The Anatomy of Melancholy

by ketherphorbia

Summary

Extending him a military contract to facilitate the war effort, the U.S. Army nationalized a Russian chemist as Alan Carey. Carey's martial contributions afforded him a place in Sanctuary Hills's Vault 111, but when the threat of Total Atomic Annihilation™ shepherds...
the vault into use, he wakes to find he's the only one of its inhabitants who survived the freeze to which none of them consented—if he can even call it surviving. With the end of the world already so far behind in civilization's past, he struggles to find his place again. (Update 2019.07.08: I finally got around to fixing the Kara/Carey errors from the early chapters.)

Arc I: First Instar--Lexington and Concord (Ch1 to Ch33). Arc II: Second Instar--Lowell (Ch34 to date). Estimated minimum of five Instars.
Arc I: First Instar

Chapter Summary

Updated 2019.08.23. Have some cover art.

The Anatomy of Melancholy
First Instar: Lexington & Concord
Special Feature: Fly-Blown

Part of Kether’s Purkinje Effect

Try as he might, Alan Carey can’t avoid becoming Melancholy just by writing about Melancholy.

A Rexford Press Original
The air shifted from stale to metallic as the gear-shaped hydraulic lift rose to the surface. Carey squinted through the wrong-prescription eyeglasses he’d retrieved off a desk exiting Vault 111. The gradual ascent could not prepare the wretch for the shift in light intensity as he emerged into stark, cloudless day, and he grunted with a flinch. His vision adjusted a bit better as he stood, in his royal blue and gold-edged vault suit, atop the hill Northwest of Sanctuary Hills. Though he fidgeted uselessly with the focal distance of the lenses up and down his nose, they seemed least of a headache at the tip of his nose. Inversely, he gave up seeking satisfaction from his long, dark mess of hair. With a 10mm pistol in hand he stepped nervously off the margin of the lift platform, following the trail back down to the suburb’s remains.

He hated the thinness of the bodysuit’s fabric. The scientists had told him of the benefits woven into the ultralight materials. Dry wicking. Thermal regulation. All manner of things he couldn’t recall because he’d stopped listening early in Vault-Tec’s rambling self-praise of its own products. He’d stopped listening because they’d told him to remove all clothing and effects before donning the suit. Jewelry, eyeglasses, hair accessories including bobby pins... underwear... foundations... The way the thing hugged his bare body... He really hadn’t mentioned such aversions to anyone. Not since he’d stepped foot on US soil, anyway. But, he couldn’t object to the scientists’ demands, with his neighbors all filing in for their own admission into Vault 111.

Especially not mere minutes after the citizens of Sanctuary Hills in horror watched a mushroom cloud consume Boston as they rode the lift down to safety. Not mere minutes since the military personnel had denied his roommate Jacob entry, when not a week before a representative of theirs had promised him there would pose no issue. He shivered, still breathing hard from the persisting, hoary static which clung to him more fiercely than even the suit.

Just like they’d assured him he and Jacob both had reservations in the vault... they’d assured him he’d have his effects returned to him once the group descended to the lower level of the vault via individual decompression chamber pods. And just like there had been only one reservation, and just like he had found no one’s belongings on his way escaping the glorified tomb... the decompression chambers were not, in fact, decompression chambers. Shit, how long had they put him on ice? Everyone was dead now. DiPietro, Russell, the Cofrans, the Whitfields, the Callahans, the Ables, even the Murphys. A shudder jolted through him as he passed a pair of skeletons clutching the remnants of a piece of luggage. His head swam, unable to recall just how many people didn’t make it into the vault in time.

They really ended it, didn’t they? He rounded the culs de sac in horror, disliking tremendously the up close affirmation of the desolation which the bombs had wrought. The detonation had reduced the once idyllic suburb to little more than a dozen mounds of steel and concrete, the cars rusted husks of their former selves. Trees and light poles had toppled every which way. He could tell no one had come here in a very long time. How long had it been? His head hurt. His everything hurt. He could scarce but pray the bombs hadn’t taken out his chem station--or at the very least, the lead lined safe he’d shared with Jacob.

“Sir?”

Carey could recognize the soothing mechanical British intonation as belonging to his Mister Handy. The spherical thruster-hovering legless robot approached him cautiously from around the side of the house. At this point in his day, he’d even believe that his robotic caretaker, bestowed upon him by the DIA’s nationalization program, had survived a nuclear bomb where his house barely could be said to have.

“Oh my stars, it really is you! You look worse for wear.” Its three optical lenses, each mounted at the end of hydraulic stalks with one to the front and the rest to either side, rapidly focused in his
face, and its trio of mechanical tendril-like limbs pivoted at what might be called its waist, to produce a variety of different apparatuses at each terminal node. “You require medical attention!”

The survivor welcomed such fawning attention, comforted by the familiar sweet-gas smell of Handy Fuel, and entered the ramshackle skeleton of a building which had once been his house. As he sat on the dilapidated leather couch of now uncertain coloration, the flame-floating robot followed him inside with a faint and gentle rhythmic sibilance. With a slouching sigh, he removed his ill-gotten eyeglasses to put them on the arm of the couch, and he lifted his chin to unbuckle the collar of the vault suit so Angel could get at him.

The Handy pressed a pneumatic syringe to its owner’s neck, and as its contents hissed into his veins, a second arm provided an inhaler against his lips, which he put around the mouthpiece. It counted down aloud from three, then depressed the trigger of the inhaler while putting away the syringe node in favor of its default tong-like pincer. Once Carey had taken in the vapor mix in a deep inhalation, the heaviness in his head felt far more pleasant than the prickling heat of the injection hitting him. The third arm of the Handy provided him a liquid to drink, a dark claret colored substance, which he took gladly, not unlike a child to a bottle. He didn’t care how much like cough syrup it tasted like.

