's why I prescribed it."

"What if I get shot and bleed out?"

"It should go without saying, but I prescribe not getting shot as well."

"O-kay… Doctor, I need to know. Are you going to join the others at the Dam or not?"

"Yes. I don't mind charring a few barbarians in the slightest. On the rare occasions I deployed with
the old group back in they day, it was more as a combat medic than as fire support. Total waste of
my skills. But I'll do my part with a flamethrower, don't you worry."

She spent the next two days resting, talking to Lily about her life, and listening to Arcade read a
book he had borrowed from Henry's collection. Now that she had been forced to slow down a little,
reading fiction didn't seem like a waste of time any more. She wasn't sure about the book he had
picked this time, however.

"What kind of dystopic world is this?"

"Victorian England."

"I thought those old-timers had the right idea when it came to taking care of children, at least. I never
imagined they would torture a little boy for asking for food."

"The will and the means to provide a social safety net didn't manifest until the mid-twentieth century,
and even then it was never universal. This book is set during the 19th century, more than two
hundred years before the Great War. If you understood the context, you would understand that this is
actually a very funny book, and wonderfully satirical."

"I don't see the humor in this. The poor kid!"

He made as if to close Oliver Twist. "If you don't want to hear it…"

"No. Go on, please. I like the way they talk. Just - if you can - explain the jokes to me?"

All too soon, it was time to leave. After the skin had healed up, her head gave her no more trouble;
though she suspected she was deluding herself, she imagined that her thoughts came clearer and
sharper now. One day, when Arcade wasn't looking, she peeked into one of his books to see if the
letters would finally resolve into words, but they remained only so much meaningless hen-scratch.
The third day after her surgery was the first of April, and the Legion was expected to make their
move sometime in May. Their time was drawing short, and there were still the Great Khans to parlay
with, not to mention the problem of Vault 3 to address.

Arriving back in Westside late on their second day of travel, they spent the night before travelling back to Freeside with Johnson, who'd apparently stayed the whole week with Kreger, doing odd jobs around town. Arcade insisted upon stopping by the Old Mormon Fort to check in before going back to Johnson's cave to retrieve the things they needed - the armor and the radios. They had barely stepped through the gate before they were all railroaded into helping the Followers. Flushed with stress and looking harried, Julie Farkas immediately tapped him to do a procedure and handed Johnson and Megan each a bundle of medical supplies and food, with instructions to deliver them to the refugee camp at Aerotech Industrial Park. Small settlements, squeezed out or intimidated by the Legion presence down south, had begun to empty into Vegas and the surrounding environs, straining the Followers' already limited resources. Though they left Arcade behind, they still departed as a group of three - since April Martimer and the other scientists were finally done examining ED, he accompanied them, beeping proudly as he demonstrated his upgraded laser on one of the city's giant rats.

They walked through the compound, looking for the ghoul in charge of distributing aid, picking their way through the shantytown that now occupied the courtyard. Everywhere they looked, hollow-eyed men, women, and children watched them pass with hungry expressions on their lean faces. Bert Gunnarsson approached them and beckoned them towards a small shed at the far end, padlocking the deliveries safely within.

"My thanks to the Followers. This will go to good use, I promise. We can use anything you send our way." The kindly ghoul turned toward Megan, "And you, Miss Martin. You look much... healthier, shall we say, than the last time you were here."

She winced at the shame of the memory. "Yeah. I'm sorry about that. I was a maniac back then. I apologize for the trouble I caused. Was that guy okay afterwards?"

"He was. Right up until someone else knifed him in his sleep for his chems. For my part, I'm sorry I had to kick you out."

She shuddered. "It's okay. I needed that. Running out of places to hide was the best thing that could have happened to me."

As they were walking back to the entrance, Johnson muttered to her, "Dare I ask what that was about?"

"Ah, well... I had a chem problem a few months ago, which by itself is something that they tolerate here. Lots of washed-out people here. But when some other junkie made a move toward my stash, I came close to killing him. Over a single fucking syringe of Med-X. It was bad. That was about when I realized I had to patch things up with Arcade. He helped me get a better handle on things."

"Glad to hear it."

Reflecting on the past, Megan didn't see the stone that clipped her ear, sending her staggering and clutching the side of her head. Nor did she react fast enough to the furious whirl of arms and legs that bore down on her, slapping, striking, and kicking her. Before she knew it, she was on the ground, curled up, trying to protect her abdomen and head. The toe of a boot struck her left hand, sending agony shooting up her forearm, before the hitting stopped amid the sounds of scuffing, shouting, and cursing.

"No, Nancy! Stop! You said you weren't going to... help me hold her back, you guys..."
Megan opened her eyes in bewildered agony, seeing a red-eyed woman crying angry tears and being restrained by two men and a woman. She recognized them all from Novac. Heart sinking, she accepted Johnson's help up, holding the hand with its crooked fingers to her chest. The old man was breathing heavily, his lip bleeding.

The woman was still trying to free herself from her companions, sobbing and shouting. "She... she... left us at their mercy. She killed our doctor, stole our sniper, let our people die. It's her fault. It's all her fault."

"Nancy..." Megan began, voice cracking. "I... I didn't mean to..."

"She didn't 'mean it,' she says! Listen to her. Tell me something, Courier - did you ever think that just maybe you should have stayed to help in Novac after leaving half our fighters dead or broken? Do you know what happened after you left? After that stupid soldier left, mooning over you? More slavers. They killed Andy, they killed Manny, they took Price's daughters and murdered him, they killed Tony in his own kitchen. One dozen. Twelve people. That's how many got out of Novac. And it would have been zero without Daisy."

Stunned and horrified by this list of names, she stammered back, "I'm sorry... you're right, I should have stayed. I should have realized how vulnerable you all would be. I'm sorry."

The other woman looked at her with real hatred in her eyes, stringy blond hair hanging over her face. "'Sorry' doesn't bring my husband back, does it?"

Megan couldn't remember who her husband had been. One of the farmhands, maybe? She shook her head, numbly, feeling blood running down her neck from her injured ear and dripping onto her collar.

She stepped away from Johnson, meeting the other woman's eyes. "I can't let you hit me anymore, but I deserve whatever you want to say to me, Nancy. I have no defense. Go ahead."

The other people, refusing to look at Megan, released Nancy warily, ready to grab her again. The woman stepped forward until she stood less than two feet away. She leaned forward as if she wanted to say something, but spat in her face instead before turning and running away.

Wiping her face on her sleeve, she let Johnson lead her away and sat on an empty barrel near the entrance, her mind adrift in emotions she couldn't process - guilt, anger, and sorrow. Someone was talking to her, but she couldn't make out the words and didn't care to try. When she came back to herself, Gunnarsson was splinting her ring and middle finger together and Daisy stood close by, looking around watchfully with her hunting rifle in hand.

"Hi Daisy. Do you hate me too?" Her tongue felt swollen and painful and she wondered when she had bitten it. One tooth was loose. Talking hurt. Breathing hurt. Thinking hurt.

The older woman looked down at her, her face unreadable, voice polite but distant. "No offense, Courier, but I don't have much to say to you right now. I can't imagine you've had a good spring either, but for us it's been hell."

After Johnson and Daisy exchanged some quiet dialogue that she didn't try to eavesdrop on, the three of them walked to the cave. Megan found that she could stay just present enough to follow the others and not trip over things too much, while letting her mind go somewhere more restful. Her body ached, but that was okay, because she was above all that. She found it odd when ED started talking fluidly with her in a tinny little voice that reminded her of a miniature Mr. Handy's, but it didn't bother her.
"You know, mum, it doesn't matter what happens to one little town, in the grand scheme of things. The sun's going to go out and we'll all die. Pip pip, cheerio, and all that."

"It matters to me. We still have a billion years to go, anyway. Not that human beings will make it that long."

"One death is a tragedy. A million deaths are a statistic. Do you believe that, mum?"

"From a purely emotional perspective, it's true. Objectively, no, I reject that - a million deaths represent a million pocket tragedies. What's your point?"

"I do have a point. A jolly good point it is, too. My advice to you would be to focus on only those tragedies that are personal to you and ignore the rest."

"I can't do that, ED. Especially not where I am responsible, even partially, for those deaths. The things I do - and the things I leave undone - have consequences. It's my punishment to live with those consequences and learn from them."

"Good show. You definitely won't be killing yourself, then. Stiff upper lip and all that."

She started to respond, then felt Arcade's hand on her arm and started a little.

He stopped her and made her look at him. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Just talking to ED. He has a British accent today."

He looked at the robot, then back at her. Daisy and Johnson had continued on and were now about fifty feet ahead. They had almost reached the hills where Johnson's cave was.

"Is he actually answering? In words, I mean?"

She nodded and pulled away, continuing after Daisy and trying to hide her mind away again, shrugging off the heaviness of reality.

Arcade kept pace with her. "I'll talk to you."

She ignored him, and looked back at ED, willing him to say something else. She already knew what Arcade would say in a situation like this and she wanted to see what the robot had to say.

"That was rough back there. I understand that you're trying to run away. I just think you should process this outside of your own head."

"He doesn't understand you a bit, does he?" ED said, doing a slow circle around the two of them. "Maybe you and I would be better off on our own for a while."

"He tries. He's a nice person, really. And I like his value system better than yours. You're selfish and cynical. Also, you're a fucking robot and this isn't real."

"Hey." Another dig in the arm. "Come on, talk to me."

She shivered, and looked straight at Arcade, now seeing the rocks and sage brush right through him. "I think I might be having a psychotic break."

"Yes, I think you might."

"This is pretty harmless, though, right? I wish ED would always answer like that."
He didn't say anything, but just watched her.

"I didn't really consider going back to Novac, Arcade. I should have, obviously, especially when I heard that Boone had left. Every time it made sense to plan a trip in that direction, though, it's like my mind had a hundred excuses and a hundred other things to do." She dragged a trembling hand through her hair. "Fuck it. You're not real, either. Arcade is probably still back at the Fort."

He seemed unperturbed by this accusation and didn't try to deny it. "Do you hallucinate often?"

"No, not since I was actively using chems. This is... new. I hope it's just stress and not related to the fucking brain surgery."

"Tell real-me about it later. You can rest and eat at the cave. It's probably worth using a stimpak on that hand when you stop moving for the day."

"Later. I'm not going to stay at the cave."

"No?"

"No. I'm going to take your father's armor and go clear out Vault 3. Violence sounds like a great outlet right about now."

"I disapprove. Real-Arcade would as well."

"I know. Sorry. Can you go away, now? You're freaking me out." She closed her eyes and when she opened them, Arcade had disappeared and Johnson was standing in front of her instead, looking worried.

"You good, kid?"

"Fine."

"You sure? It kind of sounded like you were talking to yourself back here."

"Talking is the best way I have of dealing with things, okay?"

"Can you keep up with us?"

"Yes. Sorry."

An uncomfortable silence stretched between Megan and Daisy, and it was a quiet knot of people that entered the cave. The two old people watched as she made a bee-line for the armor bundled in the corner and began assembling the frame and strapping the pieces on the way Moreno had shown her. It was only when she was fully covered, helmet and all, that Johnson spoke again. "What do you want me to tell Arcade when he comes?"

"Tell him I've gone to clear Vault 3. I'll be there for a while, looting it of supplies and weapons, if he wants to join me later."

Daisy turned to her fellow soldier, "We're just going to let her walk out of here with Israel's armor?"

Megan ignored her and started for the exit. Just before she reached the door, she heard Johnson's reply, "Could we stop her? No. Besides, it's Arcade's armor now, and he's given it to her."

Walking... no, running in power armor in open space felt amazing. She felt powerful and almost invincible - if Caesar's Fort had been close at hand, she might have tried to storm it herself. Unlike
the armor she had tried on back at the Enclave bunker, this suit interfaced directly with her Pip-Boy, and for the first time she could see every status and proximity alert at once, just by looking at the readouts overlayed on her vision. A gecko trembled and bolted at her passing. A distant rad-scorpion buried itself in the sand. Her steps brought her nearer and nearer to Vault 3. She smiled. The Fiends wouldn't know what hit them.

Many hours later, tired from a series of stressful surgeries and troubled by what his friends had told him at the cave, Arcade was walking straight into the heart of Fiend territory, the wild, walled section of the city where only crazed drug-users dared to go. He had known that the Courier had wanted to eliminate the Fiends entirely, and that Colonel Hsu had asked her to find a solution to his Motor Head problem, but had never connected her use of his father's armor with the feasibility of that task - it seemed such a base use of that tool. But it probably would be effective, unless the inhabitants of the vault had heavier weapons than expected.

He met no resistance as he entered the ruins, but the reddish light of sunset cast an eerie pall over the area and made him wary of the shadows. He saw no bodies at first, but the carrion birds guided his attention to their feast - an enormous heap of corpses, stripped of their weapons and much of their clothing, piled in a distant corner. They had been shot, stabbed, and battered, then dumped here to rot. His stomach twisted and he turned away from them, but not before he'd estimated their number to be at least fifty, possibly more.

The vault door was flung wide and ED hovered watchfully at the entrance, beeping cordially at him as he passed. He saw enormous heaps of clothing, mismatched armor, and weapons, piled around the entrance. On a desk in the overseer's office, he spotted a formidable pile of chems of all sorts. A terrifying apparition in blood-splashed armor almost knocked him down as he made for the stairs. It - no, SHE - spoke to him in a way that was probably supposed to be apologetic and calming, but it sounded mechanical and forced. It always did through those helmets. "Excuse me, Arcade. Let me take these last two bodies outside and we'll talk. Wait here, please?"

He obliged and sat down in a blood-free zone, waiting for Megan to return. A few minutes later, she did, stepping out of the armor to greet him, allowing the frame to lean against the wall where she left it. She was pale, wild-eyed and a little off-kilter, tripping on her own feet and almost falling before she made it over to him and dropped to the ground.

"Whoa. Head rush. Good thing you interrupted me when you did. I'm a little... tired, I guess. Didn't realize how long I'd been working."

He looked at her salt-dusted face and dry lips and handed her a bottle of water without saying anything.

She drank it down in a single go. "Thanks. I guess that means you're probably real. Hallucinations don't carry water."

"Were you hallucinating before?"

"Yeah, before." She seemed to think of something and started to push herself up before faltering back. "ED? Can you please close the vault door and lock it? Make it so that we can open it but no one on the outside can."

The bot did as she asked, interfacing with the controls and making the enormous gear roll back into position. When the whirring and grinding had halted, Arcade asked, "Are you high?"

She looked puzzled. "No? Why would you... oh. Technically, I guess. I took some Psycho. But that
was, like, hours ago, before I even set foot in this place. Sometimes it makes me sick to kill a bunch
of people all at once and Psycho makes it easier. It also helped my hand to not hurt so much while I
was punching people in that rig. I broke some fingers today."

"I heard. Have you eaten?"

"Not since breakfast. But I'm not hungry, although I could definitely drink some more water. I found
some that looked pretty clean, earlier, but it's like two floors down..."

He handed her his second and last bottle of water, watching her sip it and trying to assess her status.
Hurt? Not much more than a few bruises, as far as he could see. Relapsed? Psycho was bad
business, but it wasn't her drug of choice. But her eyes were crazy and she was talking a mile a
minute, refusing to look at him straight. She looked scared, and he could only guess what effect that
woman's words were having on her right now.

"I was tripping hard earlier, old buddy. ED was talking, you were there. And that was without any
drugs at all. Scary stuff."

"I'm sorry I wasn't there in person."

"It's okay. Your doppleganger was boring, but he did a better job of talking me down than ED here.
I seriously expected better of him."

Arcade didn't think this conversation was going anywhere. "Okay. Is there any part of this vault
that's... livable? I think you should get some food in you and go to bed. I would personally like to
sleep somewhere besides this concrete floor."

"Yep. I dropped my stuff on a skeleton-free bed somewhere downstairs. Hopefully I can find it
again. I have a hard time finding my way around vaults for some reason. Hey, who said, 'one death
is a tragedy, a million are a statistic'? I figured ED didn't come up with it by himself."

Taken aback by the sudden change of subject, he had to think for a moment. "Uh, Stalin, I think. He
was responsible for millions and millions of deaths himself, a huge number of them his own citizens,
whom he starved by his incompetence or executed because of his paranoia. Please tell me you know
that that robot wasn't actually talking to you..."

"Yes, I swear. I just heard the line somewhere and my sub-conscious dredged it up. I'm not Lily; I
can tell the difference between reality and fantasy." She reached out and poked him experimentally
in the arm, grinning humorlessly. "Sorry. Just making sure."

Arcade shook his head, a mix of concern and exasperation overlaying his exhaustion. "Do you want
to talk about what happened at Aerotech?"

She stood up and walked away. "No. I really don't. C'mon, I'll try to show you where the living
quarters are. Follow me." She led him down a flight of stairs, through a corridor, and then down
another flight. Everywhere they went, blood and trash decorated the walls and floors. Following his
gaze, she commented cheerfully on the scene, "So, this vault is a filthy mess right now, but it could
be something really nice, with a little-... okay, a lot of work. Do you think the Followers would like
it?"

"Actually, yes. One of our chapters in northern California operates out of an old vault. Works pretty
well, or so I've heard. It'd be good to have a secure space for our archives and artifacts, not to
mention an independent power source. It looks like the fusion generator's still working here."

"I trust y'all to make better use of it than anyone else would, so let's do that. When we're done getting
supplies out tomorrow, we'll leave it locked up under a password until your people have the time and numbers to take possession of it. I think I got all of the fresh human remains out, except for Ranger Anders' corpse upstairs, but it is going to need a hell of a lot of cleaning."

"Thank you. It's a thoughtful idea, and I have no doubt that Julie will be delighted to take advantage of the offer. I only wish there had been another way to evict the previous tenants…"

"If it makes you feel better, I freed six caravaners today. The Fiends had been keeping them in a cage, taking them out one by one and using them for live target practice. That's not counting the Ranger they killed, or the free-range Fiends they've been enabling in the area. This needed to be done, Arcade, and I was the one to do it."

"I know. I've just got this semi-mystical belief that killing does something to a person, and you've done a lot of it since I first met you. I worry about the cumulative moral effect it will have on you, and the kind of life it will force you to lead."

She shrugged wearily, leading them at last into a dusty room containing two beds and a broken terminal. "And I'll do more before I'm done. I'm a mercenary, for crying out loud. What do you expect? At least I try to kill only those who had it coming."

"Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement."

Megan spread out her sleeping bag on the dusty bedspread and sneezed. "You had your 'quoting voice' on," she remarked drily. "Who said that?"

"A great philosopher named J. R. R. Tolkien. If we had the time, I'd find and read you something by him."

Megan pulled a stimpak from her medkit and held it out to her friend along with her injured hand. "Can you do this, please?" She watched him work, flinching when he readjusted the splints and stabbed the needle into the flesh near the fractured bones. "Thank you. I'm sorry I'm not more like you, Arcade. In another, less brutal life, maybe I could have been. I can't help but follow my nature and my skills. If it weren't for you, I'd probably be much worse, if I wasn't dead already. You've had a civilizing effect on me, if that's any comfort to you at all."

He didn't have a response to this that wasn't a tired repetition of old arguments, and he soon retired to his own bed, meditating on regret, sorrow, and anticipated loss. Only much later, when she was fast asleep, did another appropriate quotation come to him: Omnes enim, qui acceperint gladium, gladio peribunt."

*"Those who take up the sword, will die by the sword."
Ranger Anders' desiccated corpse was not very heavy and, thanks to the nearly air-tight bodybag they had found in the vault's old medbay, the smell of decay was mostly contained, especially once they were out in the open. They left the majority of their gear locked safely in Vault 3, including the Tesla armor, which she didn't quite dare to wear to her next interview with Colonel Hsu. Megan had reluctantly accepted Arcade's help in returning the Ranger's remains to McCarran. She knew that being seen with her was exposing him to danger, but could see no other way of fulfilling her duty - after all, body-carrying was a two-person job.

She felt rundown and hungover, the aftereffects of the psycho and the strain of the previous day having contributed to a troubled night's sleep. Apart from his comments about the violence, Arcade had offered no further censure, but observed her warily as if he expected her to fall to pieces at any moment. Both of them were tired and pensive and very little conversation passed between them for most of the morning. When it was time to leave, she set ED the job of exterminating rad-roaches on the lowest level of the vault, and locked the door behind them.

"I'm sorry I didn't do anything to help Novac." This came out of the blue as they were resting in the shade of a burned-out building a quarter mile out from McCarran. "I have a hell of a mental block when it comes to that place, but I still could have-... should have done something."

Arcade jerked his head up from the light doze he had settled into, looking irritable and pained. "You don't have a monopoly on responsibility for the lives lost there. I knew just as much as you did and could have anticipated the attack. Boone really should have stayed, no matter what personal crisis he was going through. Now, I don't know what he's been doing, but you have been pursuing a solution to the overarching problem of Legion aggression. If we can't beat them decisively in battle, every settlement in the region is going to get the same treatment." He drummed his fingers on the grip of his pistol and looked away. "I also feel guilty for not acting on what I knew about Novac's precarious situation - mostly for not getting Daisy out, to be honest - but I don't regret the way I've spent my time. Helping you helps everybody. I have to believe that."

Mulling this over, she got to her feet again, accepting her end of the burden as they resumed their halting hike. Neither of them said anything else for the remainder of the walk. They handed the body over to the guards standing just inside the training yard with a few words of explanation, before walking together into the airport, turning left in the dark lobby and making straight for Colonel Hsu's office.

"You wanna stay out here?" she muttered to Arcade, nervously fishing Motor-runner's helmet out of her pack and tossing it from hand to hand. "You should stay out here."

He pushed his glasses up and squared his shoulders determinedly. "I appreciate your concern, but no. I want to get a feel for him myself. Besides, it's extremely well-known that we travel together. Keeping our distance at this late date does precisely nothing, like closing the barn door after the proverbial equine has escaped." He sounded glumly fatalistic. "You can do the talking."

"You're a far cry from the guy who wouldn't even travel with an Eyebot a year ago, you know?"

"Uh-huh. Maybe I should have just run in the opposite direction when you first started spilling secrets. I definitely considered it back in Primm. But then I would have missed out on all of the fun, right?"

She knocked on the office door, which was slightly ajar and pushed open at her touch.
"Come in."

"Hi Colonel," she said, strolling in with deliberate nonchalance and setting the Fiend leader's trademark helmet down on his desk. She heard Arcade step in quietly behind her. "Vault 3 is clear. I'm sorry to confirm that Ranger Anders didn't make it, however. We delivered his body to the men outside."

The man's face was tense and, although he nodded his thanks, he didn't say anything immediately, but looked pointedly over her right shoulder. Megan automatically looked behind her. There, leaning against the wall, was a stone-faced woman in her middle years, standing with her arms crossed and studying the newcomers intently. When she spoke, it was in the terse, clipped tones of a powerful person accustomed to prompt status reports and unresisting obedience.

"You must be the famous Courier I've heard so much about. And who do you have with you?" Megan didn't like the searching, analytic look the woman was giving her friend and tried to downplay their relationship.

"This is Dr. Gannon. I hired him to keep me in one piece. Believe it or not, but his skills come in handy quite a bit in my line of work." She attempted a self-deprecating smile, but inside she was all in a panic. This was exactly the sort of person they didn't want attention from.

"For a… courier… who just took on several dozen psychotic raiders on their home turf, you look remarkably healthy, actually. How did you do it? I was just talking with James about mobilizing an entire unit to dig them out, and we expected heavy losses."

She didn't see any point in lying, especially since Hsu had probably told her everything already. "I was wearing power armor. Most of the weapons that are effective against that aren't the kinds of arms people use below-ground. It was extremely easy. They didn't expect that kind of assault at all."

Sure enough, the woman betrayed no surprise. "How does a civilian find, maintain, and wield power armor? Even the NCR only has about fifty working suits left, mostly scavenged from our eternal war against the Brotherhood of Steel."

"It's on loan from some people I hired to help with the campaign. Sorry, who are you?"

She might as well not have heard. "I know Hsu and Dhatri have given you free rein to do their job for them, but I'm not entirely comfortable trusting an outsider I don't know with military matters, especially not one with your questionable ties."

"If I fight the Legion for y'all, does it matter if I'm enlisted or not? Heck, if you'll let me carry on exactly as I'm doing right now, I'll sign up today. I can yessir 'em with the best, even if I can't always keep peoples' ranks straight… hey, if I'm a private then everybody's my superior, right? That would make things simple. But I don't like following orders…" Nervousness getting the better of her, her voice had grown high-pitched and cracked, with a hysterical note bubbling up in it. Hearing this, Arcade put a steadying hand on her arm, and she ceased her babbling abruptly.

The other woman ignored her unconvincing attempt at dissembling and went straight for the kill. "How long have you been in contact with the Enclave?"

"Who's that?" Remembering what Arcade had said about her poker face, she tried to stay impassive. It took every bit of her self-control not to turn and look to him for help. She wasn't sure how good she was at playing stupid, or if that was a realistic thing to feign total ignorance about.

The woman looked like she had bitten into something bitter. "Wait here for a moment." She abruptly
left the room.

Trying to keep her voice calm, and resisting the urge to run away, she turned back to the officer she knew and trusted, at least a little bit. "Is that Colonel Moore, Hsu?"

His head was in his hands. "Yes, Martin, it is. And for God's sake, please watch what you say. She has Oliver's backing and there's not a damned thing I can do if she decides to arrest you."

Colonel Moore returned swiftly, carrying a dusty electronic device encased in yellowed plastic with a dark screen. Behind her, waiting just outside the door, stood a half-dozen NCR soldiers, weapons at the ready. "Your arm, please, Courier. The right," she snapped when Megan offered her the other one. She shoved the baggy sleeve of the flight-suit up, exposing her forearm, and slid the device along the skin on the inside of her arm, from her wrist to her elbow. The colonel frowned at the display, and tried again. When nothing happened, she moved on and did the same thing to Arcade. Only after she'd stepped back and turned to set the device down did Megan dare to exchange glances with her friend behind Moore's back. To anyone else, he would have appeared bored and puzzled, but she could read the anxiety in his posture.

Moore was frustrated and suspicious. "Where did you get those scars on your arm, Courier?"

"A Legion mongrel chewed it to ribbons a while back, when I was saving some of your boys in Nelson. Ranger Milo and retired Sergeant Craig Boone can confirm." Feeling like an innocent person would express some curiosity in a situation like this, she asked, "What were you doing to our arms with that thing?"

She sighed. "Milo died weeks ago defending that godforsaken outpost at Nelson, and no one knows where Craig Boone is. Believe me, we'd very much like to contract his services for a little 'light recon.' And I think you know what I was looking for."

"Uh… nope, sorry. I am happy to finally meet you, though. What are your thoughts about allowing me and mine to assist the NCR at the Dam?"

Moore actually smiled, though it had a nasty, knowing twist to it. "Oh, we're not so confident about victory that we can dismiss your offer out of hand. One vertibird and five suits on the ground?"

"Counting myself, yes. The Boomers have also offered to lend support, including a bombing run with an aircraft of their own. 'Course, I already told Crocker, so you probably know that already." Megan found herself fascinated with the colonel's calculating stare - ruthless and hungry, it wouldn't have looked out of place on a deathclaw.

"Should we be expecting the Brotherhood of Steel as well?" she asked sarcastically. "Or the Great Khans, leading a pack of feral ghouls?"

Megan kept her voice level, answering in a straightforward fashion. "Elder Hardin's assured me that Brotherhood's not joining the fight one way or another. I'm going tomorrow to Red Rock Canyon to ask the Khans if they'll help cover a few positions between the river and Vegas, but I have no high hopes, especially since I just wiped out their best customers."

Moore started in real surprise. "You have a relationship… a cordial relationship… with the Brotherhood of Steel." Speaking audibly, but more to herself than to anybody else, she muttered under her breath, "Maybe you're not so much a traitor as you are a whore. A hopelessly-naive whore." Megan bristled visible at the rudeness, but Moore ignored her, continuing on louder. "And you're hitting up the Khans on our behalf? Why are you doing all this?"
The simplest response seemed safest. "Crocker asked me to try." That didn't answer the real question, but it had been mostly rhetorical anyway. She wouldn't expect this person to understand why she did what she did. Hell, she didn't understand it herself, most of the time.

Moore repeated the name as if it were a bad word. "Crocker. Always with the fucking diplomacy. He'd suck off Caesar himself if it meant putting off the fight one more day. Alright, Courier. When your mercenary... arrive at the Dam, they'll be permitted to fight and retreat, so long as they don't get in our way. The General will know you're coming and plan accordingly. I can tell you without reservation that we won't be looking to pick an extra fight on that day."

"What about afterwards?" she dared to ask.

"If you're not actually working with the Enclave, you have nothing to fear, do you?" she answered lightly. "I'll leave you to collect your dues then. We'll be seeing each other again, I'm sure."

Megan waited until Moore and her men were well clear of the office before sinking into the chair in front of Hsu's desk with a sigh. "That could have gone better. Being nasty, wasn't she? Well, Hsu? Do I get paid?"

He stared at her blankly. "Paid? Yes, yes... Motor-runner. Take this to the commissary and Contreras will give you the caps." He scrawled something on a piece of paper and handed it to her. "Four hundred, and the job was worth far more. Thank you for bringing Anders home. You're worth better than we'll repay you."

"I'm glad I could help. Do you have any advice for me, Colonel Hsu?"

"Yes. You should run for the hills and never look back. Right now. Tell your friends to lie low for a while," he added, with a meaningful look at the doctor, who was still standing behind the Courier.

She smiled at him and reached over to pat his hand. "I think I understand now why no one thinks you'll ever make general, sir. No offense meant, but you're too kind for this job."

As they ascended the stairs on their way to the commissary, Arcade muttered to her, "So... that cross-country trip you invited me on is actually starting to sound pretty good. I'm not sure I want to be your best friend when the NCR can't find you to interrogate." On the surface his tone was joking, but his voice was strained.

"I'm sorry, Arcade. I never really cared too much about fucking up my own life, but I never wanted to drag you down too." Though she felt real regret for her role in his situation, she couldn't help but feel a warm glow of hope inside her when she thought about him traveling east with her.

"It's okay... well, not okay, exactly, but I don't blame you for this. Part of me knew things were going to change as soon as I met you, and that only became clearer the more I learned about you. Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt. 'The fates lead the willing but drag the unwilling.' Seneca."

"You should probably be a little mad, y'know..." They passed a pair of soldiers coming from the concourse and she fell silent until they passed. "Lucky thing you found that chip already, huh? Also that I stashed it, along with most of my other personal items, back at the cave. Also that you don't have one in your arm. God, that could have been bad..."

He just sighed, his shoulders drooping as if they bore an invisible weight. "Do you have any particular plans for these caps?"

"Not really. I was going to keep back fifty or so for food, and give the rest to Julie. Why? Do you
"I was thinking that we should build up your little cache out in the hills - more stimpaks, radaway, miscellaneous medical supplies, and water - so that flight, temporary or otherwise - becomes something feasible, whether that's just you or if I have to make myself scarce as well. If it's just you - which scares me to death the more I think about it - then I want to make doubly-sure you have what you'll need."

"Sure. That's a good idea." She couldn't stop herself from asking for clarification, but tried to keep the excitement out of her voice. "Would you really come with me if you couldn't stay in Freeside?"

The look he gave her told her that her joy was not well-concealed. "I don't want to leave, but it's a choice between exile and death or imprisonment, I'll choose exile. Stop pretending that this doesn't make you happy, if you don't mind."

She cringed at the rebuke and cast around for another alternative. "I thought you might... you know... go to Jacobstown or something. At least then you'd be close to your old friends."

"Oh, that's tempting. Spend the next five years with Doctor Henry as my only human companionship? No thanks. If you get me outed, my dear, then you're stuck with me right up until you lead both of us off a cliff somewhere in Colorado. And even then, if I die and you don't, I'll haunt you forever." His tone rose and sharpened until even she picked up on a current of genuine anger there.

She looked up at him, crestfallen. "You are mad."

"Yes. Yes I am. Mad enough with you and the NCR that I would like to be alone with my own demons for a while. They might be screaming terrified obscenities in the corner of my mind, but at least they're mine to compartmentalize. Don't talk to me for a while."

Laden with medical supplies and other equipment, including rope, extra water purification tablets, and a foil emergency blanket, they stopped by Megan's cave in the hills to drop everything off before returning to the vault. What conversation they exchanged was restricted to mere necessities, and she kept biting her tongue to keep from re-hashing other subjects again.

"Alright," she began politely, after they had eaten a silent meal in different corners of the room, "I'm going to take half these weapons to the Gun Runners to sell, and the other half to the Kings, to better arm themselves and other defenders they recruit. This will take several trips, so I'll be mostly out of your hair for the rest of the day."

He answered sarcastically. "Great. More guns in Freeside." Switching to a more courteous, yet distant tone, he asked, "What about all of this clothing? The Followers go through a lot of cloth for bandages, you know, and there's never enough of it - if you have no other plans for it, I'd like to take the cleanest items back to the Fort for sterilization and bleaching."

While sobering up at the Fort and aiding the Followers in-between jobs, Megan had spent a lot of time preparing bandages for them and had set aside the Fiends' clothing for this exact purpose. "Go for it."

"And... now for the elephant in the room. Actually, the enormous pile of chems in the room." He gestured to the mixed jumble of syringes, bottles, and ampules. "What are you going to do with all of this?" He folded his arms and looked at her sternly, a cynical glint in his eye.

She fidgeted uncomfortably, opting not to mention that she'd already secured a few doses each of
psycho, jet, and buffout for personal emergencies, leaving only the med-X alone for the sake of self-preservation. "I don't want to contribute to anyone's misery by selling drugs. If the Followers have a use for any part of it, however, y'all are welcome to it."

He nodded in slightly surprised approval. "We can sterilize and re-use the sharps, of course, and maybe use the psycho and buffout to manufacture useful drugs, if it's of good quality to begin with. I'd like to take what my colleagues and I can use back to the Fort and destroy the rest. I'll sort through it while you're gone so you don't have to."

Feeling guilty for the deception, but thankful for his thoughtfulness, she picked up her revolver, hoisted her first load of weapons to sell, and prepared to leave. "Sounds good. I'll leave you alone now."

He called after her, sounding more like his usual self. "Watch your back out there. If there are any Fiends left, they won't be happy with you."

Arcade spent a long afternoon working through a storm of his own neuroses, poking through the vault all the while and finding a surprisingly useful range of tools and resources under a grimy layer of raider filth. Finding the work of cleaning cathartic in a way, he began taking loads of the worst debris outside to dump in a corner of the courtyard far removed from the stinking pile of corpses. After trying futilely to budge a splintered heap of broken desks and chairs that were obstructing a hallway, he climbed back upstairs to where the Courier had parked Gannon Sr.'s armor. She had dutifully cleaned it of the blood and dust before he'd even woken up that morning, polishing the viewing lenses until they shone. It looked just as he remembered it from his early boyhood, on the rare occasions when he saw the fighting men and women of Navarro in full battle-dress, preparing for some terrible mission or another. Fearfully, almost reverently, Arcade opened up his father's armor and climbed inside.

The sensation of immediately misjudging his own momentum and walking straight into the wall reminded him that it had been a LONG time - at least fifteen years - since he'd worn power armor. Thankful that no one - especially not his old teacher, Kreger - had been around to see his error, he stood up again and practicing moving, slowly and carefully. Small movements translated into big ones with the help of the kinetic assists in the suit - with a good power source like the working fusion generator built into the Tesla suit, a soldier could run and fight for hours before exhaustion set in. And now he was using it to move furniture. Shaking his head, he stomped downstairs, feeling ill-at-ease as a walking tank, and not at all like he was finally participating in his supposed birthright - a birthright that had finally come home to haunt him on the eve of his fortieth birthday.

It took two days for them to haul the best of the movable supplies from Vault 3 to Freeside as it seemed a bad idea to wear the armor openly in the city. Much of the unspoiled food, Julie immediately sent to the camp at Aerotech, although she had to find new deliverers - Megan adamantly refused to set foot in that place again, afraid that Nancy would confront her again. The food collection program she had funded was going fairly well - the Fort, the King's School, and even Westside had the stores to help their population ride out the instability that they anticipated in the time to come. As expected, the Kings were appreciative of the boost to their on-hand weaponry and agreed to help organize defenses should it become necessary. Reunited with his beloved Rex, the grateful gang leader had no objection to helping the Followers coordinate relief.

While the Courier hadn't set foot in the Lucky 38 since her confrontation with Benny, April Martimer and Emily Ortiz had spent much of the Spring sequestered in the casino, wrestling with Yes Man's programming until they were fairly confident that his more adaptive routines had been neutered into submission. He would now do no more than maintain non-violent order, as House always had, using the upgraded secuiritrons as his hands and feet in the world. The Followers were in
an unusual position in that they had ultimate control over these mobile weapons, even to extend their range beyond the Strip if they saw fit; the situation was especially delicate, given that the NCR had eyed the death of Mr. House as a possible opportunity for their own ascent to control in the region. For the time being, however, neither group had allocated the time or the people to changing the status quo, not that such plays came naturally to the Followers. For now, they merely maintained the old patterns established by Mr. House.

Conversations about the future of Vegas had already begun, of course. While Megan made her perfunctory trip to Red Rock Canyon, Arcade sat in on a committee composed of the more community-oriented Followers, representatives from the casinos (sans the Omertas), the King and his advisors, Ambassador Crocker, and Major Kieran, and influential locals and business owners, debating the future of Vegas. Things could hardly help but change in the year ahead, even if the Legion conflict was ultimately resolved decisively. The Vegas natives, the would-be government of the west, and other interested parties all had a keen interest in shaping a post-House Mojave. These were deliberations that the Courier was constitutionally unhelpful with - knotty problems that couldn't be resolved through violence or luck; circumstances demanded, too, that the issues should be tackled by people invested in the future of the community, not rootless wanderers.

Although he had always tried to discuss questions of sociology and government with her, trying to get her to understand their importance and appreciate their subtleties, more and more these days, Arcade left her to her necessarily-violent solutions and focused on contributing in his own way toward the other things. In the wake of the conversation with Colonel Moore, he wondered how much longer he'd be permitted to do so.

Megan returned to Freeside a day after she'd left, grumpy and dispirited by failure. The only success she had to report was the purchase of several dozen of the new homemade stimpaks from Jack and Diane's lab - a representative from the Followers had commissioned medical supplies from them some months before, an order that the chem-manufacturers had reluctantly filled at their own pace. Relations between the Followers and the Great Khans had frayed in recent years, and the Courier's role as their representative had done it no favors - her reputation as an NCR supporter had spread far and fast, as had the news of her role in the virtual elimination of the Fiends. That she had waylaid and killed one of the Legion's emissaries to Red Rock Canyon on the way there comforted her not a little - there were always ways for the Legion to get their lying olive branches through, and their offer was bound to sound better than the NCR's empty promises to the disinherited tribe.

With her usefulness in Freeside at a close, she had decided to take the armor and spend the weeks ahead assisting the NCR troops along the river where - hopefully - politics and appearances wouldn't prevent them from accepting help in the form it presented itself. Though they never discussed it, it was clear to both of them that Arcade should remain behind at the Old Mormon Fort. Her mission was a fairly simple one that she would carry out at the speed of a galloping horse, and with characteristic bloodshed, and he could contribute nothing substantial to that.

With her gone, no amount of thought or distraction could relieve the stress he felt now, and only a resolute sense of duty prevented him from following the last of the Remnants to the Enclave bunker when Johnson, Daisy, and Kreger set off down the mountainous road toward Jacobstown in mid-April. He was alone now, and more preoccupied than ever with the principle fear of his life. Well-acustomed to anti-social and - lately - chronically absent Arcade Gannon, none of his colleagues noticed how ill-at-ease he had become… no one, that is, except for his de facto boss.

Few would ever accuse Julie Farkas of being overly sensitive. That wasn't her gift. Her leadership had single-handedly built the Mojave chapter of the Followers of the Apocalypse up from nothing, relentlessly pursuing every advantage, resource, and relationship that would keep their doors open, all in the pursuit of helping the people that no one else would help. She had no close friends, only
associates, and she demanded and received excellence from her fellow humanitarians. But even she had it in her to notice when one of her doctors was practically climbing the walls with anxiety. After watching Arcade fumble two routine procedures and blow up at a particularly obnoxious patient in the space of an hour, she decided it was time to draw him aside, pulling him into the tent that served as her office.

"Arcade, you've been with us here for five years now, right? And a Follower for almost twenty years?" She was trying not to make this sound like a disciplinary review, but he was so obviously distracted that she couldn't let his behavior proceed unchecked.

"Almost six years in Freeside. And yes." Now that she looked at him closely, she wondered if he'd been sleeping at all. He had a reputation for reading late into the night, but she'd never seen him look so tired. He looked like some devil had harried him half to death.

"We've been lucky to have you. You're a knowledgeable doctor, a precise surgeon, and your recent research has given us a breakthrough that even I didn't expect when I assigned you to the task. But how do YOU feel about the work you're doing here?"

"I... it's..." he stumbled over his words, unusual for him, so quick with his verbal jabs and parries. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly. "I wholeheartedly believe this is the work I was born to do. I haven't always felt that way, to be honest, but recent events have helped to confirm that truth to me."

This sounded promising, but it didn't explain his odd behavior at all. Julie couldn't help but look at her chronometer. She had a meeting with Major Kieran at noon about the refugee crisis and it was half past eleven already. "I'll cut to the chase, then. You're being sloppy, which isn't like you at all. I expect you to be snippy with people, but not to lose your temper with a patient for asking stupid questions. That's inappropriate and you know it. What's wrong?"

He looked down at his hands for so long that she wondered if he'd fallen asleep behind those glasses, and she cleared her throat to rouse him. Head still down, he mumbled something, of which she only caught a single word. Courier. Of course. He had begun to change when that wild whirlwind of a person had first caught him in her event horizon and drawn him in. Even though she'd had a softening effect on his personality, the girl's glaring and persistent personality flaws had obviously dragged him off course somehow. She relaxed slightly. Maybe she wasn't about to lose her best surgeon after all.

"Sorry, what about the Courier?"

He spoke so quietly that she had to strain her ears to hear his response. "The NCR thinks that Megan has ties to the Enclave. They're going to think that I do too. I'm afraid about what's going to happen. To her and to me. Selfish, I know. I'm old enough and philosophical enough to go gentle into that cold night, but she-"

Whatever Julie had expected, it wasn't that. "What? Back up a moment. Why would they think that - about either of you?" As far as she knew, Megan Martin was a drifter, perhaps a tribal fallen among bad company, that Arcade had half-tamed when he was on walkabout.

He looked around the tent, as if he expected there to be someone else listening in, and then leaned in and whispered. "It's true." Leaning back, he continued talking, loudly and almost jovially. "Of course, they don't know that. It's just luck and happenstance. A stopped clock is occasionally right, right? But it will come to the same end in the end. Prison, trial, and death. And she said I was bad at keeping secrets… well, she's worse. So much worse. My God, she is terrible."
If Julie hadn't known better, she would have thought the man sitting in front of her was drunk. But of course he wasn't, just emotionally distraught and exhausted. She opened her mouth to ask for clarification on the subject of the Enclave, even as she tried frantically to count backwards in her head, trying to remember just how long ago their defeat had taken place. 30 years? 40? She had been a young girl, barely school-age, when she'd learned about the destruction of the oil rig, and by then it had been old news. She closed her mouth, abruptly deciding that she didn't want to ask that follow-up question, afraid of what he might tell her in the mood he was in. Clearly, he was in no shape to practice today, however.

"I'm giving you some time off, Arcade. A minimum of three days, more if you need it." She said this with bluff cheeriness, mindful that she really had to be leaving now if she wanted to be at Kieran's office on time. "It doesn't have to be today, but I want you to go get evaluated by Dr. Usanagi before resuming work with patients. It's not a punishment, mind you, just a basic precaution. Everybody cracks sometimes - you're not the first or the second or even the tenth doctor I've sent that way." She stood up to go, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. "In the meantime, get some sleep. Take a day to visit your chess-playing friend in Westside. We need you at your best, so take care of yourself. Please."

Major Polati was a tightly-wound man near the end of his tether when Megan and ED arrived at Camp Forlorn hope. Megan recognized Lt. Gorobets in the command tent, and there were several others she knew by sight from her time at McCarran. The camp's needs were legion - supplies, reliable supply-lines, and better communications. Demoralized, frightened, and poorly-equipped, the men were fearful and surly, and two had even defected in recent days.

With about six hours of daylight remaining, Megan volunteered herself for the the most manageable-seeming job: updating the codes for the radio communications among the Ranger stations in the area, beginning with those to the north. There was one thing she needed to establish first, however…

"Power armor?" Polati said with a distracted frown. "No, we can't give you power armor. We don't even have any. Almost no one does in the Mojave does. Not us, anyway."

She hastened to explain. "No, no, see - I brought some of my own. I just want permission to wear it, and to let y'all know first. It's pretty intimidating-looking, and I didn't want to cause a panic."

He scratched his head, confused. "Is it the style the Brotherhood uses? The T-forty-or-fifty-whatevers? We're used to seeing those, at least those of us from California are."

"No, it's more like what pre-war special ops would wear. Here, I'll show you."

Unpacking her heavy burden, she quickly assembled and donned the suit, saving the helmet for last. "Like this. I plan to pretty much live in this armor for the next month or so, so I wanted to get this out of the way right off the bat."

By this point, she had the attention of everyone in HQ. Corporal Sterling turned a troubled gaze over her. Voice quavering, the old man said, "That's Enclave armor, that is. Doesn't matter if you've covered up the insignia - I recognize it from when I was sent against them as a fresh-faced kid. Where did you-"

She interrupted him. "Let's stick with 'pre-war special ops,' alright?"

"Doesn't matter what you call it," the old man continued doggedly. "I know what that is. And that eyebot. Who the hell are you?"
Polati broke in, "That's enough, Sterling. Fine, Courier. Wear what you want. The perimeter guard will know what to expect. Reyes will send a wire out to the Ranger camps to let them know you're coming."

Trotting along the shore of the lake an hour later, Megan had cause to be thankful she had worn the armor - swarming cazadores had attacked her, at least eight at the same time, but they only blunted their stings on her metal sides. With the help of ED's upgraded laser, she dispatched them easily without even drawing her gun, cuffing the insects as they tried to dive-bomb her. The pace she was keeping was another boon - it would have been impossible for her to maintain a steady run for more than twenty minutes, but as it was she made very good time.

Business at Delta and Alpha went smoothly, but somehow Ranger Tilden at Station Bravo had NOT received word of her approach, but what could have been a tense situation was defused fairly quickly when she loudly identified herself and her mission, hands raised to the sky.

Having delivered the new code, and agreeing to haul thirty pounds of extra ammo back to camp, she pulled off her helmet and tried to cool off for a moment with some water. The fan on her back was doing a pretty good job of keeping the heat from the reactor away from her skin, but even mild exertion over time made the enclosed space of the suit very warm. Splashing a handful of the precious liquid on her face, she didn't see the woman who walked up to her at first.

"I thought I'd come meet the boogie man I had in my sights a minute ago. What a surprise. I counted you dead a long, long, long time ago. You're the Courier who's been making so many waves?"

Blinking drops of water from her eyes, Megan looked up. The shades, the hat, the white skin… yes, that was familiar. "Hi Ghost."

"Megan, right? I didn't think I'd see you again after you and that doctor left for Novac. Did you ever connect with Boone?"

"Yes. Thank you for that. We travelled together for some time before we parted ways. He taught me how to become someone who could actually make it out here. Even though he has serious issues of his own, he helped me a lot. Taught me to fight."

The pale woman nodded knowingly. "I'm guessing things didn't work out so well in the end. He's a hard man to love, or even be close to. And I say that as someone who dated him long before Bitter Springs and Carla."

"Actually… I'm the hard one to love, I guess. The final break was on me."

Ghost contemplated her for a moment, and Megan looked away. "Well, I'll let you be getting on. It'll be dark soon and Forlorn Hope is a hell of a step from here."

"Oh, I can do it in less than an hour in this. Hey, Ghost-"

"Yeah?"

"I never thanked you properly for that shower, back at the Mojave Outpost. It was a really kind gesture, and I still appreciate it."

Hat and shades nodded to her. "No problem. We girls have to stick together out here. Take care."

"You too."

She slung the ammo bag over her back and set off again, weary of the effort and beginning to feel
hungry. The uneven weight made it slightly harder to balance at a full run, and she found herself stumbling on the rocky slopes around the camp. It was full dark by the time she arrived back at Forlorn Hope.

She set the bag down in front of the quartermaster, slowly packed the suit down to a flat parcel again, and dragged herself slowly back to the infirmary.

A cheerful voice greeted her as she stepped through the door. "Well hi there, sweetheart. I haven't seen you since Boulder City, when you and that nice old ghoul talked those Khans down and saved our bacon."

"Hi Dr. Richards. Major Polati implied I could bunk in here, but I wanted to clear that with you first, obviously."

"Sure. You can have that cot by the door tonight, unless we get ten more patients right away. Just stick your stuff under there and no one will bother it. I'm here most of the time anyway."

Accustomed to powered movement, her arms and legs felt like they were on invisible springs, jangling back and forth. She put her pack and her armor away, chaining the latter to the frame of the cot with a small combination lock for good measure, jaws working as she chewed through a strip of jerky. She also had a small bag of mixed grains somewhere...

The rustling of the tent flap made them both look up. A scrawny kid in a muffler and glasses poked his head in. The youngest member of First Recon, Ten-of-Spades, seemed an unlikely choice for a messenger, but he continued anyway, "H-h-hey, Doc. W-w-we're g-getting a p-poker g-game t-together in the officers' t-tent. W-want in? T-twenty c-caps to p-play. B-bitter-r-root s-smuggled in a c-case of b-beer. Th-three c-caps a b-bottle." He caught sight of the newcomer. "F-friends are w-w-welcome, if th-they're g-got the c-cash."

Dr. Richards looked up, shrugging cheerfully. "I'm always up for a little distraction. What about you, Megan?"

"Sure. Give me a minute, Ten. I'm in." Megan stuffed a handful of parched corn into her mouth and went rooting around in her pack until she'd found her money bag. Still chewing the crunchy kernels, she replaced her pack and swallowed with difficulty.

In addition to Ten-of-Spades, most of First Recon - including Bitter-root, Betsy, and Gorobets, had shown up, along with the camp's tech sergeant, Maria Reyes.