“This is the first normal thing that’s happened all day, Angel.”

His eyelids fluttered, head so heavy that he couldn’t manage investigating the state of his bed, in the likelihood it had not survived the fallout. He laid down on the couch, comfortably drowsy from the opiates in the cocktail. Cold metal nudged him to raise his head up off his arms a moment, and when he did, Angel tucked a stuffy pillow under his head. The exhaustion stifled any inspection of stains, let alone any complaints.

“...Spasibo.”

“But of course, Mister Carey--but remember to say it in English! Ha-ha! I’ve administered Melancholia and a Stimpak, and tended to any illnesses you might have contracted since I last saw you. Do you require anything else before I let you rest?”

“I feel like I’ve been asleep a hundred years,” he whined quietly. He tried uselessly to kick off his boots. The pistol fell to the floor. “There isn’t a blanket, is there. I’m not cold. I just feel. Exposed.”

Before Angel could reply, he was out cold.

Laser fire awakened Carey, and he scrambled to locate the gun to arm himself, his frantic scan of the room yielding no source to the sound, or the burnt smell.

“I’m sorry, Sir, I think I’ve lost them.”

A smoldering pile of ash now existed in the house, which Carey assumed had been another of those awfully huge mutated cockroaches. The irony amused him, that his robotic assistant thought it had failed at exterminating the pest, since the physical proof no longer resembled it.

“Thank you, Angel. Those roaches are terrifying.”

“My records indicate they aren’t the worst thing I’ve encountered since we last met. Did you rest well, Mister Carey? Forgive me that I couldn’t locate any bedding for you.”

Chastising Angel, nor complaining, would do neither of them good.
“I, yes. I did. And it’s fine. I didn’t expect you to. Entertain me, though: How long has it been since we last met?”

“According to my calculations...” Angel’s ocular lens dulled out of focus a moment. “Approximately two hundred years.”

_Impossible,_ he mouthed to himself in Russian. Everything he’d read in Vault 111’s terminal entries within the vault itself indicated the scientists had implemented cryogenics as part of the unannounced regimen of the vault program, but it was so unreal. From what he knew of military progress, cryogenics was still a pipe dream before the nuclear exchange, and two centuries? He couldn’t believe science, in the state he’d last known it, could have achieved what it had, if true. “That’s... remarkable.”

“Remarkable is one word for your vanishing act, Sir. I am grateful to still be here for your return. I apologize that I’ve falling into disrepair since we last met. After several decades, it would have simply been keeping up appearances for myself. Truthfully, I feared you had died like Mister Hawthorne.”

Carey’s heart sank, and he tried his best to focus on watching as the robot did its best to sweep away the pile of insect ashes out the unhinged front door.

“They wouldn’t let him in the gates,” he commented unevenly, a sharp pain throttling his left arm. “That bastard! Told me when I opted into the Vault Protection Program that they’d allow him in--with or without me, if something happened while I was back at the base. I fought like hell with the military personnel. He yelled at me to keep running! Don’t know why I did. Now I’m the last man alive.”

“Not true! And you did what you had to do. You’re here with me now, if that pleases you.”

Carey smiled crookedly, absently touching the long scar that ran from his lower lip all the way down his chin. Even if Jacob had made it into the vault, there’d have been no guarantee that the equipment wouldn’t have asphyxiated or frozen him to death like his neighbors, too. The survivor still didn’t understand why the vault had spared him the same fate as the rest.

“It pleases me that you’re still here. Of course it does.” He blinked dryly a few times, wondering if any of the skeletal remains he passed on his way down the hill had been Jacob. “How far away are the nearest survivors you know of?”

“I ventured to Concord in the past decade or so, in the chance I might encounter you on your way to work. There were people there frightfully interested in dismantling me for scrap. I dismantled the eye of one of them before making an exit. They were... quite rude to me. But you, they might better welcome you.”

Carey got up and walked slowly over to his bedroom, again noting the blown-out walls now little more than their support beams. A glance into his room confirmed his suspicion that the bed had rotted down to its frame. Opening the drawers of the vanity, with its shattered mirror, produced threadbare tatters. He did find his bobby pin box, though, and his silver hairbrush--and his spare glasses, which, like the mirror, the detonation wave had cracked. He took the first two of these and walked across the hall to Jacob’s bedroom with a mixed resignation, and sat with them at the desk.

The wall between the bathroom and Jacob’s room had blown out. Although impressed that the chair, desk, and safe beside it had remained in tact, the capacity to retrieve anything of value from the computer terminal entranced him when he realized it too survived. Cautiously, he booted it up, and while it ran its loading sequence, he tried to brush out his hair. The repetitive motion wore on
his joints, and he wheezed in an arthritic ache after mere minutes, having to set down the hairbrush.

Perhaps he simply hadn’t yet completely defrosted.

Easily recalling the password, he skimmed through the menu of the computer. Entries of all their customers, both repeat and potential, formed a sort of invoice of Carey and Jacob’s history together. Nostalgia skimmed his fingers over the names. Rosa... Isaacs... Duchesne. Man, he always wanted to know the story on Duchesne. Now, he might never. Before the bombs, Carey had an issue of the model’s lingerie catalog, and his imagination went sideways trying to figure out what she’d wanted with a dozen Stimpaks a week. He melted whenever he spoke business with her over the phone. She was smooth, brilliant, crazy. Jacob considered it the funniest shit in the world, to watch Carey try to talk to her. (He also often borrowed the catalog.)