"Yes! Another woman. Like the haircut, girl. Did you enlist when I wasn't looking?" Betsy rubbed the stubble on her head affectionately when she sat down on the end of the crowded bench beside her.

"Got it buzzed just for you, Betsy," she answered lightly, accepting a beer from Bitter-root with thanks, vowing that her first drink would be her last tonight. "Well, you and some light brain surgery."

Gorobets interrupted the various conversations in the room with his voice of command. "Alright everybody. Seven's about the most we can fit in here, so let's get started. The game is Texas Hold'em. One-cap ante. Keep it nice." He dealt and the game began.

The snipers had an advantage, Megan thought, in that most of them were still wearing their sunglasses, even at night. Still, the eyes weren't everything and within the first hour, Ten and Bitter-root were both out of caps, though they hung around to watch and drink, and she was about twenty
During a lull in the game, while those who desired to refreshed their drinks, Reyes looked across the table with a friendly smile. "Thanks for delivering those radio codes today, Martin. Did everything seem okay along the way?"

"Quiet as I could ask for. Nothing worse than cazadores. I'll do the rest - except for Foxtrot, if you don't mind - tomorrow."

"C-c-cazadores are b-bad enough," objected Ten-of-Spades. "I'd r-rather m-meet a d-dozen L-legion in the f-field than a d-dozen of th-those b-bugs."

"They're almost beneath notice in power armor," she explained, feeling self-conscious when the whole room turned interested eyes on her. "I don't think any number of them would be a serious issue."

"Funny you should mention that," Gorobets began, a little looser than usual now that he was on his third drink. "There's no betting pool on this as far as I know, but there's a lot of ambient curiosity around camp about that armor of yours. Sterling swears it's Enclave issue, others think you're a rogue Brotherhood paladin, and Ten here reckons you're a pre-war soldier that Mr. House was keeping in cryo-sleep."

"Let's go with that last one," she suggested calmly. "It seems the least dangerous rumor to propagate. In all seriousness, y'all, I'm really just here to help and my various adventures have earned me some really fancy toys. And you know what they say about gift horses."

"That there might be Trojans inside?" Dr. Richards remarked with a crooked smile.

She glared at him. "No, that you shouldn't look them in the mouth… oh, never mind. Whose deal is it?"

The game progressed, with Richards and Reyes dropping out, leaving Megan, Betsy, and Gorobets, each with a large pile of caps in front of them. By now it was past ten and, being too tired to care, she resolved to go all-in soon, regardless of the cards she was dealt. She had done well so far only because of good luck and poor competition - by playing unpredictably and changing her betting style erratically from hand-to-hand, she had stayed a step ahead of the better, more consistent players. Leaving abruptly with the caps she had won - especially at a time considered early by most - would be bad form.

Hiding a yawn, she watched as Betsy dealt the last round of hole cards. She peeked at hers - the four and seven of hearts. It wasn't a great hand to make a last stand on, but what the hell. The first four cards of the flop yielded no pairs for her hand, but did reveal both the five and the six of hearts, along with the ace of clubs and the ace of diamonds. Everybody else seemed to like their cards, or pretended to, bidding confidently, and she responded in kind. When she saw the last card - the eight of hearts - she smiled inwardly and pushed the last of her caps forward. By the final bid, there were about a hundred and fifty caps showing, and everybody was all-in except Betsy, and even she only had a handful held back.

To her right, Gorobets put a pair of sixes down with a grin. "Full house. Let's see what you've got, Corporal."

"Ha! Not bad, but I've got you beat." Betsy threw a pair of aces on the table and reached for the caps. "Four of a kind. There's no way you can top that, Martin."
Megan stopped her with a gesture. "Not so fast. With that last card showing, I have a straight flush. Which makes me the winner." She thought. "I think. Right? Straight flush beats four of a kind? Even four aces?"

Betsy huffed in exasperation. "You little minx… you bid everything on precisely nothing, and you can't even remember the rules. You got that straight on the last card. Are you cheating?"

"You dealt that one, Betsy," she reminded her. "I was just tired. And lucky. Decided I wanted to go to bed after the hand. Rich or poor, it didn't matter. I'll take my winnings to go now."

"Aw, no chance to win some of that back?"

"Nope." She stood up and scooped the whole mess into her bag. "Tomorrow's a long day. I'm running messages to all our camps in the south and hopefully picking up some supplies to bring back."

The sniper frowned at this. "Alone? With the Legion thick around like it is?"

"It's not like anybody except my robot can keep up with me, so yes. I hope I meet some Legion. That would make my day. Anyway, good night. Thanks for the game."

Megan and Dr. Richards walked back through the dark camp, with the doctor turning aside into a smaller tent beside the field hospital. She bid him goodnight, but he called after her when she turned to go.

"Megan, if you see or hear someone acting suspiciously with my supply cabinet… well, they're probably up to no good. Someone's been stealing hydra when the whole camp's asleep, and I think the patients in the infirmary have been turning a blind eye to it out of a misguided sense of camaraderie."

"I sleep pretty lightly, so if anybody at all comes in during the night, I'll hear them. I can confront your thief for you. Least I can do, since you're letting me sleep there."

"Thanks. I just need a name is all."

Morning came too early, especially after her 2 AM confrontation with a blubbery Private Stone. Not wanting to cut the kid loose too quickly, she had let him talk himself out before adding what encouragement she could, sharing about her own recent struggles with addiction. Only after he'd promised to turn himself in to Major Polati did she let him leave and returned to her cot. It was a long time before sleep took hold again, however, and when Dr. Richards came in at six to do his first rounds, it felt like she had barely closed her eyes.

"Good morning, sleepyhead. Any visitors last night?"

"Yeah. Private Stone. He said he'd be turning himself in today, so give him a chance, if you will." She yawned so hard her jaw cracked and she stood up to stretch her sore muscles. "I feel bad for him. For all of y'all. This is a hell of a place to be stationed right now."

"Oh, it's bad. So bad that the mysterious, high-and-mighty Courier volunteered to save us."

She blinked at him, not sure how to interpret his comment. She said, a little testily, "I'm not that self-important. If you have a problem with me-"

"Sorry. My cynicism gets away from me sometimes. You seem like a decent type for the most part, but you are a hard one to read… your background, your motivations, and your allegiances are all
pretty obscure. No one knows what to make of you, except to hope you don't stop doing what you're
doing."

She laughed bitterly. "Oh, I can imagine the stories they tell. That they're going to tell, when I'm
gone. Do you want to know something true about me, Dr. Richards?"

He looked ashamed. "Only if you want to share it. I shouldn't have prodded."

"For all practical purposes, I was born less than a year ago. All my relationships, memories, and
beliefs got an abrupt reset when some two-bit casino boss shot me in the head for a package I
happened to be carrying. My background's a mystery, even to me, my motivations are simplistic to
the point of being childish, and my allegiances are more to people and principles than to factions,
which makes them... muddled." Pulling her helmet on and checking the seals, she mumbled, "I've
GOT to let this air out next time. Phew." Aloud, she said only, "See you later, Dr. Richards."

"Bye. Don't die. Hey, what kind of armor is that?"

She just waved at him and left.

Days passed in a comfortable rhythm of running messages and supplies, occasionally escorting
personnel from camp to camp, and skirmishing almost daily with Legion patrols. It gave her a grim
sense of satisfaction to see and hear their terror when she ran across them and witness their desperate
attempts to devise a strategy to meet her rush. Bullets pinged off harmlessly and machetes were an
almost laughable annoyance. On one instance, early on, a lucky legionary landed a grenade near her
feet and the resulting concussion-wave made her stumble, but she recovered quickly and finished the
unfortunate man with her Bowie knife.

She had never allowed even one to escape, but somehow word was spreading, even to Legion ears.
A week and a half after taking on this eastern patrol, now well-acquainted with every camp from
Bravo to Cottonwood and a welcome sight to the men and women stationed there, ED alerted her to
a small contingent of Legion soldiers equipped for recon - dress muted from reds to browns and
machetes set aside in favor of knives and conventional firearms. The disguise didn't fool her,
however - something about the way they moved told her this was no group of smugglers or hunters.
They were retreating to the river when she spotted their column of five on her way down the
winding paths from the doomed Camp Guardian. Leaping down ridges, letting the hydralics absorb
the fall, she cast subtlety and stealth to the wind in an effort to cut off their escape. Sure enough,
when she reached the river, they were already uncovering a boat hidden beneath piles of brush, two
of them pushing it toward the water while the others opened fire on the unwelcome intruder.

An almost delicate tool in her clumsy, gloved hand, her hunting revolver punched a hole in one of
the boat-men and effectively disabled one of the shooters by skimming his elbow. "It's the Courier!"
she heard one of them yell, before she waded in with her knife, striking out with vicious
determination. They didn't stand a chance. Breathing hard and looking around her at the bodies and
the blood tingling the shallow water, she realized too late that she ought to have attempted to take at
least one of the spies prisoner. What had they learned from their foray into NCR territory? Was their
force even now preparing for a move on the Dam? What did Caesar and Lanius know of HER? All
good questions, but irrelevant to the dead. She took the time to check their bags and pockets for
papers, and collected what she could find for NCR intelligence to look over. The boat she rowed -
nervously at first, and then with greater confidence - to the recreation center near Bitter Springs
camp, leaving it dry-docked on the crumbling old pier. An idea was forming in her head, and this
boat might be just what she needed - if Polati agreed that her plan was a good one and gave her the
go-ahead to switch tactics.
By this time, she had noticed a shimmying catch in her stride as one of the motion-assisting servos groaned at every step, doubtless a consequence of her heedless plunge down the mountainside. Between the jumping, the occasional falls, and the combat she had seen over the past two weeks, her previously mint-condition armor now looked like a veteran of several wars - a hairline crack on one of the polycarbonate viewing lenses, the entire metal surface dimpled and pitted from bullets large and small, and a wobble to the whole suit that spoke to serious problems on a structural level.

"Sorry Mr. Gannon," she said out loud to the long-dead soldier. "I can't have nice things." Making a quick decision, she headed inland to Bitter Springs HQ to radio back to Forlorn Hope with an update, delivering the documents to Captain Giles to peruse. Having done her duty, she forced the battered suit into a unbalanced jog, making a bee-line for the second-best mechanic she knew. Veronica would have been ideal for the task of repairing power armor, but some part of her - the smart part, said Arcade in her head - convinced her not to try to seek the scribe out at Nellis, as much as she wanted to try to smooth things over with her former companion. Probably it would be best for both of them, she thought, if they just continued to drift apart. Different worlds and all that. Plus, if the Legion knew that the power-armored terror was the Courier in disguise, then so did the Brotherhood - or they would soon.

Raul would do his best to repair the Tesla armor, and in the meantime the Courier would see how close she could get to the Fort without being detected.
"That's the second time you've mentioned your father. It sounds like he was a very important figure in your life." Toshiko Usanagi had been happy to set aside time for her colleague, although she felt somewhat guilty for having an ulterior motive - perhaps at last she would learn who Dr. Gannon was, really. Five years of regular interaction and co-teaching had taught her no more about him than his personnel file would, and she admitted to being curious about the bookish man who carried a fancy gun.

"Yes and no. It's true that what he represented - stability, security, someone to be admired - has been with me my entire life, but I never really knew the man. He died when I was four." He took off his glasses and cleaned them absently with a soft cloth from his pocket, staring unseeingly into space. "I'm older now than he was then. He's the reason my mother never wanted me to be... a... a soldier."

She clucked her tongue sympathetically. "He died in combat, then?"

"Yes." He didn't elaborate, his thoughts taking him far away. Usanagi tried to bring him back.

"And that left you and your mother alone. She must have been an amazing woman."

"She was somewhat... broken... by the loss, but she kept herself together to raise me. Some of my father's comrades-in-arms looked in on us from time to time, but they were still bleak, difficult years. She got a job as a nurse at a Followers' clinic in the Boneyard, and brought me along with her until I was old enough to go to their school next door."

"It sounds like she, even more than your father, influenced the course of your life." Usanagi looked back at her own notes and questions. "Arcade, correct me on this if I'm wrong, but I perceive you as someone who doesn't connect with people on a personal level very often. Would you like to talk about that?"

He shrugged uncomfortably. "There's not much to talk about. I make acquaintances, not friends. My romantic relationships are doomed before they begin."

"But there are exceptions to this rule... you do date... occasionally. And, while it may be an uneven relationship, it's extremely clear to me that Miss Martin thinks the world of you."

"I care about her, too," Arcade muttered glumly. "Enough that I've risked more by getting to know her than I ever have before."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that I might lose her permanently at any day," he answered quickly. "It's painful to contemplate. Also, she's literally dangerous to be close to. Always finding trouble."

"You don't get close to people because you're afraid of getting hurt?" Usanagi paraphrased gently. "That's not unusual, although it is worth exploring in greater depth if that's something you want to change. But it is... interesting, to say the least, that you've broken a long-standing habit for this woman. Why her?"

"I can't explain why, but I don't have to hide who I am from her. I have... secrets... that I couldn't tell Ignacio to save our relationship and I can't tell you even in confidentiality. In a fit of emotional pique, I half-told Julie, of all people, yesterday, and that terrifies me."
She regarded him with open curiosity now. "If it makes you feel better, Julie didn't mention any confessions when we spoke on the radio. She's under the impression that you were having a breakdown from stress and I doubt she took whatever you said seriously." She was quiet for a moment, then asked, "Do you have a problem with stress?"

"I haven't slept well for several days. She was right to stop me when she did. I should have suspended myself for safety's sake." When she opened her mouth to ask for clarification, he added, a little irritably. "That's a 'yes,' Toshiko. I'm under some strain right now, alright? Personal problems, imminent invasion... pick one. I'll do better at keeping it under control in the future. The work itself is depressing, but I'm used to that. It's everything else piled on top that's been too much to handle."

"Understood. Well, our hour's up. I'm not satisfied with everything I heard, but I trust that you as a conscientious doctor will know when you need to step back next time. Come talk to me whenever you feel like it. If there ever is something you want to get off your chest, I'm a pretty good listener."

He nodded, although he knew he would never be taking her up on that offer. He stood up to go, "Thank you. You'll tell Julie I can go back to work, then?"

"Not just yet. Today is Wednesday... take the rest of the week off. If you can give Julie a convincing impression of a man who's gotten some real sleep by Monday, then you're good to go as far as we're concerned." She walked with him to the door. "Out of curiosity, what are you going to do with five days off?"

If the smile he gave her was genuine, she would kiss a Brahmin. "Oh, get some reading in, and maybe visit some people. I probably won't even leave Freeside."

Arcade had never expected to miss working with patients. However, stuck back in his safe, quiet tent, he found that he did - the bustle of the courtyard beyond was going on without him and he found it difficult to concentrate on the precise questions of proportions and measurements in his plant-based cures. He didn't resent the decisions that had put him back here for a few days, but he wished suddenly that he had something to do - places to explore, dangerous people to meet. He wondered, and not for the first time, just how much he'd changed under the Courier's influence.

When a quick-stepping woman in desert hues pushed through the tent flap, he looked up from his research log expectantly, only to frown when he recognized Veronica. Too surprised to be polite, he blinked at her a couple of times before asking, "What are you doing here?"

Veronica didn't answer at once, but paced a small circle, hugging herself in nervous apprehension. After a moment, she met his gaze beseechingly, and said quietly, "Can I sit down? I need to talk to you about something."

Wordlessly, Arcade motioned her to his chair and sank down on the lower bunk of his bed, inclining his head to fit under the low clearance. He had a good idea of where this conversation was going to go and he wasn't looking forward to it, but Veronica had done nothing to merit discourtesy - and she might yet be a useful buffer between Megan and the Brotherhood as a whole.

"So... I... I've been at Nellis pretty much since we last saw each other. Back at the lake with the airplane. Megan and I had a disagreement that day - she probably told you about it - but I had a couple of months to cool down over it and I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt."

"'Was'? That doesn't sound good. What changed?"

She looked at the ceiling, anger creeping into her voice now. "'What changed' is I spent the last two days being interrogated by people I thought were my friends and family, about someone else I count
as a friend. Where was she from. Had I ever seen her meet anybody suspicious. Had she ever betrayed an 'unnatural interest' in the Enclave."

Arcade felt a crazy urge to laugh at this, but restrained himself in time. "What did you tell them?"

"I don't know that much about her background, but neither does she. I'm not sure Hardin and Ramos believe that, though. I did tell them about the Eyebot, but also where she found it… or, where she said she found it. I told them the truth - she's a nice, kind of crazy person who has exceedingly poor judgment when it comes to walking the line with different factions." She laughed weakly. "I know she's not one of them. If she was, she'd be the stupidest sleeper agent imaginable. Hey… do you actually know anything about the Enclave, Dr. Gannon?"

Cursing whatever fate was writing the absurdist theater of his life, he coughed and answered, as calmly as possible, "Some. I was born in California forty years ago, after all - you could hardly miss hearing about it back then. I know enough to appreciate the extraordinary circumstance of a Brotherhood scribe trying to intercede on the behalf of a suspected Enclave soldier."

She nodded vigorously. "So you understand why she needs to stop wearing that armor publicly and lie low for a while. You can help me talk some sense into her. Make her see why she wants no part in that… legacy, even by association."

He blew out the lungful of air he’d been holding. "Well. I want the the Legion to lose more than I care about policing Megan's choice of allies. I know there will be repercussions - and she does too - and I'll do my best to help her escape with her life. She's already planning to leave the Mojave after the fighting is done with."

Veronica rapped her armored fists together in frustration, spending sparks flying. "She may not have until then. At least two teams of four paladins are already searching for her in the eastern wastes where she's been spotted recently. They have orders to collect her - alive if possible - and bring her and the armor to the bunker for… questioning. Hardin is furious that his new eldership has been tainted by her involvement, and he's trying to galvanize a manhunt as a sort of team-building activity. Because there's nothing like a convenient boogeyman to unite people in a common cause focused by hatred."

Icy fear gripped his heart, and his mind whirled, searching for options. "I don't doubt what you're saying, but I have no way of warning her short of walking into the wastes to look for her. The NCR might, if she's been helping their camps out that way, but she doesn't need that kind of chatter on the official airwaves. They've been making threats similar to your lot, only they're practical enough to want to take advantage of her help before arresting her."

"Why is she doing this, Dr. Gannon?" Tired and emotional, she was near tears by this point. "How did she even know how to contact these people?"

"Please just call me Arcade. And I don't know." Never comfortable in an outright lie, the words felt wooden in his mouth. "Maybe the Eyebot made the connection for her."

Veronica looked skeptical. "I don't think that thing works like that. But yeah, maybe you're right." She leaned her head back and covered her eyes with her hands. "I almost wish y'all had just passed me by that day at the 188, even if the last six months have been some of the most interesting in my life. I am exceedingly uncomfortable with the situation I am in, and that's the truth."

Though Arcade agreed strongly with this sentiment, he didn't know what to say in response that wasn't odd or incriminating; fortunately, he was spared this obligation by Julie's sudden intrusion. She looked more harried than usual, the characteristically neat points of her hair bedraggled and her
coat grimed with dust.

"Arcade, can you..." she caught sight of Veronica. "Excuse me... Monica? Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt." Turning back to him, she continued, "I need someone to go pick up this week's shipments from the Garrets, and Ronte's the only idle person I have on hand, and obviously I can't send him to a bar. Can you...?"

"Certainly." Glad of an excuse to end the conversation, he stood up abruptly, knocking his head on the underside of the bunk. "Ow! Veronica, I need to go."

Veronica looked up hopefully. "Can I come with you? I'd like to help, if I can."

Just as he was about to decline the company, Julie answered for him, "That's a good idea. In addition to the usual meds, we ordered some bulkier equipment this time. Plus, if you take her, then you don't have to borrow a guard and throw the whole shift off."

And that was how Arcade found himself hauling boxes through Freeside alongside a very talkative scribe. Seizing upon a lull in the conversation, he finally broke in and asked, "Why do you like talking to me, anyway? I've made no secret of my feelings on the Brotherhood, and I'm really very boring."

Veronica blushed behind her burden of equipment. "I just do. You're not boring. You remind me of my mentor... well, before he went off the rails and abandoned me and everything my people stand for. You're a safe person to talk to, you're intelligent, and - to add to that - it's not like I can talk about my current problem with anybody else. Sorry to have bothered you. I'll leave you alone once we've delivered these." She was silent for a minute, and then asked earnestly, "Can you tell me why you don't like the Brotherhood of Steel?"

He sighed, then answered reluctantly, dragging the words out, "They killed my father."

She almost dropped everything she was carrying. "Oh! I'm sorry. I didn't know... I mean, obviously I knew there were losses on both sides. My parents died ten years ago fighting NCR troopers somewhere back in California. It's stupid. There's no reason to perpetuate this war." She cleared her throat and said in a quiet voice, "I'm sorry for bringing it up."

Lost in dismayed thought, Arcade didn't even notice a familiar face they passed on the street as they neared the Fort.

A familiar, scratchy drawl intruded effectively into his meditations. "Oh, that's right. Don't even look at the ol' ghoul. How you doing, Doc? Veronica?" Carrying a bag over one shoulder that clinked and jangled when he walked, the old vaquero stood in front of them, grinning.

"Raul! It's good to see you again. How have you been?" Veronica shifted her burden to one hand and gave the ghoul a one-armed hug.

"Bueno, gracias. I came to town to shop for parts. The other chica loca gave me a repair job and a heap of caps to fund it, but I admit I'm a little lost when it comes to the finer mechanical details of this machine. Do either of you know anything about fixing power armor?"

Far away, across the river, Megan was bored, something she had never expected to be within sight of a hundred Legion soldiers. She'd been camped out in a cleft in the rocks outside of Caesar's Fort for a day and a half now, spending hours upon hours lying down and spying on the movement in and out of the camp. Setting down the binoculars, she muttered a new observation into ED's built-in microphone: "...addendum to my last note: make that forty well-laden grenadiers, headed south to
join the larger force. The howitzer is now beyond my sight. I have no reason to doubt that it's operational, and it was well-protected by a full unit of infantry. I can't think of an effective way to launch a sabotage effort without tipping our hand with the aircraft."

She set the binoculars down, rubbing her eyes, which ached from the strain, and continued her report. "No sign of Caesar yet today. As of... whatever time it is, afternoon anyway, on the second and last of this stakeout, my position is still secure. If I should be compromised, ED has instructions to carry the information to Forlorn Hope and play these logs. If all goes well, I'll be slipping back down to the river, back to my boat, come nightfall. That's enough for now, ED. Stop recording." She stretched out as much as she could in her dusty crawlspace, feeling suffocated by the overarching rock above and the ledge below. There was barely enough space to crawl in her hiding place, and her arms and legs had grown stiff from the prone posture. A hole in the back of the cave served as a passable temporary latrine, and all of her food was eaten cold, and sleep was snatched in anxious doses when the camp was quiet in the dead of night. It had been a miserable stakeout thus far, but the information would be helpful. She hoped.

Even as she was fumbling for a bottle of water - the last quart of the stores she had hauled up with her - a distant movement caught her eye and she picked up the binoculars once more. "Begin recording again, ED. There's Caesar now, catching some rays outside his tent. He does not look well. What I wouldn't give for an anti-materiel rifle and the eye to actually hit something at this range... it wouldn't make a difference for this battle, but it would make me feel better. Alright, ED-"

She never had a chance to finish the command. The shot that shattered the relative calm of the half-empty camp sounded as if it came from right next to her, and she threw herself backwards, certain that a Legion sniper had caught the glint of her binoculars. With a hushed whispered, she dispatched the robot, pushing him out of the gap as she spoke, "Go, go, go! To Forlorn Hope. Don't stop. See that Polati gets those reports. Don't wait for me. Fast, ED."

Already there were soldiers fanning out in every direction from the gate, but not yet converging on her exact position as she had expected. She spared a split-second to look through the lenses one last time, and saw that the space in front of Caesar's tent was a frenzied mass of red - the ornate praetorians, the lesser guards, and even the slaves were gathered around something or someone on the ground. Could it be... had an assassin finally succeeded where so many others had failed? Other deafening reports - indubitably coming from a position very near to her own - cracked out, confirming a sniper in the hills. Almost certainly an ally, albeit one who had just smashed her own carefully-laid plan and position to hell. Shaking her head in wondering dismay, she stashed the binoculars and shouldered her pack, forsaking her bedroll, eating utensils, and small accoutrements in the interests of time and prepared for the old fight-or-flight.

She wormed her way out of the hole on aching elbows, blinking in the unaccustomed brightness of the sun. Two impulses warred in her - the urge to escape, to run now and hope that the shooter (or shooters) would draw the Legion's attention with their continuing fire, and the equally strong push to join Caesar's killer, helping to defend their position, and perhaps giving them an opportunity to escape as well. As the first of the legionaries began to scale the rocky hillside below her position, his spear glinting in the sun, she suddenly felt very thin-skinned and vulnerable in the battered light armor that Quartermaster Mayes had lent her. Power armor had never been an option for this mission, and not only because it was currently broken: it was too conspicuous, too bulky, and too valuable to risk losing it to Legion control. Wearing it would have made this decision much easier, although she eventually resolved to try to do the right thing - which, for all of her frequent failures, was still her default mode - and fight for the stranger, whoever it was.

Boone had taken a lot of shots in his life. There were some kills that he was proud of, including a
notorious Legion officer whose long-ranged execution had earned him his first medal. Other shots, though - the volley of fire at Bitter Springs and the shot that had ended Carla's life - haunted his memories, day and night. He intended the bullet currently chambered in his modified hunting rifle to be one of his last… although he would continue to reload for as long as he could until they brought him down. Like Megan, unperceived and unexpected on a ridge below to Boone's right, he had made his nest in the dark. Now, he had only to wait and watch for his opportunity.

This opportunity came just sixteen hours later, when the self-proclaimed emperor emerged from his tent, his bald head gleaming conveniently in the intense afternoon sun. Boone didn't hesitate, not knowing how long of a window he would get. He found his target in the scope, in conversation with one of his officers, held his breath, and squeezed the trigger. *Thumbs down, you son of a bitch.*

His main target down - with perhaps 80% certainty and no spotter to confirm it - anything else was mere icing on the cake. And easier targets offered themselves obligingly, because even a camp in the process of dispatching its soldiers to the front reacts when you shoot its leader in their midst. Like an anthill after a kid kicks it, they came scurrying out, still trying to pinpoint the exact origin of the fire. Boone shot them as they came with efficient swiftness, knowing that *this* was the job he was born for… this was, finally, the good death he'd sought for so long. He had no delusions about taking them all out - there were still more men in this camp than he had bullets and, even if they couldn't easily hit him at his vantage point, they would eventually swarm up the vulnerable back slope of his hill. But it would cost them dearly to do so, and that was all that mattered.

Shot followed shot followed shot. The legionaries were trying to take cover as they ascended, but he could still see them, however they tried to move from shelter to shelter. A few tried shooting back up at him, but they were firing into the sun at an enemy they couldn't see. None of their bullets came close to hitting him. A series of pistol cracks on the slope behind him puzzled Boone, however. Who was shooting at whom back there, if not the Legion at him? Reloading his rifle, he turned reluctantly from his perch and crept down the hillside, moving stealthily through a veritable maze of boulders and brush. He found a person in generic, sandy-brown armor fending off several legionaries from behind a large rock, a knife in one hand and a handgun in the other. Already, several bodies lay strewn about, all Legion. Though he couldn't see the face and the hair was much shorter than he remembered, the absurdity of the situation and their wild shooting told him everything he needed to know at a glance. With quick efficiency, he killed the ones still standing and finished off the ones she had only wounded, before dragging Megan back into solid cover with him. He reloaded without speaking to her, sparing her only a quick look. She'd been hurt at some point, with blood spilling from a cut on whatever patchy armor she'd put on, but didn't seem to realize this yet. She was clearly startled to see him and stuttered in surprised recognition.

"Boone. Hi. I… I… didn't know that was you. I mean, I still would have stayed if it was you, obviously. I've got a boat at the river. If we work together, maybe we can escape."

In response, he lifted his rifle and shot the next two soldiers who crested the hill down the slope. He pointed to her wound, "Stim that. Get ready to run by yourself. I'm not planning to leave this position." She obeyed automatically, fiddling with her medkit while he continued shooting and reloading. The enemy was growing more cautious, hanging back now, but he knew it was only a matter of time before they attempted an intelligent assault on their position. She replaced her remaining supplies and stood up beside him, chewing something and holding out a small, white pill to him as well.

She looked at him pleadingly. "Come on. Live to fight them another day. With buffout, the shore is only minutes away. We can both make it out of here."

He grunted. "That's a blood thinner. It's no good using it to run if you bleed out when you get there.
And no."

She shrugged. "Well, let's get there and see. Please, Boone. You just killed Caesar, but you also just majorly fucked up my reconnaissance. Help me get back to camp."

"You have intel? Can't you make it back by yourself?" He was torn. Here she was again, wrecking a perfectly good redemption moment, but he still felt somewhat responsible. By moving on Caesar without even attempting to check-in with NCR intelligence, he had inadvertently screwed her over.

"Well, to be honest, ED has all of the information and I sent him away as soon as I heard your shot. So, I'm actually expendable and I don't know if I can make it back alone - but I'm also not going to even try without you. I want you to live."

A legionary's shot ricocheted off the rock wall above them and made them both duck. Boone shot the soldier responsible almost without looking and made his decision. "That makes one of us. But fine. Another day will do." He grabbed the proffered pill and chewed it furiously. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

His rough, angry voice barely broke through the single-minded haze that had fallen upon her. The last clear message that had gotten through the fog of pain was that she must keep pressure on the wound - that nothing else would matter if she did not stop herself from bleeding out in the bottom of this leaky boat. The cold river water soaking her lower back had partially numbed the pain in her right side, but a sudden spray on her face was distraction enough for her to open her eyes again. Boone had splashed the oar at her. "Hey. Hey! Where are we going? I can row and bail your lousy boat if I have to, but I need to know where to go, and I don't know what river-side camps are still occupied. Guardian's the closest..."

"Nuh… not Guard'an. Gone. 'Lurks. Bi'er Springs better."

"Figures," he growled. He was quiet for a minute and she began to drift again, closing her eyes against the nausea and dizziness that threatened to send her tipping off of the world. She tried to swallow, licking numb lips, realizing with dim dismay that her arm had relaxed, forgetting its only job, and that she was still bleeding quite badly. It hadn't seemed that bad to begin with, but she was fading fast. The aspirin that she had taken faithfully for the past few weeks might have had something to do with that, but the buffout that had fueled the desperate flight to the river wasn't doing her any favors either. She forced her hand back up with agonizing sluggishness, but knew it wasn't doing any good at this point. Pressure had to be hard to be effective and she was too weak.

"Are you going to die without attention?" His words sounded cold to her ears and she wanted to cry, but she couldn't even manage an answer this time. He appeared to take her silence as an affirmative, however, and she felt the boat rock crazily as he stepped over the boat seat to where she was slumped in the prow.

"I didn't ask you to save me, you know. I wish like hell you had just run when you heard the shot." He undid the remaining fasteners on her armor, and opened it up completely before peeling the blood-soaked t-shirt up. Megan flinched at his touch, and shivered when the air met the exposed flesh on the wound. As a stopgap, a stimpak was almost useless by itself, especially when one continued to fight and run afterwards. The sharp edge of a spear had sliced through leather, cloth, skin, and muscle, leaving a clean, straight cut that gaped and burned everytime she shifted position.

She felt him lay a thick, rough piece of fabric on her side and groaned. "I haven't done anything yet,"
he said grimly. "Whatever it feels like, this is not me trying to hurt you. Brace yourself." He passed his belt around her waist, over her hips, and, with a resolute tug, cinched it tight. She screamed, fighting him weakly as he twisted his compress tight. Her vision narrowed to an over-bright circle of sunny skies rimmed by black, and her breath came ragged and fast, matching the rapid beating of her heart.

"Don't you have any med-x?" He didn't wait for an answer that seemed unforthcoming, and poked through her little kit himself, coming up empty. "No?" He sounded surprised. "Okay then. Let's get to Bitter Springs."

_This isn't going to be one of those times when the brain mercifully shuts down a while_, she realized after a few minutes of agony aggravated by every movement of the boat. _The buffout's keeping me awake._ The cold of the water continued to creep up her body as the cracks in the boat widened further. A periodic splashing sound told her that Boone was trying to bail and row at the same time, and she felt bad for not helping him. She couldn't move, though, couldn't even feel her hands anymore, though it seemed like they were underwater. She did manage to loll her head to the side when the nausea finally overcame her, forcing her stomach to empty itself until only a bitter taste remained. She turned away from the water that Boone tried to make her drink after that; yes, she was thirsty, terribly thirsty but there was no way she'd be keeping anything down right now. For the first time in the fearful minutes or hours - she wasn't sure how long it had been since they'd fled the Fort - she wondered if she was actually going to die this time. All the confidence that she had won back while wearing power armor now drained away with this reminder of her own mortality. It was better than becoming a prisoner of the Legion, but still she felt sad and afraid, mindful of everything she'd left undone. Speaking of things left undone… there was something she needed to say.

"Boone." This came out remarkably clearly, she thought, but there was no answer. Perhaps she hadn't spoken loud enough. "Boone!" Her heart flip-flopped in her chest, a sudden fluttering spasm, and her breath hitched, bile dripping from a corner of her mouth.

"What?" He sounded… not cold, this time, but afraid. Fearful and tired.

"Mm… I'm… I'm sorry. Sorry. So sorry." She went on like that for an uncertain amount of time, until a gap in consciousness brought her to silence again, which she immediately broke. "Sorry." She felt frustrated, scared. She wanted to talk to him, explain herself, beg for forgiveness, apologize with all the words she had, but she could only manage the one. "Sorry." She couldn't tell what she was lying on anymore, or if her eyes were open or shut. With one last whispered "sorry," her tongue and lungs finally gave up the effort and she sagged back, panting.

"Yeah, okay." These words sounded brittle and wrapped around her like tactile objects, jarring her. She couldn't see his face, but it hovered before her mind's eye, perpetually angry behind the shades. "Stop talking. Breathe. Hang on. We'll be there soon."

Boone rowed as hard as he could, trying to ignore a graze on his arm. He didn't even remember being hit. He had been in a boat only a handful of times before, and it was hard to find a rhythm with the oars, especially under such trying circumstances. Every dozen strokes, he would bail a gallon or two of pink-tinged water out with the bucket that he'd found under his seat. Pale and fragile-looking, she hadn't opened her eyes or said anything else after that last "sorry," and could have been dead if it were not for the quick, shallow movement of her chest. He wanted to talk to (or maybe yell at) her - he had some rants and apologies of his own to dish out - but she was beyond hearing and he refused to admit to himself that there might not be another opportunity. He hadn't intended to live out the day, but it had never been his goal to take anybody except Legion with him.

He ran the waterlogged boat aground roughly at Bitter Springs beach, doubtless ripping even larger
holes in the bottom, but not caring overmuch. Trying not to dislodge the rough compress he'd set, he picked her up and carried her, bridal style, jogging the remaining quarter-mile to camp. Without the buffout still percolating through his system, he couldn't have done it, but as it was he didn't even feel the weight. Plunging through the flap of the hospital tent, he caught the medic by surprise. He didn't hesitate, however, and immediately set to work, hanging a bottle of saline and snapping orders at the private assisting him. By the time Lieutenant Markland stepped back, it felt like hours had gone by. At some point, the assistant had stitched the cut on Boone's arm for him before leaving him alone, but if anybody else had tried to talk to him in the intervening time, he didn't remember.

He jerked his head up out of a light doze and noticed that the medic was standing in front of him, talking. "Hey, I know you… you were here with the girl back when the Legion thought they'd try to attack our refugees. That was good work y'all did back then, and I'm glad to see you've still got her back. The Courier's been a good friend to all of us out here on the edge. She even brought me some books to help treat the kids here."

His tongue felt clumsy. "We're not… she… she'll live, then?"

Markland nodded, but fiddled nervously with his tags before answering. "Probably. I didn't have any kits to do a transfusion. S'posed to have more coming in next week, but that won't help her. Otherwise… well, she's warm, dry, and not bleeding anymore. Pressure's up. Antibiotics should prevent infection. So, as long as she wakes up and her kidneys aren't ruined, she'll be alright. Eventually."

"Good. Is it alright if I sleep here tonight?" He Boone suddenly felt very tired. Escaping from the Fort now meant planning for a new future, and he wasn't ready to face that yet. He wanted to get away before Megan woke up and insisted on more conversation or before some officer tried to pin a medal and a new commission on him, but before that he needed rest.

"Sure! Oh, and whenever you feel like it, Captain Gilles wants to speak with you at some point. Obviously, you're not obligated to report to her anymore, but orders from on high were to invite you to a meeting."

And here comes that new future. Duty fucking calls.

The trek from Bitter Springs Camp to Raul's shack shouldn't have taken more than a few hours, but even though Boone and Megan left at noon, it was almost dark by the time they caught sight of the windmill overlooking his farm. Even with the end in sight, she sank down in what felt like the hundredth break of the trip, feeling sick and impossibly tired. Boone had been polite - or apathetic - enough not to say what they were both thinking: too much, too soon. She should have waited at least one more day before attempting the hike. He hadn't said much of anything, actually, since they'd both been asked to report to the Dam in a week's time by Colonel Moore over the radio - apparently, President Kimball was putting in some rare face-time in the Mojave, and she wanted them on-site to help spot and foil any assassination attempts. Boone had offered to escort her to the ghoul's shack when she expressed a desire to finish recuperating there. The offer had surprised her, and only much later - when it was too late to ask - did she wonder if one of the officers had made the request of him in private. With ED still back at Forlorn Hope, she certainly didn't mind having him as back-up, even if it was uncomfortable to travel with someone who wasn't speaking to her.

"Okay. One more time," she mumbled. She pushed herself up, shutting her eyes briefly against the vertigo from the change in posture, and continued onward. As they drew nearer, she spotted Raul leaning against the wall of his shack, smoking a cigarette.

"Hi, Raul. What's happening?"
"Oh, you know. Running a free bed-and-breakfast for all of your friends. Just had a woman drink all my tequila for the first time in a very long time. It's good to see you, mija. And you." He nodded to Boone. "Gannon and Veronica are over there in the shed, either fixing the armor or having a fight over the existence of the armor. Not sure which, as they've been doing a lot of both today. You should go say 'hi' and try to talk our favorite scribe into taking a break for the night."

"Huh. 'Kay." Walking apprehensively over to Raul's small workshop, overhearing a loud, muffled conversation from within as she approached, she pulled the door open and stuck her head inside.

"And I'm telling you that she'd be better off if we chucked this thing in the lake." Veronica was sitting against one wall, clutching a bottle so tightly that Megan wondered how it hadn't shattered yet. She wasn't wearing her ballistic fists for once, which was probably why the glass had held.

Arcade was kneeling on the floor, wearily tightening something on one of the suit's legs. He didn't look up when the door opened, but stood, wiping his hands on a greasy cloth. "For the last time, we're not doing that."

"Yeah, please don't do that." Both of them started, turning to look at her. "Hi guys. It's looking great. Significantly better than when I dropped it off."

Veronica set down her mostly empty bottle and wobbled over, throwing her arms around her in a painful hug before releasing her and stepping back. "Hey… hey… Megan. You're here. Yay! That means I can ats… aks… ask you a question."

Megan couldn't help but smile a little, despite the anxiety she felt at facing her sometimes-companion again. "Hi Veronica. You're drunk, aren't you? But go ahead, I'm all ears."

"Yes, I'm drunk! My question is: are you now or have you ever been in the Enclave?" Over her shoulder, Megan caught sight of Arcade shaking his head emphatically and moving toward them. Taken aback by the direct approach, she fumbled for a response. "Uh. Well. You need to understand… I don't remember it, like, at all, but yeah, I used to be. Not anymore, though." This was clearly the wrong answer, and the next thing she knew she was on the floor with an aching jaw, looking up with detached concern as Boone and Arcade held the angry woman back.

"Alright, I won't hit her anymore! God. We'll talk about this like adults who don't want to kill each other. Let me go." Veronica slumped back against the wall, picking up her bottle again. "So, ever since we met, you've been this… snake in the grass, working your way into Brotherhood affairs?"

With some effort, Megan crawled over and sat beside the other woman, waving the men away. Boone stalked out without hesitation, while Arcade hovered at the threshold, looking uncertainly behind him before leaving as well. She didn't feel much like talking anymore, but knew that the woman deserved a decent answer. "I didn't know when we first met. I learned it later on that night, actually. Arcade told me."

Veronica took another drink. "How did he know?"

"He'd found a little ID chip in my arm and transcribed the writing on it. It had my birthdate and name on it - even though I haven't used it in my current life, I know now that I was born a 'Martus,' not a 'Martin' - and some other information that made it pretty obvious. That's why I was so mad at him that night at the Followers Outpost - because he'd withheld that information from me."

"That's fascinating for a couple of different reasons." She sounded almost sober as she mused aloud. "One, it means he lied to me on your behalf. Two, he found it necessary to lie to you for some
reason." She held up the bottle, swishing the remaining liquid around. "Do you want some of this?"

"No, thanks. I need to stick with water." She sipped her canteen.

Dawning realization spread over Veronica's face. "Does Dr. Gannon have Enclave connections too?"

Megan choked on her water, sending drops of the precious liquid flying. "Uh… I mean… he's not a card-carrying member or anything."

The other woman slammed the bottle down on the ground next to year, accidentally spilling the liquor that remained. "Jesus! How many more of you are there? What kind of conspiracy is this?"

"Stop. Shh. He's not in the Enclave. His beliefs don't line up with anything they used to practice. But… his father was one before the last of them were hunted down or driven into exile. That's where his gun came from. That's where I got this armor. He didn't want me to know what I used to be because he didn't want a living reminder of his origins walking around, or for either of us to face exposure."

"Oh. Oh. In that case, you really fucked things up, didn't you?"

"Yeah. What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. I obviously don't want to hand over both of you to be killed, but damn. Who else knows?"

"About Arcade? Almost nobody. As for me, I've told Raul, Boone, and several retired Enclave officers. I tell ED everything, so him too, I guess. NCR higher command knows enough to arrest me. Presumably whoever sent me west in the first place still has a file on me, but I wasn't lying when I said I didn't remember that part."

Veronica shook her head and yawned. "If I promise not to do anything rash, can we pick this up again tomorrow? I want to process… everything… sober."

"No arguments from me. I'm more tired than I've ever been, and for some strange reason, my face really hurts now."

"Sorry about that. Really. Still, I didn't hit you that hard. Your head's still attached. I can't not punch a confessed Nazi when I meet one."

Heading inside, they passed Boone leaning moodily on the steps without exchanging words with him, and found Arcade and Raul waiting inside. The latter glanced up as they entered. "Truce?"

"For now. I don't suppose you have any ice, Raul."

"I'm fresh out, boss."

"Let me see." Arcade made her sit down and felt over her jaw gently. "I don't think it's broken. If you think it's worth a stimpak, I have a couple to spare."

"Nah. I've already used one today anyway."

"I thought you looked… terrible, but I didn't want to say anything. What happened?"

She related the events at Fortification Hill two days before, and the disastrous aftermath of Boone's shot. "It hurts, but it is closed and the muscle's healing. The main problem is I'm still running short on
"I have some prenatal vitamins you can have. Iron, calcium, and folic acid mainly. They're good for anemia as well as pregnancy. I should have given you some after…” He stopped himself short. "Anyway, you shouldn't take them on an empty stomach." Searching through his bag, he caught Veronica studying him with drunken solemnity from her perch on one of Raul's stools, and asked her sarcastically. "What is it, Veronica? Am I particularly interesting to you right now?"

"I'm just taking in the con-tra-dictions you embody," she slurred. "You're fascinating. I don't know how I didn't see it before. The gun, the open animosity for the Brotherhood of Steel, the passing familiarity with power armor. But you're also a doctor and a notional pa-shi-fish. Pacifist. You were hiding in plain sight."

He nodded with amused resignation. "As of a couple of days ago, I expected you to connect the dots sooner rather than later. Once we ended up coming out here together, I thought it better to work on humanizing myself to you than to push you away. It's harder to condemn someone you perceive as a person, don't you think? That's how I can become friends with a young woman who ought to be my enemy."

"You're not mad, Arcade?" Megan looked up nervously. "She asked me point-blank if you were… and I didn't know how to lie on the spot, especially since I'd already told her about myself."

"Work on those lies, if you please. But no, not this time." He set a small bottle with a faded label down on the table. "You, take one of these after dinner every night until they're gone. Both of you, eat some food, drink some water, and go to bed. We'll talk more about this tomorrow."
*Author's Note: I didn't intend for this chapter to take the shape it did - I meant to launch more or less directly into a two-chapter "Dam sequence" - but after starting over four or five times, this was what I ended up with. Namely, a chapter that ends well short of the Dam. This one is mostly for the companions, and details the consequences each now faces because of the Courier. It functions to set each on their final course as they plunge toward the end (and, for those who make it there, the sequel), with Arcade holding steady with his usual relative stability and competence, Veronica thoroughly estranged and a bit cracked, Boone thawing slightly (I feel like I owe it to realistic characterization to mend those bridges only very gradually), and Raul being the sweet old man who... well, you'll see.

As a side note, I only recently realized (while playing the other night) that Raul's shack in-game is nothing like I've been imagining it. It's really a sad little place in canon. For the purposes of this story, however, let's assume that he took some time in his pre-Tabitha years to make himself a nice little homestead - a comfortable one-room cabin, a fenced field, and windmill-driven irrigation.*

Julie Farkas laid her reading glasses aside and rubbed her temples. It wasn't the column addition that was giving her headache, but rather the always-present financial concerns - would the caps on hand come close to meeting their need for supplies this month? The numbers never looked good on paper, but somehow they always managed to tighten their belts and soldier on. Spread out on her desk were figures, receipts, requisitions, and drafts of funding requests to be sent to their wealthier districts back in California. She turned her lantern up a fraction - with no windows, it was dark even at midday in her quarters, located in one of the few permanent structures in the fort - and was about to take up the problem again when she heard a gentle tapping on her door. "Come in!" she shouted.

"Hello, Julie. Is this a bad time... when you disappeared to do... whatever it is you do when you're not here?" She tried to keep the disapproval out of her voice, but it was definitely there.

If he heard it, he gave no sign. "Ah. Not great. I lost a friend. Two friends, if you count the one that hates my guts now, though I'm hoping she'll come around."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I know you expected me back first thing Monday morning, but it took longer than I expected to walk back to Freeside. My friend insisted on escorting me back to the gates, and it took forever for her to get going today. We survived a crisis yesterday and she's feeling a bit over-protective."

"It's actually still Sunday, so no harm done," she pointed out, as heartily as possible.

"Really? I suppose I lost track of time. Good, I guess," he said vaguely. He folded his limbs into the chair in front of her desk and yawned. "I'll be on the clock starting tomorrow."

"Are you ready to come back to work? If you need a few more days..."
"I'm ready. But there is something else." He handed her a folded sheet of paper. "This is my formal notice. I'll be leaving permanently as soon as Freeside is clear of Legion-related skirmishes."

She held the note gingerly, not even moving to open it, but only staring back at him in dismay. "Where are you going, Arcade? And why?"

"New England, I think. Or least far enough east to make a new start. It's an evolving plan. I've been studying - and copying - some of the maps from the archive, and reviewing what little the caravanners have shared about the interior. I think if we leave at the beginning of the summer, we can at least get past the Rocky Mountains before winter begins. If it were up to my travelling companion, I think we'd just follow the rising sun blindly until we hit the Atlantic, but I at least want to have an idea of where we're going. Hopefully, she'll agree to give Chicago a pass..."

Julie didn't know how to respond politely to this description of madness, but it wasn't hard to guess its inspiration. "You and that damned Courier."

"Yes," he said serenely. "She needs someone. Frankly, I need someone. And we're both in danger here. If I stay beyond a certain point, I could be a liability to you as well. It's better if we don't stay. And there could be a life for us out there, somewhere. Dum spiro spero. Where there's breath, there's hope. I've always wanted to see the tech centers of the old world, anyway."

"Why?" she said again. Aren't there easier ways to go through mid-life crisis? she wondered silently.

"She's ex-Enclave. My family was too, and I grew up among the survivors. The NCR doesn't care about time elapsed or distance when it comes to tracking former members down. The Brotherhood doesn't either," he added darkly, looking almost frightening for a moment before his face relaxed. He offered her a crooked smile. "Well, Julie, do you want me to finish out the next few weeks, or should I go pack my things now?"

"Uh..." Keeping him in the corner of her eye as if she expected the man to sprout fangs and leap across the desk at her, she scanned the single, hand-written page. It was succinct and courteous, and used the phrase "paramilitary fascist organization" in lieu of more specific terminology. It included gratitude for the training and sense of purpose provided by the Followers and ended with an apology for putting her to any inconvenience. She didn't know what to say, and settled on that reliable standby: profanity. "Fuck."

"For the record, I'm sorry to spring this on you now. When I joined, twenty years ago, I thought I could keep this to myself forever, but things have changed for me this year. I always did - and still do - believe in our mission, and I've been proud to be a part of it." He shifted in his chair and she flinched involuntarily. He noticed this and his face fell. "I'm not dangerous, Julie. You don't need to be afraid of me."

"Sorry. Really. I've known you long enough that I don't doubt your sincerity, but you do understand how this throws a wrench in our very fragile balance, right? If the NCR thinks we're allied with terrorists... who are supposed to all be dead... well, they could make life even more difficult for us. You know that."

"I do. If you don't want me around anymore, I'm prepared to withdraw to Westside this evening. That place is a good harbor for disgraced Followers, and I have the key to an empty room there. One of my friends there is on vacation."

"'Disgraced'...? You're no Tom Anderson. I hope you're not, anyway."

He grimaced. "Not quite, no."
Julie drummed her fingers on her desk, looking pensively down at the letter. "Which... personalities... among the NCR are you most apprehensive about? Not Kieran, surely?"

"No. It's Moore. I think she hopes to advance her career with a righteous and very public witch hunt. Oliver won't stand in her way. Everyone knows the man aspires to the presidency. Creating - and then stamping out - a trumped-up enemy has been effective before. Isn't democracy grand?"

She wasn't going to let this pass without a challenge. "I beg your pardon, but I know my history. Whatever they want to say about the Enclave, it can't be worse than the truth. If they are still around, I'm not at all averse to letting the NCR do something about them." Julie had grown up seeing the mangled veterans of that war begging on the streets. The after-effects of the Enclave's more horrific weapons had burned permanently into her memory, even if almost everybody else had forgotten in the intervening decades.