Once he’d gotten his fix rereading his partner’s invoice narratives, he returned to the main menu and entered the password to the safe. Incorrect. Exhaling, he tried another it might be. Incorrect. Rather than lock himself out of the terminal, he dismantled the tension trigger to a bomb failsafe. At least he had the faculty to recall the presence of that. Then, he produced a bobby pin from the sliding-lid aluminum case and bent it open, and using the screwdriver he’d picked up on his way out of the vault, he proceeded to pick the lock instead. Like riding a bike.

Once the door opened, Carey shoved the contents around looking for something specific, but when he did not find it, his face screwed up and he laid down for some time in the floor between the safe and the rotted-out bed frame. A fistful of cash, a few boxes of 10mm ammunition, two Stimpaks, and an ampuole of Jet. Collecting himself, he scooped up the various things and put them on the desk together. Then, he rummaged in Jacob’s closet in the hopes of better luck with clothing survivors. A dress shirt, suspenders, and slacks would have to do. Trying them on reminded him that although his roommate hadn’t been overweight, he’d certainly been heavier than the scrawny miscreant Carey was. He praised the suspenders for keeping the pants up.

“Angel, in your time around Sanctuary, do you remember if anyone’s sewing machine survived?”

The Handy had busied itself in the living area, but with the walls lacking substance, conversation came easily from one room to the next.”

“I believe so, Sir. Just the one, though, I’m afraid.”

“Could you... show me where?”

“I can show you where any equipment’s survived, if that pleases you.”

“That would please me so tremendously, Angel. Thank you.”

In that moment he felt a twinge of positivity and excitement for the first time since he’d awoken from his bicentennial stasis.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Carey can't recognize the transfigured Commonwealth, but some of it might recognize him.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaking.

Once he’d sufficiently tailored the slacks and dress shirt, Carey spent the rest of the afternoon and evening assessing potential salvage among the wreckage of the small suburb. He and Jacob maintained terminal entries on all their clients, and on behalf of Jacob that included casing information regarding the locations of those individuals’ safes. The three besides their own yielded a reliquary of heirlooms crafted from precious metals as well as cash, and he amassed it all though he fostered no belief money would retain value as more than a scrap of cloth to survivors of the nuclear exchange. It takes a government to cast the shadow of a gold or silver standard, and the chemist doubted in dire earnest there existed any such establishment now.

He combed the handful of houses still half-standing, inspected mailboxes both those still upright and those knocked clear into others’ yards, rooted through garages and the shells of once vehicles; but, he gained scant notable additions compared to those retrieved from his prior home. Either time had erased the quality of most things, or those evacuating to Vault 111 had taken the best things with them only to have them discarded by the shills running it. Further insects argued with the chemist’s presence in their homes, but Angel made quick work of the enormous mutant flies and roaches.

Angel’s back panel espoused rather spacious storage. Unbeknownst to the Handy, its owner had hollowed out a small false bottom to this compartment, where he’d kept things such as his Melancholia during his active duty—but now, he fattened it with cash and valuables as he encountered them, and stored the chems in the main space. The compartment soon filled with a collection of tools, and household and backyard chemicals he could recall would prove useful to him once he found someplace stable and secure enough. The Vault Suit itself got crammed furthest in, out of sight and out of mind.

Unnervingly, he knew he couldn’t stay put for long, for he found almost no shelf-stable food: only a small cache of Salisbury steaks and canned water in Heydar Jahani’s small cellar shelter. It seared Carey that Vault-Tec had not extended invitation into Vault 111 to Jahani, despite his veteran status, while they’d invited both himself and the Murphys. Albeit crystal hindsight, he wished he didn’t understand the grounds upon which the vault might have rejected the one vet while fondly welcoming the other three. Military duty at the Deenwood Compound had broken Carey and Jahani in very different ways. As he helped himself to Jahani’s dirt-dark two hundred year old stout stash, he recalled that Nora Murphy had been in the army’s Judge Advocate General’s Corps, and wondered if she could have ever resolved a workman’s compensation claim for the poor soul, given the chance.

Carey doubted it.

Besides a pair of X-Cell inhalers from the Russells’ floor safe, only the contents of the first aid kits and medicine cabinets held any value. His stomach hardened to see Jacob’s hunch checked out:
along with the performance enhancer had lain a ledger of dog fighting bets. Russell had been doping dogs with it. Carey supposed the political climate leading up to the nuclear exchange had warped just about everyone’s rationality and sensibilities.

The chemist most loathed his inability to locate any Mentats whatsoever in Sanctuary. The longer Carey existed again, the more he understood his constitution was fundamentally wrong. He struggled through murky, resistant acuity, noting a patchy memory and also difficulty pairing information. He at once felt both too loose and too stiff in most joints. He couldn’t see as well as he remembered he could. The disposition of his flesh rendered itself papery and pliant, while equally infirm. Everything took two or three times the extra effort to accomplish, down to putting one foot before the other... The cryogenesis must have surely wrought him rheumatic, and the opioids in his Melancholia cocktail had only masked the pain, not improved his function, and he opted to save the narcotics rather than plow through them since they didn’t much seem to help anyway. Between the limited food supplies and increasingly likely chronic pain, he resolved to push on to Concord proper. In the morning.

Returning to the vault overnight didn’t even dawn on him. Vulnerable everywhere else, he ate dinner in Jahani’s cellar and slept there.

When he emerged the following day, Carey located Angel and loaded the cellar’s supplies into it, then the two made a quick round to guarantee they hadn’t left anything especially important. He snacked on a can of pork n’ beans as he walked Southeast to the footbridge out of town.

“Just a bit overcast. Fine weather to walk to work, isn’t it, Sir?”

“You could say that.”