"I don't know what they've gotten up to out east - possibly, probably bad things - but out here you're talking about a grand total of seven people, that I know about anyway: five septuagenarians, one brain-damaged young woman, and one respectable doctor who had the misfortune to be born into it. I'm not willing to let them sacrifice any of us on the altar of Moore's career. Megan and I can leave, and the older ones can fade back into safe anonymity. They're not hurting anyone anymore, I promise. A few of them are pretty nice people."

"And what if the Gestapo - by which I mean the NCR's bloodhounds - comes knocking on our door, looking for a known associate of a famous war criminal?"

He studied his hands, cracking the knuckles one by one. "Tell them that your most secretive, reclusive researcher disappeared in the turmoil after the Legion defeat, and that you presumed he was dead and didn't much care if he never came back at all. In all seriousness, I think they will have to drop it if they can't find her."

Julie's shoulders slumped in resignation, and she picked up her pencil to make a personal note - not that she was likely to forget this interview anytime soon. "Very well, Arcade. Thank you for the advance warning. I want you to stay as long as you can, but do me a favor and try to keep a low profile for the rest of your time here, okay?" As an afterthought, she added quietly, "Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help you. Within reason, of course."

He nodded his thanks and turned to go, pausing with his hand on the door. "You're doing a wonderful job, Julie. No one appreciates you and what you do enough, myself included, but I know we wouldn't be a going concern in the Mojave without you."

She felt absurdly touched by the rare gesture of recognition, but tried not to let it show. "That's kind of you to say, Arcade. I try."

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30 hours earlier, some miles away.

Despite the discomfort and difficult logistics of five people staying in a very small house with one bed, Megan couldn't think of anywhere else she'd rather be. And it was very pleasant to look forward to a few days of relative peace. She slept like the dead and was the last to awaken, hours after sunrise. Stomach growling, she padded across the worn floor on bare feet, helping herself to a cupful of water from the pitcher. Raul was drying his well-seasoned skillet and humming to himself as she approached. "Buenos dias, Raul. Is there anything for breakfast?"

"Nothing fancy for lazy guests who can't be bothered to wake up before ten. If you want a poor man's meal, though, I got the ingredients on hand to make some migas. Except for the eggs. I don't
know if it counts as *migas* with no eggs, but when I make it, it's a fry-up of beans, crunchy tortilla strips, and peppers." He waved vaguely at the table. "Sit down. This won't take long."

"*No me gustan los huevos para nada.* The rest sounds good." She stretched out the kinks of a long night on the floor, and took a seat at the table, pleased to note that the soreness from her injury had faded to a dull mutter.

The old ghoul dropped some oil on the cast iron pan and began to bring it up to heat. "You say that because you have never so much as seen a chicken. When I say 'eggs,' you're thinking cazador, lakelurk, deathclaw. Those aren't the same." Half to himself, he went on, "*Yes, real eggs would be nice. I would give my left… arm… for tomato, onion, or lime, though. Cilantro! Now that was the stuff.*"

"I would eat anything you made, Raul. You're the best cook I know. You should set up shop in town. Open a restaurant."

He laughed aloud, a rusty, hacking sound. "*Nah. I don't like people so much. Besides, who wants a ghoul messing with their food?"*

While he cooked, she looked around the room. Arcade was sitting by the window, writing industriously in his notebook with a stub of a pencil, an imaginary "do not disturb" sign hanging over his head. There was no sign of the other two.

"*Veronica?*" she asked Raul quietly.

"*Sick as a dog this morning, but she's still been up for a while, trying to think through some things, I suspect. She went out a short time ago to catch some fish out of the stock tank for lunch.*" He gave her a sympathetic look from behind the stovetop. "Before you ask, Boone volunteered to go hunting and he's been gone for hours. I think both of them wanted a break from… company."

She touched the bruise on her face gingerly, thankful at least that her slow reflexes hadn't earned her a black eye. "*Yeah. I don't think last night's blow-up came close to resolving anything with Veronica, especially not now that she's sober. And for all that he's helping me for some reason right now, Boone's been avoiding me like the plague. Like, literally walking away when I try to talk to him. I can't say no to the unsolicited offer of back-up, not feeling the way I do, but it's a very uncomfortable dynamic right now. It concerns me that he tried to kill himself a few days ago, but there's no way he'll talk about it with me.*"

Raul slid a plate of food in front of her and handed her a fork. "*I'll try to catch the boy on his own tonight. I understand what it's like to survive suicidal last stands, and we actually did have a pretty good conversation - by his standards, anyway - when you two were here last winter. He wanted to know if I thought you were up for a relationship, though in retrospect that didn't work out so well.*"

She flinched at this fresh reminder of the way she had treated Boone. "*No, but it's not your - or his - fault. Please do talk to him. Thank you, Raul.*"

"*Sí.* He sat down across the table and looked at her with uncharacteristic seriousness, cloudy blue eyes focused on hers. "What are you going to do?"

She swallowed a large bite with effort. "*Um… hang around here for a few days, if it's okay with you. Heal up as much as I have time for, then get back to doing what I do. The armor looks good, thanks to you and the others. If all goes well, it'll carry me through what I need to do. I'll try to stop falling off of things and stepping on grenades.*"
"Okay," he said slowly. "And then?"

"When the fighting's done, I need to leave the Mojave. Probably for good. I have enemies I didn't ask for - I don't want to fight the Brotherhood and I can't fight the NCR, even if I didn't think they were the west's best chance at civilization. It's not safe for me to stay here anymore."

"So soon," he murmured.

"Yeah." She avoided his gaze, focusing on cleaning her plate of the last morsels of food. "If I made a list of reasons to stay here, you'd top it, but the truth is there's not a lot for me here except bad memories. Like, a lot of bad memories."

"Are you going alone?"

"I'll probably take ED with me. And maybe… well, the jury's still out..." she looked over at Arcade, who twitched irritably and spoke without looking up.

"Oh. Yes, I'm coming. Sorry, I should have told you last night. My decision became official when I learned that the Brotherhood is out for blood." Coloring a little when they broke off their conversation to look at him, he mumbled, "Sorry. I eavesdrop sometimes. It's impossible not to when I'm eight feet away." Having said this, he went back to writing.

Raul's rough features twisted into an unreadable expression, and his voice sounded brittle as he mock-whispered his commentary. "Well, he's not the most intimidating person in the world, but at least he's not a cripple."

Megan reached out a hand and covered his burned one, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Hey. If I thought you were up for a long journey, I would have asked you, Raul. I've put off thinking about saying goodbye, but I am going to miss you. A lot."

"Mm-hm. Me too, mija." He took her empty plate and carried it to the kitchen, pausing in front of the washing basin and swiping a sleeve over his eyes as he did. "You want anything else right now?"

"No, thank you." While Raul washed the dishes, Megan sat and looked down at the worn and pitted contours of the table, tracing them with her fingers and wondering what - if anything - she could do to make this easier for her friend. Suggest that she might return someday? False hope, and they would both know it. Propose stopping by for one last farewell visit after the battle? Might not work out, and would endanger them all. She was so lost in thought that she didn't noticed that Arcade had taken the recently unoccupied chair until he cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry if I seem to be a little on edge. Grumpy. I am on edge, and I think I will continue to be until we're well into Utah. I'm so anxious about the Brotherhood that I'm forgetting to worry about the Legion."

She blinked at him. "S'okay, Arcade. I didn't really notice. You're often antisocial and you have an ironclad poker face."

"Good. Inside, I'm screaming, but it's nice to know I can still pass for my misanthropic 'normal.'" He fanned a stack of folded papers and slid them all into a waxed envelope before sealing and pushing the whole thing towards her. "I don't know if or when I'm going to get a chance to say my goodbyes to Daisy, Johnson, and the rest, so I'd appreciate if you could give these letters to them when you see them. Moreno will think it's 'fruity,' but there's a note for him too. I put their initials on the outside. Can you do that, please?"
"Sure, no problem." She picked up the pouch and stashed it near the bottom of her pack before pushing the whole thing back under Raul's bed to get it out of the way and returned to the table. "This is going to sound inadequate, but thank you for uprooting your life on my behalf. If there's anything I can do to make it up to you, please let me know."

He stood up to go back to his seat. "The only thing I ask is something I don't think you're prepared to do - that you take care of yourself: don't take unnecessary risks, don't use chems, and don't fight when it's wiser to run." He stopped, reflecting a moment. "Also, if you can allot a few pounds of your carry-weight to books, I'd be much obliged." He walked over to look out the window. "I've got a few more letters to write, and then I think I'm going to walk back to Freeside today. If she's still speaking to me, I'll see if Veronica wants to come with me - we could use her help in the Lucky 38 - and I think you two could use some time apart."

She allowed herself a grin. "Yeah, just maybe. Okay. You and I will plan to meet back at Johnson's cave when the fighting is over. Where are we going to cross the river? Not at the Dam, surely?"

"No. We'll go south until we find a low crossing point or a boat or something. There are other bridges. Well, there are supposed to be..." He broke off mid-sentence, and she saw him tense as he stopped, mid-sentence, and stepped back from the window, reaching for his weapon.

"Arcade? What is it? What's wrong?"

"The Brotherhood of Steel is here." His voice was a hoarse whisper and his features contorted with terror.

"Stay there, mija. Hush, both of you. These walls are paper-thin." The old ghoul crossed the room and slid the slender door-bar home, peering out through a chink in the tar-paper. "Yeah. It's some of those Brotherhood tanks. They're clanking up to Veronica out there. She doesn't look happy."

After a brief, panicked scramble, Megan had found her gun, but stood paralyzed in the middle of the room, a boot in one hand - where had the other gotten to? - and an untied armguard in the other. She dropped the gear from frozen hands and whispered to the others, "I... I... I'll go out talk to them. There won't be a firefight if I go out unarmed."

"No." Raul and Arcade spoke at the same time, the latter ashen with fear.

"If we fight, we'll all certainly die." She felt obliged to be the reasonable one for once. "The plasma defender is the only gun among us that'll even scratch those suits of theirs. If I go with them, I'll have a chance to slip away or talk them around. It's a long way back to Hidden Valley."

"No," Raul said again, more firmly this time. "Help me move this table." He kicked the rag rug aside, revealing a hinged square of wood with a handhold on one edge. With an audible creak and a groan, he bent over and lifted the plank, revealing a dark cavity of dry, compacted earth, with perhaps 18 inches of vertical clearance. "Old smuggler's niche down here, from before my time. Get in. You too, doc. Just in case they've got your number too."

She hesitated at the edge of the hole. "Raul-..."

"Do it. Hurry." A heavy gauntlet rapped on the door, then rattled the knob.

She stepped down and rolled to the side to make room, feeling absurdly nervous about finding spiders or scorpions in the crawlspace. "We can all fit."

"Someone needs to put the rug and the table back. For the love of God, please just listen to me. I'll
be alright, mija. They're not looking for me, after all." Raising his voice, he called to the impatient soldier behind the door. "Just a minute! Don't break my door down."

In a moment, she and Arcade were lying flat on their backs, shoulder to shoulder on the cold dirt, the boards of the floor above mere inches from their faces. A rustling sound, and a dampening layer of fabric plunged them into near-total darkness and sealed the impression of a coffin-like atmosphere. The muffled thump of table legs sent tendrils of dust sifting down upon them and, as if at a great distance, they heard the lifting of the door-bar and Raul's most grating, crotchety voice.

"What's the idea, interrupting an old man's siesta? It's bad enough I've got your scribe eating all my fish and drinking all my tequila, and now I've got four more uninvited guests? No sir. I can't feed any more."

There was no answer, only the heavy tramp of feet marching into the room, making the ancient floorboards groan alarmingly under their weight. They were followed by the lighter steps of Veronica, crying softly.

"We'll give you one chance to tell us what we need to know. Where is she, ghoul?"

"Where is who?" Megan held her breath, mentally pleading with Raul not to antagonize them.

"The Courier. We know she's gone to ground. We know you've traveled with her. Tell us where we can find her and we'll leave you alone. Fail to cooperate, and we'll show you our one-size-fits-all cure for ghoulification." Megan thought she recognized the voice, for all that it came from behind a heavy filter - it was one of the bunker's "heavy guards," an unfriendly, inhospitable figure who had resented her occasion intrusions into their life. He wasn't someone you could talk back to without consequences.

Brash to the end, Raul wasn't even trying to be diplomatic. "I wouldn't help you even if I could, and I haven't seen her since Christmas. Now get out of my house."

There was an arcing, crackling noise and the smell of ozone, and something heavy slumped to the floor. Just few feet away, Veronica gasped, and Megan opened her mouth to scream just as Arcade clapped a desperate hand over her mouth. She was helpless to move, speak, or act as her friend died an arm's length away. Stuck in a virtual tomb, wrestling silently with her companion, her mind fled as it was wont to do - as it always did when it was confronted with a situation she couldn't fix - and didn't come back until all of her fight was spent.

As she would tell Arcade much, much later, it was a very long time - weeks and months of solitary meditation - before all of the blocks fell into place and every detail of that hour came back to her conscious mind. To the Courier's perspective, on that day, there was no elapsed time at all between their conversation at the breakfast table and the beach where she opened her eyes, only a short, bewildering tumble from alarm to pained consciousness, waking up in the midst of carnage.

Coming to was a bit like falling from a great height onto a spinning plate - one that would fling her off into space if she moved a muscle. Nauseous and disoriented, she stared up at the cloudless sky, wondering idly if a nap might be a good idea. Her head felt very hot and her feet felt very cold, and there was a dull ache in her chest and a medicinal taste on her tongue. Most alarmingly, there was a glassy block of lost time between here - wherever "here" was - and Raul's shack, and she couldn't begin to retrieve any of it. "Why do I feel like shit?" she asked aloud, not really expecting an answer.

"Because psycho come-down's a bitch," Boone remarked, almost conversationally, from somewhere outside of her field of vision. "Or was that a twofer? You always did like your jet. I can't believe I
used to... that I'm still running with a junkie." His voice was as flat as always, but she thought she could hear something else there - relief, maybe? - and she tried to turn her head to look at him, but could make out only sand and sky, and that only through a smudged, smoke-like veil.

"I'm not a junkie," Megan protested automatically. "I'm mostly clean. When did you get here, Boone?" she asked the sky. "Where are we? And why are my feet wet?" Her voice had a canned quality, and she realized she was wearing her power armor.

She heard him sigh. "I caught up with you on those cliffs above the beach, which is where we planned our attack, if you can call that clusterfuck of a strategy a 'plan.' If you don't remember the details of the last hour, maybe that's just as well. You soaked up a lot of lasers before you got ahold of your last opponent and now you're lying halfway in Lake Mead because there's no way in hell I could move you in that rig. I couldn't even figure out how to get your helmet off. I was only half-sure you were alive."

"Oh." This was an astoundingly long speech by Boone's standards and it took some serious parsing to make sense of all of the parts. She strained to grasp at some sense of the events he described, but came up with nothing. "This suit is pretty good against laser weapons - it redistributes the energy or something - but it's still hard to totally shrug off multiple hits. Who were we fighting and why?"

He hesitated for a long moment. "Paladins. Four of 'em. That's not a fight I would have picked, but we did have the element of surprise and more than a little luck. The Brotherhood of Steel made a big mistake today. Maybe... maybe we should leave it at that for now. Can you walk? I'd like to go back now."

"Maybe." Sitting up and scooting backward onto a drier part of the shore took more effort than expected. She pressed the helmet release, and took a few breaths of unfiltered, humid air, noticing as she looked around that there were armored Brotherhood soldiers - and pieces of them - all around her: one with a hole the size of her fist in his helmet, one half-melted into greenish soup, one who looked like he'd exploded from the inside, and one who'd apparently been torn limb from limb after being dragged bodily out of his smoldering armor. "My God. Did I do that?" she asked faintly, horrified by the brutality all the more because she'd entirely forgotten doing it.

"Headshot guy and fusion core guy were me. You're welcome. The plasma and and the... other one... those were all you. I'm glad I kept my distance. Can we leave?" he asked again, more urgently.

"Just a minute. I still feel really odd... like I'm dreaming or something. Might still be high. Do you have any water?"

"Yeah."

"Thanks." She took a long drink. "I appreciate your helping me with this, but why did you? Why are you talking to me right now, Boone? You've spent the last five days ignoring me."

He was quiet for so long that she assumed that he'd gone back to doing just that. Embarrassed, she handed him his canteen back and climbed painfully to her feet, snapping her helmet back on so she wouldn't have to carry it. She looked down with some confusion at the pistol by her side - not her revolver, that was nowhere to be found, but a very familiar plasma defender. She couldn't remember borrowing it from Arcade, but she assumed she must have - a good thing, too, as her usual weapons would have been next to useless against power armor. Before leaving, she picked up a laser rifle - the only weapon that appeared undamaged - and looted a few double-handfuls of cells from their packs. She started walking along the shore, looking for the best route to cut across the land back to the shack.
She wasn't up to more than a slogging walk and Boone was able to keep pace easily. Several minutes into their hike, he surprised her by speaking. "Just how often do you go insane? If I'm going to be watching your back, I need to know."

She was taken aback. "Well, I'm not crazy right now, but it started not long after I left Goodsprings, I guess. Right when life got stressful. I go blank, hallucinate, forget things, and act erratically. I had a good run when I was travelling with you, because things mostly went our way, but it got worse after Cottonwood. It gets worse when I drink or use chems."

He glared at her. "That doesn't seem to stop you from using them."

"Sometimes, though I try to space it out enough to not get addicted. I don't actually remember taking any today, but obviously I did. It must have seemed necessary at the time. What are you not telling me?"

"It's better if I let Gannon answer that for you. I would guess that guy has talked you down from a ledge more than once."

Ordinarily, this would have made her angry, even as the implications terrified her, but the steady numbness at the back of her mind soaked up the extra emotions along with the jet-jitteriness, and she only nodded. "Arcade has put up with a lot of bullshit from me. He's got a very long fuse, but I keep thinking he's going to give up and leave. I don't know what I'd do without him."

"You really are...fragile, aren't you?" Boone sounded dumbfounded and a little sick.

"I'm all weak points. Any strengths I have come from the people I somehow convinced to help me. But I haven't done any of them any good," she added glumly. "Look at you - I left you even unhappier than you were before. No offense. Veronica's going nuts. Arcade's in danger. Raul's the only one who seems better off, and that's only because being friends with me is slightly better than being the slave of an insane nightkin. Speaking of insane nightkin, I spent days pretending to be one of 'em's dead granddaughter. If that's not messed up, I don't know what is." She ground her teeth behind her mask, and looked away, ashamed for the outburst. "Sorry for unloading on you. You don't want to hear it. And I'm sorry for hurting you, before. I regret what I said every day." There was silence. "Sorry. I'll be quiet now."

They walked in silence for another ten minutes. "I don't want to be here. But I don't have anywhere else I want to be, either. As long as I'm going to be miserable, I might as well be miserable with a purpose. NCR's pinned a crazy amount of hope on a larger-than-life hero who only kinda looks like you on your best day, so I guess I'll help you justify their confidence. Why the hell not, right?"

"You could've been that hero, you know. My star rose because of things we did together - things I couldn't have even attempted without you. Jobs where I barely contributed anything other than a little personality and some fast talk. Alone - especially without Arcade's armor - I'm nothing. You, on the other hand, are field-smart and awesome."

For the first time since they'd reconnected, something like curiosity crossed Boone's face. "That's Gannon's armor? Why... no, never mind. I don't care. And no. I couldn't ever be more than a pretty good soldier. I wouldn't want to be, even if I had the ambition, charisma, and whatever else you have going for you. Luck. I have no luck. I'm expendable."

"So I'm lucky now? And do you really think I wanted this?"

He scratched his head and gave her a puzzled look. "Didn't you?"
"No. I just wanted to see what the world was like and how I fit into it. That's how I got where I am now - I went looking for answers."

"And? What did you learn?" He was mocking her now.

"This probably won't surprise you, but it turns out that the world is mostly terrible, and that the people in it are mostly selfish, petty, and cruel."

"Well, yeah. Maybe you should've figured that out when a stranger capped you for a… what was it? A silver poker chip?"

"A data chip," she corrected. "It was a key piece in Mr. House's grand plan, but I still don't really get what he and Benny wanted to accomplish. I haven't given it a second thought since I handed access over to the Followers. I hope that wasn't a mistake… I have made so many mistakes. Trusting the Brotherhood of Steel is only the most recent one." By now they had drawn in sight of the farm. She put an armored hand out and stopped him there. "What am I walking into? Please tell me."

"Hand over those guns and go put that armor away, and then you can know. I don't trust you not to shoot the messenger right now." Stopping in front of Raul's shed, he accepted the laser rifle and Arcade's pistol from her unresisting hands. "For what's it worth, I'm sorry. Really."

Left alone in the dim, stuffy shed, Megan struggled to free herself from armor that now seemed a heavy, confining trap and ended up knocking it over by accident, almost crushing her own foot, making the corrugated metal wall tremble ominously at the impact of its fall. She had put it on barefoot, and her feet were fish-white and wrinkled from the lake water which had seeped into the suit's legs. She felt cold and small and very scared. The truth that Boone had refused to tell her now waited outside that door, and she could hardly bring herself to face it.

Back out in the yard, Boone was nowhere to be seen. Walking proved a challenge as her knees threatened to fold at every step, but she managed it in the end, reaching the door of the shack without ending up on the ground. Inside, the room was quiet and empty, with the breakfast dishes still stacked neatly on the rack, and the cast iron pan lying forgotten in the scummy wash water. Megan frowned and picked it up. Raul had told her, more than once - you don't soak iron cookware. She gave it a perfunctory pass with the dishrag and dried it thoroughly with the cleanish side, before setting it absently on the counter and moving on.

It was always warm - too warm - in that house at midday, and sweat was beading on her face. A high-pitched drone, like a persistent mosquito, rang in her ears and she shook her head to dislodge it, stumbling forward over the splintered remains of one of Raul's chairs. Her bare foot slipped in a dark, sticky spot on the floor, and she recoiled, overcompensated, and almost fell, ending up leaning heavily on the table, eyes shut tight, trying to catch her breath. Somewhere, very far behind her, a door opened, but she couldn't spare the concentration to look up, even when the unseen person touched her arm.

"Are you okay? Stupid question. Don't answer that. Here, sit down before you fall down. That's right…"

The world faded slowly out and then back in, like a grey and black checkerboard. When she could see clearly again, it was from the vantage point of the floor, where the left side of her face was resting on something soft.

"Raul?" she whispered. She realized with a start that she was crying, but didn't know why.

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then, "No. I'm sorry. It's just me, Arcade."
"Well, that's okay. You're not a consolation prize." At least that's what she meant to say. What came out was a cracked, croaky string of consonants he couldn't possibly have understood.

"Let me get you some water." She heard him walk away and she cautiously pushed herself up to a seated position to look around. She looked over at the stain on the floor for a long moment before turning back to accept a cup. Arcade looked strange. He had taken off his white lab coat and was dusted from head to toe with reddish brown dirt. While she watched him, he took off his glasses and tried to clean them on his filthy shirt, but only succeeded in smearing the grime around. He replaced them with a sigh and sat down cross-legged on the floor with a barely-concealed wince.

"I know you don't consciously remember what happened, but I'm assuming that part of you does actually know - and is actively repressing the memory. I don't know what the best thing to do is in this case. What do you want?"

"Please tell me," she whispered.

"Okay." He took a deep breath and began, "The Brotherhood of Steel came here looking for you. Raul hid us under the floor and they killed him for being uncooperative. As soon as they were gone, you took my pistol - by force, actually - hopped in that armor, and ran after them, all without saying anything coherent. Boone got back a minute later, and I asked him to try to track you and stop you. Dumb move on my part - he's all about revenge - but at least you're alive and miraculously uninjured. Right?" he added anxiously.

The buzzing in her ears was back, and she put her head between her knees, trying to avoid another faint. Her voice sounded like a stranger's, "Yeah. That fits with what I do remember, but I'm still confused."

"What about?"

"You said Raul is dead. That's not possible. He's over two hundred years old - why would that just end this morning of all mornings? It doesn't make sense. It's not right. It feels really, really unreal to me."

"No, it's not right," Arcade agreed gently. "But that's how death is, more often than not. It just happens - on nice, normal days, to good people."

She sat for what seemed like a very long time, adding it up over and over again in her head. "Th' main problem I see with that," she muttered thickly, "is that it didn't 'just happen.' It happened - if it happened - because I brought the fucking Brotherhood to his doorstep. I shouldn't've come here again. But I did. Gotta live with that now. Guess I have to." She pressed her palms to her eyes as if trying to push the tears back and straightened up with thready determination. "Alright. Let's go finish out this shitty day with a funeral. Can I see him first, please?"

He hesitated. "Veronica and I took the body up to the hill, where Boone's finishing the grave. We can go up there if you're ready, but you should probably remember him as he was."

"I need to see him, or I'm not going to believe it. Not really."

It took a long time to climb up the sloping back of the hill overlooking Raul's farm, but she had to appreciate the place her friends had chosen. It overlooked a good view of the whole farm. A long, lumpy shape wrapped in a dirty piece of canvas lay off to the side. She unwrapped the cloth and looked at the charred and blackened remains of what had been her friend's face, and then replaced it. She swallowed, and sat back, still clinging to numbness as a shield against grief and horror. "Fuck. I'm sorry, Raul." She replaced the covering and caught sight of Veronica's huddled form on the edge
of the bluff, beyond the far side of the hole where Boone was still throwing out shovelfuls of dirt. "Did she lead them here?"

"She says she didn't know they could track her by her gear and I believe her… believe anyway that she didn't see this coming. They just formally kicked her out of the Brotherhood, although it's definitely been a long time coming. Don't you remember anything? How we hid, what we heard…" He trailed off as she shook her head. "Nothing?"

"I'm trying. I remember breakfast, I remember talking to him and you. I even remember you saying something about people outside. But then there's nothing until I came to on the beach. Give it time, though, I'm sure it'll come back. All bad things eventually do." She sat down near the body and bowed her head. "If it's alright with you, I'd like to have some time alone to process. At least until Boone decides that he's dug deep enough."

Memories, like the disconnected pieces of a rough night, were out there, waiting to be picked up and assembled. Like other events she'd repressed in the past, these had sharp edges and hurt to handle. The beginning wasn't bad, though, so that's where she began… up to a point, it had been a fairly ordinary, pleasant morning, after all. She tried to see past the homey scene at the table, but every time she did so, the playback stuttered and froze and pushed her back to migas and conversation. Try as she might, she wasn't getting anywhere productive, and gave it up at a word and a touch from her friend. "Anything?"

She opened her eyes. "No."

"I'll tell you the details of what I remember later, if and when you want to hear it. For now, though we're ready if you are." Arcade looked around the silent ring of depressed people, then down into the grave where the shrunken bundle lay. "You knew him the best, Megan. Would you like to say something?"

She jerked her head up from her anguished paralysis at the graveside and nodded. She started to stand up, but thought better of it, and sat down facing the others instead, wishing she had a mentor - or at least a clear head - to do this justice.

"Yeah. Alright. Impromptu eulogy." She took a deep breath, and tried to collect her thoughts. "Raul Alfonso Tejada… never would tell me exactly how old he was. I got the impression he was a fairly young man when the bombs fell. He was kind of a hot-rodder, a scofflaw, a hot-tempered guy with an equal talent for fixing cars and shooting guns. Back then, he was living the sort of life that ends prematurely, but the world ended first… and gave him another 200 years."

"Just like today, there were a lot of ways to die in those early years, even if you were well clear of the bombs like Raul's family was. They had food to spare, but it wasn't enough for the desperate flood of refugees coming out from Mexico City. They burned the ranch, killing everybody except for Raul and his younger sister Rafaela. That was the first time he took up guns in revenge, killing some of the people who'd killed his family. But he stayed alive, to take care of his sister."

She fell silent for a minute, licking dry lips and trying to pick up the most important threads of her friend's life. "Obviously, even in the best of all possible worlds, Rafaela would be dead of massive old age by now, unless she had succumbed to that same side-effect of radiation poisoning that Raul did. But neither of those things happened. Instead, a raider gang kidnapped and killed her. And the newly-christened ghoul vaquero got revenge a second time, buried the last of his family, and moved on, crossing the border into what had been Arizona before the world moved on. There, he gave up his guns for a long time, and lived the life of 'Miguel the mechanic.'" She smiled at the image of Raul in his Petro-Chico jumpsuit, and wished, belatedly, that they could have buried him in that instead of his overalls. "He told me once that he actually got a car working about a hundred years ago. The
joyride only lasted about ten minutes before some critical piece of the machine failed, but it was a good ten minutes. He always did like going fast.

"But he was slowing down by this point. Ghouls are incredibly resilient in some ways, but their bones and tendons and things don't last as long as their minds do. He'd become a lonely old man, a barely-tolerated outcast on the margins of what passed for society in Two-Sun. Or 'Tucson,' as he insisted it used to be called." Tears threatened now, and she sniffed, trying to force them back, before continuing, voice thick and hesitant. "There was a woman living there. A prostitute, actually. I can't remember what he said her name was. I don't think he ever even talked to her, but she reminded him of Rafaela, and so he watched over her from a distance." She looked up at the others. "You don't have to be a genius to know that this story doesn't end well. Ruffians came to town. They bought ammo from Raul's little shop. And then they got drunk and shot up the brothel and took some of the girls captive, the little Rafaela look-alike included. Again, he caught them. Again, he killed them. And again, he was too late to do any good. And this time, he was left half-crippled." She laughed, a choked, sobbing sound. "I traveled with Raul for a few weeks, y'know. Slowest roaming ever. It took so long to get from point to point, walking at zero miles per hour, and sometimes I was close to telling him that I was done moving at a crawl all the time, and done with having his popping joints give our position away to raiders whenever we were trying to be stealthy. But I never found a way to tell him that didn't sound cruel, and in the end it was he who decided to take a break and come back here. Thank heaven for small mercies."

She closed her eyes and found the thread of his story again. "The years after Tucson were low ones for Raul. He wandered west until he got to Vegas, kept to himself, scratched out a little bit of a farm here, and watched the Mojave change when the NCR and the Legion took a mutual interest in the Dam and starting jockeying for control of this blasted region. At some point, a few years ago, he got lonely enough to go wandering and ended up becoming an unwilling guest on Black Mountain for a while." She sniffed. "Y'all know the rest. Me and Veronica, we got him out of there. He had 'bout six months of relative peace. He fed us whenever we showed up on his doorstep. If you tune out all of the grumbling, which was all a front anyway, he was really a very gracious host and an excellent cook. Family - or even the semblance of family - was what mattered to him in the end. People to feed, shelter, and protect. I hope he knew that I loved him. I never said it to him when he was alive. It's only two words in Spanish. Te quiero."

Tears were falling in earnest now, and she struggled to finish. "We saved him from slavery, but sentenced him to death. I got him killed by being stupid, by involving him in dangerous stuff, and specifically by underestimating the Brotherhood of Steel and their capacity for unthinking brutality. I should have left him well enough alone instead of showing up here whenever I needed something from him. His murderers are dead now, but as Raul understood all too well... revenge doesn't do much good for anybody. None for the dead, of course, and very little for the living." Reaching down she picked up a clod of earth and crumbled it in one hand before throwing it into the grave, dusting the top of the canvas-wrapped body. "I'm sorry, Raul. You deserved better than this." She looked up at the others again, not noticing through the tears that Veronica's face had gone completely white. "That's all I had, guys. Thanks for... being here. For digging."

Boone nodded and started refilling the grave. Megan watched him for a few minutes, then started walking back with Arcade at her side. Every muscle felt like a rubber band stretched to its breaking point, and aches that had gone unnoticed before now clamored for attention. She laughed a little, realizing that, at that moment anyway, even Raul would have beaten her in a footrace. It seemed appropriate somehow.

The rest of the day was a tense, miserable affair that came to a head over an awful dinner. Since no one else seemed likely to volunteer to cook, Arcade tried to make soup out of two mole-rats - the results of Boone's morning hunt - along with whatever he found in the cupboard, but it was a dismal
meal in every respect. Once it had cooked down, there was too much spiciness and salt, and the cornmeal he had unwisely thrown in as a thickener had absorbed a lot of the liquid and given it a strange, clotted texture. It didn't really matter, though. Boone and Megan spooned it up mechanically, while Veronica stared straight ahead and ignored any offer of food. It was she who finally broke the silence, glaring defiantly at the Courier and the soldier as she did so.

"Did you have to kill them... all of them... today?" Wrists bare - the paladins had confiscated her weapons when they dismissed her - she crossed her arms in front of her and stuck her jaw out emphatically.

Really Veronica? Arcade thought wearily. You're going to go there right now?

Megan's eyes blazed back, but she answered mildly enough. "Yes, I did. If the Brotherhood sends men after me and mine, then they should expect to die. It's pretty simple."

"One of the men you killed today was younger than you are. Avery Stanton. He was one of the kindest people I've ever met, and exactly the sort of person we needed making up the next generation. He didn't even reach for his weapon today." She was close to tears now. "He was like the little brother I never had."

Not in a mood to defuse the situation, Megan shot back, "Well then, maybe your little brother shouldn't have stood by while one of his superiors killed a defenseless old man. As far as I'm concerned, that made him complicit in the crime. I wasn't interested in differentiating between the one who shot Raul and the cowardly toadies who watched him do it."

"Am I complicit too? Are you going to kill me too?" she snarled, losing any claim to reasonable ground with this challenge.

"I was giving you a pass because you didn't give us up, but I don't know. Did you intentionally lead them here? If not, I have no quarrel with you. Keep defending Raul's killers, though, or come after me yourself, and we'll have a problem."

"No, I didn't bring them here. You did. If it weren't for you, they wouldn't have been out here at all! Raul would still be alive, I'd still have my family... the way I see it, we'd all be better off with one variable missing, and that's you."

Megan deflated on the spot, answering in a hollow, toneless voice. "What do you want from me, Veronica? I can't really feel worse than I do already. I also wish I'd never spoken to anybody in the Brotherhood. They'd still be trying to kill me, but at least they'd be faceless targets instead of people."

She answered doggedly. "I want you to feel guilt for Avery's death too."

Megan poked angrily at the remains of the wretched soup. "I do. A little, anyway. You've given me a name and a face, and now he's that initiate who lost the laser gun in Scorpion Gulch and asked me to find it. I remember him, remember how excited he was to graduate to armor this year. I'm sorry that his first real mission above-ground was an absolutely pointless waste of five lives. But at the end of the day, he was someone that would have killed or condemned me on sight, so I'd do it again. Without hesitation."

"Did he at least die quickly? Can you tell me that?" She sounded heartbroken.

"Um... I don't remember the fight very well, and I didn't look closely at any of the bodies afterwards. Probably?"

"Yeah, they did." Everybody turned to look at Boone as he spoke up for the first time in hours. "And
for the record, I don't feel any guilt for the shots I took today. Too much of that'll fuck you up. If you - if either of you - were soldiers, you'd get that."

"Okay." Veronica pushed back from the table and stood up. "I don't think we ever need to talk again, Courier. I wish we'd never met, and I hope you die looking for redemption. That goes for all of you. I'm leaving."

After collecting her few belongings, Veronica was gone, leaving a chilly silence in her wake.

Megan crossed her arms in front of her and laid her head down on the table. "You got any liquor, Boone? I don't need much. One shot'll knock me out right now, I think."

"You can't drink tonight," he answered brusquely. "Haven't you realized that this place isn't safe anymore? If the Brotherhood patrol radioed in their last location before they failed to check in, then we'll have company sooner or later. That's assuming that she's not pissed enough to try to cut our throats in our sleep or burn the place down over our heads. I could go make certain of that at least…"

To a horrified Arcade's immense relief, Megan shook her head emphatically. "No, Boone. She hasn't earned rough treatment or worse from us. She lost a lot today and we can overlook a few harsh words and threats. You're right about the risk, though - if it makes you feel better, we can take turns on watch and leave at first light."

"Or we could leave now and be at Bitter Springs in an hour. That's my vote, if it counts for anything."

"Your opinion matters to me, but I can't... literally can't do that right now. You can go if you want, though."

Boone heaved a sigh and shook his head. "I said I'd stay and I will. But fuck that taking turns shit. I don't trust either of you to keep a good watch." With that, he stomped outside, slamming the door behind him.

"I am so good with people. You want to storm out too? It's all the rage right now." The smile she gave her one remaining companion looked a bit wobbly.

"Another time, maybe. Go to bed. I'll clean up. Not that it really matters anymore. Is there anything here you want to keep as a memento?"

She looked blearily around the room, eyes skating over the rug, which now covered the bloodstain and laser marks on the floor. "Jus' the pan, I think. Can you take it with you, please? I don't think I'm going to be doing much cooking for a while."

"I'd love to haul five pounds of iron back to Freeside, but are you sure you don't want Raul's pillow instead?" When her lower lip started to tremble, he kicked himself inside. "Sorry. That was a bad joke. I don't mind. A good pan is nice to have."

Megan refused to take the bed for the mumbled reason that it was Raul's, and collapsed in a pile of tangled linens on the floor instead. While she slept, Arcade finished the last and most important of his letters, then, not really knowing why he bothered, went outside to argue his competence to a surly Boone until he ungraciously agreed to relinquish half the watch. Thoroughly fed up with absolutely everything, he went to bed, preparing for a short night and another difficult day (with difficult conversations) tomorrow.

"Some of those stories raise a lot more questions that they answer. What the hell are you playing at
"lately, Arcade? Every time I stop by the Fort, you're out. No one can tell me where you go. And why do you have a goddamned frying pan?"

Arcade, who had been talking and pacing back and forth for almost an hour, stopped brandishing and feinting at imaginary enemies with the pan - really, it would make a rather nice melee weapon in a pinch - and set it down with a sheepish expression. After his tense conversation with Julie, he had decided to borrow the Followers' Strip pass to visit Ignacio at his lab, which was really just a corner of the artist Michael Angelo's workshop that they rented to house their more valuable gadgetry and projects. Unfortunately, it seemed that he may have presumed too much upon old affection - while Ignacio listened readily enough to Arcade's selective account of the months since Helios One, the particulars were clearly straining his patience.

"It's not mine. I'm holding it for someone." When he thought about it, he suppose it did seem absurd. "Look, I was just hoping to talk."

"Yeah. You've done a lot of that. I'm busy." He glanced up from tinkering long enough to catch the hurt expression on the other man's face. "Look, you don't get to drop in after months of no contact and pretend like everything's alright between us. In case no one's ever told you, you're a very awkward person with inconvenient timing. I'm doing fine by the way. Thanks for asking."

"What are you working on?" he asked belatedly.

Ignacio gave him an exasperated look, but answered anyway. "Long-term, I'm making a list of supplies we'll need to reclaim Vault 3. I don't know if you heard, but some do-gooder mercenary gave us access to that place after they cleared the Fiends out. It could have potential as a permanent, centralized hospital and research center. Can't move until we have the people, though, and Julie's told me we may have to wait another year to open it up."

"Funny story-" Arcade began enthusiastically, but Ignacio cut him off as if he hadn't heard the interruption.

"In the somewhat more immediate future, however, I'm preparing to lead a scouting expedition to the Hopeville Missile Silo this winter - part of that region they're calling 'The Divide' now, you know." Now the small man spoke with some pride. "From the reports we've gotten, we think a combination of tectonic activity and unexploded ordnance contributed to the natural disaster that wiped out the settlements there. We hope to ensure that doesn't happen again."

_The Divide._ Just the name sent shivers up Arcade's spine, even if he couldn't quite put a finger on why. "Please be careful. I've heard… other things… about that place that make me wonder if there's not something more sinister at play."

Ignacio waited for more, but when there was nothing forthcoming, he snorted. "That's it? Okay, I'll keep your vague warnings in mind." Softening a little, he sighed. "If you've got itchy feet from staying in one place for too long, there is a spot on the team for a doctor-slash-biologist. Someone to take samples, do the odd autopsy, and keep everybody alive. Your troubled young friend can come as a guard if she wants. It's unpaid work, but there'll doubtless be valuables to loot. That place should be almost untouched."

"It sounds fascinating, and ordinarily I'd be interested, but part of the reason I came to see you was to tell you that I'm leaving the Followers." Seeing Ignacio's total lack of reaction, he commented, "You don't seem surprised."

He shrugged. "I pretty much always assumed that this life wouldn't be enough for you forever."
"Well I didn't know that. You never said anything. I never seriously considered doing anything else until recently, and even then only because of external pressures."

"A man can hope he's wrong. At one time, I thought you were the perfect catch in this dusty shithole of a city - cute, cultured, and optimistic to a fault - and I didn't look too closely at your obvious drawbacks. Namely, that you're incredibly distant even when you're trying to be intimate. You never show anybody who you are."

"I'm sorry. I wanted--... I wish I could have done things differently."

With an irritable gesture, Ignacio set a wrench done with unnecessary force, making it clatter noisily across his work surface. "You knew what you were doing, though. I never understood. I still don't."

Arcade reached in his coat pocket and pulled out his last letter - this one several pages long and sealed with a small adhesive strip. "This explains things as well as I can. You can read it whenever you want, but I'd prefer it if you'd wait until I'm gone. That'll be in another month or so."

Ignacio took the letter, turning it over and weighing it in his hands as if he wanted to open it right there and then. "Let me guess. You took… three, no four sheets of paper to tell me that you're secretly straight? No? Or maybe you're the long-lost son of some recently-deceased Brotherhood of Steel elder, and you're leaving now to claim your birthright. I always thought there was something to that hypothesis. Or maybe - I only thought of this last year - maybe you're one of those synthetic people we hear rumors of from out east. Am I close?"

"Right ballpark, wrong base. On one of those, anyway. Why do people think I would have anything to do with the Brotherhood? It's honestly insulting."

"Probably because you carry a fucking energy weapon for no discernible reason," he shot back, but with no actual venom. He put the letter in his breast pocket, then turned back to his tools. "Thanks, Arcade. I guess. It's too little, too late. But it'll be nice to have an answer, I suppose. There's a pretty good chance that I'm going to read this about five minutes after you leave, just so you know. Be safe out there, wherever you end up."

Arcade Gannon could - sometimes - take a hint. He heard the dismissal in the other's tone. He didn't know what he had expected, but this brush-off seemed a fitting conclusion to the weekend. Still, it was worth a try... "Just to be clear: if I asked, would you say 'no' to spending the night together tonight? I could get us a room at Vault 21."

Ignacio shot him a look of anger mixed with disgust. "I don't do casual sex with no future. Besides, I'm seeing someone right now. Which you'd know if you gave a damn about your colleagues' lives. Good-bye."

As Arcade trudged down the Strip back toward Freeside in the slanting light of the late afternoon, dodging revellers, drunken soldiers, and aggressive prostitutes, he indulged a moment of self-pity. He didn't think he'd ever felt so lonely as he did right now, surrounded by the bustle of other peoples' lives. Maybe a book would help, at least a little. He could hope.
Day three. Forlorn Hope had earned a reprieve of sorts in recent weeks, not unlike the calm before a storm, and as a result the infirmary was almost empty, quiet except for the drone of flies on the canvas ceiling, Dr. Richards' off-key humming as he sterilized his tools, and the soft rustle of pages as the Courier flipped through her tattered magazine for the hundredth time.

Richards seemed to take her indolence as a personal insult - or perhaps a challenge. "Are you going to do anything at all today but lie there and read that ratty old thing? I would have thought you'd have memorized all the articles by now. Guns n' Bullets is mostly pre-war advertisements anyway… how can you stand it?"

Megan ignored his nagging, as she had for three days now, eyes darting from word to word, searching for the few she knew by sight: "gun," "the," and so forth, occasionally stopping to try - laboriously and usually unsuccessfully - to sound out new ones. It wasn't a very fruitful endeavor, but it sapped every bit of her mental energy, leaving none for grief and worry. It physically hurt after a while, like someone was industriously worming an ice pick behind her right eye, but it also tired her enough to sleep the days away. Sleep was the only real refuge she had now, and even then the dreams were bad. She'd find herself back under the floorboards, listening to Raul die, only in the dreams she'd scream aloud, giving away their hiding spot and watching Arcade die before being consumed by laser fire herself. Waking or sleeping, guilt weighed her down and anticipated loss threatened to steal her remaining nerve, but she didn't know how to get out from under it. For now, she contented herself with hiding.

When Megan and Boone had first arrived at Forlorn Hope together, late on the first day after the Brotherhood's ill-fated attack, she had dutifully reported in person to Polati, filled in the intelligence gaps left by ED's truncated oral record, and accepted his commendations. Since then, however, she couldn't bring herself to do more than the bare minimum to keep body and soul together - eating a little, sleeping a lot, and turning down work and recreation with indiscriminate apathy. She would report to the Dam on the morning of the president's visit, as requested, but until then she wouldn't lift a finger that she didn't want to. And she didn't want to do anything at all just now. Her armor lay folded beneath the cot, unused since their arrival; ED sat beside it, inert and lifeless for the time being, switched off entirely. She told herself that it was to preserve his battery, but the truth was that she didn't want to face anybody right now, not even a bot with no personality of its own. She accused herself constantly, so naturally ED would as well.

Boone plodded into the tent sometime in the afternoon, waking her up from a light, dreaming doze with his heavy tread. It was the first she'd seen of him since they'd arrived together, and she wondered privately if someone had put him up to it. He stammered out an extremely ungracious invitation to join him for some target practice, a suggestion that she declined before he was through speaking. There was no way she was going to improve enough to matter now, at the eleventh hour, and it would only be a waste of ammo to try.

He nodded, relief visible on his face, and turned to go, then spun back around as he remembered something. "Some of the First Recon guys - and Betsy - are planning to have a bonfire down on the east-side beach tonight. Kind of a last hurrah before things get serious. You can join us if you want. They like you for some reason. Well, everybody except Sterling - he thinks you're some kind of criminal - but he's not coming."

She closed her eyes again. "No, thanks. I need more time to rest. Have fun. Watch out for mirelurks."
He rubbed his neck with listless curiosity. "What are mirelurks?"

"I don't know." Words came unbidden sometimes to her tongue - creatures, places, and names without meaningful referents. It happened more often when she was on autopilot, speaking without filtering her comments too much. "Probably something like lakelurks, which is what I meant anyway. Good-bye, Boone."

Dr. Richards had been eavesdropping on this exchange and commented on it once Boone had gone. "I'm an army doctor, you know. I know when someone's shamming. It's my professional opinion that you're malingering. Milking that scratch for all it's worth. Using it as an excuse to hide in here. Why?"

She rolled away to face the wall. After days of enduring his chatter, she had begun to wonder if the camp's physician was entirely sane himself, and had long since wearied of his attempts at pointed conversation. He seemed to vacillate freely between manic cheer and dark pessimism, and grew increasingly annoying when he didn't have any real patients to treat. "If I'm not welcome here for the next 48 hours, let me know. Otherwise, mind your own fucking business."

He was as unperturbed as always. "Minding away. You should go spend time with your friends, though. 'Eat, drink, and be merry,' you know."

"...for tomorrow we die," she intoned to the wall.

This caught him off guard. "What?"

"That's how the expression finishes. How most of us are going to end up for real. Given enough time, that's all of us, I guess. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, etcetera, etcetera..."

"Well, not necessarily tomorrow. You have your whole life ahead of you."

This was a terrifying thought in its own right, and she'd had enough of his vague platitudes. "Please, just find something else to do and leave me alone."

"If you'll promise to amble down to the beach this evening, I won't say another word today. If you leave, then I'll have the place to myself for a few hours. I can practice my nude harmonica-playing without anyone complaining."

She could never quite tell when he was being serious or not. "You need psychological help. Not for the harmonica-playing, necessarily, but for your incessant need to fix things and people. But fine. Whatever gets you off my back. I need to talk to Boone anyway."

At half-past six, after the doctor had cleared his throat meaningfully a half-dozen times, she slipped out into the fading light, avoiding the eyes of the few men she met walking in between the tents. She had no one near that she trusted enough to tell, but her old panic had crept back with a vengeance in her days of self-imposed isolation, worse than before, and she'd become intensely aware of the soldiers' eyes on her - in a camp with almost no women left in it after orders from on high had withdrawn them, she stuck out like a sore thumb. None of them had ever tried anything (whether out of respect or fear she didn't know), only a few dared to say anything in earshot ("complimentary" catcalls for the most part), but they all looked at her. Or, overwhelmed by paranoia, she imagined that they did. Either way, she hated them all for making her feel unsafe as fear squeezed her chest, made her heart hammer out a frenetic beat, and threatened to drive her reeling back to the relative safety of the hospital cot. This is stupid, she said to herself. Nothing's changed except you. Get a fucking grip. Clutching a tent pole for support and trying to catch her breath, she admitted that there was no way she was going to be able to socialize like this - "normal" was not something she could project at the
moment. However... if the quartermaster was as well-stocked and profit-driven as she thought he was, there was a way she could feel better, maybe even well enough to pass for good company. Alcohol wasn't one of Dr. Usanagi's approved methods for staving off a panic attack - quite the contrary, actually - but it would help almost immediately. No one could feel this much fear after a few drinks. It helped immensely with anxiety in the short term, and that was what she needed.

She ducked into the tent and let her eyes adjust to the gloom. "Hey Mayes." Her voice cracked, and she tried to cover it with a cough. "You got a moment?"

The man in charge of supplies was idle, as usual, industriously flipping spent bullet casings into a rusty can on the other side of the tent. He didn't reply until he had cast - and sunk - his next shot, the little chunk of metal rattling around the inside with a resounding clatter. "What'choo need, Martin? More armor for you to bring back all tore up and covered in blood? You're not even one'uv us, and you got a free pass to take whatever you want? 'Taint right." He spat on the ground. The man sounded a little drunk himself, which gave her some hope of success.

She stuck a smile on her face, trying to sound flattering and charming, but succeeded only at a grotesque imitation of flirtatiousness. "Maybe in a couple of days, when I'm ready to head to the Dam. Right now, though, I'm just looking for something to relax. Liquor, not chems, nothing too bad. You always have everything - can you hook me up? I got… let's see… twenty caps to drop on a bottle of whatever."