Once he’d polished off the fermented mess of proteins, he tossed the can and pocketed the spoon. He stepped around the fresh corpses of a man and a mangy dog in the road. There were bite marks. With a hard swallow, he pulled out his gun and looked around more intently than before as he continued down the broken asphalt.

“I hope Miss Gretchen doesn’t chastise us for being so late,” Angel commented darkly. “Surely, she’d understand.”

“Positive that’s not going to be an issue.”

Carey whipped face-down to the crumbling asphalt too fast to think he’d tripped on it. Something had grabbed his ankle, and he rolled over to try to kick them. With a frothy growl, the thing which looked to once be human lashed out at him with too-long fingernails. A second kick gave him enough time to steady his hands to fire at it. Heart between his ears, his eyes whipped around to recognize these things surrounded him, and if they hadn’t noticed him before the gunfire, they certainly had now.

“Terrific!” Angel beamed, switching out its pincer attachments for its laser and circular saw. “It’s a fight then!”

“…God…”

Carey glazed with dread, trembling as these mutated, misshapen ghouls shambled closer. In naked tatters, their complexion and hair had burned and melted, their black eyes sank deep in their faces, and their apparent bone structure was lost in wanderlust. When one abruptly scrambled to run and lunge at him with a guttural yowl, he screamed and unloaded the entire clip at it. He continued pulling the trigger on the empty pistol as the thing crumpled lifeless at his feet atop the first one.
He pushed backwards as fast as he could to back himself into the embankment beside the road, eyes frozen open with grief.

All the while, Angel hummed eagerly while it deftly mowed down several of them.

“…Indhhh–” A third one glared at Carey, and he frantically reloaded from his slacks pocket. But, the ghoul simply stood there, breathing heavy and letting out a faint growl. It lacked a nose, and its jawline had rotted down to mere teeth, its thyroid hanging massive like a crop from a horribly elongated neck. The hairless, earless thing squinted, clearly pained. “Mhhh. Ghgh' dy.”

When the ghoul did not advance, Carey’s eyes darted to the others that had opted to attack the shiny flaming robot rather than him. Mindy. Horror seized him when he realized this thing recognized him, and did his best to aim his pistol at it, distrustful. Angel continued to contend with the dozen or so others, the violence framing this one and himself in a solipsistic, distorted sphere.

“…Jacob?” The breath to speak could scarce escape him. A drooling roar came from it, and the tears started. “Jacob, I’m sorry…”


“I don’t understand.” He shook his head at it, gaze unable to stay on any one feature too long. “What… what are you?” Suddenly, it clicked what Angel was doing and he screamed, nauseated mouth suffusing with desperate saliva. “ANGEL STOP!”

The last of the ghouls fell to the road and Angel turned in confusion to its owner.

“You missed one, Sir.”

“These… these…” He couldn’t breathe. “These are what’s left of Sanctuary!?”

“Feral ghouls are everywhere these days, I’m afraid,” the robot replied, poised to fell the ghoul between them upon command. “Allow me to get this one, Sir.”

“I, no. No. I can’t.” He glanced up at the Red Rocket filling station behind it and Angel. “I can’t. Please. Can we leave him here? At the truck stop?”

Its ocular lenses shuffled around to scrutinize the ghoul.

“I suppose. It doesn’t seem to wish harm like the others.”

He couldn’t believe Angel couldn’t understand. The more he stared at the ghoul, the more he could recognize the vestiges of Jacob’s features. He stood slowly, as not to unsettle the ghoul, and dropped the pistol hand to his side. With the other, he pointed to the filling station.

“You… you’ve been staying here? Right? Because the insects are bothering you back at the house?”

The ghoul forced through its exposed turbinates a long breath which turned into a whine.


“Jacob, no.”

Barking closed in on the paused chaos, and a sizable ramshackle dog stopped mere yards away, lowering its head to growl. Angel and Carey both moved to aim at the unpredictable new threat, but the ghoul started toward it, and crooked down slightly to pet the German shepherd’s head. The dog
softened and pulled at what was left of the ghoul’s trousers to lead it back to the filling station. The moment the dog had appeared, the ghoul lost all attention on Carey and his Mister Handy, and cared only about the dog.

“…He’s… got a friend left, at least.” Carey nearly dropped the gun in shock, but caught himself and turned on the safety before pocketing it. He looked around at the casualties littering the road, then back to the Red Rocket. “I’m not sure this is better than him dying.”

“Come now, Mister Carey. We can mull over such existential preponderances during your work break! We’re late enough as it is.”

The chemist’s fingers retraced his platysmal scar again, and he drew a difficult breath and shut his eyes.

“Let’s get going.”

The pair traveled through the decimated streets of Concord, following their routine track to and from work. A town devoid of population unsettled Carey more than the same of a small suburb. What remained of Walden Drugs did not invite them. The roof of the two story building had fallen, but the second story’s floor still shielded the first from the dreary drizzling which had set in during the confrontation.

“Go upstairs ahead of me,” Carey instructed. Once it had gone, he crouched behind the counter and rummaged the shelves, drawers, and cabinets. He emptied out the first aid tin on the wall of its Stimpak, gauze, and smelling salts, and took the box of ballpoint pens and a fistful of manila folders from the front counter’s hanging file drawer as well. In the drawer he put his hands on a pair of directories—one, of the employees, the other, of nearby drugstores and chemists. One of the locations in the latter would have to provide him supplies, and the closer, the better. Lexington Walden. He shut the directory and with a nod slapped his peeling counter with the wad of papers. Out of habit, the fifteen dollars still inexplicably in the till found its way into his pocket.

He ascended the stairs with the files under his arm, and everything else awkwardly in his trouser pockets. The light rain annoyed him only slightly less than finding that so little remained of his former workplace. The desks had rusted and rotted out, despite a scab of papers plastered to the floor by centuries of weather, and the inventory had been looted. From a metal storage box near the baseboards, he grabbed a bottle of Wonderglue and a box of .38 bullets. Then he got Angel’s attention to deposit everything in its storage compartment.

Pulling out the box of bobby pins to reuse the one he’d bent up the day before, he approached the small wall safe that had once belonged to Gretchen, the store owner. Angel idled anxiously, finding little to occupy itself.

“I wonder where Miss Gretchen and the others are.”

Carey did not respond, haunted as ever by this nightmare he’d awoken to, lost in thought as he struggled with the sophisticated lock. He couldn’t handle the idea his boss, or any of his coworkers, had suffered the same fate as his roommate and the others. Jacob’s face wouldn’t quit him. His friend had been so plain before, but he was so… beautiful now. When he caught himself in such thoughts, he shook his head of them and had to stop a moment to recollect himself. God, he needed a drink.

His boss’s safe gave him more trouble than his own, but the effort yielded him a .38 pistol with a wood-panel grip and a fine scope, as well as war bonds and a set of spare keys which no longer belonged to anything. Well, the scope seemed wonderful by comparison, anyway, to the shoddy
company-issue 10mm pistol with iron sights he’d nicked off the corpse of that Vault 111 security guard. The chemist favored it, and stored the 10mm in Angel.

Descending back to the main floor, the nag graced him with a difficult and thoughtful squint: “Did I… clock out that day…?” But then, he noticed the cardstock had plastered into mush in the slots of the time card rack, and he stared vacantly for some time at the clock itself. Suppose it’s 9:47am forever. He shook the nonsense from his brain and very much just wanted to leave, and yet... He hadn’t checked the mudroom.

As he walked behind the counter again, and back under the stairwell, he stopped, stunned. The lockers to the left had remained untouched, and everyone’s coats still hung to the right—including the garment bag he’d had ready for the evening the bombs fell.

Saturday morning, Jacob had dropped Carey off at work. The Pharmacy Corps veteran had brought his uniform with him, to change into after his shift. Their neighbor, Nate Murphy, was also a much-decorated veteran of Anchorage, though he’d been at the Alaskan war front as a soldier, while the chemist had stayed on base here in Massachusetts. Nate was to give a speech at the Concord Veteran’s Hall that night, and everyone in Sanctuary Hills was going, out of a mixture of enthusiasm and moral support. Even Jahani intended to go, and Carey found it odd though never mentioned it.

But then, around 9:30, the screaming and chaos began. Carey had thought it had been yet another riot outbreak, but then Jacob’s sky blue Chryslus Coupe jumped the front curb, and he got out without turning off. The thirty-some blond hopped the counter and, beyond words, dragged Carey out of the pharmacy by the wrist. Because the chemist’d had his nose buried in his work, the repairman had heard news of the apocalypse first. Walden Drugs didn’t have a television in its waiting area.

“Angel!” Jacob demanded. “Go home. Wait for us there.”

“Mister Hawthorne--” Angel looked between the two of them, trying to follow both figuratively and literally. It read the gravity and concern in his voice. “Yes, Sir.”

Carey tried to pull away from him.

“Jacob, if this is about keeping me from going tonight--”

The blond threw him into the passenger seat and slammed the door, to get in the driver’s seat himself.

“We have to go, Carey. Now.”

“But I didn’t clock out--”

“It’s started. Those fucking pieces of shit--”

Jacob turned on the car radio, and didn’t have to tune—the news was on every station.

“--We’ve lost contact with New York and Philadelphia. Confirmed nuclear detonations across the country. A blast, followed by a bright flash of light. Take shelter, if you have it. Oh. God help us all--”

“We don’t have much time. Can’t even stop at the house first. I’m gonna park at the foot of the hill and you get a head start running to the military check-point. Okay? I’m one step behind you.”
Except, the military check-point had rejected the non-veteran in favor of the veteran. Unable to bring himself to think again so soon of his roommate’s fate, he instead recalled the frost-mangled countenances of everyone back in the vault. Nate never would get to deliver his veteran’s speech. Heart stabbing his arm, the chemist unzipped the garment bag, to find the Pharmacy Corps uniform nearly pristine. The nameplate read A. Carey. His hand clapped to his mouth, and he collapsed in the mudroom to his knees in tears.

“Of all the things to have survived in tact--”

He lay in the floor for some time, cradling the garment bag, and he finally let himself cry out the trauma after days spent in total shock. Angel came to the doorway once it heard him.

“Sir, are you... are you injured?”

“O-- only spiritually.”

With a series of hard snorts and hacks, and a face a blur of swelling, he proceeded to try to focus on picking open all the lockers to retrieve valuables. In addition to smoking paraphernalia, timepieces, and a few hats including a visor, he also obtained several wallets; all of these, he poured into Angel, with the sacked uniform folded neatly atop the entire cache. The finesse of such a task grounded him enough to move on, ears no longer ringing by the time they left the pharmacy.

As the two exited to the street, they noticed nearing gunfire and panicked to outpace it. Slowing a bit a few blocks later, a winded Carey came across a body on the sidewalk, and he knelt down to remove the canvas hood. Deranged from the day, he put it on and aligned the small eye-holes, and pushed onward in the hopes nothing else would recognize him from that point onward.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Carey must not seem to think molerat is edible, hm.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaks.