He eyed her knowingly, taking in the hungry, frightened eyes and shaking hands. "I don't know. There's a reason I usually keep it out of the enlisted men's hands. There's too much potential for trouble in a depressing little posting like this. If you raise hell and tip the latrine - or yourself - off'uv the cliff, who you think Polati's gonna blame?" She heard enough in his tone to know that this wasn't a hard no, per se, just an indication that her price wasn't high enough.

"I don't get like that, I promise. No violence, no hijinks. I just need… I just want to calm down a little." She looked in her coin purse and exclaimed with feigned surprise. "Oh! Here's another ten caps, just hiding out. Thirty caps, now that's not too bad for a fifth of something that could take the skin off a deathclaw." A desperate note had crept into her voice that she didn't even try to conceal. "Please."

Maybe "desperate" sounded intimidating coming from her, because he capitulated sooner than expected, reaching out a hand for the money. "Alright, kid. Knock yourself out. Which poison would you like - bad whiskey or bad vodka?"

"Clear liquids are healthier," she answered seriously, much relieved, accepting the vodka and sliding it into her oversized pants pocket. "Thank you."

"You share that with someone, y'hear?" She gave him a dismissive wave, already far away mentally, and kept on walking.

The moon had begun to rise as the sun finished setting upon the unusually warm night, illuminating the somewhat treacherous path down to the shore. The Forlorn Hope encampment stood high upon a promontory overlooking a horseshoe-shaped bend in the river, and she intentionally chose the side that the others were not going to be camped out, upstream from where she expected they were currently gathering driftwood for their fire. She might join them later, but first she'd need to unwind a little. The solitude of the desert night was nice, if a little scary in its own way. At the sound of a coyote's faraway howl, she remembered, a little belatedly, that she'd neglected to bring a weapon of any sort - not even a knife - but by then she had cracked the seal on the vodka, and soon stopped caring about such trivial concerns. She stretched out on a flat rock ten yards out from the water,
soaking up the residual heat that it still retained from a day in the sun. At first, she gagged on the burning, bitter liquid - it was bad vodka by anyone's standard and it was nasty to take straight - but by the time it was a quarter gone she couldn't even taste it anymore. Numbness felt superlatively good. For the first time since Raul had died it didn't hurt to be awake and conscious. Even the dizziness didn't detract from this sense of well-being - all was right with the world and always would be, as long as there were escapes like this to be found, smack dab in the middle of a spinning, tilting universe with a population of one. Tomorrow would hurt. Tomorrow she would pay for this with well-deserved misery. But that didn't mean this wasn't worth it, if only she could stretch this moment out to last without tipping over into a dangerous zone. She reached to cap the bottle, thinking she could save the rest for the next time she felt bad, but accidentally knocked the whole thing off of the rock with her clumsy movement instead,

"Shit!" Megan half-rolled, half-fell off the rock, picking up the bottle, which lay on its side in the sand, unbroken, but mostly empty now. "Oh well. Fuck it." She gulped the last of it with heedless incaution, capping the bottle carefully, and set it down on the rock, thinking sagely to herself that you couldn't have too many good bottles. Incapable of standing upright without support, but happier than she'd felt in a long time, she leaned on the rock and watched the river flow by - it seemed to move with her, washing back and forth upon the shore. Feeling spontaneous, she pulled off her socks, boots, outer clothes, and Pip-Boy, with the light switched on as a beacon for easy retrieval. Walking took more coordination and balance than she had, but swimming would be easy - you couldn't fall down if you were floating.

Getting into the water was harder than it should have been, and she fell twice before she got past the ankle-deep shallows of the bone-chilling water, leaving scrapes and bruises that only sobriety would appreciate. Once in, though, paddling along under a bewildering, revolving sky with its glorious moon, she thought it was the most fun she'd had in recent memory. Slowed by the Dam just upstream, the current was little more than a gentle push here, occasionally grabbing her, spinning her around, and ducking her under before releasing her. It wasn't that deep: she could touch bottom if she needed to, and kick off to breathe. After the first splashing, freezing shock, she adjusted to the temperature - or thought she had - it was like the river was giving her a bracing hug as it carried her onward with inexorable strength. It was only when she noticed that her hands refused to open and shut normally and that her teeth were chattering intermittently that she decided perhaps she'd had enough swimming and that it was time to walk or crawl back before she drifted too far from her shoes. Hopping on feet too numb to feel the bottom, she scrambled on elbows and knees until she lay panting on the wet gravel, shivering even in the warm night breeze. She might have fallen asleep there, unconscious to the dangers of exposure and predators, but the sound of distant footsteps and voices roused her soggy sense of perception, and she climbed up to a wobbly stand to meet the new challengers. A flashlight - a rare item that only a few lucky soldiers carried - shone out at her face, temporarily blinding her before the beam bobbed down to the ground and someone laughed.

"W-well, th-th-that is… n-n-not another l-lakelurk. G-g-good thing you didn't sh-shoot, B-boone."
That boyish stutter could only belong to Ten of Spades.

"I don't shoot at what I can't see," Boone growled back. "What are you doing, Megan? Sneaking up on people with guns in a war zone is a bad idea. And where the fuck are your clothes?"

"Wasn't sneaking. Swimming. An' comin' to th'party. You invited me, silly." Not self-conscious in the slightest, despite being dressed only in a bra and underwear, she stepped up to him and stroked his cheek, not noticing his flinch as she did so. "It's nice to see your eyes again, Boone. I guess even you wouldn't wear sunglasses at night." Giving the others a wave in passing, she stumbled toward the fire behind them, intent on getting warm, and not really caring how many times she fell on the way there.
Behind her, above the others' muffled snickering, Gorobets commented aloud in a wondering tone, "You couldn't pay me enough to get in that water. Doesn't she know what lives in there?"

Shaking her head, Betsy followed her, hoisting her up when she stumbled and stopping her from falling into the fire, guiding her instead to a log beside the roaring blaze. "You want to cover up? You're embarrassing the boys and giving me all kinds of uncomfortable thoughts." Without waiting for an answer, Betsy wrapped a dirty blanket around her shoulders and asked, more kindly. "Where are your clothes, honey?"

"B-b-back on the b-b-beach a ways. On a r-r-rock." She heard the other woman relaying this to the men, and felt a mostly submerged flash of guilt at inconveniencing others. She was starting to feel somewhat unwell, and wondered for the first time if she'd be able to walk back to her cot at all. The heat felt good on her skin, but inside she was still freezing, nauseous, and very tired, ready to lay down and give up the attempt to stay vertical, and hopefully not roll off of the wobbly plate that the world had become. When she started to give in to this impulse, however, someone caught her and pushed her back up and snapped a finger against her cheek until she opened her eyes again.

Betsy sounded irritated, and a little concerned, "I thought you had a handle on your shit these days, girl. Maybe you're seriously out of practice with your drinking or maybe you didn't even try to press the stop button tonight. Either way, this was a pretty stupidly dangerous stunt. What gives?"

Megan was just self-aware of to be aware that she was probably in blackout territory, but that wasn't enough of a caution to keep her mouth shut. She later had a muddled impression of telling Betsy - telling everybody in earshot, really - about every fear, burden, and sorrow that she was holding onto, then lapsing into a crying, vomiting jag that went on and on and on until she lost the thread of consciousness. That was when the night shuddered to a halt as far as she was concerned.

Day Four dawned painful, sore, and disorienting. Searching for some clue about what had happened, she found humiliation at what little she could remember, and worry about what she couldn't. Like where she was and how she had gotten there.

"Did you have a fun time last night?" a disapproving voice boomed out from somewhere behind closed eyelids.

She groaned in response. "Please talk more quietly, Arcade. Your voice is like a sledgehammer."

"Hey, I know an Arcade." The voice sounded amused. "Nice guy for a… a talk, once in a while. But I'm not him."

She opened her eyes wider and recognized the familiar ceiling of the Forlorn Hope infirmary. "Dr. Richards, I mean. I, uh… I'm sorry if I put you to any trouble. I don't remember."

"Let me refresh your memory, then. It was costly, annoying, unnecessary, sleep-depriving trouble, but that's my job. To treat everybody that walks, crawls, or gets carried through that door. But I don't have to be nice or happy about it."

She wished he would stop talking and hand her some water. "Did I throw up on you or something? I know I had a little too much to drink, but that's nothing special… I guess I shoulda just stayed out overnight. Spared you the mess."

This provoke a minor explosion from the doctor, whose voice rose and stabbed through her aching head. "Kid, you were cold, dehydrated, intoxicated to the point of being unresponsive, and still dressed in wet clothes from your nighttime swim when the others brought you in. People die from
shit like that. And that's why I gave warm saline to a drunk that should have been reserved for some poor sap with a few bullet holes in them." Ah. There was real anger now. Richards really could run the whole range of emotions in a single conversation.

"Damn. I didn't think..." She felt ashamed - ashamed and sick, but not as sick as she should be by rights, if what he said was true. If living with the Followers had taught her one thing, it was to never, ever, ever waste medicine. She flexed her right hand, noting the a small bruise over the vein, and looked over guiltily. "I'm really sorry. I know what that stuff is worth - really, I do - and I never meant to make you waste it on me. I wish you hadn't." More quietly, she added, "Thank you."

Calm again, he answered in a normal tone, "De nada, my strange, sad little guest. Your one saving grace is that you are the reason I have any supplies to begin with. So, did you get the self-destructiveness out of your system? I must admit this wasn't what I'd expected when I pushed you to get out last night." He was back to radiating bracing good cheer, but there was a watchful glint in his eye now.

"For now," she said absently, blinking and watching the ceiling rotate slowly, wondering if she was still drunk. "'Til the next time I let people shoot at me, I guess. Hablas español?"

"Just a little, honey. Enough to be polite. I used to work in a neighborhood that had a small but very tight-knit community of people who'd been a part of a bilingual vault." He dragged some partitions over, enclosing her in a semi-private space. "You're stark naked under all those blankets, just so you know. Might want to get dressed if you can manage it. Let me know if you need help."

She heard him sit down beyond the canvas barrier, humming cheerfully to himself. Getting up, getting dressed was a real chore this morning - stiff fingers didn't want to work clasps or buttons, and every motion sent little waves of nausea and chills shivering down her spine.

The humming stopped. "Hey. I got a question for you. You don't have to answer, but I have to ask. Those scars - especially on your back - what happened to you?"

"Don't know." The lie slipped easily from her tongue. "All that was before some casino boss shot all my memories to hell. It's just as well though, right? Who would want to remember that?"

"If you say so, kid," he said dubiously. "Why'd you go and drink so much, though?"

"It's just self-medication taken too far... for anxiety. And grief. I got off the hard drugs a while back, but alcohol's an easy fix that I can't forget about and doesn't seem as bad in comparison. But don't worry. I've got someone... at home... who won't tolerate that kind of thing. I'll be okay when I'm done with the fighting, when I get away from all of these... men. No offense. I'll dry out, stay level, and get away from everything that makes me want to blot it all out. God willing, I won't have to watch any more friends die because of me..." By the time she trailed off, she was talking aloud to herself, and at this point something clenched inside her chest, and she squeezed her eyes shut to keep the tears in.

He waited a moment, then asked, "Where's home?"

"Freeside. I've spent more time there than anywhere else. I figure home's where you hang your hat, and I'm pretty sure that's where I left my last sombrero, because I haven't seen it in weeks." She was going for a flippant tone, but her own words made her head throb and she gave up trying to sound lighthearted. "Truth is, I don't really have a place I belong at all."

"I always thought home is where the heart is," he commented agreeably.
"And... there's another trite cliche from the good doctor. It's true, though."

A quart of water and a few hours of sleep later, she decided to get out of the tent, if only to get away from the probing questions that kept coming. And begin a round of apologies. Despite the overwhelming brightness of the day and the dull throbbing in her head, she felt surprisingly good - and, strangely, happy. It was like the drinking had flipped some switch in her brain, making the needle rest just above "okay" for the first time in days. She activated ED for the first time since she'd reclaimed him from Polati and the little bot bobbed along behind her as she made her way through the tents, making her feel like she had someone watching her back, keeping her safe. The first person she found was Boone, who had situated himself upon a comfortable perch on the highest promontory overlooking the camp.

She approached him loudly on purpose, knowing from long experience that it didn't do to surprise the man. "Hey. You on watch?"

"Not formally, since I don't have an official role here other than being your de facto handler. Which I may not be doing a very good job of, come to think of it. I just like having eyes on the area. Hair-of-the-dog?" He seemed remarkable relaxed, perhaps because of the flask he now held out to her.

She grimaced. "Thanks, but I'm good. I don't want to get back into that cycle of always being a little buzzed. Therein lies problems… especially if you ever want to stop."

"Suit yourself. Helps me aim steady."

"I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to crash y'all's party. I don't remember everything, but what I do is pretty embarrassing."

He actually smiled, but it had a strained edge to it. "Yeah, that was… something. We all learned some interesting things about you last night, even me. I had no idea that you considered yourself personally responsible for the total nuclear annihilation of human civilization… or something like that. You weren't real coherent. Were you trying to kill yourself or something?"

She winced at thought of whatever she might have said. "No, I was just being reckless. I had no intention of getting into the water until all of the vodka was gone. At that point, it seemed like the best idea in the world." She shivered briefly, rubbing in arms in memory of that awful cold. "I wasn't… I'm not suicidal, but I guess I'm hovering around the point where I don't care too much if I die. Not enough to be careful all the time. Sometimes I forget that survival is an inherent good."

"I know exactly what you mean, unfortunately." He shifted uncomfortably, looking anywhere but at her. "Betsy tore me a new one last night, right after we handed your sorry ass over to the doc. I guess she has a point. But can you blame me for not wanting to get close to you when you're hurting?"

"No. It's alright. I'll talk to her when I go 'round to make my apologies. God, this is humiliating… I'm sorry, Boone. I feel like I probably embarrassed you in particular."

He shrugged one shoulder. "I don't embarrass easily. What all have you been doing for the last several months? You referenced a lot of random things in passing and I don't know if you gave us the full list."

The question surprised her, and she struggled to formulate an answer on the fly. "Uh… I cleared out a couple of vaults, recovered an airplane from the bottom of Lake Mead for the Boomers, forged an alliance with the Kings, got the Enclave back together, and killed a hell of a lot of Fiends and Legionaries."
"Impressive." He sounded slightly disbelieving, but his eyes were unreadable behind his glasses.

"That was everything in the 'win' category. On the less positive side, I went through heavy Med-X withdrawal, had an abortion, had someone else's unwanted baby die in my arms, failed or alienated a lot of people, almost got kidnapped by the Legion again, and got experimental brain surgery that seems to have made things worse. Raul's murder is just the latest thing I have to handle somehow. I've 'bout gotten to the point where I feel like the best way to avoid losing friends is not to have any in the first place and sometimes I'm afraid that I'm going to end up there no matter what."

He was quiet for a long moment. "I'm sorry. I'm surprised you still give a fuck about anything. You don't have to, you know. There's no one holding a gun to your head saying, 'you must do this.' It's not... it doesn't have to be your fight."

"I do have to care. At this point I do, anyway. It's my duty to do something if I can. But I'm finally seeing a light at the end of a long tunnel. I'll be free soon."

"Free," he repeated, with just the slightest hint of alarm. "What do you mean?"

"Pretty soon, I won't have to be 'The Courier' anymore. I can just be Megan, far away from here. I can leave all of this behind, and never again be the kind of person who makes big things happen. Either I'll escape, or I'll die trying, and I can't wait. Did you ever read much mythology in school, Boone?"

He shook his head impatiently, swatting a mosquito on his arm. "Nope. Teacher traveled around the farms, showed up once a week or so. He eventually got most of us reading and figuring a little, and that was it. All we needed. Didn't have any books of our own."

"Well, Arcade likes it, so I've heard more than my share of Greek and Roman mythology. My takeaway from all of it is that no one should ever want to be significant - it sucks to be a person that the gods notice for any reason. Those are the ones that get killed, tortured, driven mad, and turned into things. The ugly farmer, minding his own business? He's usually okay. He doesn't make it into the story, but he survives to live a boring, happy life and have boring children more often than not. I want to live outside of the big stories, both for my own sake, and so that my footprint doesn't crush any more little guys. I'd rather die than let that happen again, so I'm going to get out."

"I hope you make it," he answered quietly. "I think you and that city-soft doctor out in the wild are a recipe for disaster, but I could be wrong."

"Thanks. I'm optimistic." She frowned. "I can't really say why. There is a path to safety, though, and I think me and Arcade will find it. I have faith in him, at least. That his decision-making is more grounded in reality than mine. And he has maps." She said this word like another person might say "magical talisman," with unfaltering hope and trust. "What was Utah like, Boone? I've heard parts of that region are beautiful. We'll be cutting through the south part, but I don't know what we'll see there."

"I don't remember any beauty," he began haltingly, his voice distant. "I went with a caravan, but everyone else died. Even before we got ambushed, we were lost. Our navigator - a psycho addict hired just because he had a Pip-Boy - died of an overdose pretty early on. No one else could figure out how to get the damn thing working, even the smart girl we had with us. Screen was all locked up, she said. Then, just as we got close to Zion canyon, we got hit hard by these tribals called 'White Legs' and it was all over for everyone not wearing good armor. Everyone except me."

She looked at him in earnest confusion. "Why did you go, Boone? I thought you just wanted to kill Legion. There aren't that many in Utah, surely?"
"There *are* some, out there trying to convert more tribals. But I was there for one in particular. Joshua Graham. The Malpais Legate."

"I've heard that name," she began slowly. "Chief Hanlon at Camp Golf told me about him. He also told me that he died. That Caesar had him set him on fire and thrown into the river."

"He didn't die. NCR knew it - First Recon knew it - but kept quiet about it. He was a low-priority target, since Caesar also wanted him taken out, but I wanted to see it done. Because you can't just step away from a life of brutality and not have it follow you. That's not justice." He threw a stone as hard as he could, watching it arc down to the ground far below, falling well short of the river.

She didn't think he had intentionally aimed that last jab at her, but it still felt like a personal warning. "I'm guessing he's dead now."

"Yeah. I pretended to help him for a while, gathering crap for whatever his plan was, then killed him in an unguarded moment, away from his men." What was that she heard? Regret perhaps? "I tried to make up for it, though," he said defensively, even though she hadn't been about to accuse him of anything. "Tried to help some of the others get clear of the White Legs' path. The White Legs were propped up by Legion resources. Without Graham's military leadership, the other tribes didn't stand a chance, especially not with that peace-loving fool Daniel. But... I held their pursuers back for as long as I could." He was talking to himself now and she didn't interrupt or offer judgment. She understood unintended consequences all too well. "And that's what I did in Utah," he finished.

"I wish things had been different and I could have been there to help you," she offered sincerely. "It sounds like hell to be all alone except for enemies and strangers for weeks or months."

"I didn't at the time - back then, I hated you even more than him - but now I wish you had been there too. It was exactly the sort of thing we would have done better together, although I think you would have tried to stop me from killing Graham, especially after talking to him. He was always watching his back for Caesar's spies, but for some reason he didn't fear me. Even at the end. The bastard almost got the better of me, even half-crippled with those burns, with my bullet in him already." He stopped, thinking back upon the moment, and changed the subject abruptly. "Do you know anything about a *frumentarius* named Ulysses? That guy and Vulpes Inculta were the two that he was on the lookout for."

"Vulpes is dead," she blurted out distractedly, heart racing. "Some combination of deathclaw and mini-nuke did for him a month or so ago. Ulysses is... or was... a Legion-affiliated courier who apparently knew something about my past that he didn't like. I think he was trying to kill me last year - he was the one who pinned that last job on me. And now I'm pretty sure he's trying to get me to show up to my own execution *again*. But I'm not dancing to his tune. I'm going in the opposite direction of those coordinates." ED beeped and nudged her arm, tired of being ignored, and she stroked his armored plating without looking up. "Why do you ask? Do you know something else about him?"

Boone relaxed a little, shaking his head. "Not really. Just that Graham saw him as a rare big-picture thinker among Caesar's dogs. I was worried that he might've started maneuvering to take his place instead of that madman Lanius. But if he's playing cat-and-mouse games with you, he's probably just another brand of crazy." He looked up, a feral grin on his face that frightened her a little, "If you'll give me those coordinates, I'll go make sure he's not a problem for you or anybody else - once we're done at the Dam, of course."

Her headache was building again and she wished she had dared to ask the doctor for something to treat it, though she suspected that he would have laughed in her face. "No. I don't want to send you alone to what could be your death. He's a dangerous man, hanging out in a dangerous place, and I
won't be responsible for what could happen." She took a deep breath, struggling to get the words out through her fuzzy thoughts. "Why don't you… if you want to, of course… travel with us for a while. I know things still aren't what they were between us and probably can't be, but you could come east until you find something that you don't mind being a part of. Something new."

He looked equal parts amused and surprised. "What do you think Gannon would say about that invitation? We don't exactly get along, you know. I can't stand that superior look he's always got on his face and I know he doesn't like me. Never has."

"He'd be annoyed. But I'm worried about leaving you here. I'm afraid you'll… you know…"

"Drink myself to death? Blow my brains out when I run out of escaped legionaries to shoot? Go on a killing spree of people that I blame for my problems?" That scary grin was back on his face and she wanted to punch it off of him, but contented herself with scowling at him instead.

"For starters, yeah."

"If I do any of those things, that's my problem. And I'm not your concern anymore," he said, his tone curiously gentle and at the same time dismissive. "Leaving for good is not an option I'm going to consider. I need to stay near Vegas. That's where I met Carla. I'm not leaving… her."

"That's your final word on that?"

"Yeah." He took a sip from the flask that had been laid aside, and turned back to survey the rough, sloping decent to the sparkling river below. "No offense, but that's enough talking for me for about a week. Can you go bother someone else now?"

"Fine. We'll head out tomorrow morning. Hopefully my head won't burst before then."

He sighed. "Yeah. Take it easy tonight. I don't want my back-up to be hungover."

"No worries on that count. Right now, never drinking again sounds like the best idea in the world."

Day Five was beautiful, and she at least felt clear-headed and focused, interested in scoping out a new locale - she had never actually been to the Dam before, at least not that she remembered. To be a tourist of sorts at one of the most interesting - and, for today, at least, the most secure - places in the world was uncommonly pleasant, and it almost made up for the fact that Moore had mandated that she leave her armor, all of her weapons, and even ED in her assigned bunk in anticipation of Kimball's visit. For safety purposes, she said.

Hers and Boone's briefing in Moore's office had been an interesting one. It was obvious that the sniper's surly presence in the room had set the woman slightly off balance, and she remained fairly businesslike instead of making vague threats and insinuations in her face.

Completely disarmed as ordered and now confused by the summons that had brought them here, she asked the officer directly, "So, why are we here, Colonel?"

The other woman rolled her eyes. "Didn't anybody tell you? The president wants to meet you both. Caesar's killers and all. He'll shake your hands, exchange some pleasantries, and you'll say nothing substantial at all."

"What?" she protested. "I didn't kill Caesar. Can I sit this one out?"

"Boone told Captain Gilles that you helped. And no. I need you to make a public appearance for
reasons that you don't need to fully understand. Basically, I need to show the world a tamed Courier
that I control, not to put too fine a point on it."

She shot an exasperated look behind her. "I helped Boone escape. Nothing more."

Moore waved a hand dismissively. "Same difference. Nice photo op. Good morale boost for the
troops, yada, yada. His public relations people decided that Caesar's death would make a pretty
speech, so a pretty speech about you misfits is what he's going to give us."

"Alright, whatever. Don't you actually want us to do anything useful around here today? Ferret out
traps, search for enemy snipers and assassins, that sort of thing? That's the sort of thing I usually do."

"No. Take a break from the heroics. I've got a hundred rangers and twice as many ordinary soldiers
on the scene already, so we've got it well in hand, thank you very much. We don't need the likes of
you poking around behind the scenes. And Martin?"

"Yes?"

"If you so much as look at the president the wrong way, I've got a sniper waiting in the wings just for
you. That's all."

Leaving Boone to his fate, she stepped out to see the crowd waiting outside and immediately
understood Moore's complacency. There were more rangers here than she'd ever seen in one place.
Thanks to her patrolling efforts up and down the river, she recognized quite a few of them, including
the harried-looking man with an eye-patch who was in charge. Many greeted her, but she suspected
many others didn't recognize her at all - they knew her as the colossus in armor, not as the slight girl
in civilian clothes. Their leader, at least, knew her face and gave her a nod when she walked up to
greet him. "Hello Ranger Grant."

"Courier. Good to see you alive and well. Could you do a favor for me? Check on my man up there
on the farthest tower -" here he gave a wave and a distant figure, wearing the full armor of a veteran
ranger, waved back - "I keep trying to page him, but he's not responding on the radio. Valdez isn't
good with tech, so it could be broken, or he might just have switched it off by accident. Carry this
portable one up the tower to him? Please? The numbers we have, it may seem absurd, but I don't
want to pull anybody else off their detail right now. We're putting this whole place - down to the last
lump of dirt - through a fine-toothed comb right now."

It was on the tip of her tongue to decline with an apology - she wasn't keen on heights, after all, and
Moore had told her in no uncertain terms that she didn't want her to do anything - but she saw how
overwhelmed he seemed and accepted the radio he offered, listening to the simple instructions.

"Just tell him to press and hold that button to speak. All I need is a verbal confirmation from him that
things are okay."

He was sweating more than the breezy day could account for. Going off of a hunch, she asked, "Did
something happen, Grant?"

"Yeah." He lowered his voice to a harsh whisper. "We found an improvised bomb on the helipad.
One of the engineers who was in charge of inspecting it has gone AWOL - we don't know if he
planted the charge himself or if someone killed him for access. Either way, the saboteur could still be
here. And the president's 'bird is only an hour out."

It was awfully windy on the ladder leading up the side of the tower, and Megan wished that she had
at least asked for a key to the building so that she could have taken the stairs instead. When a particularly forceful gust swept past her, making the awkwardly heavy radio thump against her back, she gasped and tried to hug the wall with her body, gripping the rungs of the ladder so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

"I gotta stop saying 'yes' to things," she grumbled aloud, reluctantly letting go with one hand to reach for the next rung. "They'll be scraping me off the ground if I fall."

The man on the roof started and whirled around when she poured herself over the edge of the ladder, feeling like her bones had turned to jelly. She gave him a disarming smile and showed him her empty hands before standing up slowly. "Tech support?" She had decided on the way over that she'd take a crack at fixing his permanent radio before handing over the mobile one. She had a knack for fixing simple mechanical things, after all.

Valdez was a man of few words, it seemed. He stood over her, impassive behind his red-eyed gas mask, while she checked the power connections feeding the communications system. Over his shoulder, he carried an enormous gun, an anti-materiel rifle that Boone would literally have killed to own, and favored his left leg heavily when he moved. He watched with eerie focus while she cracked open the back of the radio on his table and peered at the delicate apparatus inside. "Here's the problem. There's a wire loose in the back. See? It probably got jostled out when they set it up for you." She unclasped the snaky extension cord which ran across the rooftop from the trapdoor to the table, leaving the plug dangling from the edge - it didn't do to be careless around two-hundred-year-old electronics, especially not when it was receiving live juice from the heart of Hoover Dam. The ranger watched silently as she meticulously twisted the errant wire in place and reconnected the power. She flipped the switch and was pleased to hear it hum to life. "Hey Grant, Courier here. The main radio's fixed. Over." She spotted him - or at least the dark shape she thought was him - standing in the crowd in front of the visitor's center and gave him a little salute, before replacing the radio's casing.

"Damnit, Valdez." The man's sigh made the speakers whuff in protest. "Is everything copacetic up there? Over."

"All clear. Over." Muffled by his mask, the man's reply was a barely intelligible growl, but Grant accepted it.

"Great. Keep on telling me the same thing, every fifteen minutes. If you don't mind. Over and out."

Grant may have been satisfied, but Megan wasn't sure she was anymore. Some unnamable quality in Valdez's three-word reply was sending fear-signals crawling up her spine, and she took an unconscious step back from the man, who also moved slightly, cutting off the most direct path to the ladder, his hidden gaze now fixing her like a predatory animal's. Megan fumbled for the now-superfluous radio on her shoulder, never taking her eyes from the man. Her finger found the button as she brought it to her mouth, but she hadn't gotten the first word past her lips before he struck, crossing the space between them with a speed and grace that belied his injured leg. She reacted quickly enough that his haymaker only grazed her elbow instead of breaking her collarbone, but lost the radio in the dodge, flinging it by accident against the low wall, where its casing split in two, sending its components rolling across the floor.

"What are you doing? Who are you?" she gasped, backing away in a defensive posture while at the same time trying to stay as close as possible to the middle of the roof, mindful of the terrible fall awaiting her over that edge. The man didn't say anything, but drew a serrated combat knife, and continued advancing on her, leaving a steady drip of red droplets in his wake. When his duster flapped open, she could see that the upper thigh of his denim pants was dark with blood on the left
side. She pointed to it. "Do I have the real Valdez to thank for that one?" He didn't respond, but the sight had given her hope. The longer she could draw this out, the weaker her opponent would become... and the better chance she'd have that someone on the ground would notice that something was wrong up here. He couldn't use the anti-materiel rifle on her without blowing his cover, which is not to say he wouldn't if he became desperate. Particularly if he knew who she was, as the whole Legion probably did at this point. She cursed Moore for disarming her, and wished that she had kept a holdout weapon. A razor, some knuckles... anything. As it was, the only thing protecting her skin from that knife was a thin layer of cloth, a plaid shirt tucked into faded bluejeans.

"HEY. HEY! I need some help up here!" The area around the tower was not well-patrolled, and the wind stole the force from her words; she didn't think anyone on the town could have heard it unless they were standing immediately by and paying attention. The attempt was enough to make her wary opponent act out of panic, however - he leapt off of his good leg, closing the distance quickly and leading with the point of the knife aimed at her midsection. She did the only thing she could do - threw herself backwards to the ground, narrowing missing braining herself on the boundary wall. He was quick to take advantage of her position - too quick - and dove at her at the same time that she launched her whole body into a two-legged donkey kick, straining her back and shoulders to force height and strength into the move. The soles of her boots - weapons in their own right, she realized - connected solidly with muscle and bone and she heard his pained grunt along with the rattling clink of a falling knife as it skittered over the stones into a distant corner. Up again in a moment, she took the lead and drove fists, elbows, knees, and boots into his most vulnerable areas - above the waist, these merely bounced off his gear and bruised her unprotected limbs, but they still knocked him backwards, keeping him on the defensive, and preventing him from turning the contest into a wrestling match that he would almost certainly win. She didn't really know the vulnerabilities of black armor, and seriously doubted her ability to match even an injured man wearing superior protection in hand-to-hand for long, but if she could keep him off-balance, then maybe she could tumble him over the side. What else could she do?

All this would be moot if he gave up on secrecy and just shot her, of course. The president would live, but that wouldn't be much consolation to her if one of those .50 caliber rounds went through her. When they broke apart, both breathing heavily from the exertion, he took advantage of the respite to swing the rifle off of his shoulder, grasping it firmly with both hands. As a close-range gun, the anti-materiel rifle was shit as far as recoil and aiming were concerned; as a melee weapon, it wasn't much better - extremely heavy and unwieldy - but the fact remained that he had a weapon and she still did not. Moving slower now, he struck again, attempting to swing the barrel into a crushing blow on her ribs, and she did the only thing she could think of - stepped into the swing, cutting the momentum off before it got going and letting the impromptu club slap into her hands. Then it became a matter of hanging on for dear life.

Accepting a game of tug-a-war with a larger and stronger opponent may not have been the wisest course of action - she immediately lost ground, lost balance, and couldn't dare let go for fear of being at his mercy. Within seconds, he'd managed to lift her feet off of the ground in an attempt to either shake her off or throw her over the side - a terrifying shift that nevertheless left her free use of her feet, one of which kicked out and connected with his wound, making his leg collapse under him. Another boot to his face - this one from an unstable stance, and lacking force, but still enough to stun him - and he lost hold of the gun. She clubbed him once on the side of the head for good measure, hopefully not hard enough to kill him, then retreated slowly to the radio table, jangling with adrenaline, not taking her eyes off of the crumpled figure for a second.

"Grant? Martin here. I don't know where Valdez is, but this ain't him. I need your people to come take charge of my prisoner, as I don't feel competent to escort him down alone. Maybe bring a medic so he doesn't die. Over."
There was a stunned intake of breath on the other side, then, "We're coming. Don't let him move. Over."

She heard wet, breathy laughter from the downed imposter, who did not look like he'd be going anywhere anytime soon. "Well done, lambkin. You won. You've always surprised me, and this time you've impressed me."

"Vulpes." Of course she had known that voice. "I thought you were dead. Damn, you really should have killed me when you had the chance - the first time, especially. Imagine how much better off your precious Legion would be if I had just died in Nipton." There was a slightly hysterical surge of triumph welling up inside of her, and she couldn't keep from babbling on. "Do you know how many of your lot I've personally killed?"

"Oh, I know. I underestimated you from the start, and absolutely should have killed you before you came into your own. Do you want to know how I survived last time we parted?"

"No. I don't care. I'm guessing you wriggled away like the vermin that you are." Triumph faded as other emotions took over: anger at the man for making her feel so much fear, along with disgust - and, surprisingly, regret - at the way he'd chosen to lead his life. "Don't move or I'll shoot you," she warned, as the man struggled to sit up. It took an annoying amount of effort to keep the twenty-pound gun trained on him, and just thinking about trying to fire it out of armor made her shoulder ache. Not that it seemed like it would be necessary - there was a lot of blood under that leg of his now. She wondered if she should try to protect the NCR's interests and go tie a tourniquet, but she didn't want to touch the man, even now. He made her feel dirty and ashamed by his very proximity and, truth be told, she was still terrified of him.

"Relax. I'm just taking this helmet off." Once the possessor of nondescript, boyish looks, Vulpes would fade into a crowd no longer. His eyes, it seemed, had been spared the rush of heat and radiation from his homemade bomb, but not his skin, hair, or nose. "Do you like what you see, my dear?"

"No. I don't." It was true. She'd seen too many mangled humans while shadowing the doctors in Freeside to rejoice in it, even at the expense of an enemy. "Can I ask you some questions real fast, Vulpes? Not about state secrets or anything - I'll leave those for your interrogators. Just personal stuff."

He lay back again, watching her with strained good humor. "Shoot. Or, rather, don't. If you want answers, that is..."

"Where's my combat shotgun?"

"Down below, with the ranger's body and my gear. I kept it in good condition. An effective weapon, if not at all subtle. Perfect for you."

"Thanks. I guess." She heard the rattle of the door and muffled commands below and knew she was running out of time. "Who is Ulysses?" she asked quickly.

He grunted with surprise, and opened eyes that had drifted shut. "He's a frumentarius, like me, but not like me. Older, stronger. Smarter, if I admit it. He's a born killer with a personality as forceful as Caesar's. Think he's gone off the reservation, though. There's been no word from him for over a year now..." His voice trailed off as his eyes closed again and she saw him clench his jaw from pain. The trapdoor beside her flew open with a bang, and she finally relaxed, letting the rifle-tip sag to the floor as Grant, followed by five others, moved to roll Vulpes over and cuff him. He said something to a man with a white arm-band - the medic - who shook his head with disgust and stood up.
"He's dead."

She set the gun on the table and walked over, puzzled. "No, he's not. He was just talking to me. He might be unconscious. The ranger that was up here managed to stab him, and I gave him a few good hits too."

The medic, a man she'd never met, nudged Vulpes' head with his foot, showing her his face, which was rigid and set under the horrific burns. "Take a look. See that froth on his mouth? Cyanide. These high-ranking Legion bastards get away from us all the time with these hollow tooth-capsules they got. They bite down on them when they're about to be captured. Not much anyone can do about it, even if they know to expect it. Do you need medical attention?" She shook her head and he tramped downstairs, followed by two troopers carrying the corpse. The others searched the rooftop briefly for other evidence, before heading down themselves.

Grant surveyed the scene mournfully before using the radio to summon a new team to the top of the tower. "Two men this time," he muttered to Megan. "Wish like hell I'd done that the first time. Valdez might still be alive. But thank you for what you did. Without you, he would have taken a shot at the president and I'd've gone by 'Mud' for the rest of my miserable life. How did you know he wasn't a ranger under that mask?"

"I'd run into him a couple of times before. The voice sounded familiar. Do you think there are any more spies here today?"

"Face looking like that, I don't think this one could have gotten to the helipad without being noticed, so yeah. We'll stay alert. You better get down there now. It's almost time."

Passing a team of engineers doing a last-minute check on the speech platform under the supervision of a dozen soldiers, Megan caught Boone coming out of the visitor center, looking grim. She almost skipped over to him, feeling light and happy with relief.

"Boone! I could've used your help a little while ago. Did you know there are-" she dropped her voice to a whisper "-Legion spies here?"

He folded his arms, leaning against the wall, and stared down at her. "Moore doesn't like you."

She stepped out of the wind into the shelter of the building and tried to smooth her rumpled, sweaty hair and clothes. Some blood had gotten on her boots, but it didn't show much on the leather.

"Really? She hides it so well."

"She just offered me land - good land - near my family's old homestead in exchange for agreeing to testify against you. Like, in a formal court."

"That sounds like the kind of manipulation of justice that would be illegal in a civilized world. But, in any case, you should get that offer in writing."

He swung an arm down to slap the concrete wall in aggravation, making her jump slightly. "I don't want any land. Be serious, goddamnit."

"I am. Ask for money instead. I don't plan to be in that court. She can try me in absentia. How do I look?" She smiled up at him, still feeling the euphoric rush that comes of being alive.

"Scruffy like you always are." He looked closer. "Like you've been in a fight. What-"

She interrupted him. "I'm kind of nervous about meeting President Kimball. What do you know
"That he was a better war hero than he is a president. That he's over-extended our resources trying to fight here and the Baja at the same time." He lowered his voice, glancing around. "That half the Senate half-hopes someone takes him out here, or at the next ribbon-cutting ceremony in the Hub, or wherever."

"What's the Baja? What's in the Baja?"

"It's down south somewheres. And I don't know what he's chasing and don't care. That's Ranger business. Veteran Ranger business. I don't think very much about things that are out of my control and don't affect me directly."

"Well, I don't think assassinations are conducive to regional stability, so I'd rather he not die on my watch, even if he is a lousy president. Of a nation I'm not a citizen of and don't ever plan to set foot in, but still. It's my job to keep him safe as long as he's here."

She'd apparently said something funny, because he let out a genuine laugh at this. "You're a real wild card, aren't you? I still don't get what makes you tick, but I think we're lucky to have drawn you." He scowled. "I'm not sure you can say the same, though."

"I mostly try to do the right thing. I don't always know what that is, but keeping the Legion from their target seems straightforward enough. Something I don't have reservations about doing." she said stolidly. "That's the second time I've heard you use the first person plural for the NCR. Are you reenlisting?"

"That was one thing Moore and I discussed. Maybe. Gorobets said Sterling's retiring soon. There's a spot for me if I want back in. If-" here, he hesitated, checking around for listening ears. "If I can bullshit my way past that goddamned psych eval."

"Do you want to? You quit for a reason, remember."

"Maybe. I dunno. It's something to do." He bared his teeth in a grimace. "She also sort of implied that things would be harder for me if I didn't turn on you. What the hell did you do to piss her off?"

"Me? Nothing. I'm just a convenient stepping stone. She's a power-hungry bitch, you know. She just wants to use you - the stoic hero who killed Caesar - for window dressing on her bid for advancement. She'd step over both of our corpses without a second thought if it benefitted her at all."

"Yeah, I gathered that much myself, thanks."

They both turned at the distant sound of a vertibird cruising in from the west. Across the open, sunny space in front of them, a sea of khaki and desert-brown snapped to attention, alert to any sign of danger.

Megan led the way forward to the platform. "C'mon. We're supposed to take our spots up there before he disembarks. Eyes open now. There's probably at least one assassin left, and I'm all out of luck for the day."

"I'm ready. And, unlike you, I have weapons."

"Well, I don't need weapons. I am objectively awesome and a formidable foe to all my enemies."

"You're crazy."
Bantering back and forth, almost like friends again, the Courier and the sniper made their way through the crowd and onto the front page of the NCR's quarterly newspaper for Spring 2282, with a headline reading: "Heroic Pair Kills Caesar, Assassin, Saves President Kimball." Technology being what it was in that benighted time, it would be the only photograph that anyone would ever take of either of them, and, by the end of her life, a copy of that paper would be the only material evidence among Megan's possessions that a man called Craig Boone had ever existed, a crystallization of a rare moment of unmitigated triumph for the both of them.

And no, of course he wasn't smiling in it.
May 15th, 2282 promised to be yet another clear, hot day in late spring, but for now, with the sun still hidden by the horizon, soldiers on both sides of the river shivered in the pre-dawn gloom. The signal, echoing out from the Legion camp in the hills all the way to the watchful NCR on the other side of the river, had been clear and loud; there would be no surprise in this attack and there wasn't meant to be. Caesar had wanted a classic battle - two armies lining up to meet on a predetermined field - and even in death he would get his wish. Legate Lanius was no Caesar, however. His interest was not in the wall that spanned the river, but in the land and its people, commodities both and a playing ground for his own dark desires. Already moving into place, having crossed in boats and at distant fords and bridges, his armies would flow through the leaky sieve of the NCR’s defenses and strike directly at the heart of the Mojave, the place once known as Sin City. What would happen then was a secret best left contained to Lanius’ murky heart. Caesar had imagined imposing civilization by force, differing from the NCR only by degree of brutality and level of control, but Lanius could hold no such organized vision in his head, only wanton destruction. The city would fall, the Bear would burn, and the Bull would become the tribe to end all tribes.

New Vegas, once Mr. House's glittering gem, and now up for grabs (winner takes the pot!), had its defenders, though these were few and fractured; on this day, they would join with unlikely allies to repel the greater of two evils.

At Nellis Air Force base, a dozen former vault-dwellers and their descendants prepared a World War II plane for its maiden flight, checking and double-checking every mechanism against their ancient blueprints. Their crew of eight, hand-selected by Mother Pearl for the honor, stood proudly beside the craft as their young historian sketched the scene for posterity. Not one of them had ever flown before, except in the flight simulators they'd inherited by accident. They couldn't have asked for a better way to demonstrate the ingenuity of their people.

Far to the northwest of the city, a pre-war refueling station opened its hangar doors for the first time in decades, revealing a aircraft of a different sort, made for different wars. It was matte black, with a insignia that hadn't been seen for decades, and which had once inspired terror in all who saw it. The five people gathered in the bunker below - relics of a bygone age as much as their vertibird - awaited the second communique from the Courier, the message that would launch them once more into glory, back into the memories of the west, and possibly to their own deaths.

In Freeside, the Followers of the Apocalypse prepared to give aid to a dark city under siege, amassing fuel for their generators, torches for their doctors and guards to see by, and food parcels for people in need. The city could not depend on the Dam beyond this day, and Helios One was no good to them in the night; night would be the most dangerous time, driving desperate, frightened people to desperate action. The King’s men filled out their guard and provided the authority they would need to maintain order and distribute resources safely, but there was only so much a few dozen men could do. The Followers were of two minds on this day, and all because they now held the key to a weapon. This in itself was not unusual - they had always had the ability to build bombs, wield diseases, and otherwise lend their science to war, but they had never considered actually doing so. In giving up the Lucky 38, however, the Courier had handed them a ready-made and very powerful weapon without a second thought, and now some of them wanted to use it. The debate raged quietly, in private circles stretching all the way to the Boneyard, even as Arcade.
Gannon - already an outsider in their eyes, though he still wore their symbol - watched his people with a troubled heart, hoping that they at least would keep their identity through this time, even if he could not.

Dispirited and frustrated, the surviving Brotherhood patrol began their weary march south from the shore of Lake Mead, where they had finally retrieved all they could carry of their fallen comrades' gear, destroying and sinking the rest. Back at home, unbeknownst to them, yet another power struggle was taking place in the weakened hierarchy of their order. Among other things, this meant that reliable and current intelligence failed to reach them in a timely fashion. Narrowly focused on an ghostly enemy, the Brotherhood had neglected to keep up with the very real threat of the Legion’s imminent incursion. In the day ahead, the best of their remaining warriors would meet, not their intended target, but an entire hostile army on the march, virtually putting an end to Brotherhood hopes of enduring in the Mojave.

Bored and lonely without any humans to talk to, Lily Bowen picked up her crude sword (a blade which had once served as part of a vertibird propeller, scavenged by Leo from a crash in Klamath) and began the long walk to Westside. Her old friend Mean Sonofabitch would let her in, and maybe she'd find some of her children and grandchildren there. There was always that chance. She would keep them safe from those that would hurt them, no matter what.

In a dingy corner of one of the Dam's massive interior chambers, more than two hundred nervous, tired soldiers forced themselves to eat and drink, huddling in small groups while they awaited the order to take their stations. Drumming her fingers with impatience, Megan checked her Pip-Boy clock by lifting up the the armored panel on her wrist, as she had five, ten, and fifteen minutes before. 4:15 AM. A deafening alarm echoing through the bowels of the Dam had woken them all a half hour before, summoning everybody not already awake to a state of readiness. Within minutes, she'd been in armor, loaded for bear, and carrying all of the ammo she expected to need, along with a dozen grenades, a pound of dynamite, and her knife in its sheath. Fiddling with her allies' radios, she sat wishing that it would begin. All of this waiting only heightened her anxiety. As if picking up on his mistress's distress, ED nudged her, beeping softly, and she patted his grill affectionately. She'd gone back and forth on whether or not to bring the little bot out with her today, but had decided in the end that if hundreds of humans were risking their lives, then it was only right that a mere machine should do the same. She'd worked out a plan with her comrades - ED would play an important role in destroying key targets, and helping her and her companions avoid unnecessary risk. With luck, he too would survive.

For the past several days, Megan had slept, eaten, and drilled alongside different parts of the regiment stationed at the Dam, as the leadership struggled to find the best way to incorporate a non-NCR military unit into their strategy. General Oliver had refused to even meet with her, leaving the details to Colonel Moore, who in turn had fobbed her off on the impossibly young Captain O'Brien, an anxious, sandy-haired man only slightly older than she was and a brand new arrival from California via the Mojave Outpost. The men he'd brought with him to the front - some of them children as young as 16 - were as green as he was, and as poorly-equipped as any soldiers she’d ever seen. Still smelling of the farms from which they'd been drafted, a quarter of them were carrying varmint rifles and had no better protection than a single thickness of Brahmin hide, for Christ's sake. For the first time, she thought she understood why the Followers had such strong opinions about war: this day would see the slaughter of hundreds of people and the maiming of countless more, and for what? A piece of real estate and the precedence of one ideology over another. Granted, a Legion victory meant suffering and death for many non-combatants as well, and as a casus belli, this seemed a relatively worthwhile one. But it still didn't seem right for these frightened young people to die so far away from their homes for a cause they had so little to do with.
In the course of training with O'Brien's men, as well as more experienced units, learning how to respond in real time to their communications (their tech officer had patched their official channel into her Pip-Boy radio), and memorizing the best points of cover along the Dam, she recognized for the first time a major weakness in herself: she had never learned to fight within a team of more than two or three people. When it was just Boone or Arcade shooting above her head at targets they usually hit, she had never worried about getting shot in the back; wisely, too, they had always given her a very wide berth to let her strike out with wild abandon at anything and everybody within reach. But what had worked perfectly against a group of six enemies would get her mobbed and torn apart by sixty; here, at least, she couldn't be an army of one, but would have to rely on others.

One thing was clear: Megan knew by the afternoon of her first day that she would not be finding her niche among the half-dozen power-armed soldiers allotted to the defense of the Dam. These were uniformly grim-faced, muscled men, bulky even outside of their suits. She found no common ground between her own fighting style and theirs: three of them carried miniguns intended to soften an oncoming charge before the lines met, and three carried missile launchers, in the hopes of taking out fortified enemy positions at a distance. None intended to meet the enemy in close combat, let alone dive into the fray with wild abandon. The only one who condescended to speak with her made it clear that they prioritized their survival - and, more importantly, the survival of their suits - over gaining a slight advantage in battle. They didn't have much to do with each other after that, except to exchange suspicious glances at a distance during aboveground drills - she kept getting rattled by their Brotherhood-like appearance, and they, in turn, had recognized her armor for what it was. She wondered now why the NCR hadn't salvaged any Enclave armor - surely there had been some to find at Navarro - but didn't find the question important enough to draw attention to herself by asking.

In the end, she had decided that her most effective place would be among the small complement of Veteran Rangers, who were to take the most aggressive role in the battle, fighting to get through to the enemy command and artillery, leaving the less-experienced, less-equipped troops to finish off the Legion soldiers that got around their small formation. Grant's public approval of her, added to her almost uniformly positive relationship with this branch of the NCR's forces, made them a good fit; as an added bonus, they were competent, well-equipped, and accustomed to working with non-military individualists in the field. If the timing worked out, then the Boomers and the Remnants would be dropping what explosives they had before any friendlies got that far, and then Megan's group would be joined by the Enclave's heavy ground fire to fight a path to the main camp by brute force, with their power armor hopefully protection enough against whatever the Legion would throw at them.

Boone's search for a job had been much simpler. With First Recon still holding the line at Forlorn hope in expectation of a secondary attack from the south, he was far and away the best sniper the NCR had on site. His ideal role was obvious: he'd not lack for targets from atop the highest watchtower in the middle of the Dam. They'd upgraded his weapon and assigned him a spotter; he was content… or, rather, as content as he ever was. Also, unless the enemy scored a direct hit on his position before they took out the big gun (or unless the Legion had finally found some competent counter-snipers), then he'd probably be safe.

Megan hadn't seen or spoken to Boone much in the days since they'd saved President Kimball from the last would-be assassin, a knife-wielding maniac dressed in a mechanic's jumpsuit. They'd both been busy, true, but she knew he'd been avoiding her, taking his meals alone and moving his bedroll to some obscure corner of the base. At the moment, he was nowhere to be seen in any of the clumps of nervous men and women sitting and standing around the tables. Probably already in position - ever since our spies reported the Legion movements last night, she considered, realizing for the first time that if all went as planned this morning, she was unlikely to ever see him again. She wondered if she'd ever know whether he'd survived the battle, and wished for the thousandth time that their relationship had ended differently.
A shaky voice roused her from her regrets. "Ready for your first battle?" It was O'Brien, the young man's freckles standing out sharply on his pale skin. She felt sorry for him. It was obvious that he was intimidated by and even afraid of her for some reason, but he was still trying to take responsibility for her as she was technically under his command, which was more than his superiors had done. She offered him a reassuring smile.

"I've been in skirmishes before," she answered back. "But yeah, this is on a whole new scale. I feel pretty competent for the challenge though." She tapped her chestplate. "Not much gets through this. How about you - you and your boys up for it?"

He shook his head, and sat down across from her, his head in his hands. "No. Between you and me, names like mine and my men's are the ones you'll likely read on the next war memorial in the capital."

"I hope not." She looked him, wanting to offer some comfort, but not sure what she could say. "Hey, whatever happens, and whatever Moore told you, don't waste another minute worrying about me. I'll order myself around just fine. Anybody asks, just say you gave me a field promotion to do whatever the hell I wanted."

"Yeah, sure. I know you're running with the Rangers. I hereby promote you to 'not my problem.'" He lowered his voice to a hushed whisper. "She just didn't want to be the one left holding the bag if any of your... stranger associations caused problems. If the rogue variable goes rogue, blame it on the dead captain."

"She's a grade-A bitch and a coward," she muttered back, sotto voce. "Have courage. This can be the story you tell your grandkids. The tale of how you helped hold Hoover Dam."

He shook his head, looking like he was holding back tears, and got up to walk away, just as a second alarm blared, sending the entire room into a flurry of fresh activity. It's time. Megan sent the final signal to the Boomers and the Remnants, acknowledging a terse response from both. She pulled her helmet on and began the ascent to the surface to assemble with the Rangers, mentally calculating how long it should take for both groups to arrive. Once it was in the air, the B-29 should be capable of reaching the Dam in minutes, if it didn't explode on take-off. Daisy's vertibird had further to go and wasn't quite as fast, but it could fly like a fixed-wing aircraft on straightaways and would make good time once it got up to speed. Megan estimated a ten-to-fifteen minute gap between the two attacks, but admitted to herself that she could be way off. In any case, it was out of her hands now. The Remnants at least were trained professionals... and, well, the Boomers were highly-committed zealots, which had to count for something.

Once outside, she trotted down to join the others at the cover they'd selected, a defensible point well ahead of the regular infantry. Crouched impatiently, she listened to one last briefing, one last exhortation to excellence from their most senior fighter, a tall bear of a man with the incongruent name of Smalls. Looking up at the watchtower looming behind their position, she thought she could just see Boone inside the blind the engineers had constructed for him. He would wait until the peace was broken before firing, but he was doubtless already scooping the likely points of egress from the Legion line. She took a long drink from her suit's built-in reservoir, which was filled to the brim with a gallon of slightly briny water, fortified with sugar, salt, and potassium, and patted the chem pocket on her suit, wondering if a hit of jet wouldn't be a bad idea after all. She had previously decided and had really wanted to do this first day clean, for the sake of enduring the crush of the next few days. Drugs pushed her to greater feats in the short-term, but made the inevitable crash come all that sooner and harder; still, the prospect of slowing the chaos down a little was tempting, so tempting that she actually had her hand on the inhaler when Smalls addressed her directly, making her jump.
"You ready, Courier?"

She nodded, withdrawing her hand and zipping the pouch shut, meeting his helmeted gaze with her own.

"ETA on that airplane?"

"Five or ten minutes. Or never. It's more than three hundred years old..."

He ignored her pessimism. "And the other?"

"Twenty minutes. I have higher confidence in them."

"Okay. You hear that, men? Once the air support finishes dropping bombs, we can push into enemy territory. Our job is to blow that wall to clear a way. Once we're through, don't fire on anybody that looks like our friend here. For today, at least, the Enclave is our ally. Eyes forward. If they don't break cover in five minutes, we will. The darkness and this mist is our shield from their cannon, but we'll be losing it soon."

With the sun still behind the horizon, only a pale gleam foreshadowing its eventual rise, fog was an ever-present reality so close to the chilly river. It blanketed the Dam, limiting clear lines of sight to a few meters. It wouldn't last long - the sunlight and the warm winds of day would disperse it quickly - but for now it made both sides hesitant to abandon cover and move forward. In the end, it was the Legion that made the first move - a peppery burst of automatic fire from nowhere that sailed harmlessly above everybody's heads, which nevertheless acted like a starter's pistol for the action of the battle.

Despite her constant reliance on the Pip-Boy for navigation and time-keeping, VATS had never been a tool that Megan made effective use of. As a general rule, she could see her targets long before she had a prayer of hitting them, and that without looking down constantly at the screen on her arm. The power armor's HUD, however, allowed for the targeting system to limn distant enemies in glowing green, superimposing their locations upon her visual field. Yes... there they were. Out of sight, but within range of her kinetic-assisted throwing arm, sat a dozen soldiers, crouched behind a sheet of metal, having already crept into NCR space under cover of night. Pulling the pin on her first grenade, she hurled it with practiced force, banking the missile off of a larger barricade behind them and landing it in their midst just as it exploded. It was a good beginning.

Beyond this initial exchange, Megan forgot to think about the other moving parts active in defense of the Dam, and would later recollect with crystal clarity only a handful of exchanges. At the time, she assumed that this was just another abnormal stress response on the part of her damaged brain, but in discussing it later with more experienced soldiers, she learned that it wasn't unusual to lose track of time in the heat of the moment. Battles were intense experiences, and the violence, brutality, and danger all around wasn't conducive to normal, linear thinking. The noise was extraordinary, overwhelming and distressing - more screams that she had ever imagined, from the wounded and dying on both sides, explosions that shook the ground, shivering ancient constructions to rubble, and a constant stream of communications in her ear from Oliver and his lieutenants. Apparently, a number of Legion soldiers had infiltrated the Dam below, but there was nothing she could do about it now. Below wasn't her job - there were enough problems to deal with up here. A whistling, piercing sound was the only warning she got before the first shell out of the feared howitzer struck the paved surface only yards in front of her, the shockwave temporarily deafening her (in spite of the protective foam padding on the sides of her head) and knocking her down. Uninjured but shaken, she picked herself up and kept moving, wondering how much of that Hoover Dam could absorb without damage to its functionality, and whether the Legion would just try to destroy it if they couldn't have it, in a monumental pique of sour grapes.
Oliver's tinny voice brought news of the Boomers even before the sound of the plane registered. A striking, anachronistic sight, it seemed impossibly fast to a girl who'd never seen a vehicle moving faster than a man can run. It was, perhaps, faster than its pilots had anticipated, as it overshot its target on its first sweep, disappearing and then returning a moment later to drop its entire payload at once, an abrupt line of bombs released above a still-obscured position on the hills behind the reinforced walls. It looked good from her angle, but there was no way to tell what they'd hit. She had her answer in a moment: smoke arose from the hills, but the intended target - the Legion's one artillery piece - continued firing as the plane turned back west, incapable of contributing anything more. Even as she continued fighting - destroying a man's face with a blast from her gun without even flinching - Megan had time to wonder in a strangely cool corner of her mind if all of the work, and all of the risk with the Boomers had been worth it in the end. They had agreed to deploy additional support to protect northern Vegas in addition to Nellis, but that wouldn't mean much if the NCR couldn't hold the Dam today. Well, they had done their best. She couldn't fault them. Hell, she only hoped the NCR would give them credit for showing up.

Within a quarter hour of the first shots, Megan had pressed forward as far as she could, halted by the impenetrable barricade at the end of the Dam; she'd left a respectable trail of corpses in her wake, but had inevitably allowed others to slip by her, limited by the range and rate of fire of her shotgun. The few who'd attempted to engage her directly met a quick and messy end. One fellow in a catcher's mask - smarter than the others - landed a grenade at her feet, which she kicked contemptuously back at him, taking out him and his compatriot. As long as she didn't take a direct hit from a big gun or overextend her position too far without backup, the Legion wouldn't take her down easily. She could hear shooting - an awful lot of shooting - behind her, but couldn't turn back, could only trust the ordinary army to do their job.

The Rangers weren't far behind. Smalls caught up to her and tapped her arm, handing over a string of dynamite on a single, long fuse - his contribution to the day's fireworks. Together, they stretched it out along the wall as they'd practiced in training, left ED behind to light it with his cattle prod, and beat a hasty retreat under fire - two bullets pinged off of her back, and she heard Smalls grunt in pain, although he kept on running. Heads down, almost lying on the ground behind shelter too low for comfort, they waited until the fragments of the wall had finishing pattering down before rising to move forward again. Beyond this point, it was all uphill, all unknown from here on out. They had now pressed past the Dam, making this the first real offensive against the Legion after almost five years of stalemate. It was frustrating that the enemy had been given so much time to prepare its resistance, and at the NCR's very doorstep. What on earth were they thinking, Megan asked herself, and not for the first time.

A clattering sound pierced through the now-constant ringing in her ears and she looked up. God, wasn't the sun up yet? It seemed like they had been fighting for hours already. There, awesome and terrifying, a shiny black intrusion against the dark blue, still-starry sky, the last vertibird of the Western Enclave had arrived. Something like pride filled her heart at the sight and, for the first and only time in her life, she felt a sense of exultation for her participation in their transient greatness. Two missiles, a strafe of minigun fire (she could just make out a man - probably Moreno - manning an enormous gun mounted on the wide open side), and a series of dark bombs found targets around or near the camp across the river, and then it circled back around, landing on the only flat space available - the wide open no man's land at the end of the Dam, recently cleared for their passage.

Megan gave Smalls and the other rangers who'd caught up a farewell salute as Moreno, Kreger, Johnson, and Henry, the latter clad in some sort of hazmat suit instead of armor, disembarked, leaving Daisy to lift the craft again, taking it out of the danger zone to await pick-up at a safe distance. Kreger - she knew it was him from the rank indicated on his chest - wasted no time, but addressed her directly, "We didn't get the howitzer. They positioned it intelligently, shielded on two sides by the mountains. We lit some fires, probably charred some supplies... it's chaos up there right
now, but it's only a matter of time before they get back to manning it again."

She nodded, reloading in the momentary calm left behind in the shock of the vertibird's appearance, and gestured resolutely forward. "Let's go, then. We have to take it out or they're going to keep getting pounded down there. The Rangers over there will be bringing up the rear, protecting our backs from the ones that get around us. They're good enough to not shoot us; don't shoot them."

ED took point through the maze of blind turns, trenches, staggered palisade walls, and fortified positions, beeping warnings and lending his own augmented lasers to the attack while hovering well above the line of fire. The soldiers they encountered melted away before a rain of laser, plasma, and fire, with Henry taking particular satisfaction in incinerating the ornamental helmets of the officers they met. It was easy, almost effortless work, and Megan shivered at the thought of being on the receiving end of the force that the Enclave had once wielded - and perhaps still did, she thought darkly, on the other side of the continent. She was thankful that Arcade had been in position to help her take up the Remnants as a weapon for the NCR, but shuddered to think of a different sort of Courier who might have recruited them for the Legion instead. Johnson probably wouldn't have swallowed such a bitter pill, but Moreno and the others might well have, for lack of a compelling reason not to. They were all dangerous people once, she reminded herself; they were old lions now, it was true, but not tame or toothless.

Progress slowed for their group as the fighting got harder, as more and more legionaries threw themselves bodily forward, some holding explosives, in an attempt to sell their own lives in exchange for crippling them. Machetes scratched and beat ineffectually at her armor, hardly felt, but when she found herself surrounded, having unwisely allowed herself to be led away from the protective half-circle of the others, the weight of a dozen grasping hands threatened to disarm her and bear her down helplessly to the ground. One of her companions - Moreno, she thought - noticed and vaporized her attackers with a hail of lasers, scoffing as he stepped over the pile of bodies he'd manufactured. "You need a better gun. An Enclave soldier doesn't use a fucking shotgun."

"It does the job,“ she spat back, embarrassed at how heavily she was breathing - the sun had leapt into the sky at some point when she wasn't watching, and sweat was now pouring into her eyes and she couldn't even wipe it away without taking off her helmet. This was more grueling than she'd expected, having never before been in a fight that lasted more than a few minutes.

He let his gun spin to a stop and fanned the red-hot barrel with one hand to cool it, looking over at her curiously. "Where'd your plasma defender go, Gannon? Even that old pea-shooter was better than whatch'ya got now."

"Uh, Moreno…” she began, concerned, but her words were lost to a fresh burst of fire, as a dozen heavy-armed enemy soldiers decided to try their luck with super sledges. These were worth avoiding, she decided, when one grazed her elbow and almost made her drop her weapon. By the time this new threat was finished, the time to talk was past and the others were moving forward, gesturing for her to complete their formation. Praying that the next Ranger to poke his head around the corner didn't get blown away by a senile old man who'd forgotten the last few decades, she followed, taking the time to lob a few grenades blindly over the walls into the next levels.

At last, they reached their goal, a plateau still well below the enemy camp, and the fighting became more confused and uglier, with Legion streaming down at them from all directions to protect their prize artillery piece, which sat just ahead, surrounded by jumbled heaps of munitions that would have terrified any safety-conscious explosives expert. Twice, Megan had to check her fire when one of the others came too close to her target; after the second time, she switched to that magical combination of Bowie knife and armored fist, beating and cutting down opponents indiscriminately. This stand went on for a long time, but they finally won a respite, standing within a circle of bodies as distant shouts
rallied more legionaries. She called out, loudly enough for the Rangers behind to hear, ignoring ED's triumphant music in her ear. "Listen! We're going to do step two now and that means..." She didn't have a chance to finish the sentence, as, at that moment, her head exploded in a burst of light and horrific electronic screeching.

At least that's what it felt like. When the light faded and her head resumed its usual place on her shoulders, she was still on her feet, and someone was pulling her back to cover, to the last row of palisade walls. "Wha-... what happened?" she shouted, trying to be heard over the ringing in both ears.

Johnson - she thought it was Johnson - shouted back, barely audible over the drill that had found a home in her head. "Legion has one good sniper, it seems. Your Eyebot is scrap and your helmet has a nice dent. Both saved your life, though."

Her heart sank, and she tried to regain her balance while pushing back shock at the sudden loss of her second-oldest companion. It was only a bot, after all. "We've got to put these around the cannon, to set off their extra ordnance," she began weakly. "We've got to do it now."

"Give 'em to me, Gannon. Big explosions are my business," Moreno said good-naturedly, bellowing aloud to the others. "EVERYBODY RETREAT TO SOLID COVER! YOU DO NOT WANT TO BE CLOSE TO THIS, TRUST ME."

She and the others ran back down the hill toward the Dam, hoping that they had time to get clear; this was the most dangerous part of the plan, and the main reason she had wanted ED to light it for them. If the fuse was too long, then there was a higher risk of the Legion finding and stamping it out before it could ignite the payload, so they had less than fifteen seconds. The rangers - a surprising number still alive, she noted with dazed happiness - had a head start and reached the wall well before the five of them did. Together with the Courier, they had practiced this retreat beforehand, none of them knowing precisely what magnitude the explosion would have, but planning for the worst. What exactly would happen next was a question that she'd discussed at length with the Boomers via radio, and their only consensus was that it would be dangerous for everyone and everything in the vicinity. And, as Jack had added with no small amount of regret, even a few shells - and, by the looks of it, there had been a lot of them back there - would contain enough TNT to obliterate the gun and possibly a lot more. Megan hoped that its loss would leave such a big hole in the Legion's resources that they would be entirely unable to regroup and mount a new offense, leaving the NCR to finish the fight without too many casualties. Taking out the gun was the last play the Remnants (and Megan) would make, and the primary goal of their presence here today. Wonder of wonders, it seemed that they might actually manage it without any casualties. She was pleased to see Moreno to her right - the bastard had not only caught up, but had actually brought his fifty-pound gun to boot. Johnson and Kreger, slightly ahead now, leapt forward and disappeared from sight. And that was the last thing she had the capacity to notice for several minutes, as that's when they ran out of time.

The explosion was even more quick and terrifying than she'd imagined - she and Moreno hadn't quite reached the barricade yet - and Megan could feel the heat flooding out from it even before a chunk of something very heavy struck her between the shoulder blades and sent her sprawling for the third time that morning, flipping over and smashing into the barricade upside down. Barely clinging to consciousness and utterly winded, she didn't register the vertibird's second descent, and didn't protest when someone dragged her into the craft. Sounding as if it came from very far away, she could hear General Oliver's pompous voice on her radio, urging his men forward to claim their victory, and she would have laughed if she'd had any air left in her lungs.

"Shut that off," Henry snapped, and someone obliged, mashing Pip-Boy buttons with armored hands until the radio went silent. "Is he still-"
"No." This was Kreger, solemn and tired, a commanding officer who'd just lost one more, long after retirement. "A strip of sheet metal slid between the rivets and into his heart. It shouldn't have been possible. Wouldn't have been if we'd had any real maintenance done in forty years. Old armor and all that. See to the young one."

"I think I'm okay," she said with the first breath she had, personally thinking that she might be concussed, but not particularly wanting Henry to touch her. "Who'd we lose?"

"Moreno," Johnson told her, helping her sit up. "Bastard didn't even say goodbye. Typical of him." His voice was quiet and regretful and his lined, sweaty face was contemplative as he regarded the body of his old enemy and old comrade, laid out on the floor in a pool of blood. "Are you sure you're alright?"

"My cooling fan isn't working very well anymore." Technically, it was still turning, but only with a slow, strained rotation - something was clearly warped or broken back there and the warmth from the mini-reactor was beginning to seep into her skin. She pulled off her helmet with effort and took a breath of unfiltered air. "I'm sorry about Moreno. Y'all were amazing, but I feel bad for dragging you into harm's way again."

"Ah. Henry. Can I have some med-x and a stimpak, please? I think I need… something if I'm going to walk this off. Day's not over. Shit, it's barely 7:00..."

Sneaking up on her blind side, Henry jabbed her in the neck with a couple of needles and then sat back down, rubbing his gimpy left knee irritably and staring off into space. Johnson took a spot beside Megan and patted her hand reassuringly. "That was the most… living… I've done in years. I suspect all of us - including Moreno - would say the same. New enemies and old bodies, but otherwise it was just like the good old days. Or at least the bad old interesting days."

"Speak for yourself, Johnson," Henry grumbled. "My best times were spent in a lab doing important work, not roasting savages like you lot. Still, girl, that wasn't unpleasant. And the plan worked about as well as it could have given conditions. Bad luck we didn't all get out. Moreno was a difficult man, but he was the only one who never stopped fighting. Unfortunately for him."

"You were all amazing," she said again, vaguely wondering if Henry mixed something special into his chems, or if this was what getting a fix after a long break felt like. She felt like melting into the floor and staying there indefinitely, but roused herself with an effort, trying to pick up the thread of conversation again. "Poetry in motion… with guns. There's something… Arcade and I are leaving the Mojave soon. Safer that way. He wrote you all letters."

"Sit down before you fall on me, Martin. You still want me to drop you outside the city?"

Dropping sounded painful. She collapsed into the empty co-pilot's chair. "Yeah. Please."

"I couldn't hear everything from up here. You said that's from Arcade?" She jerked her head toward the folded paper, hands tight on the control wheel.
"Yes. If all goes as planned, he won't get a chance to say goodbye in person."

"I don't understand what he sees in you," Daisy burst out, making the entire craft swerve a little when she jerked her hands on the controls. "What he gets out of your little arrangement. But I guess it doesn't matter. He's an adult, and he chose you over his whole life here." She stared forward, stone-faced. "I'm going to miss that boy. I still miss his father. It seems like only yesterday that I lost him too."

"I'll do what I can to keep him safe." She meant it, too.

"Forgive me if I don't trust your promises, Courier. I do think you mean well, but that doesn't mean jack squat in the real world. He's my family, goddammit."

"Mine too."

Daisy shot her a look, but didn't say anything. They flew onward, over the cliffs along the river and the scrubby plains beyond. Studying this flat area from their bird's-eye view, Megan spotted a wide spread of Legion troops - so numerous that they made the ground appear dull red, like drying blood on dirt. She supposed she should feel terror - Lanius had diverted many more than she'd expected away from the Dam, and she didn't know how the defense here could ever repel so many - but the day had already delivered too much for her to feel anything very strongly.

"You got any more bombs, Daisy?"

She shook her head, biting her lip with a troubled expression. Then she laughed, an unpleasant, vicious expression rather than one of real merriment. "Wish I did. Look who they're fighting down there."

Megan looked. Four - no, three now, as one was already down - Brotherhood paladins had somehow walked straight into the Legion column and were now engaged in a hopeless, losing fight. It was superior technology against sheer numbers, and there was no way that they were going to survive. Under the numb disinterest, she indulged in a quiet moment of satisfaction as they passed the desperate melee as mere observers. "Good," was all she said aloud.

It wasn't long before the ostentatious tower of the Lucky 38 appeared on the horizon and the aircraft slowed to a gentle hover as they approached the north side of the city, keeping well away from Camp McCarran. She shook the Courier's shoulder, rousing her from a stupified state. "Clip on to the rope. One of the men will show you how. I'll lower you and try not to drop you too hard. Once you're down, unclip. Pray that these old winches still work."

"Thanks, Daisy. Uh, y'all should probably stay at Jacobstown or the bunker for a while, just in case the witch-hunt takes off." Walking to the back, she shook Kreger's hand, thanked Henry, and turned to bid an affectionate farewell to Johnson. He had made his way over to the cockpit to speak with Daisy for a minute. Megan heard the pilot raise her voice in response to something he'd said, but she couldn't make out the words. When he was done, Johnson joined her at the open side of the craft, helmet back on.

"After seeing that army down there, I've decided to come down with you, Martin, if that's alright. I know people who live here and I'm worried about them. One more man can't hurt, can it?"

While this wasn't a part of the plan, not at all, she didn't have the energy to argue and simply nodded her acceptance, let Kreger set the carabiner into a loop on her waist (so that's what that was for), and stepped backwards into space, her fear of heights and falling temporarily banished.
The battle was over; it was time to prepare for the war.
*AN: I know, I know… I said two chapters until the end. But this was getting long, and it made sense to make a break 27 where I did, dividing a dialogue-and-exposition-heavy beginning from the more action-laden second half. Might have to do the same with 28, as right now it stretches over two pretty long and chronologically-separate pieces. In case it's not obvious, I'm playing this tune called "structure" by ear and abandoned my skeletal outline long ago. I'll try to plan better on future projects.

On that note, I published the first chapter of a FO3 fic last week and will be updating that occasionally in tandem with my continuing Courier story. It's technically (and mostly irrelevantly) in the same series as this one: the LW will run into Megan in a blink-and-you-miss-it cameo in early 2278 somewhere near Raven Rock. Otherwise, it's just a homage to FO3's fascinating locations, a playing ground for my own persistent desire to experiment with my characters and torture them, and a means of providing backstory for some of my favorite minor FO4 characters.*

The north gate looked pretty imposing - much better than Megan had expected from the less-important, less-populated side of Freeside. Someone had been doing a great deal of digging, at any rate, tearing up the ancient asphalt to carve diagonal trenches lined with razor wire that precluded a direct approach. She and Johnson were forced to double back and forth in a wide zigzag as they drew near to the gate. She counted twenty heads poking up curiously above the wall - they'd torn down the ornate facade for better visibility and had apparently constructed some sort of scaffolding on the inside. The two of them halted well short of the entrance, waiting empty-handed for someone to give them leave to enter. It would be a shame to be shot here over a misunderstanding; only a few people in Freeside knew to expect her in power armor, and the sight of the vertibird in the distance would have set everybody on edge. Finally, the gate opened a crack and three people - a motley mix of a King's gang member, a Crimson caravan guard, and an unfamiliar NCR soldier with a corporal's stripes on his sleeves - came out to meet them. The soldier took the initiative with the conversation.

"Is one of you the Courier?"

Megan raised her hand, making them all flinch backwards. "That's me. This is my associate. We'd like to come in, if that's alright. Major Kieran is expecting me."

"She didn't mention an associate." The man was trying to sound tough, but she could see the fear in his eyes - and liked it a little, truth be told. It made her feel confident.

"You'll want us both, trust me. There's a lot of Legion on their way. We also have news of the Dam if word hasn't gotten here yet." When none of them moved, she raised her voice and snapped, "Fuck it, we've got hours, not days. Let us in, or we'll just jog off and take our power armor with us. Y'all aren't in a position to turn down allies."

They let them pass, reinforced gates slamming shut behind them. Inside, the streets were more crowded than north Freeside had been in living memory, with cook-fires burning in the middle of the street, Followers hauling and distributing water from the pump to the people on guard, and reinforcements resting in the shade under the storefronts. In addition to the locals and NCR standing by, there was also a small group of Boomers, keeping to themselves with their small arsenal of missiles and launchers. Two of the Strip securitrons flanked each side of the entrance, scanning...
Megan and Johnson as they walked through.

Before ascending the scaffolding again, the corporal pointed curtly to the south. "The Major's at the old train station. You can check in with her there."

She thanked the man and they continued onward, attracting a lot of curious onlookers, but no open hostility as they made their way to the southwestern edge of town. Megan pulled off her helmet - with her cooling fan barely turning anymore and the sun rising higher, she was very hot - and waved to the people she recognized, politely dismissing those that tried to pull her aside for a chat.

A little boy she knew slightly from her weeks working at the clinic cheered and ran along with them for a few steps before his mother snatched him out of the way and disappeared down an alley, and Johnson turned his head to watch him, commenting quietly. "You know, in all the years that I wore this… back in the day, I mean… I never once walked into a settlement without seeing terror on the face of every person I met. We had a million enemies then, and only ourselves as friends. All things considered, this is much better."

Megan smiled and nodded at an approaching Follower, who reciprocated the smile nervously and then crossed the street to avoid them. "Maybe that's why y'all lost. Absolutely no sympathy to give or receive."

"Yeah. We had the best technology in the world, but a tribal from nowhere sparked the beginning of the end for us. It certainly didn't help that everybody hated us." He fell silent. "There were some people that didn't deserve what they did to us - some of the eggheads and other non-combatants, the kids of course - but all in all, we had it coming. Weaponizing the FEV, creating and loosing monsters like Frank Horrigan, and trying to stamp out other folks' attempts to rebuild civilization… yeah, we deserved it. I'm ashamed to have been a part of all that. I hope this makes up for things, at least a little."

Megan listened intently, hungry for more scraps of information. "If it's not too hard for you to talk about, I'd like to hear more if we have the time later. As much as he's taught me about other things, Enclave history is a no-go subject for Arcade, so I hardly know anything about what happened back then. As much as I'd like to build on that connection to my own identity, I don't like to push him on this."

He nodded soberly, but then laughed. Answering her questioning look, he clarified, "Just remembering the boy when he was l'il more than a baby, back when we were all still together at Navarro. He was always awkward. Shy with other children, great with adults, reading young and asking all kinds of questions... the kid's always been an odd one. If things had stayed the way they were, he probably would have grown up to be another Henry. I think he did alright, considering. He's got more heart that his dad ever did."

Megan tried to imagine Arcade as a lonely child, but found she couldn't. In her mind's eye, he was shorter, but still had the same lab coat and glasses, the same wistful look. By this point, they had almost reached the train station, which had a dozen more soldiers standing watchfully outside. She thought of something else she'd been worrying about ever since Johnson had announced his plan to belay down from the vertibird, and reached out a hand to stop him while they were still out of earshot of the soldiers.

"Johnson, you should know… there's a couple of NCR people who have been threatening me. Even if we do win against the Legion… well, let's just say that there's no victory condition for suspected Enclave associates. Kieran, Crocker, and Hsu are decent enough to listen and act in good faith, but
certain others - more influential others - have different plans."

"Don't worry about me, Martin." His tone didn't invite further discussion. "Let's focus on step one first. Then we'll see about disappearing."

They found Major Kieran deep in conversation with Julie Farkas just inside the train station they'd converted into a temporary barracks and command station, but both women looked up with identical looks of apprehension on their faces when the guards escorted them inside.

"Hi Major Kieran. We just came from the Dam to help out here, if there's anything specific you wanted to point us at." Following her gaze, Megan added, "This is my, er… associate-"

The old man had taken off his own helmet when he stepped inside, and nodded courteously to the officer. "Ebenezer Johnson, ma'am. Once 'pon a time, I was a soldier too. I was at Navarro in '51, so I know something about defending a city under siege against hopeless odds. Hopefully this time things will go better."

Megan stared at Johnson, open-mouthed in dismay, but Kieran accepted what amounted to a confession in stride. "Thank you. We could certainly use your expertise. What do you have to report from the Dam? Radio's patchy and Oliver's given us no details."

They filled her in, with Johnson supplementing in the details he'd spied from the air on their approach as well as the events Megan had missed after being stunned. Kieran listened attentively, taking notes as they spoke. When they finished, she stood up, handing off her notes to a passing lieutenant. "We could use one or both of you to help fortify walls and barricades. McCarran wouldn't spare us even a single power armored unit, and there are some things we just can't move without machines."

Julie piped up from where she'd been listening in to the briefing, "On that subject, there's a heavy generator we had given up on retrieving from the New Vegas clinic ahead of the attack. If one of you could come with me to the Fort, I would like send you with a team to load it onto a cart and escort it to the Strip."

It was decided that Johnson would go with a small group of soldiers, while Megan went with Julie back up the street toward the fort. The Followers leader always walked quickly, everywhere she went, but for once Megan had no trouble keeping up. Despite the heat, which was becoming unbearable, the air between them was chilly, as Julie only answered questions in a clipped, abbreviated manner and didn't follow up with any of her own. Megan tried to remember what she could have done to offend the woman. The only thing she could recall was her slip-up at the Wrangler all those weeks ago.

"How's Bill Ronte?"

"Fine. Sober." The professional part of the woman seemed to engage reluctantly at this. "Are you staying clean?"

"Eh…” Memories of all of the jet, psycho, buffout and alcohol she'd used lately flashed through her mind. Focus on the positives. "I'm not abusing med-x. Although," she added for the sake of honesty, "I took some this morning. It was from a doctor. Or an Enclave scientist, anyway. I got hit a couple of times."

"Enclave," Julie repeated, rolling the word over in her mouth like a distasteful morsel. "If you're wondering why I'm being cold to you, Courier, that's one reason. You brought that... specter... into Freeside with you. I'm appalled and frightened by such strange bedfellows, however helpful they
might be. They were the absolute antithesis of everything we stand for. They make the Brotherhood of Steel look like our closest ideological kindred."

"Johnson's not a bad person," she protested, wishing people would vent their spleen at someone else for a change. She'd had enough of people pointing out things she couldn't help. "By all accounts, he was a conscientious man, even back then. And he's very pro-NCR-

"I'm not talking about that poor old man you've dragged out into the light. It's you I have a problem with. You and the ripples you cause without thought. Do the words 'butterfly effect' mean anything to you?" Julie, usually so controlled, was almost shouting, causing the people they passed to stare at them.

"Well, Arcade read me this story about a dinosaur and a time machine…”* she began, baffled and hesitant, before Julie interrupted her again, fuming.

"You changed the Followers' future without fully understanding any part of what you were doing and without being one of us. I think you intended the Lucky 38 as a boon, but there are going to be lasting consequences to the course you've set us on and I don't know if we'll survive it without compromising everything we're about." She stopped for breath, and finished mournfully. "You've ruined him, too. Or do you think he's better off for having met you?"

Megan honestly didn't think that was true of anybody she'd ever met, and shook her head, resulting in pain and dizziness that took a moment to pass. Julie must have noticed this, because she stopped hurling accusations. "After you do this, you should go rest for a while. They'll probably wait until nightfall to attack." She seemed to remember something. "You have tried very hard to help Freeside. The food and supplies - they'll save lives. I thank you for that, just not… the other things."

Clenching her jaws against the urge to vomit, Megan fanned herself with one hand and tried to focus. There was something else she was needed to ask… yes, that was it. "Do you know of anyone who can fix the fan on my armor? It's all bent out of shape and I'm overheating. Like, literally baking in my own, personal sauna. I can't wear this for much longer."

Relieved to be leaving Julie behind at the Fort, Megan set off with two Followers guards, a man and woman, leading the brahmin which pulled the cart. They were uneasy outside of the wall and downright anxious around her, but they at least they were polite. The clinic outside of town had been carefully stripped of all medical equipment and beds, leaving bare walls and empty rooms. Only the generator remained of the valuable property on the premises. It was a monster of a thing and almost too heavy for her - in the end, she needed both of her companions' help to lift it enough to slide it onto the cart, and by then her back and neck were one giant ache again.

The brahmin struggled to pull the new load over the broken pavement, and she had to help push it most of the way. When the cart finally rolled onto the Strip and the generator was unloaded, the water reservoir in her suit was empty and she was drenched with sweat inside the humid hot-box that her power armor had become. Once inside the warehouse-turned-workshop, a spacious, airy room full of interesting things, she spoke briefly with the irritable scientist, stumbled out of the suit, and crawled out of the way to lie stretched out, panting, on the cool concrete floor, waiting for her heart to slow down and the spots in her vision to dissipate. Focused unhappily on the armor in front of him, Ignacio Rivas gave no sign that he recognized her from Helios One, but accepted the job after
reading his boss's note. Megan wondered exactly what Julie had written.

"This is Arcade's?" he asked quietly. She could only stare at him and he took that for an affirmative answer. Shaking his head, he said only, "I just wish he had told me. Alright, Courier. It'll be here, hopefully ready, when you need it." Casting a critical eye at her, he added, "Would you like someone to help you to the hospital?"

"No. I'm alright. Just give me a minute, please." Megan had found that if she held perfectly still with her eyes closed, her head didn't hurt so much, and had no immediate desire to get up. Maybe she'd just stay here until it was time to fight again. The soft rumble of the generators was soothing and even the clatter of tools wasn't enough to disturb her, not with the morning's explosions still echoing in her ears. Behind the white noise, she heard things that weren't there as well: ED's "happy warble," the thump of a vertibird's rotors, and the tread of a million feet marching toward Vegas. This last sound got louder and louder, drowning out the others, until it was right on top of her and she sat up with a start, fumbling for a weapon that wasn't even within arm's reach. But it was only Johnson, still in his armor (sans helmet), grinning down at her.

"Huh, if I'd known the other option was taking a nap, I wouldn't have spent the last few of hours moving rubble."

"I wasn't asleep." She accepted his help up, aware for the first time just how much she smelled - clothes that had been fresh the previous night (which felt like a hundred years ago now) were now crunchy, steeped in sweat, oil from the armor, and the grime of the battlefield that had sifted through the cracks. "Sorry."

"It's okay. That dragon lady told me where you'd gone. Is she always like that?"

"Dragon lady?" Her thoughts were moving slowly and his words brought to mind the mother deathclaw from the quarry, not a person.

"That Followers' administrator. She's really suspicious and angry."

"Julie's actually pretty nice most of the time, but she's under a lot of stress right now." And we're contributing to it, she thought. "Let's go. Rumor has it they'll feed us at the 38." Giving a wary Ignacio a farewell wave, she lead the way back outside.

The Followers of the Apocalypse had completely taken over the Lucky 38, transforming it from a derelict casino into an effective aid distribution center. The lobby was crowded as it hadn't been since before the war - on one side, there were well over a hundred refugees - men, women, and children huddled around their possessions in frightened little clumps; on the other, dozens of white-clad workers were putting the finishing touches on a field hospital, including some fairly sophisticated equipment that Megan recognized from the clinic outside the city walls - the two precious auto-docs, a dialysis machine, a defibrillator, and other devices she didn't recognize. Inside and out, securitrons stood watch.

"Good afternoon and welcome to the Lucky 38! If you're in need of food, medicine, or a safe place to sleep, we… the Followers, that is… offer help… to everybody." The speaker, a tall, lanky man barely out of his teens, trailed off as he spotted Johnson's hulking figure. "Please..." his voice cracked and he swallowed nervously, "...if you don't mind, weapons and… and... power armor… need to be left in the lockers up front. For safety?"

"We'll disarm, don't worry." Megan handed over her shotgun and knife to the woman behind the bar counter, while Johnson stepped out of his armor, relinquishing his laser rifle as well. "Is Arcade
Gannon here?"

Still watching the old man uneasily, he shook his head. "Who? I'm new here. A bunch of us just arrived from California."

"Never mind. Thanks for the welcome. We'll just head over and get some food, if that's alright."

Lunchtime had come and gone, but there were still leftovers to be had in abundance. Megan hadn't yet met a Follower who knew how to cook, but she wasn't complaining: even cold, bland beans alongside soggy cornbread were a welcome sight. Taking a stool at what had once been a blackjack table, the two of them cleaned their plates in silence, then went back to ask for seconds.

Chewing his last bite, Johnson wiped his mouth on his sleeve and began, almost shyly. "So, what did you want to know? About the Enclave, I mean?"

"...and then they populated the place with trained deathclaws, hoo boy. I wouldn't have wanted to be one of the ones guarding that perimeter, no sir. Luckily, I was stationed pretty far away..."

Ebenezer ("Cannibal") Johnson hadn't had a new person to tell his stories to for many years, and was having the time of his life with an audience hanging on his every word. His cheerful, raspy voice had attracted a handful of idle young Followers, whose keen curiosity apparently outweighed their fears of the one-time Big Bad of the west.

"I've been to Vault 13," said a girl with serious grey eyes. "The Followers keep an archive there. No one ever told me that there had been deathclaws living there, though. What happened to them? And how do you train deathclaws, anyway? I don't think they're very smart."

A new voice spoke up behind the old man, strained and tight with barely-contained anger. "They weren't trained, exactly. In an act that showcased the heights of their hubris and cruelty perfectly, Enclave scientists genetically engineered them for sentience, then tried to wipe them out when the intelligent beings they had created rebelled. Johnson, would you mind... being... just a little more discreet? And don't you kids have work you could be doing?" This last was directed at the lookers-on, who scattered like children caught being naughty, and Arcade dropped onto an unoccupied stool, glaring across the table.

Johnson's wrinkled face grew regretful. "Sorry, Arcade. But Martin asked, and the others seemed interested too... it's not every day I get to talk to people. And I don't have much else to talk about."

The doctor snapped back. "Megan's asleep. And for pity's sake, we are barely tolerated here right now without your war stories."

"No, I'm not." Her head, which had been propped up on her hand, jerked up suddenly. "I heard every word. You were talking about Frank Horrigan? Arcade! You came back!" She beamed happily at him.

He spared her a half-exasperated, half-relieved look, and continued his admonition, "Please. Not here, not now. Some of the people here were personally hurt in the background of those 'glory days' of yours - or their parents or grandparents were, anyway. Reminiscing fondly about those times is an affront to decency."

"I'm sorry, boy. Really. I won't talk about it anymore. I guess I'll... go get some shut-eye. Leave you two to talk. Wake me when it's time to suit up." Johnson hobbled off, stooped and ancient, and Megan turned on Arcade with rare disapproval in her eyes.
"That wasn't very nice."

He didn't reply, but automatically leaned over to peek at her Pip-Boy. "You're dehydrated. See this red, flashing H2O warning? That means drink more fluids. I could just record myself saying that on a holodisk and you could play it back whenever you're wondering why you feel like crap. It's always applicable. That and 'don't do drugs.'" He frowned. "Speaking of which… med-x?"

"Henry gave me some after the battle. I'll probably need more to get moving again." She cracked open another bottle of water obediently and took a drink, but wasn't going to let him dismiss her so easily. "Johnson's an old man whose only stories are war stories. He lost a comrade today - well, Orion Moreno, anyway - and he's feeling his own mortality right now."

Arcade stiffened, and mumbled, "Moreno's dead? Well, if it had to happen to one of them… no, I can't think like that. That's sad. And it's understandable that Johnson would be feeling nostalgic right now. But it's still not appropriate to talk about in public. It'd be like goose-stepping down the Champs-Élysées in your grandfather's Sturmführer uniform. It's obscene."

"What are you talking about?" she began wearily. "Never mind. I don't want to know. Anyway, yeah, I didn't like the man as a person, but the he's a goddamned hero. ED was destroyed and I was stunned, so he lit the fuse that destroyed the howitzer and blew an enormous hole in the Legion defenses. The flying debris killed him. It was my plan and all and I feel responsible." She looked down, guilt clawing at her as much as the headache. "And don't blame Johnson. I did ask him about history, since I really don't know much about it. I shouldn't have gotten him started, and I'm sorry." She looked more closely at him, and said carefully, "Have you had a hard time lately? You look kind of ravaged and you don't really sound like yourself."

He passed a hand over his face. "You could say that. I just can't-"

They were interrupted by Emily Ortal, who had walked up without either of them noticing, tight-lipped and furious. "If you're done corrupting our youth, Courier, I have questions."

Megan blinked. "Uh… I wasn't… what? Okay. I might have answers."

Arcade sighed. "Not this again, Emily. I told you-

"...and, again, I'm telling you: you're on your way out, Gannon. You don't get a say in what we do anymore. My business is with her. Courier. You've been to Mr. House's bunker under Fortification Hill."

It wasn't a question. Had she told Ortal that? Megan couldn't remember. But it was true. "Yes. Many months back. Last October maybe?"

"What did you do there?"

"I had my one and only conversation with Mr. House on a screen near the entrance. At his direction, I used the platinum chip to remotely upgrade the active securitrons… presumably the inactive ones too. I didn't disturb any of the equipment there, although Caesar had asked me to."

She tapped her foot impatiently. "You saw securitrons housed there?"

"Yes… lots of them. I don't know how many."

"Yes-Man's records say there should be one hundred. What would it take to activate them, to put them under control of the mainframe here?"
"Yes-Man would know better than me, but I think he and Benny believed that a good, long hit of power diverted manually from the Dam - fifteen minutes or so - would be enough to jump-start the robots, open the gates, and set them on their course here. According to Kieran, the Dam's offline right now, but that's just for repairs. If the NCR wanted to they could power it up and release the Securitrons for you. But they would need to do that on location."

She mumbled a foul string of words. "We were afraid of that. We can't do it remotely?"

"I don't think so. You'll have to get Oliver on board with handing Vegas a literal army." She thought about what Julie had said to her and now understood better what she'd been talking about. "It's none of my business, but since when do the Followers of the Apocalypse control armies?"

"See, even a complete outsider - a **soldier** - sees the problem," Arcade muttered. "How do we stay who we are if we preserve and impose ourselves by force? 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' We can't use it, and we can't hand the reins over to the NCR either. It's like grabbing a snake by the tail. It'll turn and bite us, destroy us."

"For the last time, it's an internal matter, and we will debate it later. We'll police our own ideological purity, if we survive the next few days. We already control twenty-three of those robots; another hundred only exacerbates the problem by a matter of degree." The lines of her face and the tremble in her voice betrayed more disquiet than her words. "Look, even if it gets me kicked out, I will personally take the fall if it means protecting this city. I won't stand on principle while people die." Her shoulders sagged. "I'm going to go try to wear Julie down enough to approach Kieran or Hsu about this. Please send word if you think of anything that can help, Courier."

Megan watched her go, stomach tied up in knots. "I'm sorry, Arcade. Jesus, I didn't mean to… I'm just sorry. For this. Julie was right." She pressed palms against the sides of her head to try to keep her skull from cracking open. "But Emily is right too. There are so many Legion coming… I don't know if any of us will survive without that army. The Dam was easy - too easy, in retrospect - but that's because Lanius put everything into his secondary advance." She groaned involuntarily. "Something for a headache? I'm going to throw up if this doesn't get better soon."

Without hesitating, he gave her an analgesic and another bottle of water and she put her head down on the table, waiting for it to take effect. Arcade ran a gentle hand over her skull. "Did you get hit on the head?"

"Someone shot the side of my helmet through ED, and then I got thrown into a wall, so yeah. All in the suit, or we wouldn't be talking, but still. Ouch."

"How about a stimpak and some real sleep, then? It might be a while before you have another chance."

"Yeah. Sounds good." This was the third time she'd let him stab a needle into the back of her head and it wasn't getting any easier. It did help, though. Most of the pain and dizziness would fade overnight, given the chance to rest.

"You've got to stop getting head injuries. Like, make it a priority to take up a less dangerous career. People who suffer repeated concussions have a much higher incidence of early-onset dementia than the population at large. Stimpaks can only do so much for the brain, as you know very well."

"I'll get right on that, Arcade. And I think senility - if I live long enough - is a foregone conclusion for me at this point, but I'll bear your warning in mind. You can remind me of my name when I inevitably forget it. Again. I bet you'll still be sharp as a tack when you're ninety-"
"It's not a joking matter!"

"I'm not really joking. But, come on, it's not like I'm trying to get hurt. Don't lecture me for stuff I can't help." She looked up blearily, the day's second stimpak already dragging her down. "Actually, can you not lecture me at all right now? I've really missed you these past couple of weeks, you know."

"I'm glad to see you as well. Should have led with that, I suppose." He stood up and gestured for her to follow him to an empty cot on the back wall. "How have you been doing since… the funeral?"

"Fine, at least after the first few days, which were rough. Let's see… I took Vulpes Inculta down last week. He's dead for real this time. That was satisfying. Boone n' me saved th' president. Eden awarded me citizenship, which is pretty cool… you're talking to an official NCR citizen, for what little that's worth to me at this point."

"You mean Kimball," he corrected automatically.

"Yeah. What did I say?"

"Eden." This provoked a new outburst. "Good God, I hope you never have to testify… you'll incriminate yourself without even knowing it. All they'll have to do is get you talking." Words seemed to fail him then and he took off his glasses to clean them furiously on his coat before replacing them and looking up with a desperate, lost sort of look. "This… plan… of ours almost seems like fantasy right now. But it's all I have, so I have to hope it works," he finished dully. "I moved our travel bags from the cave to Kreger's house, by the way. That way we won't have to pass so near to McCarran on the way out."

Megan sat down on the cot and fumbled with her bootlaces. She wanted to ask about Eden - the name clearly meant something to Arcade, whether he'd tell her or not - but instead repeated a sing-song bit of folderol that was running through her fuzzy thoughts: "Tell me about the rabbits again, George. Tell me how it's going to be when we're living off the fat of the land."

Arcade started with surprise, then laughed humorlessly and a little hysterically until tears came to his eyes. Wiping them away, he remarked, almost cheerfully, "An appropriate reference. But dark, Megan. Intensely pessimistic. You do know how that book ends, right? I never read it to you. I don't even know where I'd lay my hands on a copy around here. It was banned before the war, so I don't know how the hell you would have read it in any vault library."

"Well, I didn't spring fully-formed from your head. I had life experiences before I met you. But in this case, I don't know what I was alluding to. The words just floated up and I said them. Who's George? What book? Why was it banned?"

"The author was a Socialist sympathizer. That was enough to merit censorship in the 21st century." He grimaced, hesitating. "Remember, you invoked this, not me. The book is Of Mice and Men, by John Steinbeck. A clever man is saddled with a dangerously clumsy moron for a best friend. They have this pipe dream of 'making it' someday - this takes place during the Great Depression, and they're homeless vagrants - and every night around the fire, George spins a pleasant vision of a little farm of their own, a couple of cows, and some rabbits that Lennie will inevitably pet to death on accident."

"Oh. Wow. I couldn't have insulted myself more if I tried. They don't ever 'make it,' do they?"

"Spoiler alert: they do not. Even by that author's standards, it's a downer of an ending."
"Don't worry, Arcade. We will. Otherwise, what has this whole story been leading to?"

"Faulty premise. We're not in a damned story. There's no overarching purpose directing our steps, no omnipotent intelligence shaping our fate. We're-... oh, just go to sleep Megan. There's only so much of this talk I can take right now before I go insane. Focus on surviving today, and we'll worry about tomorrow together. If tomorrow comes at all."

Arcade shook her awake shortly before midnight, somewhat less agitated now despite the urgency of his words. The shadows under his eyes looked deeper by lantern light and she wondered if he'd slept at all in the interim. "It's time. Your armor and your weapons are here. Ignacio fixed the fan and knocked out the worst of the dents. I filled your water tank and added some salts. Do what you need to do and let's go. I and some of the others need to go to the Fort to start our shift, and I'd like you to escort us to Freeside. The streets are dangerous right now. Desperate, frightened people do desperate things in the dark."

"Is Johnson coming?" she yawned, still half-asleep, trying to pull a boot on the wrong foot. She was so stiff she could barely bend over that far. Her neck and back were all one, continuous mantle of pain.

"No. He took ill in the night. His heart. He's stable now and they'll take good care of him here." He shook himself and rubbed his eyes. "Do you want half a dose of med-x now? That's all I'm offering. You can have the other half in twelve hours."

Megan looked up sharply. The old man had been moved from his cot to a hospital bed, where a doctor whom she didn't recognize was monitoring him closely. He was asleep, or possibly unconscious. "Yeah, I guess. Is he going to be alright?"

"I don't know," Arcade said heavily. "He's old. He never mentioned chest pain before, but he obviously shouldn't have exerted himself so much yesterday. None of them should have and I shouldn't have asked them in the first place. Come on, Megan, get ready. Kieran wants you to take up a position at the north gate. After watching them stand out there in the desert for hours, they think the Legion may finally be trying something. They're not exactly altruists, but the Van Graffs are committed to protecting their own interests at the east gate, so you and the Boomers are going to be the heavy-hitters at the other one. Crimson Caravan's providing a lot of fire support too. Our chances are looking about as good as possible at this point."

Coming back from a quick bathroom break, aches slowly shuffling away with the drug, she noticed that he was carrying Johnson's armor in a pack on his back. "You're bringing that to the Fort with you?"

He nodded curtly, waving to a knot of interns talking nervously in the middle of the room. "Even if he recovers, he's not going to be fit to wear it anytime soon, if ever again. You or I might need it." In answer to her unasked question, he added defensively, "It seems cold, I know, but we need to be practical. This is a tool that could make all the difference as we're helping to defend this city. I do wish I had said... something different... than what I did say to him earlier, but I can't help that now. Okay?"

"Okay."

It was dark on the Strip, with only Megan's headlamp and the Followers' emergency lighting to illuminate their steps, but Freeside was much worse. Faces peered out from second-floor apartments,
darting away when the light played over them. Once, Megan thought she saw the barrel of a gun out of the corner of her eye, but the window slammed shut when she turned to look. She and Arcade shepherded the young Followers, most of them strangers to Vegas and unused to immediate danger, keeping them moving despite the disquieting noises they all heard - distant shouting, gunfire, and the deeper sounds of explosives. According to Arcade's sources, McCarran was already being hit from two sides by the Legion and the Khans; most available NCR resources had been diverted there, but they still weren't sure if was going to be enough. Pairs of securitrons passed them twice, rolling straight down the middle of the broad street, calling out to furtive figures slipping through the gloom that it was past curfew.