The Pip-Boy at Carey’s right wrist served as a useful compass, to guide him Southeast out of Concord. Ten years in service, wearing one all the while, had given him ample time to adjust to the boxy shape of the grey-green device as though an extension of his person. He consistently failed to notice he even had on this one that he’d stolen off the body of one of the Vault 111 scientists in the vault gate atrium. In the military, he’d had a Pip-Boy 3000 Mark III, which at the time of its issue superseded any other models in terms of functions and performance. Carey hadn’t had a chance to really inspect this newer Mark IV model, only noted its user health diagnostics had no grasp as to a cause for his diminishing quality of life, and of course now, used its refined GPS mapping to navigate. He’d have to see what all the thing could do compared to its predecessor. The thing was far lighter and less bulky, but it didn’t have the Nostrus glove anymore, so he had no idea how to input data into it. It would take time to learn the nuances of the device, and now was not that time. As a southpaw, he simply appreciated they hadn’t done away with the ambidextrous property of the Mark line.

After a while, a hurricane fence jotted along the left of the road, and the drizzle shifted into a downpour. Once he recognized the flying saucer sculpture which topped the small two-story structure and knew the exact property which the fence rounded, he and Angel raced to get under the place’s awnings, which resembled two airplane wings (albeit one had broken off and crushed an automobile that had crashed into the ticket booth pillars).

The Starlight Drive-In Theater. He and Jacob had come here often in Jacob’s sky blue Chryslus Coupe: Carey would take in the latest horror films, while his roommate usually had more interest in completing chem deals. They both got something out of the venue. Soaked, Carey held his chilled shoulders and stared at the enormous projector screen at the other end of the lot, ripped but still largely, impressively, in tact. It upset him that he couldn’t remember the last film he’d seen before they’d frozen him. Night of the Fish Man’s Revenge didn’t sound right. Nuka-Valley Massacre?

The awning belonged to the concessions stand and projector booth. He glanced around the long countertop which curved around the entire front end of the stand facing the screen. Time, or the bombs, had blown out the glass of its windows. Unnerved, he paused when he saw a makeshift bomb on the counter.

“Angel, don’t make any sudden movements.”

He reached out with caution, and, keeping his arms at full distance, lightly nudged the wiring so he could scrutinize the construction. With the rain coming down like this, he wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon, and he had to disarm this thing. Fortunately for him, the bomb’s maker had crudely crafted it with a lunch-kit, duct tape, and uncapped wire twists. Unsure as to the explosive inside, he didn’t breathe until the wires had all been completely separated from one another. For safe measure, he picked it up by the handle and flung it into the middle of the drive-in’s parking lot. He
jumped when it still exploded anyway, and the detonation knocked a station-wagon on its side.

“Bang-up job, Sir.”

“...Funny, Angel.”

“I thought so.” It gave him a holographic laugh, and did the honors of opening the employee door to enter the concessions stand. Before either of them knew it, Angel was kicked back outside with a second blast. “That’ll leave a dent.”

“Are. Are you okay?” With a slouch, Carey muttered to himself, very much needing to sit down, out of the rain. He found the stairs which led up to the projection booth and settled on that.

“Hopefully that’s the only booby traps.”

“Quite. It’s just a scratch, Sir.” The Handy came inside the booth with its owner, and inspected the storage beneath the concessions counter. “You don’t suppose they’ll mind if we take these snack foods, so long as we deposit the correct compensation to the register, do you?”

Carey stared at it for a minute, head still swimming far too much to handle this.

“I very much don’t think there’s anyone who will mind if we take the potato crisps, and the gum drops, and the Fancy Lads, and the contents of the till.”

“Oh. ...My.” It complied in collecting the foods, but left the cash for its owner, who did take it. “Still, I wonder what might be the value in this place, for it to boast so many points of sabotage.”

“I think the staff, and maybe some customers, took shelter here, only for the radiation to kill them. There’s probably nothing actually here. Still, you’ve got me curious to look around in the projection booth.”

“I’ll keep watch down here whilst you do.”

Carey slowly ascended the stairs, and praised that he’d watched his feet as he walked, able to bend down and disarm a makeshift landmine and pick it up. A door opened out onto the wing still propped up on the ticket booth pillars, and he threw it like a disc, aiming for the street. It hit one of the cars instead of coming anywhere close to the street. First, the mine exploded. Then, the car’s nuclear engine did. Removed from the carnage, he could get a chuckle out of the destruction.

Rounding to the second floor, he a skeleton with a 10mm pistol on a mattress. Several weather-decimated reels lay in the front corner, but he could not locate the projector itself. He supposed the survivors had dismantled it to repair and craft things more useful than watching the same four films for years. Still, it felt like a slap to art history, to have destroyed equipment for viewing films. Clearly, he’d encountered proof in his time above-ground that humans had survived besides himself, though he couldn’t guess whether they still made films, or if they even could. And many films were formative media for him. Prior often called an English textbook by his army colleagues, he’d improved the casual nuances of speaking colloquial English by bingeing on horror movies on his weekends off the base.

He adored creatures. He adored creatures more than anything. And now, the nuclear exchange had sprawled out a vast wasteland and set in motion the transformation, transfiguration, of the life of the New England Commonwealth, and likely the whole planet. Fiction and reality might not remain so dissimilar from one another.

The reels retained legible labels. Night of the Fish Man’s Revenge. The Chatreuse Slime 3: Slime Doesn’t Pay. My Husband the Mutant. It dawned on him that the bombs fell a mere week before
Halloween. All of these, he’d enjoyed, but the last of them had been a favorite of his. Very satisfying practical effects, with very little holo-projection technology. And, of course, the ending was most satisfying of all to him. The wife’s unyielding fidelity through the husband’s gradual, slimy disfigurement exposes her to the same mutagens that had made him monstrous, and she in fact becomes a mutant herself—and she joins him in the shadows.

The sounds of laser fire and the repeated powering up of a circular saw jarred him out of nostalgia, and he hurried down the stairs and out onto the roof of the concessions stand. The rain had stopped while he was upstairs.

"I don’t feel pain, you know.” Angel whipped its saw at a creature. “Is that all you’ve got!”

Angel’s changed a lot while I was asleep. It sure has grown most complacent to acting upon violence.

Carey used the sights of the .38 as a sort of spyglass to see the action in the parking lot. The best he could assess, the explosions had nettled the place’s inhabitants, which now attacked his Handy. They squealed shrilly and tried to bite Angel. Enormous tailless cats with huge protruding fangs. Or possibly... moles? As they continued to burst out of the ground, the latter felt like the better approximation.

“I’ve got your back, friend.”

He aimed and picked one off. Laughing to himself at the success, he cleared out as many more as he could. After a few, Angel noticed Carey helping him and it began to hum enthusiastically at the collaborative nature of the task. He lost count how many he shot. Once it seemed safe to return to ground level, he walked out among the cars and started looking for valuables.

“Thank you for the support.”

“It’s all my f-- my pleasure. Glad I could help.”

He picked the lock on the utility shed, but rounded back to the screen itself. Under the stairs, he encountered a mess of empty beer bottles, and a chem cooler with a half bottle of Buffout. With ennui, he pocketed the amber bottle and moved on to letting himself into the storeroom built into the backside of the projector screen. A RadRoach argued with him, but met his boot. He took the one box of BlamCo Mac on the shelves and ignored everything else, and walked around to the manager’s office to the end of the storeroom.

“At this rate, I’m not going to have any bobby pins left by the end of the week.”

He opened the door and looked around. Sure enough, someone had tried to settle down here. A mattress and a baby crib cramped the tight space, and carton after carton of Yum Yum Deviled Eggs filled the fridge. He found no signs of recent life, however, and loaded up the food into Angel’s storage, along with the chems.

“I... I don’t feel safe staying here tonight,” he admitted to Angel. He internalized the self-honesty that he didn’t like that it was looking as though he’d have to foster a migrant life whenever food supplies dried up. “There might be more of those... things. Starting to understand the reason for all the traps.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” the Handy objected thoughtfully. “Where are we off to, then, if we don’t remain?”

“The Lexington Walden Drugs. It’s bigger than the Concord one, and more likely still standing.
Here, I need the directory again.” He dug it out of Angel’s compartment and skimmed over it. “I’ve only ever been there by bus, and only a few times. It’s on Massachusetts Avenue, but I don’t remember how to get there. I need to give Gretchen credit for this, though. She wrote down landmarks to follow for customers who struggle with compass based or street based directions. The state things are in, I doubt most street signs are still legible, if they’re standing at all.”

“Miss Gretchen is quite the smart cookie.” Angel pivoted its tendrils close to its body, anxious as to the real reason that its owner might so doggedly seek a pharmacy. “We’re almost to Lexington from here, by my calculations, Sir. We should be able to get there by sundown. ...Provided it doesn’t rain again...

“Let’s... let’s keep moving. This wasn’t a bad detour. We found more food.”

“Ah yes, your favorites, as I recall.”

“Yum.”

The striped smoke stacks of the Corvega Automotive Assembly Plant peaked in the distance, and Carey sighed pleasantly to know he was going in the right direction. The high rises of Lexington stood mostly in one piece, it seemed, and this sight reassured him.

Slocum’s Joe Coffee Shop came up first on their way into town. The register didn’t have much in it, but he found a few sweet rolls and more Fancy Lads in the back room. He’d stepped into the establishment to raid it for coffee, though, and while he found four bags of whole beans, the grinder looked ruined. He handed off the coffee to Angel, and continued down the street.

As night fell, he turned on the display light of his Pip-Boy to illuminate his path. In the dark, the still-standing city no longer comforted him, and the slightest sound afforded his attention.

To his left he passed a parking garage--the lot for the Super Duper Mart, he recalled, as he passed the grocer’s outdoor patio with its accordion awning. Rounding the corner, he referenced the directions again.

*Pass the Slocum’s Joe to the left, then turn left around the Super Duper Mart. You’ll be on the Lexington Commons. Take to the right on Massachusetts Avenue. Pass the Liquors store, turn right at the red house with all those lawn flamingoes. There’ll be a three-story building right across from it, with a big yellow ‘Pharmacy’ sign and blue awnings. Can’t miss it.*

Unwanted attention had crept up on the pair while Carey inspected the directions, and he broke into a sprint across the triangular Commons at the first understanding that the sounds of the shadows had been from more feral ghouls.

“Have at you!” Angel waved its tendril-saw at them, facing them as it flew backwards to catch up with its owner, who’d long since darted around the maze of abandoned cars and upturned picnic tables and come out the other side of the once-park still running.

All manner of cursing coursed through his mind as his stomach churned in his heart. He couldn’t keep up this pace long enough to get to the-- *there’s the Liquors. There’s the red house.* Angel sped to close the gap between him and itself, and he didn’t want to think his Handy had gotten chicken. His head hammered as he slammed into the red wood-panel front door of the pharmacy and pawed at the handle to run inside.

Carey collapsed over the counter the instant he got in. His blood pulsed everywhere it ought not in him, and eyes wild, he scanned the lantern-lit space trying to identify at a glance which of the
corpses had worked here. One of them still had their apron draped around them, and he scrambled through the pockets with a prayer. Breathlessly praising they’d been the acting manager, he took the keys to the front door and bestowed the two of them some relative safety. Then, he slid down the door to sit on the floor.

“Too much for one day. Please, no more.”
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Carey gets a moment of quiet.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaking.