A small pack of locals - thin-faced men armed with clubs and one long firearm - slinked out of an alleyway ahead of them with expressions of rapaciousness that turned into abject terror when Megan stepped forward. She plucked the rifle from their leader's nerveless hands and added it to the guns she already carried, her own shotgun and Johnson's laser rifle. Then, she addressed the men directly. "You'll disperse now if you know what's good for you. I'm going to check back at this alleyway in half an hour, and if I see you here, I won't risk letting you go again. You've been warned."

"Thanks for not killing them. Or giving us six more patients," Arcade remarked casually as they walked on, more quickly now. The explosions in the distance had grown more frequent. "No problem. What are the securitrons programmed to do if they come upon a group like that?"

"They'll use lethal force as a last resort to protect themselves and people they recognize as victims of violence. Emily and April warned the city before they set them loose. There are also a number of people upstairs in the casino monitoring their behavior on the terminals, ready to jump in if a situation needs a human hand on the wheel."

"Arcade, what should I have done with the Lucky 38 and the securitron army? Before today, I hadn't set foot in that place or given it much thought since the time I walked in and killed Mr. House. I was on the outs with you back then, or I would have asked for your advice. Not that it's your fault," she added quickly. "But Julie is furious with me, and I know you're not happy, but for the life of me I don't know what I should have done. Destroyed everything? Offered it to one of the other casino bosses to step into the vacuum left by House? Let Benny do what he wanted instead of killing him?"

He shook his head. "Let's hash this out when we have breathing room, Megan. When there's time, we'll talk about what could have happened. I'm not angry at you for this. And Julie's mostly upset because things are changing so fast." They had arrived at the Fort. The others disappeared inside, but Arcade lingered a moment, ignoring the securitrons flanking the gate on either side. "You'll be careful?"

"Always. You stay safe as well." On a impulse, she hugged him, careful not to squeeze too hard. "It'll be alright. You'll see. We'll both live to look back on this. I promise."

He said something in return, but it was drowned out by a louder, much nearer series of detonations from a new direction, the northern wall of the city. Multiple mushrooms of fire billowed up as a rain of atomized concrete sifted down on them, giving the illusion of snow falling on Freeside for the first time in living memory.

"Those are mini-nukes. Boomers?" He had to raise his voice to be heard over the ringing in both their ears.

"They don't use nuclear weapons!" Without looking back, Megan sprinted toward the gate, while Arcade ran inside to muster stretchers for the wounded and rad-x for the defenders.
It was just past midnight on May 16th, and the battle for Freeside had officially begun.

*The short story Megan is talking about is "A Sound of Thunder," by Ray Bradbury.*
Between the destruction of much of the northern wall and sunrise, there were seven long, anxious hours of darkness in which an extremely diverse group of people, possessing varying levels of discipline and experience, tried to defend a now very-wide gap - some fifty yards of irradiated, waist-high rubble interspersed with largely useless sections of intact wall - against an enemy they could hardly see on the moonless night. They’d had spotlights, two of them, but these had been mounted on the wall on either side of the gate, which was no longer even identifiable as such, and what little the Followers could find to carry away of these and the generators that had powered them looked irreparable to Megan. In any case, they hadn't brought replacements by sunrise. The NCR corporal from earlier in the day had been replaced at some point by a useless captain, whose nerve had broken in the explosion that had taken out half of his squad. He continued to give tremulous orders - mostly orders which echoed other peoples' muttered "suggestions" about what they should do next - but he also persisted in saying unhelpful things like, "We're all going to die," and "That's it, boys. We're not making it out of here," until she finally stepped up and had him escorted away from the lines, taking what little authority remained for herself, but struggling to wield it effectively. At around two o'clock, finding herself well out of her depth, Megan sent two of the remaining NCR men to Kieran to request a replacement, but neither the men nor a message nor a new officer ever returned.

The wounded were taken to the Fort or to the 38. The dead were set aside with little ceremony in a side street that they evacuated of squatters for that reason; burial duty would have to wait until crews could leave the city without being shot. The names of the deceased - as best as they could determine them - were recorded by an old woman who had volunteered for the task. Only some of these casualties were replaced as the night wore on. There had been a rotation in place before the disaster - the NCR, the Crimson Caravan, and the Kings had organized shifts to keep a strong presence on this side - but those in charge of administering these were now either incapacitated or incapable of motivating their remaining charges to courage. No one had expected the Legion to use nukes; no one knew where they had gotten the launchers or the ammo. There had been no contingency plan for this event.

While not at the top of anybody's concerns, the radiation was worrisome to Megan. Her Geiger counter - the only one among them, as it turned out - was clicking only very slowly, but she was an inadequate canary for the group, shielded as she was in armor. The Followers kept them supplied with rad-x and offered radaway to those actively experiencing symptoms of radiation poisoning, but it added an unpleasant wrinkle to their already precarious situation. Trying to relieve this a little, she had teams with gloves, lanterns, and shovels search out and scoop up the remains of the missiles and dump them into the most distant trenches. There was nothing she could do about the dirt and rubble that had been dusted with the fallout; the chunks of concrete that remained intact were largely unmovable and their only remaining cover to shoot from. Well, dying slowly wasn't the big concern anyway.

It was hard to understand why the Legion didn't just rush them then and there. It would be costly for them, of course, though Megan had observed that losses didn't seem to matter too much to their leaders, not at the Dam and not here. But there was costly, and then there was stupid. The darkness went both ways, of course, and any approach on the gate still had the trenches to contend with. A head-on charge meant either running toward fire or crawling in and out of holes lined with razor wire. It wasn't that they didn't try these suicidal runs, however - at seemingly random intervals of ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes, they came in smallish groups, shooting back when they were shot at and mostly falling dead before they’d crossed more than half the distance over the field. The randomness and persistence of these attacks made it hard to accomplish anything in between: when they could get to them, the Legion dead needed to be stripped of ammo and useful weapons, then dumped on the
outside of the wall, to the north of their position and as far as they dared from the city; there was also the constant need to shore up defenses, improving the walls and trenches as much as possible. The unceasing threats had the effect of exhausting them all by keeping them constantly in a state of action, reaction, and tense waiting. The night would never end, it seemed; by six o'clock, as a slight lightening in the eastern sky revealed the distant sight of hordes still to come, Megan was wishing that the Legion would just attack in force so that they could get this over with. A fight she could handle with enthusiasm, but not this interminable waiting. Daylight brought only scant relief, changing only the style of these mini-assaults, which had taken to using sheet metal to form a phalanx of sorts to get close enough to hurl grenades in the general direction of the barricades. For every ten of the attackers that fell, only one or two of theirs did, but even this lopsided loss eroded both the morale and the numbers of the defenders more than it affected the Legion's hordes. Already the men were slipping away when her back was turned, or outright refused to do what she told them if it was at all dangerous; the soldiers were a little better than the civilians, for all that this wasn't their home, but not much better. Freeside had never quartered the best of what the NCR had to offer, and that became increasingly obvious as the hours went by. She was told, again and again, "It's alright for you to say," and "I'm not wearing power armor; you do it," and, sure enough, she did end up doing a lot of the heavy lifting and exposed retrieval, but trying to do it all was steadily wearing her out.

Thankfully, dawn also brought reinforcements; people returning to the lines after rest and medical treatment, along with forces redistributed from the east gate, which by all accounts had had a better night, successfully repelling the Legion and Khan forces that had bypassed McCarran. One of the new arrivals included a tweaked-out gang-member who offered her a hit each of jet and mentats. Combined, these kept her awake and alert with some cost to big-picture thinking and overall stability. It also had the effect of making the time pass by in leaps and bounds, which was unsettling, but seemed to be working insofar as the mound of Legion bodies kept piling up in the distance and there were still people doing more or less what she wanted them to do. Still, she knew, a break would be good, and at some point necessary; but no one offered to take over the reins and there was no one present she trusted to be pressed into the job.

Around noon, a reprieve appeared in the form of an old man called Grisham. He had accompanied the Followers for their lunchtime food delivery, and stayed afterwards, first to observe the operation and then to fight. He was a grim-faced, gray-haired drifter with a wooden leg that she knew by sight as a long-term resident of the refugee camp at Aerotech - she'd always taken him for yet another washed-up addict spinning out his life in that hole, but on this occasion he seemed steady and sober enough. At least he could hold his ground and shoot, which was more than you could say for most of the others.

Hobbling over after they'd fended off yet another attack, he asked her point-blank, but very quietly, in a surprisingly clear, cultured voice, "Why are you in charge?"

It was a good question and one that deserved a better answer than, "Because I started giving orders." But that was all that came to mind. That, and, "Kieran's forgotten us." She told him these things, then asked him to remind her of his name for the third time in an hour. Details like this kept slipping her mind. He frowned at this, looking her straight in the eye.

"Would you let me take over some of the details of command? I know I don't look it, but I do have experience, and it seems to me that this is not really your strength."

She couldn't have agreed more. "It's not. Take all the details. I don't know who you are, but you have to be better than me."

Refreshed by this relief, she set herself to manageable, relatively simple tasks that allowed a mental
break: corpse duty, helping to stop those few Legion who got past the obstacle course, and always shifting rubble around, still trying to rebuild a wall. As long as no one expected her to tell them what to do, or to anticipate the dangers of the future, she felt she could do this job forever. And if and when the Legion finally pulled the lever on the Big Battle, then she'd be standing by, ready to leap into the fray. And hopefully that would happen sooner rather than later, before she collapsed from exhaustion.

At around three, another replacement finally came, and not a moment too soon. She could have given the power- armored person who approached her an enthusiastic hug, even though she couldn't immediately remember who it should be. "Moreno… Johnson… Arcade! When did you get a plasma caster? And what took you so long? I'm dying out here."

"Uh, I'm Stanton. Alec Stanton. Don't let this get-up fool you - I'm Brotherhood. Or I used to be before the bunker went to hell. I snuck out to look for Veronica and ended up in the city this morning when the NCR let a new batch of refugees in. The guy who gave me this said to tell you to come get some sleep while you have the chance."

She froze in the act of patting him on the shoulder. "Stanton?"

"Yeah, you might have met my brother. He's a Knight, I'm just an Initiate. I do know how to use power armor, though this set is weird. And black. Apparently we used to be at war with you guys, did you know that?"

She didn't have a response to this and introduced him to Grisham before walking away, thinking guiltily about Avery Stanton and the last thing Veronica had said. She hoped that she wasn't standing by when he finally got the news of his brother's death. She didn't want to kill him. Or be killed by him, which seemed more likely.

As she drew near, she noticed with dismay that the Freeside hospital had now spilled out of Fort, with patients huddled miserably in the slight shade afforded by the buildings on either side, and some actually lying in the sun while the doctors did their best to tend to them. Megan spotted wounded Legionaries among them and frowned. Her group had taken no prisoners, given no quarter at all, had never so much as considered it; why waste time and resources on the people that were trying to kill them? It made no sense.

Inside the Fort, it was much worse, with only narrow walkways in between the wall-to-wall cots and bedrolls that occupied every square inch of that space. She took off her helmet and regretted it instantly. The smell was hellish - blood, shit, and vomit - and the heat only exacerbated the oppressive atmosphere inside the packed courtyard. She ran into Arcade - almost literally - as he was walking briskly out of the largest tent, the food distribution center. He gave her a short smile and jerked his head toward the corner of the compound.

"Hi. Most've us have been catching our sleep up in the tower. No patients up there on account of there's a ladder. Go ahead. Should be space to lie down."

Arcade watched her disappear before continuing on to what had once been his research tent, and now served as an operation theatre. Julie had set him to permanent surgery duty, alternating every six hours with one of the new doctors, an import from California whose name he had yet to learn. It was important work - work he was *good* at - but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was in the wrong place, that none of it would mean anything if *(when)* the Legion marched in and executed everybody. Unlike Megan, whose competence and imagination didn't extend beyond the aspect of defense in her immediate control (and who seemed to think winning was somehow inevitable for the "good guys"), Arcade had gotten a comprehensive impression of the wider situation from the radio
and word of mouth and it didn't look good. To his credit, it looked like General Oliver was attempting to regroup from the Dam, but the NCR would never be known for its efficiency; adding to that, Lanius had apparently left a series of ghostlike guerilla teams in the wake of his massive army and the sole purpose of these was to slow the recall of troops to Vegas and McCarran. Assuming that the NCR wanted Vegas to stand, they weren't doing a particularly good job of it.

At this late stage of the game, the evacuation of civilians from Freeside would be a humanitarian disaster of epic proportions. Those that could reach the Mojave Outpost - if any made it that far, given the threat of Fiends, Khans, Legion, and environmental dangers - would have a good chance of making it to a refuge, assuming the residents of California felt like being good hosts. But the strong, the wealthy, the bold, and the well-equipped had already been gone for weeks - or had made the decision to stay and fight. Those who remained were the kind of people who would be nightmare to try to shepherd across the wastes; these would likely die en masse, and their guard with them. That wasn't even counting the wounded, many of whom could not be moved.

No, the Followers were committed to staying with their patients. And, as seemed increasingly likely, to be slaughtered in their traces. Whatever lingering sympathies the late Edward Sallow had retained for his former faction, the new Caesar, Lanius, was almost guaranteed not to spare the group that was single-handedly propping up the defense of the city with material support. Arcade didn't relish dying that way, another neck under a boot that couldn't be impressed by nonviolent resistance; even so, he had freely given away the chance to play Horatius-at-the-bridge when that opportunity presented itself. Like Megan, Stanton had been optimistic and openly enthusiastic about the opportunity to take a stand; while Arcade had a problem with asking him to fight - he was little more than a child, really - it really wasn't his place to stop him. At least Johnson's armor would see some good use. As for Johnson himself, that was another worry for the pile, but Arcade couldn't do anything for him now: he hadn't had the chance to return to the Lucky 38, and didn't expect to anytime soon.

Drifting as he was on the outside of the Followers' thoroughgoing pacifism, Arcade had warmed to Emily Ortal's position over the past twenty-four hours. Faced with imminent annihilation, the prospect of a literal deus ex machina via Mr. House's securitron army was starting to sound like an acceptable option that the Followers could eventually deal with on an ethical level. He resolved to say as much to Julie the next time he caught her in between tasks. It was late at night before he got the chance, as the flow of casualties had finally slowed down at that point. Why the Legion had slowed its attacks, he wasn't sure, but he didn't question it. He had been about to go rest, when he spotted Julie on her way out of the Fort - armed and alone, unusual for her on both counts - and accosted her at the gate, not bothering with pleasantries. They were beyond that.

"Julie, did you approach Major Kieran about pressing the switch on those robots?"

She gave him a sharp, tired look. "Of course I did. Her superiors declined, knowing full well what will happen without them. They want us to give operations directly over to Hildern before they'll divert the power. I can't do that. It goes against our core principles. And anyway, unless something drastic happens to clear the enemy at our gates, we're completely cut off from the OSI's people right now. McCarran has other things to worry about, like surviving tonight."

"So, everyone here will die and then either the NCR or the Legion will pry those controls out of our cold, dead hands?"

She shook her head firmly. "No. There's a self-destruct program tied in to every point on House's network. I made Emily put it in weeks ago. The last person standing will trip it before they allow that to happen." She said this as calmly, as if she was announcing a plan to order new supplies for the clinic. "But yes, most of us will probably die unless something happens."
"What if someone… me or Megan… were to run to Hoover Dam and try to… force our way into the control room?" As soon as he said this he suspected it was a stupid idea and the pitying expression on Julie's face confirmed this.

"That's, what, 30 miles? Over rough country? With two armies in the way? Even if there was time - and I don't think there is, based on the latest rumors - there's no way the NCR would let either of you get close." She relented. "Between you and me, I have an idea, but it's better that you don't know the details. If it doesn't work - and if it doesn't I may not be back - then Stephen will attempt to lead those who can still walk out the east gate before dawn, with as much of a guard as possible. You can accompany them or stay to defend the people left behind… or just escape. You're free. I won't judge what you decide to do, even if that means you and your foster-daughter make a run for the hills."

"We wouldn't do that." They would have subtly different reasons for staying, he felt, with Megan's primarily connected to the lens of anticipated guilt through which she viewed nearly every situation, and his own attached to some romantic sense of honor and duty gleaned from - where else? - his books. Or what he imagined his father would have done. Regardless of the reasoning, it came to the same conclusion. "I couldn't live with myself if I abandoned Freeside right now."

She shrugged as if it didn't really matter one way or another. "Maybe you should. This doesn't work, the city falls before morning. This works, I and the other leaders proceed to play a difficult game of diplomacy with Oliver and Moore. I'd rather there not be too many pawns left on the board at that point. Well… whatever happens… good luck and good-bye. I have to go now."

He watched her go off on her mysterious errand, then climbed the ladder to the tower and crawled onto the unoccupied pallet beside Megan, noticing that she'd taken off the armor to sleep, but still kept an arm draped protectively over it. After a moment of indecision, he gently shook her awake.

She half sat up, eyes wide. "What? Is it time? It feels like I just closed my eyes."

"Shh. It's actually been six or seven hours but no, you don't need to get up yet. Megan, do you want to escape Freeside? You can if you want to. Now would be the time. With that suit on, you could probably climb the wall and be in Westside in less than half an hour. The buzz is that the Legion's mostly been ignoring it since it's relatively unimportant, tactically-speaking."

She groaned and rolled over to look at him uncomprehendingly. "Leave? That doesn't seem right. Unless we've won?"

"No, we haven't. We haven't even started to fight. Not really. All this has been a preamble. You understand that, right?"

More awake now, she half sat up to glare at him. "I'm not afraid and I'm not leaving. If you want to go, I'll catch up with you later." He shook his head and she smirked. "Yeah, I didn't think so. C'mon, Arcade, when did I ever run away from a fight? And how could I leave when there are still others willing to stay?"

He lay back and stared at the sky, the stars bright above the darkened city, unsurprised but sad. She was doomed. They were all doomed. "I had to ask. I'm sorry I woke you. Go back to sleep."

There was no reply and he assumed that she'd done just that. His own mind was too stirred up to settle down easily, but exhaustion was finally winning out when Megan spoke again, sleepy but serious.

"Okay, best-case scenario, we beat the Legion back and survive. What are we going to do about Johnson then? He was talking way too much yesterday and not just to those interns."
"I don't know. I was thinking about that too. I mentioned my concerns to a couple of my most principled colleagues, indicating that they should keep him out of sight if the NCR gains access to the casino. Fake his death or something. Toshiko-... Dr. Usanagi wouldn't surrender a patient willingly." He sighed. "Even if that works, I don't feel good about abandoning him, but I don't see another option." He heard a noise and opened his eyes. Megan was sitting up and putting her boots back on. "You're getting up already?"

"Yeah. You got me all worried, and anyway I feel bad about leaving that Stanton kid out there by himself all night. How old is he, anyway?"

"Too young for this. Should have stayed in his bunker. You know that his brother-"

"I know. Can't do anything about that now. See you later, I hope. If not... well, thanks for putting up with me."

Megan grabbed a roasted ear of corn out of a cookfire as she passed through the compound, waving it in one gloved hand to cool it down enough to eat. All things considered, she felt pretty good. Sore, sure, and a little hungover from the amphetamines, but alert and rested. Given time, this crazy schedule would wear on her, but for now it was okay. Not much time for second-guessing, not much mental space or energy for worry.

Focused as she was on not stepping on the wounded in the street, she almost ran into Julie Farkas on her way to the gate. She'd come round a blind corner, from the south, and in the dim light it wasn't easy to see her on account of she'd shed her usual white lab coat. The older woman appeared to hesitate, then greeted her politely, if a little distractedly. Megan nodded in return and was about to jog off before the haranguing started afresh, when Julie spoke again. To her surprise, her voice was gentle and a little apologetic, not critical.

"Just a few more hours, Courier. That's all you'll need. I hope. Do you think you and your lot can keep them out if they mount a full attack?"

"Not for very long," Megan admitted. "Have you seen that side lately? The gate's gone and more. We have a one-shot line of charges buried, but honestly that's only going to buy us a short time. After that, we'd be playing a guerilla game, fading back to cover. Probably retreat toward the Fort, in the hopes that y'all could give us a bit of covering fire from the wall. But, if they get that far, then we've basically lost already." She paused, looking around. "Can you get these patients off of the street, though?"

"We'll work on it. NCR's going to let us use the area around the train station in exchange for providing aid to their wounded. Kieran and the King are having problems on that side, though. With internal unrest and Legion aggression both. That's why they haven't been able to send any new help to this side." Julie was uncharacteristically nervous, and kept glancing behind her, in the general direction of the army's HQ. "The army is expected to be here around dawn. Lanius probably knows that, so they'll be moving sooner rather than later."

"Okay." Megan wondered what Julie was getting at. "Can you ask Emily to spare us a couple more securitrons? One of ours got completely destroyed last night, and the other is disabled - the wheel got ripped off."

"I'll ask, but I can't promise anything. This is what I will tell you: if you can wait, you'll have all the securitrons you need."

"You mean...? You convinced the NCR to divert the power? That's wonderful!" This news came as
warm confirmation of Megan's best hopes: of course they would win. That's how stories were supposed to end.

A shadow of fear (or was that guilt?) crossed her face. "Something like that. There's a... human element in every hierarchy, after all. That's their weakness. Just buy as much time as you can. And don't tell anybody just yet, especially whatever soldiers you have left."

Stanton was still standing when she arrived, but the rest of the ranks had thinned somewhat in the intervening hours. Grisham was gone, and Megan was afraid to ask after him. Walking straight up to the initiate, she asked, "Who's in charge?"

"Eh... no one, really. The old man got hurt and the doctors took him away, and since then we've been floundering. I'm the most imposing, so I yell things at people sometimes, but they don't listen. We just kind of try to focus on our own jobs right now. People do what they want to do. It's so dark you can't really tell, but bodies are stacking up out there wherever they fall - we haven't been able to safely clear them for a while. Why should we bother with the enemy dead, anyway?"

Megan pushed down a flash of anger, and explained. "Enough corpses and they'll fill up the trenches. The Legion can run right across on the backs of their dead comrades. That's why we were doing that." She adjusted her headlamp. "I guess I'll go out there and do it myself." Stanton shook his head in protest. "What?"

"They've got at least one sniper who's gotta have night vision or something. Took out half of our last salvage crew before we knew what was happening. Occasionally takes shots at us back here, too, when we forget to keep our heads down. With your lamp on out there, you'll be an excellent target. I don't know about this material-" he tapped his own chestplate, "but Brotherhood armor is not graded for armor-piercing bullets. Or not too many of 'em anyway."

She rubbed the dent on her helmet absently, her souvenir from Hoover Dam. "It's better than the Brotherhood's, but not impenetrable. Alright. I guess we'll just sit tight. The word on the street right now is that they'll move before daylight, so we'll have the darkness to our advantage."

Staying low, she made the rounds, checking in on the other defenders - only about thirty in number now - and whispering words of encouragement and warning. Those remaining were ill-equipped, shivering with cold or fear; some were already injured, carrying pistols with the hand not in a sling or peppered with tiny cuts from explosives. In the dim light of lanterns and fire, with their factional clothing smeared with dirt and blood, and covered up by mismatched armor scavenged from the dead, it was hard to tell Kings from NCR from Crimson Caravan from Boomers. They'd achieved a kind of unity here at the end, Megan thought: people fighting together for a common goal, in defense of innocent people. The whole west was represented here tonight, even its hated rejects; it seemed poetically appropriate, somehow.

Taking up a watchful position behind a crumbling pillar, she asked Stanton in a low voice, "Did Arc-... did the guy who gave you that armor give you any warnings with it? Namely, that it marks you for death - from the Brotherhood and the NCR? Hating the Enclave is pretty much the one thing those two groups agree on, and that's the common enemy that made them join into a short-lived alliance forty years ago."

He cocked his head in puzzlement. "He said something about that, but I wasn't really paying attention to anything after the words, 'Would you like to wear power armor?' And I was like, 'Hell, yeah.' My people wouldn't kill me, Courier. Even if I did just run away. We're family."

"Your people have been trying to kill me for weeks. For the crime of wearing this armor."
"Well, they don't know you very well, do they? They probably think you're one of those bad guys."

Not sure if he was an idiot, or just naive, she dropped the subject after telling him to ditch the armor when he had the chance. "Don't try to give it back to one of us. Just drop it and move on, with no one the wiser. And if you do find Veronica... please tell her I'm sorry. We parted badly, and I never meant for anything bad to happen."

Having done what she could for him, she tried not to think about the "after" any more, focusing instead on the task at hand. The horizon was still compared to the preceding twenty-four hours. She'd spent at least fifteen minutes talking, and waited another fifteen in nervous idleness before asking Stanton how long it had been since the last dust-up with the Legion.

He ducked his chin and thought, before answering, "About an hour now. It was pretty steady until then, and then it just stopped. It's weird, but I'm not complaining. I only have about 50 cells left. Do you think it means something?"

She didn't know. The night stretched on, still and ominous. Midnight passed, then one o'clock. Stanton wandered off at some point to take a leak and grab a bite before announcing his intention to take a nap in his armor ("If you lock the knees, you can totally fall asleep on your feet in these things. Just ask any Knight with boring guard duty."). At 1:15, the street lights of Freeside came back on, a refreshing change welcomed by ragged cheers of enthusiasm from those awake and on duty. Not Stanton, though - she could hear him snoring in there. Megan was uneasy. The light felt like a signal; of what and for whom, she didn't know. As a precaution, she conscripted one of the children who'd been carrying water and messages to wake the reserves from their pallets and campfires in the side-streets; they grumbled, but they came, some with blankets still wrapped around them against the cold, some clutching beer, wine, or liquor as well as their gun. She frowned at this, but didn't think it was worth trying to do anything about it; they were mutinous enough as it was. At 1:30, they numbered about fifty, the most they'd had on duty since the catastrophe with the nukes. At 1:45, the Legion finally made their move, a two-sided attack that caught everybody in the city off guard.

Unable to rely too much on the radio (the group at the north gate had held one, but that had been destroyed along with everything else on that first night), the defenders had worked out a crude signal for communicating a simple message to everyone in the city: firework flares meant a breach in the defense, with enemy boots in the city, and would theoretically spur a quick reallocation of resources to the weak point. The informal "leaders" had taken it in turns to hold the gun - Megan had repossessed it from the NCR when their control faltered and later passed it on to Grisham, who'd handed it to Stanton, who'd relinquished it back to Megan upon her return. She examined the slender gun now, wondering if they could rely upon it working when the time came - she didn't know where the signals had come from or if anybody had tested it for use. Even as she pondered this, however, someone else, a quarter-mile away, had the chance to do just that: a shower of blue, red, and white sparks hovered briefly over the Strip before dissipating. For a moment, no one reacted. Then - panic, noise, confusion. No one knew where to look - at the army camped in the wilderness outside, or the threat of invaders at their backs.

She hit Stanton on the shoulder to wake him and raised her voice, "Right, people. This is it. We didn't expect them to hit the Strip first, but at least they have the bulk of the NCR forces centered around the embassy and a bunch of securitrons, not to mention casino security, so they should be able to contain it there. You... what's your name? Go check it out and report back. The rest of you-

"They're rushing us!" This was the same strung-out King she'd met the previous morning. Has he been on duty all this time? she wondered, amazed. Jet's a hell of a drug. He screamed out this warning from his post on the wall, terror obvious in his voice. Any hopes she had of this being the result of drug-induced paranoia faded when she looked as well. No longer invisible in the distance,
she could see legionaries running toward them, a solid line with no gaps, the front-runners carrying boards, sheet metal, sandbags - anything to shield themselves and build a bridge across the traps.

"Never mind the Strip, then. Take your positions!" Megan fired her own flares into the air and threw the empty gun aside. It would warn the Followers and the others in the neighborhood, if nothing else. Reinforcements seemed unlikely just now. She plucked the handheld detonator from the niche where they'd been keeping it; she would wait until they had almost completely closed the gap to set it off, to maximize the damage. She hoped everybody had the autonomy and initiative to handle themselves in an all-out fight, because she had no notion of how to provide leadership and fight in close quarters at the same time.

The fight was every bit as bad she had imagined - much rougher and less certain than the Dam - but also easier in some ways than the waiting game had been. Once she'd set off the mines, blowing the legs off of a half-dozen attackers, there were no more logistics to think about, no more support personnel to coordinate, no more details to worry about. Her job was to prevent any Legion from passing her, to not kill anybody else by accident, and to maximize her own people's survival as much as possible.

Time was weird in moments of high adrenaline. That had been true at the Dam and it was true now. Their stand at the gate - her and Stanton front and center, neglecting cover, with everyone else flanking them - seemed to last for hours. Not well-acquainted with "normal," Megan didn't know if she was merely being calm under pressure or if this was another sort of dissociative fugue, but for the first part at least, it felt like she was taking a back-seat to the action, watching herself fight. She was doing just fine, she knew; and from what little she could see of Stanton's actions at her elbow, he was doing an excellent job as well. It was the action on the periphery - the part she couldn't spare the attention for - that concerned her: how many of their men were still standing? How much were they hurting themselves with friendly fire? How many Legion had already slipped by them into Freeside? It was impossible to bottleneck the rush sufficiently with the resources they had left. Some were certainly getting around their vanguard. If these had the presence of mind to surround them, separate them, and pin them down long enough to smash the vulnerable parts of their suits, they'd be doomed. There was another compelling reason to not let them pass: if the Legion had it in mind to penetrate to the heart of their resistance - the Fort, with its many defenseless targets and ample resources - that was also bad and had to be prevented at any cost. Watching Stanton stumble under a new barrage of bullets, and feeling a similar clatter on her own chest (it sounded like a mere handful of gravel, but did hurt in an abstract sort of way), she decided they needed to move. This wasn't working.

"Retreat to cover!" It was impressive how loudly she could shout with this helmet on. It sounded like to her like the voice of a different person, someone who knew what they were doing. "Cover" meant the secondary barricade, a line of debris they'd set up a safe distance from the gate, behind which many of their number had been sleeping until a few minutes ago. It was low and patchy, and wouldn't keep anything out for long, but it did span the whole street, and gave them another wall of sorts from which to slow the Legion. She and Stanton held their position just a little longer - they'd stayed more or less where they'd started, on the threshold of the former gate, forcing the enemy to either smash into them or clamber over the rubble on either side - before turning and running back to join the others.

It was easier to see here, with a streetlight directly overhead. Megan counted the people crouched beside her there and her heart sank. There were thirty, give or take. Thirty out of fifty, all breathing hard, and some badly injured. One near her - a King, she thought - was barely conscious, propped up against a waste bin by his leather-clad companion; she ordered these two to move back to shelter, to the Fort, now not all that far behind them, to warn those there to ready their own defense. And then the time for worry was over: the Legion had mustered their new wave, and there was nothing to do but fight.
Rattled by the decimation of their forces, Megan lost her grip on the calm detachment that had kept her above fear and the pretense that she was in control of anything. Now the hits hurt; now exhaustion threatened to overwhelm; now the sight of the sea of enemies terrified. From their new position, she could see the whole enemy column approaching at a run, not hesitating even though they were running into shots that couldn't fail to hit something. One couldn't help but admire that kind of discipline; if the NCR had half that kind of cohesion, Megan thought, things never would have come down to this. With the light above and the close proximity to the other survivors, she could see every new casualty in real time, felled by a headshot or a machete swipe. Whenever an enemy tried a weak spot on the barricade, she went at him with a long piece of rebar - a weapon she didn't remember having picked up at all - felling them like trees. Her gun was empty, and although she had a double handful of shells left in her pocket, she hadn't taken the time to reload yet.

Something small hurtled toward her, thrown by an unseen enemy, and she swung at it - purely on instinct - and managed a lucky hit, batting the missile back to the other side, where it burst into a wide sphere of blue-white sparks. She shivered. An pulse grenade. An EMP attack was almost useless against a human opponent… except when they were wearing power armor. She couldn't remember 

"Fuck..." Thirty was down to twenty still standing, and without another heavy to depend on, it was becoming harder to hold the line. If she turned to her right or her left, there were enemy soldiers and dogs jumping over. The ones that made it past took off running down the street behind and she could do nothing to stop them or go after them. And still they came. Behind her, she heard the bark of a dog and more gunfire and her heart sank. If the Legion was already in the city in force, then they weren't going to be able to last much longer. A panting snarl behind her made her whirl around, just in time to catch Rex in the act of tearing out a Legion mutt's throat. Behind him were a dozen of the King's men along with the King himself, accompanied by an equal number of rough-clad locals. They were all in sorry shape, but at least they were alive and had working guns. The King took a knee to reload and beckoned Megan down to talk.

"We're fixin' to pull back just 'bout e'rybody to the Fort - us and whoever you got left, which unfortunately looks like not that many. We'll try to carry whatever wounded we can. They got us a place to stand and shoot from the wall and that seems like the best way to hold out. The signal's all the grenades we're gonna throw in about twenty seconds. Others are spreading the word. Be an almighty bang and should shake those guys up enough to stagger them a little."

"Alright. Where've you been, anyway?" This sounded accusing to her own ears, but she didn't mean it that way. In truth, she could have kissed him just for being a real, live authority figure.

He gave her a reproving look. "Puttin' out fahrs. Watchin' the walls by shantytown - some of those bastards have been tryin' to hop over where's it deserted. I ain't been hidin' if that's what you're gettin' at. Now, here we go... Get ready, everybody. One! Two! Three!"

In the confusion, they turned and ran, taking with them whoever they could. With some difficulty - he was very heavy and she was very tired - Megan got Stanton in a fireman's carry, armor and all, abandoning the rebar regretfully. She didn't know if he was alive, but she felt responsible for him. There was some gunfire from the Legion behind - a couple of defenders fell with the man they were trying to carry to safety - but there was no immediate pursuit and most of them were able to make it to their goal.
The Fort was a disaster, stretched far beyond capacity. There was no room to walk, let alone stretch out. Most patients were sitting, or propped against one another. But the sea of people contracted a little bit to let the last of the newcomers in before the guards shut the gate and slammed the door-bar down.

As quickly and gently as possible, Megan pulled Stanton out of the fused power armor, throwing the useless pieces over the wall to get them out of the way. He was breathing, at least, and looked exactly as she'd imagined him - a broad-faced boy of fifteen or sixteen, unused to much sunlight, with softer features than the circumstantial enemy who'd been his brother. She pointed him out to a passing doctor with a word of explanation and then turned her attention to other things. All along the wall, on the side facing the main street, people had taken their positions, standing on barrels and boxes or on the wall itself, waiting for targets with weapons drawn. Trying not to step on people, she worked her way across, eyeing the tower on the far side. She was about to climb up, when she heard a whimper by her feet. Huddled against the wall, hugging himself and rocking, she found the gang member she'd nicknamed "Jet" in her mind - the same one who'd given warning of the attack an hour before.

"I thought you were dead." He hadn't been at the second barricade at all. She'd assumed the worst, and was slightly miffed to find him here. Still, he was pretty young - her age or younger, she guessed. And the jet-jitters had done nothing for his courage.

His shock of black hair was soaked with sweat and flopped untidily over his dark, dilated eyes. "S-s-sorry, I b-b-bolted. Don't tell the K-k-king."

"I won't. And I'll even forgive you if you have any more drugs for me."

He pulled a syringe out of his pocket and handed it to her apologetically. "Nothin' if you're looking to die happy. Just some slasher."

She was already opening the panel on her arm, looking for a vein. She was anxious to get up on the wall. "Happy's overrated. What's this one do again, exactly?" She'd once heard an addict describe it as "the chem that turns a barfight into a triple homicide" and had never been quite desperate enough to try it.

"Anything you want, for a little while. It'll make you stronger and make it so that nothing hurts until you're done."

"Sounds about right for this. Thanks."

Arcade looked up with hollow eyes when she scrambled over the ramparts to crouch beside him, bypassing the ladder and the trapdoor in favor of the direct approach. He had a little pile of grenades and a scattering of cells on hand. "What happened to the boy out there? I saw you carrying him. I thought he'd be safe."

"EMP. He's still alive, though."

He winced. "For now. Until Lanius has us all executed. Shot, if we're lucky. Crucified if we're not." He cast a discouraged look at the enemy, still outside of range, and at the columns of smoke rising up all over the city. "In case you can't tell, I'm afraid."

She gave him a smile he couldn't see. "Hey, pessimism's not helpful. Julie said we'll have help soon."

"I heard a 'definite maybe' in that promise. But fine. Let's do this like we have a chance. You need a weapon? Ammo? There's a spare hunting rifle behind you."
Megan loaded her shotgun with the rest of the shells she had, for when it came to close fighting, and then secured a half-box of .308's and a rifle for herself. She was feeling pretty good now, warm and energetic - a little too energetic - and was ready to get back into the fight. "Fair warning. I'm probably going to jump down there when they start mobbing our walls. I can do a lot more down there."

He looked over at her and sighed. "Make that a move of last resort, please. Call me sentimental, but I don't want to watch you die." The Legion column had come into range - at least for people who could aim with accuracy - and he leveled his plasma defender, biding his time. "I can see the Legate back there. He's not playing it safe with his own skin, is he? Maybe we can kill him, at least."

"Now you're talking."

They started shooting. It was hard to miss, even for Megan, but if anything touched Lanius he didn't show it. They had height on their side - the walls were a solid 14 feet high, and the tower about 20 - but not numbers. They didn't even have enough ammo, she realized as the guns on the walls began to fall silent, empty. Every now and then, too, a Legion bullet would score a lucky hit and drop another of theirs, and even the shots that missed were chipping away at the crumbling adobe walls, but there was nothing that could be done about that. She unloaded the rifle twice into the thick of the enemy and hurled all but one of the grenades in the general direction of Lanius, causing disarray in their tightly-packed ranks, but not dropping their leader. The last grenade she pocketed, thinking that you never knew when you might need a grenade. She was reloading the rifle for a third volley, using the last of the bullets in the box, when she spotted a new kind of threat - a stick of dynamite, flipping over end to end, trailing sparks behind its lit fuse. Before it had struck the ground, she was moving to leap down; by the time it had rolled into place at the foot of the wall, she was scrambling to grab it, knees groaning at the heavy impact of landing. With a flick of her wrist, it was sailing back into the sea of red, where it burst just above their heads. And now she was on the ground, outside of the Fort. Well, that was alright. That was the plan. With the wall at her back and covering fire from above, she could do this for a good while.

And it was simple, at least. No more babysitting. No more checking her fire when a friendly got too close. She emptied her shotgun at the unlucky few who charged her first, then used it as a club until an enemy sledge shivered it to pieces in her hands. A swift wrestling match later, however, and the sledge was hers, the brains of its former wielder dripping off of the jagged end, and nothing within reach was safe anymore.

The legionaries became more careful with their distance after the hammer smashed a few more of their skulls; they kept shooting and moving backwards, trying to draw her away from the wall so they could get her surrounded. She was reluctant to give up the protection at her back, and was still afraid of them landing a successful explosive near the Fort, but she couldn't just stand there and let them shoot her. Close, even circled around, was better than being target practice; already, the suit was pitted with a hundred tiny craters, some deeper than others, and she imagined that the bruises underneath would eventually hurt. The others continued firing from the wall, peeling some of her attackers off. She could only see direct evidence of Arcade's steady shooting, with green plasma illuminating the dim street below, but she could hear the others keeping up the attack. More than that, even: when a Legion grenade flew over her head and rolled up to the bricks, someone jumped down, threw it away, and ran back around the corner without injury. It was an impressive act of bravery for anyone outside of armor, and she wondered distractedly who it was before losing track of that thought.

It was getting harder to focus on anything outside of the three-foot radius she occupied; always myopic, never precise, her perception of things and people had now shrunk to a tiny fraction of the scene. She didn't know how long the slasher was good for, or how long she'd be able to keep this up
when it gave out. She wished she'd found some water in addition to drugs: her mouth was dry and it hurt to swallow. At some point she had stopped hearing anything on the outside - the screams, the shouts, the never-ending shooting faded away - and could now only hear her own breathing and heartbeat, both working overtime, painful rhythms that were probably dangerous in some way. But if this was hard on her body, it was harder on her enemies', so she didn't mind a little exertion. Boone had actually had the right idea for once, she decided. Killing was the best way to exorcise demons, not talking about them or trying to drown them out with chems. That she had to do it up close and personal instead of from a faraway scope was just fine with her. It was more satisfying that way.

On some level, Megan knew that these strangers were mostly newcomers to the area, no one she'd ever encountered personally. They were tribals fresh from Arizona and Utah, young men who'd barely had what anybody could call a choice in the matter of their service to the Bull. On a different day and in a very different place (talking with Arcade, far away from danger, perhaps), she might have played an apologetics game on their behalf; she had, in fact, defended individual legionaries to Boone in the past, on more than one occasion, a habit that had infuriated the sniper to no end. Not today, though. Today, they wore the faces of the long-dead men who'd hurt her and destroyed so many other lives. Smash. That was for Nellie. Bash. Manny. Crunch. Carla, though she'd never met the woman. Boone. Everybody in Freeside. All of the NCR soldiers who'd never go home. Her targets were the monsters that had shaped the first year of her life and had threatened the only home she'd ever known and the only people she cared about, and she gave herself over fully to hating and destroying them. For a while, caught up in a smooth, Zen-like flow, it was as if she could make no wrong move - everything they tried (ropes to trip her up, weighted nets to pull her down, explosives at her feet), she countered or avoided, reacting quicker than she had would have thought possible, the sledge as light as a feather in her hands.

Shockingly, too, all this had the appearance of working. They were backing off from the Fort now, away from her, and away from the continuous covering fire that was sapping their numbers as much as her hammer. Success stacked with the drug to make her arrogant, giving her the impression of being omnipotent and infallible. That was why, when the ranks opened to reveal Lanius himself standing at the end of the street, massive sword drawn, she took the bait greedily and charged gladly into the challenge. Cut off the head and the snake dies, she thought. He was just a man wearing heavy armor and wielding a primitive weapon. She had no doubts whatsoever about her ability to defeat him.

Before she could reach him, the noise came back suddenly, a crash of overwhelming sound that caught her off guard and robbed her cool detachment. From somewhere far away, Arcade was shouting something (and she doubted it was "good luck"), but she could only hear Lanius' clearly. He had raised his voice to throw down some kind of formal gauntlet.

"...I'll ask you again, Courier: are you ready to die for this city?" His voice sounded as unnatural as her own from behind his mask, loud despite the muffled quality.

"I'm not going to die, but yeah. I guess." If they had to do the dramatic dialogue thing, then fine. She could really use a breather. The enemies on either side could have attacked her then, but no one moved toward her, either out of fear of interrupting their leader or of being killed by her. Instead, they resumed their assault on the Fort, leaving the two of them to it.

"I'd call you brave and honorable, but you're just a weak woman using a cheap trick to defeat worthier opponents. You couldn't stand against even one of the Legion's finest without being cloaked in abominable technology." He was walking toward her now, slowly and deliberately, and she gripped her weapon firmly, ready to end this talk with a swing.

"It's just a tool, Lanius. I have no compunctions about using the best resources on hand against the
likes of you. And anyway, you're wrong - I beat Vulpes Inculta without it. I've killed dozens of yours in ordinary armor. I helped Caesar's assassin escape with no better defense than leather. This is a special occasion, though - the end of Legion as far as the Mojave is concerned. I wanted to be dressed for it." Tired of this tête-à-tête, she swung first, as confidently as she had done a hundred times already, intending to crush his shoulder under that metal. To her shock, he reached out, lightning quick, and *caught* the hammer, jerking it out of her hands as easily as a normal person would pop a xander root out of the ground. Acting impulsively, she charged at him, surprised and angry, and he stiff-armed her effortlessly before swinging her own sledge back at her, managing a one-handed hit that left her right arm numb from the shoulder joint down. It was the first hit that had actually staggered her since arriving at Freeside, and she froze in shock, disarmed and off-balance.

"I'm not one of the rank-and-file,," he said, sounding slightly offended now, throwing the hammer far to the side and taking a double-handed grip on his sword. "I'm not Caesar, soft and intelligent and careful. I'm not that devious little *frumentarius* either, always talking when he should be acting. They call me the Monster of the East for a reason, and you're about to find out why." The "why" was punctuated by another swing, this one at her chest. Megan tried to sidestep, but was too slow; even with her hands up to block it, it drove the air from her lungs and threw her backwards, scraping and tumbling over the broken asphalt. Rolling over, she managed to get to her hands and knees before his boot caught her in the face, flipping her over and effectively ending her will to fight. Face-first on the ground, she hadn't even moved yet before another massive blow across her back drove her further into the unyielding ground. She still didn't feel any pain, though all of the rush from the drug had gone, and she wondered if he'd broken her neck with that kick.

"Right. That was easy." He was amused now. "Let's see how tough you are under that armor." There was a sound like he was sheathing the sword, and then he planted one foot behind her right shoulder, and began trying to pull off the armor protecting her right arm, wrenching it terribly in the process.

*Oh, I can still feel pain. That's good.* She tried to move, but he pressed down harder, and kept pulling her arm. There was green light glowing in her periphery, and she suspected that Arcade was trying to hit him, but they had strayed a pretty good distance away from the Fort. One bolt must have connected, however, because she heard him grunt and a little shower of green droplets pattered down, sizzling where they encountered her suit.

"An energy weapon. More cowardly technology. Oh well, another time, Courier. I'd like to get to know you better, but it can wait until after we finish taking this city and killing your friends." He was dragging her further away now, threatening to pull the arm from its socket, shouting orders to his men to get ropes and nets for 'the prisoner.' Desperate, Megan stuck her left hand into her pocket, looking for a syringe, a knife, *anything*. She found the grenade instead. When the Legate stopped, dropping her in a heap to shout more orders, she didn't hesitate: pulling the pin and releasing the lever, she waited a second - just a second, as one never knew exactly when these old explosives would finally detonate - before rolling it in his direction and curling up in a ball, protecting her head as much as possible.

He began, "What are you do-" That was as far as he got before the explosion went off at his feet, actually knocking him over. This would have been a great time to escape, and that *had* been a part of the plan (insofar as she'd had a plan at all), but Megan found herself stunned, and deafened, and moving in extreme slow motion. By the time Lanius had recovered enough to kick away the twisted remains of his shin-high boots, she had only made it to her knees. If he was talking, she couldn't hear him, but she suspected that she'd achieved nothing more with the grenade than a quicker death, as he had drawn his sword again and appeared to be glaring down at her. He couldn't cut her head off cleanly - probably - but a direct hit would almost certainly kill her. Hopefully.
Oh well. I tried. She closed her eyes and waited for the blow, thinking of better times - eating tamales with Raul, shearing bighorn with Lily, listening to Arcade read. These were calming memories and a good note to go out on. Focused inwardly, cut off from external stimuli, she didn't hear the warning shouts of the Legion soldiers near the entrances to the city. She didn't see the missile that ended Laniu's life. All she knew was that there was suddenly something heavy and limp lying on top of her and she pushed it off impatiently, looking up to see what she could from the vantage point of the ground. The securitrons had come at last. And, she decided, this would be an excellent time to get out of their way.

Crawling, walking, falling, and crawling some more, she made her way back to the wall of the Fort, which had gained a massive crack in her absence, doubtless due to a grenade or some dynamite that had hit home when she'd been wasting time trying to fight Laniu. God. Was the man human at all? She wouldn't have expected an ordinary man to do what he'd done. It was a little humiliating, actually. Too sore to climb back inside and too rattled to do anything else, she sat against the wall to watch the fight. Laniu lay where he'd fallen, and his men were being routed, mowed down as they fled. The robots were equipped with automatic weapons and missile launchers, although they were being careful with these, not firing any at buildings if they could avoid it. It would have been satisfying to stay and watch the whole thing, but her mind had other plans, letting dizziness drag her down into darkness.

She wasn't allowed to sleep for long - when she awoke, there was still fighting going on somewhere, if the noise was any indicator. Her head hurt along with everything else and someone was bothering her.

"Hi, are you awake? Dr. Gannon told me how to take your helmet off. He's tied up at the moment, but wanted someone to check on you. A good thing, too. That filter was smashed in and I don't know if you were getting enough air." The voice was young, female, and nervous. Megan opened her eyes and saw a Follower with long, dark hair and a burn on one cheek.

"Tied up?" She imagined Arcade in a slaver's bonds and shivered

"Busy, I mean," she clarified. "I'm Penny. Are you okay?"

"More or less." It might be true; she wouldn't know until she tried to move. "Did we win?"

"I think so. There are still robots standing and no Legion, so that's probably a good thing."

"Good. Tell Arcade I'll meet him where we planned. In the meantime, can I have some water, please? And some med-x if y'all can spare it?"

The woman got her what she asked for without question and left, doubtless eager to get back behind walls; she left a full canteen behind, which Megan sipped slowly while she watched the securitrons roll back and forth, seeking out stragglers. It was a strange scene. She could still hear shouts and gun fire in the distance - the sound of a score of the things using their automatic weapons was unmistakable - but the only Legion she could see were the dead and dying. Even as she watched, a pair of Kings were making the rounds, finishing those who still breathed with a single shot to the temple. So much for rules of warfare, she thought mildly, not really caring. As far as she was concerned, they all deserved it.

Her armor was in abysmal shape. She doubted that the combined efforts of Ignacio, Veronica, and Raul could have repaired it without the appropriate machine-made parts from some pre-war factory. When she sat up straighter, her right pauldron - the part Laniu had done his damnedest to pry up - fell off spontaneously and clattered to the dirty street beside the abandoned helmet. The LEDs that
she could see had gone dark. All things considered, it was probably time to abandon the armor, but getting out of it seemed like too much work. Sleepy again as the med-x set in, she decided to rest her eyes for another minute before beginning the long walk to Westside, but when she opened them the sky had gotten lighter, with dawn fast approaching. And again, someone was trying to talk to her. An angry someone with a red beret, whom she hadn't really expected to see again.

"...need to wake up, damnit. You have to get out of here."

She smiled. "Boone! You're alive!" He looked every inch a man that had fought a battle, then marched and fought over rough country for two days: covered with dust from head to toe, beard rough and stubbly, and weary all over. "You missed the fun part here, but I'm not mad. Just happy to see you."

"There's no time for that. You need to leave. At least get out of sight. Moore is in the city, and she definitely sees you as a flight risk."

This was concerning and she tried to rouse herself to respond appropriately. "Oh, okay. Thanks Help me up?"

He obliged, but with some effort, as she wasn't helping much. The Legate's sword, while unable to actually cut through to the skin, had done a number on the armor's individual components, deforming even the largest plates and splitting weakened rivets at the seams. It hurt, of course, but more importantly it meant that getting out of the suit was going to be a bit like trying to scoop pork n' beans out of a can that a super-mutant had crushed in his fist. That by itself was only annoying. What was much more alarming was the acrid, burning smell coming from behind her - it seemed that something in the power source had ruptured. Already, it was becoming harder to move, as the artificial muscles of the suit ceased to amplify her movements. Without that boost, it was just dead weight, a confining shell trapping her in a box with a possibly-damaged radioactive core.

Arcade chose that moment to show up, moving briskly around the corner, alarm visible on his tired face. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I lost track of time. The other surgeon got diverted to the railway station and there's a lot of casualties. I thought you had already left."

"I fell asleep… or passed out or something. It's stuck, Arcade. I can't get out. It's not working either. I can barely move."

He tugged at the release, trying to open it. The metal around the clasp had warped, making it hard to undo. "I can't believe Lanius was able to do all this with a sword on power armor. It shouldn't have been possible."

"I think he was a small super mutant. Or maybe he was secretly wearing a power frame himself." Her pride hurt, along with everything else. Making excuses helped.

"Jesus, you people. Urgency!" Boone moaned. "Quit talking and move." He lent his strength to the effort, and in a minute Megan was able to step free of the twisted remains of what had once been Israel Gannon's power armor. It was smoking and sparking in earnest now, emitting heat where the power source had been breached. She looked up to thank Boone, but his face had gone slack, staring at someone or something behind her. "Shit."

Megan didn't have a weapon anymore, and supposed it didn't matter. It wasn't like she had it in her to kill even one of the people now approaching, not even the woman leading the way. Well, maybe she would kill Moore, given the chance, but not in front of dozens of witnesses.

"Colonel! You made it. I was worried - did the truck get a flat?" She had no plan for what she was
going to say, other than the general idea that it would be nice to speak her mind for once. "Well, as you can see, Freeside did just fine without you. So you can just go to hell."

Moore ignored her, taking in the scene in front of her with a smile. Her backup was nothing impressive - a half-dozen sleep-deprived troopers, all propped up with jet and buffout from the look, clutching small arms and eying their little group with confusion and anxiety - but in the distance Megan could see the larger body of an occupying force, including rangers, all jockeying for a place in the streets beside the menacing securitrons. Running or fighting would be suicide, unless the securitrons took her side - and they wouldn't. The Followers were practical enough not to break a truce for the sake of one person.

"Good work finding her, Sergeant Boone. Miss Martin - and it gives me great pleasure to say this - you're under arrest. You're going to be a guest at McCarran for a while. You can rot in the brig for a month or two and when we have the time we'll deal with you properly."

Megan took an involuntary step backwards, and raised her hands in front of her, an act which made the soldiers flinch to their weapons. "Arrested? On what charges?" Talk, talk, talk. Keep talking. Maybe an ally will show up. More Legion. A deathclaw. Anything might happen.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, use your imagination. I'm too tired to spell them out. I actually haven't written them yet at all. In broadest terms, 'suspicion of involvement with the terrorist group known as the Enclave.' Somehow, I think any prosecutor can make that stick for a nice jury of upstanding citizens."

This wasn't new rhetoric from Moore, but Megan still felt floored at the unfairness of it all. "You mean that tiny group of people that helped win the battle for you? Colonel, we both know this is a stupid waste of time. I'm not a bad person. I'm not even anti-NCR, not really. If anything, you should embrace me as a war hero and use your brilliant recognition of my excellence as your ticket to a better posting."

Her smile was cruel now. "I like my plan better. Truth is, Martin, I don't like you. I think your 'indomitable fool' act is wearing thin and it's time you got dragged down to earth. And, if there's one thing that recent events have proved beyond the shadow of a doubt, it's that the Enclave is indeed still out there and an active threat. I'm going to make it my public mission to eradicate them."

Megan glanced to her left, at Arcade who just stared back at her in horror; to her right, at Boone, who refused to meet her eyes at all, before squaring her shoulders and facing forward again. "Alright. I'll go to McCarran without a fight. Can I talk to Colonel Hsu?"

Her smile widened a tiny fraction before melting into an appropriate display of sadness. "Regrettably, James Hsu was killed last night when the Legion broke through at the Strip and destroyed the embassy. The Omertas betrayed the city and he and Crocker didn't see it coming. They'll be missed."

Grief mixed with dismay over losing her most powerful allies. "Ranger Grant?"

"Back at the Dam, and anyway this isn't Ranger business," she snapped. "Hands behind your back. Now."

Two things happened before the man with the cuffs could move. A series of fireworks went off at the east gate - hopefully someone's ill-advised celebration, she mused, not a warning of a new attack. Something vital in the mangled armor at their feet finally burst with a muffled explosion that emitted a vile-smelling cloud of smoke into the center of their huddle. Half turning to watch the show in the sky, Megan noticed her right arm - tucked obediently behind her back despite the strained muscles - was stinging slightly. Moving it in front of her face, she was confused to find a deformed bullet
wedged superficially in the crook of her elbow. It hadn't penetrated far and there wasn't much blood; it was just irritating and painful. She picked it out effortlessly and examined it more closely on her palm. It was still hot.

"I guess I got shot? Ricochet, from the look. Not too bad." She held the bullet out in explanation, but the colonel wasn't paying attention to her, but to one of her own men, who was looking down at his drawn pistol with confusion, hand trembling on the grip.

"You trigger-happy idiot! I needed her alive."

Odd thing to say about a nick, she thought, though she did feel strange. Winded and nauseous, like someone had darted in and punched her while she was distracted by the light show. She caught Boone looking at her sharply and shrugged her confusion, before doubling over with a groan as a sudden stitch grabbed her side. It hurt, even with the med-x already in her system, and she still didn't understand.

"Fuck, Megan..." Boone mumbled bleakly, moving to her side. His unexpected hand on her back actually felt pretty nice, in a touch-starved kind of way, heat spreading out from the spot. What felt less nice was the fire burning behind her sternum and the horrible sensation of being drained of every bit of strength she had. She let him bear her down to the ground - not that she had much of a choice - and tried to fill her lungs enough to comment. They worked, sort of, but whatever flippant thing she had wanted to say fled when the second wave of pain hit, as something sharp shifted in her chest when she breathed. Freeside must have lost power again, she thought, because it had gotten pretty dark on the street. Maybe her ears had been hurt too, or maybe it was all of the loud noises of the past few hours, but for whatever reason, she only caught half of what her companions were saying.

"... handle another stimpak…?"

"...pressure on the exit... did it... her spine?"

"No… to the right…"

"...Auto-Doc in the 38… has a chance..."

This back-and-forth was aggravating. Guys, she tried to say. Talk to me, not about me. And maybe Arcade heard her, or maybe he was just trying to be comforting in his own way, because he did address her directly then. "...not complete without a crippling injury? You'll be okay… promise..." The platitudes went on, a pleasant but meaningless noise (he had a habit of rambling when he was afraid), and the pain went on, albeit numbed by the all-encompassing cold settling in, and all around her, things happened and people hurried, but as far as Megan was concerned she'd earned a break. She wasn't worried, though. Arcade would fix her, like he always did. She'd get a well-earned rest in the hospital. Maybe ask for a bed near Johnson and listen to his stories. Deal with Moore's bullshit charges later. And then, when that was done - on to the east. To freedom. And maybe to some answers.
The Best of All Possible Worlds

Author's note: This is a dialogue-heavy bridge chapter with an unusual dream sequence, no action, and a lot of angst. That ticks all of my boxes, but may not suit everybody.

For the record, Arcade is officially wrong on at least three points in quick succession (you'll know the place when you see it). I'm not about to throw out a ton of canon for his intellectual comfort. Let's not tell him yet, though - he's having a bad week.

One more chapter to go and then I can mark this "Complete." It will almost certainly be very long, and may take a few weeks, as I haven't actually written much of it yet. Who knows, though - I've been pretty productive lately.

Thanks for reading this far.

"Oh no… that doesn't look good."

After a brief foray into nothingness, Megan found herself standing in the middle of the street in front of the Old Mormon Fort, watching uncomfortably as a small cadre of Followers doctors clustered around the body (her body, she corrected uneasily), handing things to Arcade, who jammed in three… four… no, five stimpaks into the wound even as one of his colleagues assisted. It didn't look so bad at the front, just a tiny hole in the nasty shirt she'd worn for days, but the the glimpse she'd caught of the back was awful - a massive hole ringed with torn muscles, bone, and cartilage. She hoped she'd still have some blood left when they were done.

Something worrisome struck her then and she stepped up behind her friend, noting happily that at least nothing hurt anymore, and tapped him on the shoulder. She didn't want to distract him or be a bother, but felt like she should say something. "Hey, Arcade, I thought using that many stimpaks at once was a bad idea? Can't it, like, put the patient in a coma? Or kill them? I'm not telling you how to do your job or anything, but I do have a vested interest in how this goes."

He ignored her entirely, and stood back as two others brought a stretcher over and started toward the Strip. Colonel Moore said something that Megan couldn't make out, to which Arcade responded with a level of vehemence unusual for him. She actually backed off, but gave an order to four troopers to follow the doctors. In the meantime, Boone had wandered away and was almost out of sight in the distance; she tried to walk over to him, but found it impossible to get too far from her body. Megan shrugged and was beginning to follow the others, when the last person she expected appeared out of nowhere beside her. "Hey baby. You've got some sure-fire luck, you know that? What happened here?"

Benny. Checkered suit unstained with blood. As smooth and suave as he'd been the one and only time they'd met, up in his room at the Tops. Right before she'd killed him. She glanced at him warily, but without much fear. What could he do to her now? "For all that my luck stinks, I think I have more than you. Some zonked-out soldier shot me while I was surrendering, but I'm pretty sure it was an accident." She felt a steady, compulsive tug and started walking in the direction that they'd carried her. "I'll be alright, though. There were literally a dozen capable doctors on hand. There's no better place in the world to get shot. The most important thing is that we won the day."

He strolled along with her, still trying to get a rise out of her. "'We' won? NCR won, more like. What kinda future does that spell for Vegas?" He snorted and shook his head. "Baby, you left a lot of
blood on the ground back there. I wouldn't give you good odds. Or what do you think is happening right now?"

"I'm having a near-death experience," she said confidently. "Emphasis on 'near.' Arcade talked about it once. The brain sometimes responds to trauma with a lot of happy chemicals that help relax the victim. I'm tripping, and it feels so much nicer than the last time I almost died. You, though, you're just a figment of my imagination, and not a particularly welcome one. You can leave now, or I'll find a way to kill you again."

"Nah. You can't kill me. I'm your guide. You didn't let me talk much last time, so I'd like to get a word in now. Show you the error of your ways."

"If I have to have a dead companion, I'd rather it be Raul. Or literally anyone else. I don't really know anything about you." For a split-second, the man's visage seemed to ripple, with Raul's cloudy blue eyes taking over Benny's dark ones, but then the ghoul was gone and it was all Benny again, all empty eyes and false smile.

"Nice try, pussycat, but you're stuck with me. We're going to the Lucky 38 - you know, the fortress that woulda been mine to control? That you gave to a bunch of eggheads? That one."

She sighed. "My subconscious hates me. That's a well-established fact." She started trotting after the retreating palanquin, bound for the gate to the Strip "I don't need a guide. I know the way."

Inside the casino-turned-hospital on the Strip, she looked on with dismay, wondering if this was going to be it for her after all. "Aw, shit. Ow," she flinched sympathetically as if she could feel the needle that someone had just jammed into her chest. "Hey, dead guy - if I die on that table, will I just fade out here too?"

"I don't know."

"I want to stay and watch."

"I need a guide."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know."

"You're alive. Happy? Come on up. There are some things you need to see."

Megan had only seen House's penthouse once, through the shimmer of a stealth boy, when she'd slipped up the maintenance stairs and past the massive screen, intending to assassinate the man himself. She'd followed Yes Man's instructions to a 't,' and had still almost died when she'd failed to account for the last securitron, the one standing guard beside the cryogenics pod itself. A hastily thrown pulse grenade had taken care of it, but had also shorted out House's life support, killing him almost instantly and depriving her of the opportunity for a final chat with the ancient technology magnate.
Now, led by a shoddy imitation of Benny - someone she'd only spoken to once, for scarcely a minute, and now recalled only as a loud suit tied together by cliches - she saw the room again, now subtly shifting under scrutiny: one moment empty, screens blank and dark, the next moment crawling with generic, faceless Followers in white coats. Her memory was struggling to render details, and the little things - colors, brightness, furniture, background - wavered and changed, melting into new things in corner of her eye. Through the massive windows - a breathtaking, 360 degree view of Vegas - she could see the aftereffects of the battle in the damaged structures and greasy fires that still burned in the distance, all lit up by the gentle rays of the rising sun.

"This is a dream," she said out loud, taking up a perch on the balcony overlooking the control room. Benny stood just behind her, as unobtrusive as possible, a smooth-faced mouthpiece for her buried self.

"Yes, it is. Pay attention. You shot me before I could tell my own truth, and now I get to tell you yours."

A new scene took over. The Followers disappeared, replaced by a solitary figure with long brown hair, slouched over in the biggest chair and languidly watching a hundred screens, the viewpoint of every securitron currently under the mainframe's control, Yes Man's visage beaming down on them. Megan hopped down from the balcony and approached the figure cautiously. The stranger swiveled abruptly in her chair, and Megan gasped. Brown eyes - clearer, harder than her own, but familiar all the same - stared straight through her. It was her, but all the same, it wasn't: this person had fewer scars, more muscle, and a confident, steady air unmarked by trauma. She wore a clean, crisp shirt - shockingly white in a world of dingy, dirty clothes - along with jeans that looked freshly pressed and brand-new. Beside this person, Megan felt grungy and weak, a filthy, broken version of what she could have been. Envy and grief twisted her stomach, but she kept studying the other self, searching for something, some clue as to the kind of person she was. As she contemplated this better version of herself, noting that the one scar that really mattered was gone altogether and with it the root of most of her weaknesses, the other woman spoke up in a commanding voice, with a tiny thread of nervousness that Megan only noticed because she recognized her own tells, "Is he here, Boone? Let him in, please. Keep a bead on him. I'm not at all sure how he'll respond. This could go a couple of different ways. Only shoot if you have to, though. I need him."

Megan looked up. Sure enough, Boone stood watchfully above, equipped with a beret, sunglasses, rifle, and generic, high-quality combat armor. He entered a code into the security box, and the doors to the elevator slid open, revealing an unsmiling Arcade, lab coat splattered with blood and grime, and slightly singed on the bottom.

"Thank you for accepting my invitation, Dr. Gannon. Finally."

He pushed his glasses up and narrowed his eyes at her. "As if you gave me a choice in the matter, Courier. Your robots dragged me away from my patients. I'd like to go back now."

She waved a hand airily, gesturing to a chair. He descended the stairs, but remained standing. "This won't take long. And I gave you ample opportunity to come voluntarily, you know. I need your help, and I need it soon. We've been overdue for a talk for a long time."

"I don't know why you would think that I would want anything to do with your authoritarian regime. Your methods are brutal. I heard what you did to the Brotherhood of Steel. To the supermutants on Black Mountain. To the Khans. To the White Glove Society. To General Oliver, for God's sake. Am I supposed to be courteous to a mass murderer? You appall me. I don't even want to get into what you did with Helios One."

"Those were all necessary casualties of an independent Vegas. Actual or potential enemies. And are
you really going to tell me that *you* of all people shed a tear over the *Brotherhood*, Dr. Gannon? Or a bunch of muties?" Megan knew her own voice well enough to know that this doppelganger was being knowingly nasty, flaunting an as-yet-hidden ace in the hole. Arcade must have heard it as well, because he stiffened on the spot, hand dipping briefly to the pistol on his belt, before letting it relax to his side.

"My personal feelings on them don't matter. You massacre people at the drop of a hat. I seriously don't even want to stand here talking to you."

Not-Megan went on as if she hadn't heard. "The reason I brought you here today is that I wanted to invite you to join my team as my advisor. You're right about one thing: violence is not a good long-term solution for a stable society. I need a well-educated person, someone who understands government, economics, and organization. I need your help."

Arcade tilted his head back, rubbing his chin. "Hm… let me think… no. No, thank you very much. May I go now?"

The woman cocked her head as if to say *You can't be serious.* "You don't want to influence my decisions? I thought this was the kind of opportunity you people live for. A chance to shape the future of the Mojave in a real way. I'm a twenty-one-year-old with a resume that's limited to soldiering and vault-dwelling. Do you *really* not want to temper and improve my approach to running this city?"

He hesitated for a brief moment, but shook his head firmly. "I'll pass. You're no better than House in my book. I don't want to be your powerless foil while you roll over people."

Not-Megan stood up and began to pace up and down in front of Yes Man's screen. "I didn't want to have to do this at the beginning, but you've forced me to take a more direct approach. To be succinct: I know what you are. I know where you came from, Dr. Gannon. Can I call you Arcade?"

"No." His face had gone paler than usual, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "How could you know anything? You've only been in the Mojave for a short time… there's no way you *could* know."

"I've known it - or least had a good guess - since the moment you introduced yourself at the clinic, a year ago this month. The plasma defender and your overall oddness helped. Your reaction just now is all the confirmation I needed." She smiled again, watching his movements very carefully now, tension in every line of her body. She appeared unarmed, but Megan could tell by the way she carried herself that she was prepared for a fight. "I saw your family name on a war memorial back in Chicago, when we were wintering there on our way out west. *Gannon*. I have a good memory for things like that. I had the most boring guard duty you can imagine, and nothing to read but that damned stele in the courtyard engraved with the names of 'our fallen heroes in the fight against the Brotherhood of Steel.' Israel Gannon was one of the names on there. Even now, I could list most of the others for you. It was a long winter."

He muttered wonderingly, backing away slightly, "You were half out of your mind when we met, bleeding to death from your shootout with that casino boss. I didn't think that you knew which way was up, let alone that you were actively scheming about something like this. I saved your life, and this is how you repay me?"

She absently rolled her shoulder, rubbing a sore spot from an old wound. "I appreciated your help then, and I'm asking for it again now. And yes, I'm always observant for little things like that. Things that might help me later. Do you deny your association with-

"No," he interjected hastily, not wanting her to say the word. "But, see here… if what you're saying
is true, then you're guilty of the same thing as I am. Worse, really, for it being quite recent. You know what they say about people who live in glass houses."

"There's that. However..." She walked over to the window and looked out, continuing in an, apologetic tone, "Well, see, my house is a castle and can take a few stones. Can yours, Dr. Gannon?"

His silence was answer enough, and she went on briskly, turning back to him, "So, I'd like to work something mutually agreeable out with you. You agree to come talk to me - just two hours or so each day - and I'll leave you alone to do your work the rest of the time. Furthermore, I'll be a good patron to the Followers. I sincerely like their moxy. Resources, safety, facilities - your people can have what they need to operate in Freeside. Your leader, Farkas, is more than willing to play ball. She's already been very helpful with tech support. I'd like to continue that partnership." She sat down and leaned back, hands behind her head. "You don't have to be my friend, Dr. Gannon. I don't expect that at all. I just need someone I can talk to." She jerked her head in the direction of the sniper, still in position on the balcony. "Boone's a great listener - I've got no secrets at all from him - but he's a brick wall, not a sounding board."

Arcade was plainly still trying to catch up with the unexpected collapse of his guarded self. "When we first met - when you were completely addled by med-x and blood loss - you talked about guilt. About something terrible you had done. You asked how you could earn absolution. I told you -"

She sighed loudly, interrupting him. "And that right there is why I don't use drugs or alcohol. They make me talk too much to the wrong people. Anyway... right. You suggested that I dedicate my life to protecting peace. I took that to heart, and that's a big reason why I sought you out specifically. Because that's what I've begun to do here. By beating back the Legion and destroying others who might do us harm, I've made civilization possible in the Mojave."

Arcade's response to this extraordinary claim was mirthless laughter. "You had a funny way of carrying out that admonition. But fine. Tell me what you've done that you feel guilty about - if you know my pale little secret, then I deserve to know your darker ones - and I'll consider letting you blackmail me. Either that, or I'll just kill you, and rid the world of your twisted good intentions."

"If you try that, please believe me that Boone will kill you," she said idly, unperturbed by the threat. "But fine. I'll tell you the beginning now. Enough for you to make an informed decision between compliance and suicide. In the words of Adolf Eichmann, meine Schuld ist mein Gehorsam. I was only following orders." She pronounced the foreign phrase very slowly and haltingly, her darting eyes and restlessly-moving hands betraying more of an internal struggle than her petulant, flippant tone would suggest. "You think someone my age gets to call the shots in a military operation? It wasn't my plan. I was only along for the trip in the first place because President Eden thought our team might need someone who spoke Spanish. If you ask me, his intelligence on the demographics of the southwest is a couple of centuries out of date."

Arcade interrupted this digression, bursting out into real anger now. "'Following orders'? That defense didn't work at Nuremberg - or, in Eichmann's case, in Jerusalem - and it won't work with me. What did you do?"

She dropped her eyes, avoiding his, and muttered her answer so quietly that Megan - an unseen ghost in their midst - had to creep closer to hear. "At the command of my superior officer, I waylaid and killed a courier who kind of looked like me. Stole her identity papers. Collected and carried a techy sort of package south from Navarro. What happened next was out of my hands. I didn't mean to. And that's all I want to say right now."

"What a surprise. This story starts with murder." His voice was thick with sarcasm and disgust. The real Megan, who'd been taking all of this in with horrified fascination, recoiled from the look on his
He hated this version of her - and, if her suspicions were correct, this was an accurate picture of who she'd been before the brain damage. The truth - and his reaction to it - devastated her to the core.

Not-Megan, on the other hand, became defensive and irritable. "Look, Gannon. I can't change the past. If I could take it back, I would. But if I can be a force for good now, then I will. And I want you to help me do that. You're smart. You understand how complex things work together and can help me anticipate problems before they happen. Plus, we share a secret. That makes us family, sort of."

He flinched at this reminder, but didn't try to deny it. He stood with his arms crossed, glaring at her for a long time, before coming to a decision. "Fine. I'll advise you. Evenings are my free time, and I guess I'll give them up to try to prevent the harm you'll continue to cause otherwise. One question, though: where did you learn Spanish? German? Our people never had much time for such impractical pursuits, unless they've changed significantly in their eastern exile."

"No, you're right, that was from before. My vault was all about studying the humanities. Serious books, books on language, philosophy, and history, books that had been banned before the war... we read them all. I was an abysmal student, though - worst in my family, worst in my year. I only liked fiction. My teachers despaired of me, said I'd never amount to anything." Her eyes were faraway now, as remembering something painful. "Not that all that study did the others much good in the end." She broke off and resumed with forced cheerfulness, "Well, that's that, then. I'll expect you tomorrow evening, Dr. Gannon. Thank you for seeing reason. I hoped you would."

The scene closed, lights dimming. Not-Megan was gone, Arcade was gone, Boone was gone. Benny walked over from where he'd been standing invisibly in the corner. "What did you learn from that, Courier?"

Megan spoke slowly, still processing the information. "Most of that was stuff I already knew, or at least half-knew. If all that was true, though... then I'm not really a courier at all."

He had pulled out a file and was cleaning his beautifully-manicured nails. "Don't sell yourself short, doll. You carried the two packages that really mattered. The Platinum Chip. The tech from Navarro."

"Yeah, what was that all about?"

"The full answer is still locked up in the vault of your past. Even you won't tell yourself. You'll have to find someone else to tell you. Or, you could go on ignoring it altogether. You have that choice."

He paused. "Would you like to see some other might-have-beens? I've got a whole slew of them to play back."

Suddenly very tired and resigned to whatever might come, Megan sat down on the cold floor, pulling a blanket - where had that come from? - to herself and wrapping it around her. "Sure, Benny. Let's see how else this could have gone down."

And so he showed her.

Hours or days passed as she watched a panoply of characters parade across the stage of House's control room. She watched herself bend the knee to House, banter with Yes Man, and stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Benny above a city on fire. Sometimes the array of computers were swarming with Followers, sometimes with NCR officers and scientists, and sometimes with Brotherhood scribes. One time, she saw herself addressing the Enclave Remnants in view of Mr. House; another time, there were only Legion to be seen, smashing the terminals with reckless abandon. Boone was often there, but not always. Lily, Raul, Veronica, Arcade, ED, Rex, along with other people she couldn't name, each took their places at her side before each faded away in turn. At
some point, when all of this grew monotonous, she closed her eyes and curled up on the tile. She could hear voices - distant, indistinct murmurs, and felt pain for the first time since she'd woken up into the dreamworld, distant and abstract, but still present. She wondered if she was still alive downstairs, or if she had drifted into a purgatory of her own making.

Benny nudged her shoulder with one shiny Oxford. "Look. There's just one more. It's an important one."

She obliged, sitting up with an effort and shaking the cobwebs away. The room was empty except for House's projected face and a handful of securitrons. Beyond the windows, the city appeared to be as it always had been. There was no smoke, no destruction to be seen at all.

"Is this before the battle?" she asked sleepily.

"No. This is a version of the present in which there was no battle. The Legion never had the resources or the opportunity to even attempt a second move on the Dam, let alone penetrate to Vegas."

She yawned. "What was different about it this time?"

"You were never born. Or, at least," he amended, "you never came west. The supply line through Hopeville stands. The NCR had the resources it needed to attack as well as defend. In the end, the Legion was contained to northern Arizona, a mere shadow of Caesar's grand aspirations."

"Huh. Good. Can I sleep now?"

Benny sighed and relented, fading away into darkness. "Fine. Just... try to remember this when you wake up. If you wake up."

Megan was back downstairs, without any memory of climbing back into the elevator. She'd been blinking at the ceiling of the Lucky 38 for a long time before she realized what it was, and longer still before her mind moved from "I'm awake" to "therefore I should do something." Nothing hurt - it was as if she didn't even have a body to hurt anymore - but talking, moving, or even keeping her eyes open seemed too hard, and she soon went back to sleep, a dreamless stretch this time, waking up in the near-dark to find the numbness replaced by a deep ache. She could hear people snoring around her and guessed that it was nighttime now. Wow, I slept all day, she marveled, realizing for the first time how incredibly thirsty she was. She didn't want to bother anybody and started to sit up to look around for a bottle or a pitcher or something. This was a mistake. After only the slightest effort, the dull pain became a fire, choking her next breath, and even when she settled back it stayed, like a red-hot pool spreading out, paralyzing her. Not daring to move, keeping her breath to shallow little gasps, she lay completely still, tears trickling unheeded down her face. If she could have filled her lungs, she would have screamed, but as it was she could only moan. Though quiet, it was enough to draw someone's attention.

"You're awake. That's good... that's really good. I was afraid... oh, never mind. Try to breathe normally, okay?"

She moved her eyes. That white shape, distorted through the tears, that was Arcade. He'd help her, unless he was still mad at her. But no, he probably still would. "Hurts."

A pause. "I'll give you a little more med-x. I have to be careful with the dosage. Don't move. It's okay."
He must have done just that, because it got a little easier to breathe even as her thoughts got more muddled and dreamlike. She could let her body relax, at least the parts that weren't close to the fire that stabbed through her. "I'm sorry." *For forcing you to help me.*

"For what?"

*Was he being stupid?* "You know."

"I don't. But it doesn't matter. Be calm. Don't talk."

Not inclined to listen, her brain and her mouth worked hard to get a whole sentence out. The most important question that she could think of. "Is this the best timeline?"

He was confused. Dismissive. "What does that even mean? Things could be better, sure, but this is what we've got. Let's face it together." Speaking quietly and calmly, he told her what the bullet had done to her with characteristic directness. "...and if your liver keeps on doing its job and your body stays on top of infection, then you'll eventually recover."

She gave up on trying to express herself and let the fragments of the dream slip through her fingers. Arcade wasn't mad. He didn't know. She trusted him to take care of her, regardless of what she'd done. That was the kind of person he was.

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Arcade Gannon was well-accustomed to death. He'd had to be. Scarcely a week had passed in the past twenty years in which some patient under his care hadn't died despite his best efforts. It was normal. Expected. Not pleasant, no, but something one had to inure themselves to in order to survive. Emotional distance made it easier - indeed, he was so good at avoiding interpersonal entanglements, that he hadn't had to lose someone that he cared about on a deep level since his mother's death, so many years before. In the past week, however, he'd seen the passing of two of his oldest acquaintances: first Moreno, who'd been a longstanding fixture in his life, if not an actual friend, and then Johnson, the day after the final showdown in Freeside. The latter had slipped away in the night, with little fuss, and without ever fully regaining consciousness; Arcade had been awake at the time, as he had been for what felt like days (*was* days, in fact, not counting short naps in a chair), but not paying close attention to that side of the room, caught up trying to save his other friend's life. He felt bad for letting Johnson die alone, but didn't yet have the head-space to grieve. This was relegated to the future, along with every other concern. A lifelong planner, his brain was refusing to consider new contingencies at this juncture; as of the present moment, he had no idea what he would do if Megan died. Somehow, his vague intentions of opening his own practice in Westside had lost most of its shine; perhaps he would go further afield. He would think about that later.

She had one good day after waking - happy and alert despite the heavy medication - and he allowed himself to hope. The stimpaks *could* continue what the Auto-Doc had begun, and the antibiotics *might* be enough to stave off infection. He relaxed, slightly, and enjoyed the opportunity to talk with her, even if her preferred choice of topics was consistently a bit silly. Silly was alright. It reminded him of better times, before they'd gotten directly involved in a war. He'd been the one to read her all that science fiction, after all; he supposed he deserved this conversation and others like it.

"So, are you saying that you don't think that intelligent alien life exists, period, or that you just don't think they've visited earth?"

"I actually think the first is highly probable. The galaxy is huge. The second is much less so. If there is another sentient race out there, and if they are somehow capable of interstellar travel, I think we'll
be ships passing in the dark. Chances are very good that anyone who thinks of visiting us will miss the geologically brief window of our existence. There's also a good chance that another sentient species would follow a similar trajectory to ours - flame out and kill themselves off before getting close to advanced space travel. There's just no evidence that extraterrestrials have ever had anything to do with us. And who can blame them, right?"

"Well, I think I saw a spaceship in the desert once. It was a blinky, spinnny light. Really pretty." She smiled. "Before you ask: yes, I was incandescently high. But I still saw what I saw."

He tried not to sound too condescending in his reply. "If you saw anything - and that's a big 'if' - it was probably a pre-war satellite. There's still a few of them up there. Solar power will keep them in a stable orbit semi-indefinitely. There's always a naturalistic answer to something that doesn't line up with your expectations for reality, if you just look for it."

She raised her eyebrows at this. "Don't you believe in anything, Arcade? Ghosts?"

That was an easy one. "Nope."

"Cthonic monsters?"

_How does she know that word? "No. Just people and mutated animals. Aren't those bad enough?"

"Psychic powers? There's a boy over under the bridge by the 188 that can tell you your fortune. He's pretty convincing, too. He told me things about myself that I wouldn't expect him to know."

"Well, you're famous, so knowing things about you is nothing special. Most hucksters are pretty convincing. Nothing I've seen or heard or read has convinced that that's possible. The future doesn't have objective existence until time actually advances to that point. There is no legitimate arcane epistemology, only people who are more intuitive than others, who grasp whole truths from partial evidence." He frowned slightly at her, wondering where she was going with all this. "I'm a thoroughgoing empiricist, Megan. You should have figured that out by now."

She sighed, resting a hand briefly on the bandages that swathed her torso. "Ow. I do know that. I'm just, like, grasping at straws. I'm afraid I'm going to die and I want there to be something else. Heaven. Hell. A pleasant, warm light. Anything. I'm scared of nothingness."

_Of course that's what she's doing, you fucking moron_, he thought miserably, backtracking unconvincingly. "I'm sorry. I could be wrong about anything and everything. I... would you like me to find someone who actually believes in... things for you to talk to? I know a couple." He caught himself short. "Not that you're going to die. Not for a good many years, anyway."

"No. I want to talk to you. But you don't have to pretend for me. I wouldn't expect you to. You're so consistently you. On that note, give it to me straight: am I going to die?"

He couldn't give a lie to a direct question. "I don't know, but I hope not."

Another day passed and hope began to die. Her temperature crept up, a half-degree at a time, and her skin, along with the whites of her eyes, had gone a faint, sickly yellow. She still wanted to talk, though her discourse made less sense as time went on, as she rambled on and on about a subject that seemed to be haunting her: how she could have lived the past year differently.

"D'you know what I realized when I was asleep, Arcade?" This came after hours of silence and
semi-consciousness. He had been almost asleep in his spot and jerked his head up when she spoke.

"What?"

"I could've been queen of Vegas, could have held off the whole Legion army, if I'd just taken what Yes Man offered. I could have ruled this town, protected the whole region, and left the Followers out of it." Her eyes were glassy, and her words came out in a breathless rush. Breathing was difficult for her - the bullet had done some serious damage to her ribs - and she had trouble getting the air to talk, and continually exhausted herself trying. Not that it stopped her.

"Hmm. That's a frightening thought. No offense, but you're not dictator material."

"In this scenario, I would have appointed you as my chief advisor on day one."

He pretended to consider this hypothetical job offer. "I would have said no. I have no desire to rule this city by proxy."

"Oh, sure you do. You love to meddle. And would you really have left me to my own devices? That seems irresponsible. Who knows what kinds of shenanigans I'd get up to without your moral direction. I think you would have come. If not," here her cracked voice became sly and teasing, "I would have had my securitrons bring you in to make you help me."

"Then my first moral direction would be that it is bad to imprison people against their will."

"Ah, but I would have reserved the right to selectively ignore you. What else is new, right?" She tried to roll over to look at him directly and grimaced. "I wouldn't really do that to you. Not in a million years. I'm sorry I ever considered it. Please forgive me, Arcade."

"I forgive you," he said automatically, conceding that this wasn't worth arguing about. "And maybe I would have helped you after all. You make a good point." He touched her forehead gently. Dry and hot. It had now been a week since the Legion defeat, and the Followers had run out of IV fluids for all but the most extreme cases, which Megan's was not judged to be, since she could technically take fluids orally. It had become difficult to keep her hydrated, especially once infection had set in. Lucidity came and went; when she was awake, she talked in feverish spurts that only occasionally made sense. The rest of the time, she was alternately scared, confused, or simply listless. "Time to drink some water."

She turned her head away. "My throat hurts."

"It'll hurt more if I have to put a tube down your esophagus. Drink."

After long minutes of coaxing, the fluid was gone, and with it the antibiotic. He prayed it would stay down this time, and was relieved when she fell into a peaceful sleep. Arcade sat back in his chair and tucked his chin to his chest, hoping to catch forty winks himself. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt rested. Before he could drift off again, a voice he'd grown to hate jarred him to alertness.

"Can she be moved yet?" Moore's snappish voice made Megan frown and shift in her sleep, and Arcade whispered fiercely in return.

"Absolutely not. Go away. You and your people have done enough."

"Oh, I'd actually like to talk with you, if you don't mind." It wasn't really a request. "We can go over here so we don't wake your friend. She's not going anywhere."

With a backwards glance at Megan, absurdly worried that a team of soldiers might come rushing in
to carry her away, Arcade followed Moore to the former casino's bar, which the Followers had turned into a kitchen-slash-laboratory for the field hospital.


He didn't answer. "What's your interest with that person over there? Why help her so damn much? We've done some digging, talked to witnesses, and have come to the conclusion that she wouldn't have survived the last year without you."

He rubbed his eyes with one hand, trying to formulate a response that wouldn't incriminate either Megan or himself. "Compassion. Hope. Love. I wouldn't expect you to understand. I wanted to help her become something more than a victim perpetually lashing out. Help her redeem herself from the things she's done, and recover from the things that have been done to her. That's all."

Moore leaned forward, greedy eyes intent on his face. "What has she done?"

"I don't know if you've noticed, but she has killed a lot of people. To collect bounties, to enact revenge, and as a part of war. What makes it worse is that she enjoys it sometimes. In my arrogance, I thought that I could play Pygmalion and make her into an image of what I thought she should be… for her own good, of course. I can't say I totally succeeded in that aim. She's her own person. Sometimes that's actually a good thing, though."

She'd tuned him out halfway through this self-directed reproof, and was sitting back, disappointed, lip curled up in derision. "You've killed a few people yourself, Dr. Gannon, unless I'm much mistaken. Or wasn't that you taking potshots at Lanius right before the securitrons finished him off?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Speaking of that day, do you mind if I ask what kind of gun you were using?"

There was no reason to lie more than was necessary. "It's a plasma defender. I picked it up from a junk shop in the Boneyard years ago and repaired it. I use it in self-defense, and - in that case - I was using it in defense of Freeside's people." He closed his eyes again. God, he was tired. "I'm in no mood for conversation with you, Colonel, so unless there's something important you wanted to demand…"

"Where did she get the power armor?"

He'd been expecting this question, but it still put him into panic mode for some reason. "I don't know - she just showed up with it one day. Probably found it somewhere. You would not believe the places she goes - if I never see the inside of another vault in my life, I'll die happy." He was babbling. He stopped himself and swallowed. "This whole discussion is academic. Whatever you want with her, she's probably going to die before you can do it." He hadn't said this out loud before, but had seen the writing on the wall with the first signs of sepsis. If it hadn't been for her occasional rallying moments and flashes of clarity, he would have already considered administering a fatal overdose as a last misericordia, to save her from the long, painful death to come. He might still do that, but only as a last resort, when hope was entirely gone.

Moore frowned, looking over at the still form on the bed across the room. "Is there anything that can be done?"

Arcade wanted to shout at her, but kept his voice level in response, "More IV fluids and antibiotics than we have to give her. Then… maybe… there'd be a fifty-fifty chance." That might have been optimistic, but he clung to hope. He cursed himself for not thinking to ask the NCR before now; he hadn't realized how committed Moore might be to her plan. If she wanted to drop a fortune on drugs, he wouldn't stand in her way.

"I'll have supplies sent over with Kemp. He'll be making his own report, just in case you're lying to
Dr. Kemp came and went, leaving a veritable treasure-trove of antibiotics behind, some unfamiliar to him, and so strong that Arcade wasn't at all sure about using them on such a compromised system. The NCR doctor concurred with his colleague's fears, but pointed out that they had nothing to lose by trying it. If he knew what Moore intended to gain by this generous act of goodwill, he didn't betray any sign of it, but expressed genuine concern and sympathy for the Courier, who had once been a well-known face at McCarran.

To his amazement, these medicines worked - or at least deferred the progression to septic shock and organ failure - and the saline and glucose kept her stable. By now, though, she had burned through what reserves her body had left, stealing what little body fat remained and leaving her too exhausted to talk. When she slept - which was often - he slept too, finally catching up on all of the missed hours. When she woke, he read aloud to her from a book he'd promised to find, and had finally succeeded in borrowing from one of the newly-arrived doctors: The Hobbit. She smiled at the right parts and occasionally offered one-word commentaries; frequently, he'd look up from a long, interesting passage to find her asleep, and would resign himself to re-reading it on the next session. He wasn't sure how much she would remember of the story if she survived, but he intended to make this time as pleasant as possible. Sometimes, he'd discuss the content for both of them, raising and answering questions about the book's historical context, the world-building that Tolkien had indulged himself so much with, and asking hypothetical questions of the sort that he knew she would like.

"What character do I identify with? Oh, Elrond, I suppose. Healer and half-breed. Pretty extraordinary backstory, too, if I recall correctly. How about you?" He paused for an answer he didn't really expect. Her eyes had been half-closed for about ten minutes now.

"Gollum," she whispered.

Pleased that she was paying attention, but puzzled by the answer, he countered cheerfully. "That's a strange response. He's not a good character, you know. Why not Gandalf? He's a bit of a chaotic trouble-maker too, at least in this book. Gollum's… gray at best, in a series that's mostly about black and white morality."

"I'm not good."

Was that despair? "Yes, you are." She shook her head, eyes now fully closed. He didn't try to argue the point, but let her sleep. He wondered what she'd think about the rest of Gollum's character arc, providing she ever got a chance to hear it - the rest of the trilogy lay with their untouched travelling gear, still safely stored (he assumed) at Judah's house in Westside. He would have gone to grab the first book, The Fellowship of the Ring, as they were almost done with the light-hearted prequel, but he was afraid to leave her for very long. As it turned out, a few days later, he had been right to be afraid.

He was only gone for a short time. Maybe an hour. She'd finally taken a turn for the better - fever down, redness receding from her wound, back to taking oral fluids again - and he felt confident...
enough to step away to take care of some basic hygiene. The Lucky 38 had showers and by then he needed one badly. He tapped Dr. Usanagi, one of the few Followers not treating him like a leper by that point, to keep an eye on her and went upstairs, feeling dull and weary, but fairly unworried for the first time in a week.

When he returned to the lobby, her bed was empty. The IV, the catheter, the extra medication were all gone as well. And there were soldiers by the door, speaking with Julie Farkas, who had never before set foot in the casino as far as Arcade knew, preferring to keep to her post at the Fort. He made a beeline for this group, even as the Asian doctor moved to intercept him, apprehension apparent on her face.

"Move, Toshiko. What happened? You were supposed to watch her, to send someone to get me if anything happened." Arcade tried to push by her, but she moved and he had to stop or risk knocking the small woman over.

"I'm sorry. It happened too quickly. Julie told them that she was stable enough to be transported and that colonel lady put her under arrest." She grabbed his arm, in a futile attempt to hold him back. "I tried, Arcade, believe me, but they had a lot of people. I think they were waiting for you to leave to make their move." He wanted to yell at her, but then he spotted a bruise on her cheek that hadn't been there before, and redirected his anger instead.

The soldiers turned and left at his approach, and Julie squared her shoulders to meet him, crossing her arms in front of her, plainly afraid but trying not to show it.


"She's been under arrest since she arrived here, Arcade," the Followers leader answered, voice trembling only a little. "I told them the truth, that she'd survive a transfer to McCarran. Or did you think you'd be allowed to sit and read to her until she was well, and then the two of you would walk off into the sunset?" She was shaking her head now. "You're pretty far gone if you didn't see this coming. And I'm sorry, but I wasn't going to risk our arrangement with the NCR over one dubious person, however helpful they've been to us."

He stood there, stunned. "What arrangement?" His tongue felt stupid and heavy in his mouth, like someone had just hit him over the head with a brick.

Julie gave him a sad smile. "It's an... internal matter. Another part of my burden to bear. And I'm sorry for this too, but you need to go now, as you are no longer one of us." She lowered her voice so that only he could hear. "I haven't told them anything about you. I won't. If you start exercising a little caution, you might stay clear of it. Go live your life."

He stared back for a long moment, then threw his lab coat at the floor by her feet and stormed out, stammering out one last, angry imprecation as he left. Caesar si viveret, ad remum dareris!*

"I don't understand Latin," she answered automatically, but he had already gone. She stood frozen for a second after he'd slammed the door behind him, before stooping to pick up the abandoned coat and looking around, shamefaced, at those who had witnessed this exchange. As if suddenly aware of their silent judgment, she snapped out at them, "Oh, move on people. It's finished. There's nothing else to see here. Get back to your work."
* "If Caesar were alive, you'd be chained to an oar."
Call No One Happy Until the End

Two months later.

Unchallenged by the one, indolent guard on duty, Craig Boone stalked through Westside's gates, which were splintered and hanging from their frame, still bearing the signs of the Legion's truncated assault on the town. It was an afternoon in late July, and the Vegas sprawl was a shimmering oven - the kind of heat that made animals lay down and die, blackened tongues hanging from their mouths. If they were smart, people didn't even try to move about during these hours, but instead crawled under whatever shelter they could find, waiting for the sun to drop behind the cliffs. Boone had chosen this time deliberately, not wanting to meet more people than he had to; he was on an errand that he preferred to keep under wraps.

The streets were empty. A nightkin and a supermutant snored peacefully against the cool overhang of the cistern, sitting hand-in-hand in a grotesque parody of a couple in love, a purple head lolling against a green shoulder. Boone gripped his rifle more tightly at the sight, but passed them by without violent incident.

The first store he tried was closed; the door bore a hand-lettered sign which said only, "Siesta." He went on a little further and finally spotted someone: an elderly man, wrinkled skin either very tan or naturally dark, seated under the canopy outside of a derelict old cafe and studying a chess board. Though he appeared to be focused on the pieces, the tension in his posture told Boone that the man was alert to his presence, and had been ever since he rounded the corner. Eying the recon armor and the red beret, the man frowned at him as he drew near, and there was a steely warning in his greeting. "I think you're in the wrong place, boy."

He ignored the veiled threat in the tone. "I'm looking for Arcade Gannon. Someone said he'd holed up here."

This invited a deeper frown. "What do you want with him?"

"I need to talk to him about something."

The stranger crossed his arms defiantly. "Arcade's not exactly the NCR's biggest fan right now. I'm not sayin' he'll shoot you - he's too nice for that - but he may not be very friendly to the likes of you."

"It's about a mutual... friend. Megan. The Courier. I need his help to help her."

At that moment, a familiar face stepped out of the cafe behind the table, carrying two glasses of an amber-colored liquid. Daisy Whitman was well-known to Boone, but he had counted her dead with the rest of Novac, months back. He gave her a jerky sort of nod, which she reciprocated coldly.

Not taking his eyes off of Boone, the old man spoke aloud to his companion, "Daisy, this man says he wants Arcade's help with our unfortunate young sister-in-arms. Do you know him? Trust him?"

The old woman snorted. "Not exactly. But if he says he wants to help her, he's probably telling the truth. They were all over each other the last time I saw them together."

He relaxed slightly. "So... Boone, is it? Do you believe she's guilty? Of consorting with those Enclave bastards? Of being one herself?"

"The girl talks a lot if she likes you. Too much. So I know what she is, but it's more complicated than that. And those 'bastards' helped us at Hoover Dam. I don't want to see her - or anybody else -"
punished for helping defeat the Legion."

His stern, leathery face broke into a somewhat vicious grin. "You were at the Dam? Me too. That was the most fun I've had in decades. Right up to the point when that big boom killed my heavy weapons man. I lost another in Freeside afterwards. It's hard. I thought those days were behind me. I'm Judah Kreger. Used t' be Captain Kreger."

Not to be outdone, Daisy chimed in, eyes flashing, "And I was flying the vertibird. Not bad for an old scavver, eh soldier-boy?"

The penny finally dropped. "Huh. So you guys are the Enclave."

"Such as it is these days. D'you think your Colonel Moore would still care if she knew we were just a couple of geriatrics shuffling around Westside?"

"Yeah. She might be a little disappointed, but doesn't really care as long as something good comes of this mess for her. Gannon too?"

Kreger shrugged. "Not really. We claim him because he was born into it, but that's not the life he's chosen."

Daisy looked up from her drink anxiously. "Our boy's still in danger, though, Judah. They've held trials for second-generation Enclave associates before. Not recently, but you know that they would in the current climate."

Boone scratched his head, uncomfortable standing there in the heat, and honestly puzzled at their behavior. "You people shouldn't be here at all. It's not safe to stay so close."

"I'll go when I feel like going," Daisy snarled. "NCR's not going to scare me away."

"Westside's my home and has been for a long time," the old man confirmed quietly. "I don't plan on leaving until they're ready to bury me. To answer your question, boy, Arcade is out visiting his patients. He'll eventually wander back here when he's done. Always does. In the meantime, have a seat. Play a game while you wait? I've got chess... or checkers, if that's more your speed."

When he returned from his rounds, Arcade was surprised - and more than a little uncomfortable - to find Boone playing checkers with his father's old commanding officer. It seemed the sort of thing that might happen in a weird dream. He didn't comment on it, however, but only dropped into the one unoccupied chair in the shade, turning wearily to Daisy. "Hi. Is that whiskey or tea?"

"Honey, it's three o'clock in the afternoon and we have nowhere to go and nothing to do. Of course it's whiskey. Would you like some tea? All we have is creosote, though. Nasty stuff."

"Yes, please. That's fine. With ice, if you don't mind." It was about a hundred degrees in the shade and he would have given a great deal for something cold. Never mind that the nearest source of refrigeration was miles away.

She chuckled at the joke. "Sit tight. I'll have that right out."

He thanked her and waited patiently until Kreger had captured the last of Boone's pieces, all the while sipping the dreadful, lukewarm drink. A tough, woody evergreen that grew wild everywhere in the southwest, creosote - *Larrea tridentata* - had been used for centuries as an folk remedy for a variety of things. It tasted awful, but he hoped it might soothe the knot of anxiety that had settled permanently in the pit of his stomach.
"Good game, NCR. Best out of five?"

"No thanks." Boone pulled out an envelope and tossed it across the table to Arcade. "Megan's lawyer wants to talk to you about testifying. Read it and write your answer. I'll deliver it when I go by the embassy later."

"She has a lawyer? That's good. Court-appointed?" He scanned the letter quickly, and turned it over to scrawl his response to the suggestion of a meeting the following day.

"No. Some big shot from out west showed up. Seems alright. Sharp enough to decline my testimony anyway." He grimaced. "I've got too many pressure points and I'm not smart enough not to give something away. She didn't say that last part out loud, but I got the gist of it."

Arcade eyed him cautiously. "Moore wanted you to testify against her, right?"

"Yeah. I've been staying on at McCarran on a probationary basis, but I'm pretty sure that my paperwork's gonna fall through if I don't show up at her office to meet her fancy-pants lawyer this week. Oh well. Not sure I really wanted to join up again after all." He took off his sunglasses, revealing murky green eyes bloodshot from exhaustion, and ran an embarrassed hand over his face. "If she does get off - and that's a pretty big 'if' - can I travel with y'all for a while? Only she asked a couple months ago, and I've reconsidered my answer."

Long-term association with the sniper was not something Arcade had ever anticipated, or wished for, but he supposed it wasn't altogether up to him. "Um… sure, I guess so. What changed?"

"Megan and I talked," he said simply. "Or I let her talk, and finally shot back a few of the words I needed to say in return. I swapped guard duty with the guy manning the brig a few times, just so I could get close enough for a word. She's half out of her mind with loneliness and boredom… and, I don't know, it's hard to stay mad at her right now. It made me want to give her another chance. She's a painful person to be close to sometimes, but she's still better company than my own thoughts."

This was the longest speech Arcade had ever heard the soldier make, and its sincerity surprised him into answering positively. "If she doesn't have a problem with it then I don't either. Three would be safer than two. This may surprise you, but I'm not much of a survivalist." Arcade frowned and signed his answer, before folding it and handing it back to Boone. "I don't know that the defense is going to want my testimony either. I have weak points in spades as well. But I will go talk to her."

With their old embassy lying in ruins, NCR had commandeered the lobby of the Gomorrah for their new one after arresting the remaining members of the Omerta family for their role in the Legion attack on Vegas. As uneasy as he was heading into this meeting, Arcade was amused at the start contrast between the bordello's gaudy trappings and the military presence that now occupied it.

Megan's lawyer was waiting for him in her assigned office off of the main corridor. Formerly a private room for VIP "encounters," it had been stripped of its more salacious decorations and furnished with a crumbling old desk and a pair of chairs. The interior lights in the building were working, with the Dam's output now almost fully restored from the damage it had sustained, but it was still a dim, dreary place that carried echoes of the misery it had held for many of its employees.

The attorney was a fierce little woman in her late fifties or early sixties, with thin gray hair, a pair of pince-nez resting on her nose, and a conservative gray dress that she wore buttoned to her chin. The eyes that examined him across the desk were bright with keen intelligence, and for the first time in many weeks, Arcade felt something like real hope.
She extended a firm hand for him to shake. "Dr. Gannon, I presume? Sheila DuBose. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

He did so, sinking into the dusty velvet and trying not to think about where the chair had been. "Thank you for being a party to Megan's defense; I'd worried that she'd get some useless rubber-stamper who wouldn't mount a real attempt, but your reputation speaks for itself. Even for someone who doesn't usually pay attention to legal proceedings in the NCR."

She accepted the compliment with a slight bow, rifling through the papers in front of her. "I read your response to my letter, but I wanted to make sure I understood who I was calling to the stand, and that you understood what's needed. Your testimony is not the peg on which I hang this case, but I think it can serve well to humanize her. She really needs that for this jury. The evidence itself is, er... pretty bad. Emotional appeals may be our best shot."

He nodded, slowly. "If you think it will help, I will, gladly. I... I'm just not sure how much weight it will have, though. I'm not an NCR citizen, as I wrote before; my only allegiance for the last twenty years has been to a group that's fairly anti-government and I'm not even with them anymore."

She looked up curiously. "Why did you leave the Followers, Dr. Gannon? I'm not a member myself, but I've worked directly with the group for thirty years. Julie Farkas is an old friend, and the sole reason I attached myself to this case, but she wouldn't comment on you at all."

He opened his mouth to say... something, though he wasn't sure what, and she superseded him. "Please don't lie. I need to understand my defendant's life so that I can present her in the best light. We're alone here and you have my assurance that nothing you say will leave this room."

"When she began to wear that armor openly, I felt obliged to warn and withdraw from the Followers as I prepared to protect her in the long term. Not that the plan worked out." He added as an afterthought, "Also, I'm more than a little disillusioned with the group." And furious at Julie, he thought angrily. His voice dropped to a bare whisper. "The real reason, though, is that my father was an Enclave soldier. I didn't want the Followers to suffer consequences if I went down with Megan."

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She only blinked at this admission and asked another question, "Should I put you on the witness stand, Dr. Gannon? You seem ideal on paper: intelligent, articulate, and well-disposed toward the defendant. Assuming you can also be warm when needed, I need someone who likes her personally up there. I have a dozen soldiers lined up, ready to sing her praises for being a helpful military resource, but I don't have any that know her really well. I don't want a liar, you understand. I want someone who can tell the truth I'm presenting."

"Vincit omnia veritas. What's your truth?"

Without taking her eyes off his, she recited her summary. "Miss Martin is a person who chose her tools unfortunately in her sincere and single-minded focus on defeating the Legion. Her lack of foresight and good judgment in this matter may be attributed to the head injury she suffered last year, as can her total lack of common sense. In short, she is an illiterate, somewhat childlike, victim of circumstance who has no more to do with the NCR's historical enemy than any other person who might pick up an old symbol without understanding its implications. The Enclave approached her; she accepted their help not knowing why she should not, because she was desperate to help in the war effort. Her only crime is idiocy."

Arcade privately wondered what choice words Megan had had to say about this defense. "That's selling her a little short... but yes, I agree with the substance of everything you said. It sounds believable. You think that'll play with the jury?"

"Maybe." She said this with a sigh. "She's very lucky this came down to a civilian trial at all; the
Colonel and her cronies requested a full military tribunal, as befitting a 'captured enemy militant.' President Kimball's aide had barely filed the paperwork to award her citizenship when this suit came up; more than anything else, that helped to sway those with in power toward a fairer option. All the same, it's not fair. I didn't get to have a say in the jurors. A trial like this, out in the boonies, military stuffed shirts pulling the strings? They make their own rules. They'd have dispensed with a public trial entirely if she had been less high-profile, less popular with the locals they're actively trying to pacify. Our jury are well-fed, well-heeled, landowning citizens that don't understand life out here in the slightest. Moreover, they were hand-selected for one trait in particular: every one them has a personal reason to hate the Enclave, having lost family members to their aggressions back in the 30s and 40s."

Arcade's heart sank. "That's going to be a challenge."

"Yes," she answered flatly. "So, I need to show them a sweet, timid young woman who flat-out isn't smart enough to pass as an enemy agent. She obviously isn't old enough to be directly associated with the Enclave as they were; the state's attorney will be insinuating that she's the child or grandchild of that last generation of Enclave survivors... or possibly that she came from an unknown group of survivors to the east. Either will seem plausible to the jury. They're swinging for some big crimes on this one - had to in order to justify the expense - and in a perfect world, a 'shadow of a doubt' wouldn't be hard to get. This isn't a perfect world, though. We're not even in the NCR."

Arcade let that pass without comment. "You're not going to let her talk, are you? Please don't."

"She has to. I assume you're familiar with it, but you need to forget what you know about the constitution that our own law is based on. It doesn't apply here. There's no way she can avoid testifying. I told you - their rules. The most I can do is prevent it from becoming a complete kangaroo court."

This was a frightening thought. "Megan - and I say this out of alarmed affection - has a terrible habit of saying revelatory things without even noticing it. It's like her mind and her mouth are on different planes of existence. Her reactions to surprises and challenges will be genuine and obvious to everybody." Remembering what Boone had told him about her mental state, he continued, "She's not all that stable even at the best of times, and I can't imagine that she's at her best right now, not after being isolated for so long."

She regarded him calmly. "I've spent hours with Megan. I know exactly what you mean, but don't discount her yet. They've been interrogating her for a month now - even before I arrived to counsel her - and she's said nothing incriminating. To them, anyway. She also turned down a generous plea bargain: five years imprisonment in exchange for exposing the real soldiers she brought to the Dam and Freeside. She claims she never knew their names."

"What kind of sentence are they seeking?"

She sighed. "A guilty verdict here will declare her an enemy combatant and strip her of the rights of citizenship, and then this will move to a tribunal back home in some secret government compound. She'll be beyond our help then, facing torture, imprisonment, and death." She said this soberly, but then began again with brisk urgency, "Can I count on you, Dr. Gannon? Good. Very well, putting my questions aside for the moment, here's what they'll likely be asking you... and please tell me if you think you can't handle it."

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Nine days after this meeting, the moment had finally arrived. The McCarran concourse looked nothing like the combination dormitory, mess hall, and hospital it normally served as; the NCR had cleared one entire terminal of beds and lockers in preparation for the trial, an event they'd been
compelled by widespread pressure to open to the public. The first two days had been well-attended, but this, the third - and, hopefully, the last - saw all of the available space jam-packed with curiosity-seekers, with standing room only by this point. It was a logistical and security nightmare, and Arcade only hoped that the NCR had done their job and confiscated all of the weapons. In front of the massive windows, they'd built a rough platform for the judge and his officers, as well as a box for the jurors, but the witness stand was nothing more than a simple, wooden chair. Arcade approached the front, trying not to show how intensely uncomfortable he was under the scrutiny of hundreds of eyes, and wishing now that he could have found a shirt that didn't have holes in it. He stood and waited for the officer of the court to administer the oath.

"Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"I do." Mostly, he amended silently. Arcade had no moral problem with lying to the courtroom - he'd been lying to the world for decades, after all - but despite all of the practice he wasn't that good at it; it was better to stick with the truth as much as possible. There were many true things he could say in Megan's defense, after all.

It had been two months since he'd spoken to her, and two months since he'd parted ways with the Followers and gone his own way. In that intervening time, a relatively peaceful period in which the people of Vegas buried and mourned their dead and began to rebuild the damage from the battle, he had regained a portion of the composure that he'd lost in the chaos of the past year. He'd always been fairly comfortable in Westside, and now found a temporary niche there that agreed with him as much as anything could under the circumstances. He treated people with the supplies he could get, sparing many of them a long walk to Freeside; in the evenings, when the community slowed down to eat, mingle, and talk, he offered a sort of open-air school to children, teenagers, and adults whose formal education had been limited to what the NCR social worker's bimonthly visits had to offer. Literacy was an obvious goal, of course, but he also kept in mind a Followers-sanctioned course of study covering such practical and diverse issues as sanitation, first aid, and safe sex. Arcade enjoyed teaching, and wanted to make the best use of his time, for as long as he could. He didn't plan to stay there forever, regardless of how the trial panned out. And, now that he'd heard the case against her, he didn't feel very confident about an acquittal.

For a man who had spent his entire adult life dreading a moment very much like this, Arcade found the reality of it to be almost a relief, even if it felt a bit unreal - like a stage play or some bizarre tableau from his nightmares. The right props were there, displayed on the evidence table: the remains of his father's armor as well as Johnson's, arranged beside a damning piece of weaponry that the prosecution had acquired somehow. The right people were also in place: in addition to what looked like half of Freeside and McCarran, including not a few of his former colleagues from the Fort, Daisy and Kreger were in the crowd, not unmasked yet but too proud or too tired to flee. Of course, it wasn't him on trial, he reminded himself; not yet, anyway. But the prosecution's evisceration of Megan's supposed crimes and associations, lasting almost a day and a half, had felt very personal; he almost wished, now, that he had just accepted his responsibility as his father's son and the danger that came with it. Megan probably still would have found enough rope to hang herself with, but at least they'd be in it together.

DuBose's voice broke into his reverie and he snapped to attention, dry mouthed and terrified in an instant, "Dr. Gannon, in your own words, can you please tell us how you and Miss Martin met?"

His own voice sounded like a stranger's as he began to recite what he'd rehearsed to himself all week. "I had been captured by a Legion patrol, and they were taking me on a southern route near Goodsprings..." Reassured by the truth of his story, he warmed to the subject, and set about the task of making the Courier into someone human - not the calculating monster the prosecution had described, nor merely the war hero that the defense's previous witnesses (mostly NCR troopers and
rangers) had spoken about, but a complex and sympathetic person. He spoke for the better part of an hour, longer than any of the others so far, prompted here and there by questions directing him to specific points.

"Did she ever express fear or disgust for non-human sentients? That is, ghouls or mutants?"

She hadn't, and he said as much, and now that Arcade had actually thought about it, that was a little odd, wasn't it? She didn't just lack the built-in prejudices that the Enclave had been famous for (bigotry that Arcade himself had had to address in himself early on in life); quite the contrary, as far as he could tell, she almost preferred ghouls and mutants to humans, all other factors being the same. He didn't say this, exactly, because it sounded suspect in itself, but he did describe her relationships with Raul and Lily. Those two - especially Raul - had brought out some of her nicest, most warmhearted moments in the recent past.

Everything he said was true and stayed well away from danger areas... or so he thought; it wasn't until the cross-examination that he began to sweat. This was what he'd been afraid of, ever since Boone had hand-delivered the witness summons to him in Westside. That visit had surprised him, but perhaps it shouldn't have; for all the sniper's issues, he was no backstabber. More to the point, he was openly angry about how the NCR had treated Megan when they no longer needed her. The man had good intentions, and had proven this with his silence despite its cost to him, and despite knowing almost everything.

DuBose sat down, and Moore's lawyer, a thin man with a weasel-like face named Pierce, stood up to cross-examine Arcade's testimony. The man's voice - drily sarcastic by default - set his teeth on edge. And it was worse when he was pretending to be friendly. "It sounds like you taught the defendant a lot, Dr. Gannon. If she really was as forgetful as you say, there must have a great deal for her to catch up on."

"That's right," he said cautiously. "I've always enjoyed teaching. Literature, history, medicine... she's a good listener, and mostly remembered what I told her."

"It's nice to have an eager student. I suppose at some point you must have filled her in on the history of the region - how the NCR came to be, who the Legion are, and so forth?"

He saw where this was going, but didn't hesitate to answer. "Yes, of course. Doctor Mitchell had begun that education; I added on to it."

"When did you tell her about the Enclave?"

He had prepared this answer in advance. "Well, I focused on recent things first and foremost; the Enclave didn't come up until she received an old eyebot as payment for a job, in Primm. That was the first time I talked about it to her, and then only to explain why she should be careful about adding the bot to her retinue."

"Very wise," Pierce said agreeably. "Did you have a lot to tell her about the Enclave?"

"Only what she needed to know. That they were bad and she should avoid picking up their broken toys. Because of the associations."

"I'd say your star pupil wasn't listening very hard that day." Hushed laughter in the courtroom. "Do you know what's interesting to me, Dr. Gannon? That you knew anything about the Enclave to tell her. The average person out here doesn't, you know. Would you consider yourself above average in your knowledge about the Enclave?"
He was irritated, but kept his voice level, as instructed. "Yes, but-

"Not just that, but you just happened to run into the one person in this entire region who's unnaturally and very publicly attracted to all things Enclave. Who went from not even knowing about to them to wearing their armor, using their technology, summoning their crafts, and commanding their forces in the space of a year. Surely, you can sympathize with our incredulity?"

"Yes, but-

"I don't know how deeply involved you are in this conspiracy, Dr. Gannon, and for now I don't care. I think you - and the eyebot, perhaps - intentionally or unintentionally helped remind a brain-damaged Enclave scout who she was, which led to her seeking out her compatriots lingering in the area. How am I doing?"

_Pretty damn well_, he thought miserably. Out loud, he only said, "I admit that the coincidence stretches belief. But that's not how it was. And it's not like I'm the only person who knows the history of the west. I'm not from the Mojave, after all. I spent most of my life in the Boneyard. I saw the aftereffects of that war firsthand. My dislike for the Enclave is entirely genuine; if I thought for a moment that Megan was really one of them and committed to their cause, I would never have aligned myself with her at all."

"Hm." Pierce pretended to look at his notes. "And here I thought you weren't an NCR citizen. Why didn't you say you were?"

"Because I'm not. I was born in Klamath before it was incorporated." This was a lie so familiar to him that it felt like the truth as he said it; it was damned hard to disprove, too. "My mother could have applied for citizenship on both of our behalfs when we moved to the big city, but she never did. Too busy." _Too proud_, he corrected to himself. Miriam Gannon hadn't been ready to kowtow to the people who had destroyed their way of life. He added, trying to explain, "It was less important to be a citizen back then."

"Alright, Dr. Gannon, we'll return to that later. Since you mentioned him in passing earlier, I can now ask you about the man whose body our MP retrieved from the Lucky 38 on May 20th, one Ebenezer Johnson…"

Another hour went by in this vein, and Arcade was finally permitted to step down from the stand, dazed by the grilling and shocked at what the man had gotten him to admit. He simultaneously felt as if he'd shown both too much and too little loyalty to his heritage, and done Megan little good to boot. She'd been watching him closely, appearing attentive and alert for the first time in the two and a half days since the trial had begun, and now gave him a sad smile and a tiny wave as he passed her on his way back to his seat.

He resumed his spot between Daisy and Kreger with an apologetic shrug to the latter; he didn't think the old man would hold his repeated defamations of the Enclave against him under the circumstances, but he was a man who set great store by loyalty. Daisy only smiled and squeezed his hand in reassurance. With a sigh, he faced forward and waited for the next witness to be called forward. Hopefully, it would be someone without a lot of baggage.

Between the exhaled warm air of hundreds, the lack of any cooling system, and the sunlight streaming in the windows, it was oppressively hot in the concourse. The officer of the court was sweating through his khaki shirt and squinted down at his clipboard as he leaned over to speak into the microphone. "Next witness for the defense is… Courier 42? Is that right? Do you have a name?"

A tall, lean colossus with dreadlocks, sunglasses and a long duster ambled up to the stand with the
casual ownership of a man who assumed possession of the ground under his feet as a matter of course. He spoke in spare syllables, as someone who spoke little but expected to be heard. "Nemo." Still reeling from his experience up front, Arcade barely noticed the man until he was standing to be sworn in, but something about this one-word introduction sparked a note of fear, the source of which he couldn't quite put his finger on. Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed a symbol on the man's back, but before he could identify it, he'd turned around to face them. It wasn't the name that concerned him, exactly. Lots of people had Latin-inspired names, himself included. Before his sense of alarm could seize upon specific reasons, he forcibly reminded himself that DuBose wouldn't have called this man as a witness unless he was helpful to Megan's case. He dismissed his half-formed concerns before they took shape; perhaps the man's parents had been afficionados of the works of Jules Verne. *It doesn't matter,* he thought. *Stop worrying.*

"Mr. Nemo, it says here that you're a courier. Can you tell us about your routes? Where you've been?"

"As far west as the water; as far east as Dog City. If I have a home, it's in the Divide." His voice was deep, the meter rhythmic and almost hypnotic. Arcade wondered idly to himself what "Dog City" was; it sounded dirty.

"Then I'm sorry for what happened there," DuBose said soberly. "Do you know the defendant?"

"Yes."

"By what name do you know her?"

"By the name on her papers. The name under which she ran her jobs. Courier 6." Something about the way he said this last part sent another frisson of fear up Arcade's spine, but it was still undefined and nebulous.

She continued, "Do you affirm that Courier 6 and the defendant - known as Megan Martin - are the same person?"

"Yes. They are." There was a slight emphasis on the last word, and the barest inflection of humor, but Arcade didn't know what this meant.

"When did you first meet her?"

"Five years ago. We crossed paths occasionally. Stole jobs from one another. Traded work, too. Travelled together sometimes. Not often. She bothered me. Didn't know when to shut up."

"How old would you estimate she was when she started out as a courier?"

"15. 16. Give or take. Young. Kids grew up fast in the valley."

"Did she ever say where she came from? Her family?"

"Farm outside of Hopeville. Another orphan of deathclaw attacks."

"Did you ever see any sign that she was involved with the Enclave?"

"No."

"Ever see her wear power armor?"

"No."
"Did she ever use energy weapons?"

"No."

"Mr. Nemo, when was the last time you saw Courier 6? Before today, I mean."

"Late March or early February of last year. About two weeks before the earth erupted."

"Can you summarize that last encounter?"

"She'd just returned from a month-long run to Shady Sands. She said she was going to take some time off. But the next day she was gone. I never spoke to her again."

"Did you know where?"

"No."

"And then, two weeks later, Hopeville was destroyed?"

"Yes."

"Thank you. Now, before I turn you over to my colleague, let's review the timeline one more time to be absolutely clear…"

Even as DuBose finished extracting what she could from the courier, and the prosecution tried to squeeze out an admission of uncertainty from the impassive giant, Arcade turned over this new narrative in his head. He didn't think it was even close to true, but it didn't have the ring of a lie. Either the man was mistaken or he was a very good liar indeed. Regardless, it was hard to reconcile this version of Megan's past with the one that Moore and Pierce had constructed. Arcade allowed himself to hope - just a little - but knew in his heart that the word of one, unknown courier wouldn't be enough to sway the verdict all the way over.

After the conclusion of Nemo's testimony and a short, mid-day recess, the defense brought out what appeared to be their - and shakiest - witness. One look at Megan's face, and Arcade's heart sank. She was selling "pitiable," as per DuBose's intentions, it was true, but every bit of her body language also said "scared and probably guilty as hell." She was pale and plainly terrified and kept scanning the crowd, as if looking for help; Arcade wasn't sure if she could see him at all at that distance, but found himself trying to catch her eye to reassure her.

The direct examination shouldn't have been too bad, but it was. If they had been going for a plea of non compos mentis, Arcade felt that this display would have been convincing proof. Megan had to be repeatedly reminded to speak into the microphone, and to reiterate what she had just said for the jury's benefit. She mumbled, she whispered, she trailed off into silence… and this was in answer to her own lawyer's softball questions. Her only saving grace was that she kept her answers succinct, and didn't elaborate or ramble on. DuBose didn't spend more time than was absolutely necessary; after she'd quickly reestablished the strongest points of the case - the amnesia, the good intentions behind her participation in the war effort (including a repetition of a significant point in Ranger Grant's testimony, namely that Megan had helped prevent President Kimball's assassination), and the semi-plausible explanations for the armor and the involvement of the Enclave, she ended her side of the questioning. Arcade frowned a little at this choice; there was certainly more that could be said, and it seemed to him that she had cut herself off prematurely. Only a half-hour later, when the cross-examination had succeeded in bringing Megan to tears, did he consider that DuBose's restraint had been a concession to her client's flagging endurance.

If Pierce's questioning made her cry, it also made her angry and defensive, and neither was a
particularly good look. If she had just kept crying, it would have made him look like a bully, but as it was she snarled and snapped back in between sobs. He, of course, remained perfectly cool and dry.

"The jury will please consider exhibit B." He stooped to pick up a gun from the evidence table turning it over in his hands. "Laser pistol, pre-war design, serial number and name machine-engraved clearly on the handle." He gave it to the head juror to examine. "Juror one, will you please read aloud the name written on this gun for the court?"

The juror - a brahmin baron from the south by the look - spoke two words in a wondering drawl, "Megan Martus. Mart-us."

The prosecutor took the gun and returned in to the table before addressing the jurors. "This gun was retrieved from the shelves of Miguel's pawn shop, where it had sat, unclaimed, for over a year according to the clerk. He claimed that a Great Khan sold it to him last spring. I move to suggest that the gun once belonged to the accused, and that she's mistaken about her own name. This connects her, once again, to Enclave proclivities. Well, Miss Martin? If that is your name?"

Megan looked and sounded as surprised as the juror, and for once spoke in an audible tone, loudly incredulous. "My name is my name. And I don't use energy weapons. I don't like them. Seriously, ask anybody who knows me. That laser pistol is not mine and never was."

"You would maintain that it's just mere coincidence that it happens to sound very much like your own name, then?"

"Yes. If I were going to go to the trouble of changing my name, why would I change it to something that sounds exactly like it?"

"Now, no one's accusing you of having an excess amount of guile, miss. I would submit that it is possible that you forgot your own name - and your own choice of weapons - when you suffered that head wound. Is that possible?"

She hesitated. "I guess-"

"You allegedly forgot everything else - your place of birth, your past, your allegiances - is it so unbelievable that you would forget your name, too? Enough to get it just a little bit wrong?"

She sighed. "No, it's not. But I wouldn't be caught dead writing my name on my gun. Seriously, who the fuck does that?" A titter of laughter rippled through the room, making the judge frown in disapproval and caution her for language.

It only went downhill after that. Arcade thought the worst part was her impassioned defense of Johnson's memory, the one Enclave Remnant they'd unmasked, if only in death, and the only one she'd admit to knowing by name. The prosecution made capital of that, using her declaration that he was a "good man" as an excuse to bring up some of the worst atrocities committed by Richardson's ground troops. That was pretty bad, and even from his vantage point in the back, he could see Megan's lawyer shaking her head despairingly. Her admission that the Brotherhood of Steel had pursued her for much of the spring didn't look good either. Her reaction to specific information about the Enclave - some of which was news to Arcade - could have been worse, though.

"Miss Martin, no one's maintaining that you're one of Dick Richardson's soldiers. A new era has dawned. Would you like to name who you serve or would you like me to do that?"

"I serve myself. And I don't know who Dick Richardson is."

"Really? I thought you had an amateur historian filling you in on things like that? Did Dr. Gannon
not tell you?" Arcade exhaled a breath he'd been holding. He had told her as little as possible - for his own reasons, it was true - and now he was glad that he'd managed to keep her in the dark to a certain extent.

"Tell me what?"

He obviously hadn't expected her to deny this knowledge, and was caught off guard. "Dick Richardson was the Enclave president until '42, when they lost their base on the oil rig." He recovered quickly. "Ancient history, true, and perhaps it's not surprising that it didn't come up. And you're from out east, aren't you, Miss Martin?"

"I may be. I told you, I don't remember where I'm from originally." She sounded petulant and impatient now.

He pressed onward. "Your parents - or maybe your grandparents - were among the survivors who fled before we obliterated Navarro. They went east - to Chicago, to DC. They were summoned by a voice on the radio calling himself John Henry Eden. They later took to calling him President even as they attempted to carry out their mission on the eastern coast."

"I can't speak to any of that. I don't know anything."

Pierce let his voice take on a kindly, understanding tone, "No, perhaps not. Still, there's good news from the east to report now. Our own intelligence sources only released it this week, even though it's almost four years old now: outside of the nation's old Capital, the Enclave was destroyed again and their self-styled president is dead. Tell me, what do you think of that, Miss Martin? Now that you have no people at all? No allies other than a few holdout stragglers in the wastes?"

She was surprised - that was obvious - but she wasn't the only one. The room broke out in hushed murmurs as the crowd processed this information. This confusion gave Megan the moment she needed to recover, and she came back fairly strongly. "I'm glad the Enclave is gone. They aren't my people and never were, and the world is better off without them. And maybe - since they obviously aren't a real threat anymore - you can call off this pointless witch hunt?"

Pierce didn't dignify this with an answer and launched into a new attack, this one calculated to wear down her credibility. He dragged her through Novac and Cottonwood Cove again, focusing only on those details that made her out to be selfish or cruel, before moving on to the drug abuse. Fuming in his spot, but unable to do anything about it, Arcade wouldn't call this move an unqualified success on the prosecution's part. Though it was infuriating, it didn't accomplish anything directly for his case; while failures and character weaknesses certainly didn't spell "hero," they also didn't spell "insidious enemy combatant." It did have the effect of making Megan shut down, affirming or denying further questions and insinuations with equal apathy, and by the end had taken to staring out the window behind her at the tarmac below, jerking her head back around only to mumble an answer into the mic. At some point, she reached an internal limit and put her head down in her hands, no longer responding to anything.

The judge - a tired-looking, portly man with an eternal scowl on his face - looked down at the prosecutor, and asked, a bit roughly, "How much longer do you need to draw this out? Do we need to resume this after a break? I'd really rather not reconvene tomorrow."

Pierce looked over at the jury, shifting uneasily in their places, then furtively glanced back at Colonel Moore. Arcade couldn't read the woman's reaction from this distance, but she must have given some sign, as her lawyer then conceded. "No, your honor. I'm done with this witness." The crowd let out an audible sigh of relief as the bailiff led an unprotesting Megan back to the desk and chained her back to it. The people were restless, and eager for a verdict at this point: the ones that liked her were
upset, and even the ones who disliked her or who straight-up didn't care were uncomfortable with what they had seen and heard.

DuBose stood up and spoke over the crowd's muttering. "The defense calls its last witness."

All eyes turned to the figure approaching the stand from a row near the front, a haggard, gray-haired figure dragging a prosthetic leg slightly at every step. He wore a distinctly military-looking parade outfit, but lacked any adornment, stripes, or medals. Something about him was familiar to Arcade, but he couldn't immediately remember where he'd seen him. Why was she calling another apparent soldier? They'd had almost a whole day of those already. And why now? Normally, the defendant would be the last witness brought forward.

The officer of the court administered the oath to him, halting at the name he read from the register. "Obadiah Grisham? Is that right?"

"Retired General Obadiah Grisham. You have my papers there if you need proof."

"I thought you were dead years ago!" This outburst triggered general amusement and the unfortunate officer blushed red. "Sorry, sir."

"Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated. Are you going to swear me in or not?"

As the flustered man complied, Kreger leaned over and muttered to the other two, "It's a damned good thing Moreno's not here to see this. As things stand, I might take a shot at that guy myself if I meet him in a dark alley some night."

Daisy nodded emphatically, eyes flinty, but Arcade was mystified. "I thought he was a local. I've seen him around before. At Aerotech, actually, which is... not the sort of place retired NCR generals hang out. I didn't think. Who is he?"

"As young as he was then, that man single-handedly spearheaded Tandi's campaign to wipe us out after the oil rig. Ran down a lot of ours before they could retreat to Navarro or elsewhere, and killed every last one of them. I heard rumors that he even killed the children, though I don't know if they're true. That could easily have been us - including you and your mom, boy - if it weren't for our team's vertibird access. He's no friend to people like us. What's that lady lawyer doing?"

The woman in question seemed pretty confident for someone whose client had just cracked. She wasn't even carrying her notes with her as she approached the old man sitting up front.

"Thank you for agreeing to testify today, General. For the young people in the courtroom, could you please tell us a little bit about yourself? About your career, I mean?"

"I served the NCR for the last twenty-five years of President Tandi's time in office, and the entirety of President Tibbett's term. Worked my way up to the top before I threw in the towel. At first, it was just rebels, raiders, leftover muties, and the like. Then it was the Enclave. And then it was the Brotherhood. We fought them all. We won." He spoke with an educated accent, if slightly rough around the edges, and his tone was matter-of-fact rather than triumphant.

DuBose affected a tone of surprised confusion. "What made you retire to the Mojave, General? You were very popular at the end of your career. You could have named your place on the senate - or even aspired to a higher place - but instead you ended up out here. Why?"

The old man sighed. "I wanted to breathe free air again. And I think politicians should be politicians, and soldiers should be soldiers. I've always been the latter. Always will be."
"I see. General, have you met the defendant?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"May 16th," he replied promptly. "In the middle of the Legion siege against Freeside. I joined the defenders by the north gate, where she had stationed herself. Fought alongside her for a good part of that day."

"What was your first impression of her?"

"My first impression was shock at the sight of a working suit of Tesla armor. It was like… noticing a monster that only I could see. No one else was alarmed. No one there was older than thirty, either, so why should they be? More to the point, they all knew her and were apparently used to the sight."

"Had you heard of the Courier?"

"Of course! Who hadn't by that point? But I didn't connect the dots until someone - a message-boy, I think - called her by that name."

"You said she was defending northern Freeside. How was she doing at that job?"

He winced and laughed ruefully. "I don't mean to cause offense to someone who's already taken a beating today, but it was pretty goddamn awful."

The woman winced at the language, but the judge let it slide. "How so?"

"How to explain? She'd reluctantly taken control of her position when the NCR leadership faltered. In between waves, she was a basket case, running from this task to that, giving orders that people refused, trying to do everything by herself. There was no calm at all, no air of command, no authority. I'm paraphrasing here, but I'm pretty sure I heard her say the words, 'If you wouldn't mind, when you have a chance, could you please go bury these mines over in no-man's land?' This request was ignored, even though it came from a terrifying spectre clothed in metal; they knew by then that she wouldn't use the threat of force to make them move. She's a very kind, polite, even gentle woman, but not officer material. Not soldier material either. To be fair, almost no one there that day was, even the actual NCR troopers that remained..."

DuBose interrupted him before he could get too far off track. "General Grisham, are you saying that the individual whom a hundred witnesses saw taking on the whole Legion army was not a soldier at all? Can you explain that?"

"I'm not saying she's not brave. And foolhardy," he answered seriously. "She is those things. As a single, autonomous unit in power armor, she was devastating in close quarters. I never saw her use a gun very well, but even without ranged weapons she was good. A credit to her own determination, to whoever manufactured that armor, and to the skill that maintained it through all the years since. But she only looked like a soldier. She wasn't one. No aptitude for giving or receiving orders. No desire to, either. She handed me command when I asked for it without a second thought and then wandered off to do the things that she thought needed to be done without waiting to be told." He paused, and looked straight at the jury, "I met Enclave soldiers back in the day. Even talked to them sometimes. They were fiercely loyal to their own, focused on the mission to the point of appearing brainwashed, and utterly indifferent to the plight of anybody outside of their army. This woman - this altruistic, unstable, much-besieged woman - is not our enemy unless we make her one. For what it's worth at this late date, I stake my reputation on this truth: she's no threat to us. We risk more by
prosecuting her and ruining our reputation as a benevolent force in this region than we do by allowing her to go free."

When DuBose didn't say anything to stop or redirect him, he kept on going, still addressing the jurors, "I know many of you people by name - or, at least, I knew your parents when you were children. I sat in your parlors, drinking tea and talking politics. I mourned your losses from the war and shared mine in return - my own son died under vertibird fire, did you know? - and did my best to avenge them. I succeeded. Our nation survived its first major roadblock, the first of many to come. Things were simpler back then, but I don't think things have changed as much out here as they have back home. I still believe that someone who willingly helps us fight our enemies is our ally. We owed the Courier a debt for her help against the Legion, and instead we shot her, imprisoned her, and humiliated her. Let's not compound our error by condemning her today."

Satisfied, DuBose clarified a few points with Grisham and then allowed Pierce a turn; Moore's lawyer found it difficult to erode the testimony of a war hero without casting himself as the villain, and quickly dismissed him as a witness. The trial was almost over. The heat had grown worse as the afternoon dragged onward. Not a breath of air moved and the atmosphere could best be described as oppressive. People fanned themselves frantically, but there wasn't a dry collar in the room and a handful had even fainted as four o'clock came and went without the usual recess. Megan stayed awake long enough to hear the prosecution's closing remarks, chin resting in her hands, but had dozed off somewhere in the middle of her own lawyer's summation and exhortation to the jury. By the time the twelve men and women in charge of her fate had left the room to consider the evidence, she was fast asleep, beyond caring about what would happen next.

Megan's perception of dangers had become mercifully vague by this point. She slipped into a dream in which her chains melted away, along with the judge, the jury, and most of the crowd, until there was only Arcade, Boone, and - oddly - Lily. They were there to rescue her. They would simply stroll away while everybody else was busy looking somewhere else. The exit was just over there: down the ramp and past the depot. They'd be outside before anybody thought to look for her. She smiled, and accepted Lily's massive hand helping her up, and then she was walking away, happier than she'd imagined she was going to end this day. They were almost to the door… soon she'd be outside again… but it was at that moment that someone interrupted her fantasy by shaking her shoulder. She opened her eyes and found her lawyer nudging her awake and the real Arcade standing in front of her.

He looked different without his white coat, but he was still a welcome sight. He forced a worried smile. "Hi there, Megan. Sorry to disturb your nap."

"That's okay, Arcade. Is it time to go?" The dream was still fresh in her mind. She started to get up before being reminded by the tug on her wrists that she was chained to the desk and sank back down.

He frowned at this, studying her with concerned eyes. "Not yet. The jury, remember."

She shook her head to clear away the clouds. "Oh, right. Hey… um, thanks for testifying. I know that was really hard for you. You took a risk, and I hope it doesn't end up getting you in trouble."

He looked down, dismissing the danger with a flippant remark. "Don't worry about me. They have nothing on me. And you can make it up to me later. Attend all of my poetry readings for the next ten years or so."
"Heh. I wish." She sniffed and reached a hand up to rub her eyes. "This might be your only chance to say 'I told you so.' You were absolutely right about a lot of things. I'm sorry I didn't listen to you. I should've just stayed in Goodsprings or something. We'd probably all be dead, but at least we wouldn't be here, right?" She blinked hard, trying to keep the tears from starting, and tried not to sound too whiny as more words spilled out, "Arcade, I'm really scared about what's going to happen next. I don't want to go back to that cell. I'd rather die."

"Maybe you won't have to," he offered earnestly. "That General Grisham was solidly in your corner."

The name sounded familiar, but she didn't know what he was talking about. "Really? I tuned out everything today except your testimony and mine. You'll have to tell me about it later. Maybe." She twisted in her spot, trying to get comfortable on the splintery chair, and then changed the subject abruptly. "So, Arcade, I made a vow a few weeks ago. If I get out of here, no more killing, except in defense. No more drugs." She smiled. "So far it's been really easy to keep. I've been a perfect monk, at least since Kemp cut me off the med-x."

"I'm all for beating swords into plowshares," he answered agreeably. "Though we'll see how that works out in practice. How are you? Noticed you were limping earlier."

"Eh, I was playing it up a bit for the jury's benefit," she admitted sheepishly. "It still hurts, though. I really thought I'd be okay by now. I'd never been so fundamentally hurt before. Well, not since Benny shot me. That brings me to my other goal in life. To not get shot anymore. I'm going to request a hangman's noose instead of a firing squad. Think they'll grant that request?" She was talking quickly now, rambling and trying to say everything on her mind while there was still time.

"Stop being so defeatist. You have a chance." DuBose chided her, looking up as the double doors from the meeting room opened again. "You need to go back to your seat now, Dr. Gannon. They're coming back in. Fast deliberations could be good news or bad. Either way, you need to leave. I'm sorry."

Megan half-rose, before remembering - again - that she was chained and sat down again. "Goodbye, Arcade. You… and the others… should leave immediately if there's a guilty verdict. Really. You probably should have left already." She was starting to wall herself off from hope, insulating herself against the crushing despair that was about to come.

He reached out a hand to touch hers, only to be warned sharply against contact by the bailiff standing nearby. His shoulders sagged a notch, but then he straightened and shook his head firmly, saying with conviction, "I'll see you soon."

After Arcade disappeared into the crowd, Megan fell into a depressed slump. In an empty corner behind the judge's stand, she could see three people - a familiar old man, General Oliver, and Moore arguing fiercely about something. Moore in particular sounded almost apoplectic with rage, but Megan couldn't bring herself to care very much. Mumbling to the woman sitting beside her, she forced her lips to form an expression of gratitude. "Thanks for trying. Sorry I fell apart up there. It's not your fault. I'm a terrible defendant."

The older woman's mouth twisted into a rueful half-smile. "I've had worse than you, believe me. Now hush. They're about to read the verdict."

Megan didn't hear it. The world had gone gray and the sound faded out as she clutched the table desperately, trying to stay grounded. She thought she might faint, vomit, or otherwise behave badly otherwise, and couldn't even begin to lift her head to see the chief juror preparing to read his statement. She focused on breathing, feeling choked by the rapid flutter of her heart, and wondered if
people ever died from stress. I should be so lucky, she thought, closing her eyes against the fuzziness.
A long moment, and then there was noise again. Everyone was talking at once and it was
bothersome. There was a rattling at her wrists and the cuffs fell away. She sat up, head still whirling,
blinking stupidly.

"Am I going back to my cell now?" Maybe they'd let her sleep for a while there.

"No. You're 'not guilty.' In other words, you're free to go," Miss Dubose told her, already packing
her documents into her leather briefcase. "I strongly suggest you stay out of the NCR's way for the
foreseeable future, especially that colonel." The corners of her mouth turned up wryly. "The next
time the Followers call in a favor, I'm going to ask more questions before I accept the job. I
wish you luck, though."

Megan stood carefully, shaking her wrists free of the sting of the cuffs, suddenly overwhelmed by
the noise in the concourse. There were so many people in here - some she knew, some who actively
disliked her, and many, many strangers and curious onlookers. She wanted to get out of here, but
didn't even know where she was going; she'd lost sight of Arcade in the crowd and was afraid to
plunge into the middle to look for him. Then - there he was, just behind Boone, who didn't mind
shouldering people aside as he made his way across the room. Megan's heart leapt and she took one
step toward them, before turning back to her lawyer. "Thank you so much. I really appreciate what
you've done for me and I won't forget it."

"It's my job. I'm glad this ended well. Go ahead - your friends are waiting."

Before she could move, a McCarran staff member she didn't recognize, a doleful old man nearing
retirement age, approached her, carrying a box. He set it down on the table in front of her with a
thud. "Your belongings, miss."

"Thanks." Her Pip-Boy was the only thing she really wanted back. The box also contained three
caps and a small knife that had been concealed in the clothes they had confiscated when she arrived
at McCarran. The return of the big bowie knife that had been holstered in her armor - not to mention
the remains of the armor itself (Exhibit A), of course - was probably not in the cards, and Megan
decided there and then not to press the issue with the authorities. She strapped on the wrist-computer
and stood still, trapped by people, accepting their well-wishes and glares with equal bewilderment.
She just wanted to be outside again, but felt trapped by the press of the crowd. Finally, Boone and
Arcade were there and she nodded to them, a little shy for some reason, still not quite believing that
she could leave.

She tried the bluff, cheery approach, but found her voice faltering at the end. "So, guys. A good
ending. Can you believe it? I can't. Like, I really can't..."

Arcade wrapped an arm around her and began escorting her toward the exit. "That went much better
than I expected. I'm amazed. Faith in humanity - or at least the NCR - slightly restored." He eyed her
askance as they worked their way slowly through the bustle to the exit. "Are you up for a walk to
Westside? To be honest, I wasn't planning that far ahead."

"Me neither," she answered. "And no. As of the last day before the trial started, I was up to 62 laps
around my cell. About a third of a mile. Pathetic."

"If you can handle the indignity, we can carry you. Dr. Usanagi will lend me a stretcher. I can be at
the clinic and back in thirty or forty minutes. Boone will help. Right?" The quieter man shrugged,
keeping his head on a constant swivel for threats, but nodded.

She laughed nervously. "That's fine. I don't really want to let you out of my sight, though. Is it really
going to be okay? I feel like I got off too easily."

"It's okay for you to be happy. *I'm* happy. But let's get out of here before someone changes their mind."

Megan would never quite remember how she got from the concourse to the double doors leading into the training yard. She retained a vague impression of being stopped by dozens of people on the way - one of whom, Arcade later claimed, was a Californian reporter seeking a statement that was unforthcoming. It was all too much on top of the day she'd already had. One thing she did remember clearly was setting foot outside again for the first time in a long, long time. She could have jumped for joy if it hadn't hurt so much; as it was, she had to cling to Arcade's arm for support and was ready for a break long before they'd even cleared McCarran field. Every step strummed a note of pain in her chest and back, and it only got worse the longer she was standing. If not for her vow, she would have asked him for some med-x.

The old airport entrance was practically a public thoroughfare today, as the multitudes streamed excitedly out, retrieving their checked weapons from a station set up near the entrance. Arcade retrieved his pistol here, eying Boone oddly when he didn't approach the station, "No gun?"

He patted a holster under his arm. "Not one that I felt like checking."

"Right." Arcade looked around. It was quite crowded, even outside of the gates. People were in no hurry to return to their fields and shops, and were lingering to gossip with one another. "Megan needs to stop. You two stay here, and I'll be back soon enough."

Boone and Megan watched him walk briskly away and stood awkwardly for a moment, not looking at one another.

She broke the silence, "Is it okay if we move a little further from the crowds? I really don't want to talk to more people today if I don't have to."

"Yeah. Me neither."

They separated from the crowd and sat down against the wall facing the city, watching little clumps of people wend their way home from the entertainment. She leaned back against the sun-warmed concrete, thankful for the rest and the freedom to not be in a tiny room. "Thanks for trying to help me back in Freeside, Boone. And for not throwing me to the wolves today. I'm sorry I've made things difficult for you. I never imagined that Moore would fixate so much on you. We shouldn't have done so much stuff together, I guess."

"It's okay. Weren't for you, I'd be dead a couple of times already. Soldiering was all I knew. That was the only reason I wanted to go back to it. Nothing else to do."

"I'm still sorry." He didn't answer, but also didn't resist when she picked up his hand and held it in her own, smaller one, tracing all of the thin, white scars on the palm and fingers before releasing it and rocking nervously in place. "I've missed human touch. Not just in that cell, but in general, ever since… you know. I don't know how to explain how confusing it is to simultaneously crave and fear intimacy. But I did have a lot of time to think about it recently. I think it's worth it - to me, anyway - to try again. So… yeah… if you ever want to work on building mutual trust… I'm ten times more fucked-up than I was the first time, but I wanted to let you know that it's something I'm interested in. With you."

He still didn't say anything, but reached up slowly - very slowly - to tuck an errant lock of hair behind her ear. She shivered at the touch, but didn't pull away. He sighed, and let his hand fall to his
side. "I've been thinking about that. I'll think about it some more. I need time too. Even if it hadn't ended so badly, last time was too soon."

"I understand," she said in a small voice, looking down.

"That's not a 'no,' Megan. I just need-"

At that moment, there were interrupted by a furious-looking Lieutenant Gorobets, followed closely by Major Dhatri, who'd come storming around the corner. "Boone! A word, please. In private."

He smiled down at her, a fairly natural smile that looked strange on his face - for once, he looked his actual age of twenty-seven instead of ten years older. "And now I get to go explain to those two why I'm no longer in their unit. This will be fun." He got up, and, looking around suspiciously at the people still passing by handed her the hunting revolver he'd had strapped on. "Hold this. Shoot or shout if you need help. I'll just be gone a minute."

Megan watched him walk a good fifty feet away with an animated Gorobets and a surly Dhatri, and wondered if they were more angry at Boone or at Moore. She looked down the sights of the heavy gun - it did feel good to be armed again - and waited, humming happily and looking up at the lengthening rays of the sun, trying to gage the time without looking at the restored Pip-Boy on her wrist. It might have been about 5:15. She wondered if Arcade was on his way back yet. She wondered, too, when she'd be fit to travel, or if she'd ever be pain-free again. It was frustrating to be so low, and for recovery to take so long.

A slightly thick patch of air to her right chose this moment to growl. "Enjoying the sunset?"

She jumped and had the barrel half-turned on the invisible speaker before the weapon was jerked out of her hands and absorbed into the attacker's stealth-field. She was about to scream, when she felt the barrel pressed against the skin of her neck and froze. She didn't even dare turn her head to see if Boone or the others had noticed her reaction. "What do you want? Who are you? Please don't… I just got out… I don't want to die."

"In this place, I'm literally no one. Today I called myself 'Nemo.' My little joke. But I have another name - can you guess it?" There was a dark hint of humor to his voice, and it sounded as though he were savoring a long-awaited moment.

She knew. How she knew, she wasn't sure. "You're Ulysses. You're here to kill me." She half-tensed for a desperate struggle for the weapon, but relaxed almost at once. The man she'd seen on that stand through her haziness had appeared very strong. There was no winning a hand-to-hand fight, even if she had been at full strength. And any scuffle would bring Boone running into an unarmed fight again a cloaked fighter with a gun. "Alright. Do it and go. Only, please tell me why."

"I didn't try to spring you from the NCR's trap just to kill you. Not here, anyway." He sounded surprised, and still a little amused. "I have an invitation for you. In case you've lost the others I've sent. You're going to follow me to the Divide. At the end of that path, I'll explain everything that you still refuse to know at a place of my choosing."

"What if I don't come?" she whispered.

"You will." He sounded almost apologetic now. "After this, you won't be able to help it. I know you better than you know yourself, even better than that neurotic scion of the Enclave and much better than that sad, angry killer over there. I know how to command your steps."

A nasty suspicion was growing in her mind, but she asked the question anyway, "How do you know
anything about me? We've never met… that I remember, anyway."

"There's an old folktale about a man who had a deadly secret that was burning him up inside. He told it to a hollow tree and went away satisfied, but the wood knew the secret and shared it with the world through music when a craftsman made instruments from the branches. That man may be forgiven his confession, but you… you told your every secret to a machine, of whose counterpart I was master."

Oh my God. ED. "What are you going to do?" she breathed, terrified of the threat and reeling from the revelation. She'd told that eyebot everything she knew or suspected about herself, never dreaming that someone was listening.

"Some people might be motivated by the truth alone, but not you. You're perverse. You hate the truth. Revenge is the only thing I can count on from you. Therefore, I'm going to kill one of your men, and then you'll come to try to kill me." He said this very simply, and stood up, withdrawing the gun from her neck. "You can pick which one if you like. If you won't, I will."

She stained her eyes in the dim light, looking first toward the clinic - was that Arcade she could see, that spot of gray in the distance? - and then back to Boone, who had his back to her, still exchanging heated words with his former lieutenant. "I'm not going to choose." Trying not to telegraph her movements, she gathered herself to leap at the shimmering mass. He'd kill her in a moment, but maybe that would be enough to save Boone.

He nodded knowingly. "The soldier, then. The doctor's much more likely to deliver you alive, anyway. I'll see you in my Temple, if you make it that far." There was a quick movement that she didn't see, and a glancing blow from the pistol across her head sent her sprawling. Blood in her eyes. Dirt in her mouth. And then there was a shot.

She pushed herself up just in time to see Boone sprinting toward her, even as the stealth field moved away from her. The revolver flew out from the cloud in a wide arc, into a clump of grasses some fifty feet away. Ulysses had shot into the air and thrown it away. She tried to shout, to warn Boone away, but her mouth wasn't working right, and he probably wouldn't have understood it in the moment anyway. Paralyzed, as if in a nightmare, she could only watch from her hands and knees as Boone met an invisible Ulysses… and fell. Impossibly fast. The mobile stealth field had fled... or so she thought; it was hard to tell through the dimness that had settled on the world, and anyway she had eyes only for the man lying on the ground in front of her, a knife in his unprotected chest. She got to him, somehow - running, stumbling, crawling - but it was too late. He was gone before she reached his side.

For the next hour, angry, grieving, concerned people questioned her on the spot until Arcade could wrest her away from them. They kept asking, one after the other, "What happened? Who killed him?"

"A frumentarius did this," she told Dhatri. "His name is Ulysses," she told Gorobets, and to a newly-arrived Bitter-Root she said only, "Nemo." After that, her grasp on coherence began to slip. "No one did this," she told a confused and horrified Betsy, who'd shown up too late to bid her old partner farewell. Everything she said felt like a lie. Only at the end of the confused interrogation - shortly before she passed out - did she admit what felt like the real truth, and then only to one person. "I did it," she told Arcade, dry-eyed with shock. "It's my fault. It's all my fault. I have to make it right."

Author's note: Well, that's it for Part I of this series! If you're not too depressed by this ending, stay tuned for the first installment of the as-yet-untitled Part II, set mostly in the Divide. Part III
will be somewhat episodic in form - I've been viewing it as more of an exercise in short dystopian fiction than a classic novelization; it will take place in Colorado, Kansas, the Ozarks, and DC. Part IV will begin in Boston in 2284 and will cover a timeline beginning before and continuing after the events of Fallout 4.

Thanks for reading. If you liked it - or if you didn't - please consider leaving a review if you haven't already. Constructive criticism is fine if you have the time for it; I like to learn from my mistakes.

~ScrimshawPen

Edit: As of March 9, 2018, the first chapter of the sequel is up. Check out "The Courier's Revenge" if you'd like to read more. :

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