Carey forced himself to stand again, no longer tolerating the floor, still nearly heaving. The twin phone booth chairs had fallen apart, and locals had looted the waiting area seating. His eyes fell near the checkout to the overturned wheelchair, rusted tight, and righted it independent of its previous owner in the floor, so that it might provide him the first chance he’d really had the entire day to sit down for any length of time. Albeit sturdy, it clearly would no longer move.

The heavy breath that came next deflated him. He slung off the sack hood into his lap, and shakily helped himself to a cigarette, as he’d stolen the silver case and gold lighter from DiPietro’s coffee table in Sanctuary. Menthols tasted better than this, but he couldn’t complain. The main light in the store front came from a flameless lantern on the counter; since such things ran on fusion cells, he couldn’t really estimate how long it had been left on. He took in further details of the demolished shop from where he sat. Everything had fallen off the shelves, including the shelves themselves, and the front windows had been boarded up in the absence of glass panes. Some of his faculties crept back into him, and he resolved he’d scrounge for supplies in the floor rubbish once he’d finished his cigarette. His spirit popped in one place, reflecting on the reality that even if the wheelchair were still operational, that it bore no feasible function in the post-apocalypse.

Angel watched its owner curiously.

“Sir, can I be of any service? My sensors indicate you’re unwell, though diagnostics can’t pinpoint anything besides an unusual level of fatigue. Perhaps you’ve pushed yourself too hard. This location seems most secure. I surveyed the stock room, and it seems the neighboring building collapsed and caused a good bit of damage to this one. We needn’t worry about securing the back way, for the time being. Dare I recommend some solid rest?”

The Handy was right about one thing: Everything felt more difficult than he ever remembered it. Upon his robot’s commentary, he noticed he was still wheezing, and shakily took another hit off his smoke. The ashes ended up in his lap before he could flick them into the floor, and though his face soured, he left them, too tired to bother.

Could he blame the ambient radiation? His Pip-Boy’s Geiger counter didn’t indicate an especially high level of it anywhere he’d been so far, including the vault itself. Maybe he’d contracted some strain of cold? No, Vault 111’s cryogenic chemical process had to have done this to him. The accessible terminal entries hadn’t listed off most of the chemicals, but he’d come across many empty canisters in the vault with labels suggesting they’d once contained liquid nitrogen. Very little could survive that kind of freeze without tissue damage.

Carey figured he could chalk up the deep aches to the onset of arthritis, but at the same time that assumption couldn’t accurately account for how loose the joints in his body had become. He huffed, tired of trying to piece it all together. He nearly couldn’t point at what he wanted, his features drooping against his will.
“Angel. Bring me the book under the counter there.”

“Absolutely.” Eager for a command to follow, it retrieved the periodical for its owner and deposited it in his lap. It looked him over for a long spell. “...You don’t think you’ll be needing the wheelchair, will you, Sir?”

With a hard sigh, he rubbed his forehead with his cigarette hand, and he uselessly pushed his long, sweaty dark hair out of his face. He preferred to look at the cover of the literature rather than make eye contact over this. As anticipated, the periodical was a catalog which listed the company’s broad mail-order inventory.

“No, no. We’re going to try to figure out a way without it. Hairbrush, please.”

Again, Angel obliged. More persistent this time than before, Carey brushed out his hair, which fell just past his shoulders. He reached into his pocket and slid the bobby pin tin open on the periodical in his lap, cigarette filter pursed between his lips while he worked. Between his aches and lack of a mirror, pulling off a french twist from muscle memory troubled him, and some of it still readily fell loose to either side of his face. But, he could tolerate this far better than just letting his whole hair stay down. Satisfied, he flipped through the catalog while he finished his smoke. The words looked like an alien language in his exhaustion, and he struggled with anything more than just the pictures.

Carey pushed himself up out of the wheelchair and emphatically smacked the catalog onto the counter beside the register, which he readily emptied. The tin went atop the book until he next needed it. He didn’t waste any time digging in the fallen aisle shelving, though he reserved the added effort of getting down in the floor for a suspicion that something he saw looked worth it.

“Sir,” Angel started. “You haven’t eaten anything as of recent, nor drunk any water. You should do so and rest. We can clean up the pharmacy in the morning.”

“I came here for specifics. I’ll take a break when I can, not when I feel like it. I need what I’m looking for.”

“Perhaps I can help then?”

Carey leaned on the counter, consenting to the assistance. He flipped through the catalog and opened it to a particular page, to point to the items on it.

“We’re looking for orthotics, Angel. They look like this, out of the box. Any of them will help me, to be honest. I’m falling apart.”

“I’m worried for you. You haven’t been this worse for wear before. Not even during that terrible bout of influenza back in ‘68.”

The chemist nearly didn’t reply, the words glued in his mouth.

“I know. And this should help. Help me find these.”

“...Yes, Sir.”

Angel seemed nearly hesitant, lacking a better explanation as to the need for such a thing. It recalled that Carey tended not to elaborate when things were beyond his capacity to put in words, English or Russian, and it found such things typically emotional in nature. Rather than mull on it, it set itself to searching the floor debris for their prize, while its owner continued at shelf level.
Carey observed over time that, as it scrutinized each thing it came across, Angel had been instinctively cleaning up the small demolished store front. It had mostly mounded up the debris into the front corner, and it had even been reassembling the salvageable aisle shelving as able. The Handy also had relocated the wheelchair to sit along the wall, directly behind the counter. Ironically, it had righted the wire waste bin, but neither of them had used it so far. Still, they had a lot of work cut out for them, for the pharmacy to be comfortably habitable long-term.

The chemist found a wooden cane, and began to use it as he moved around the pharmacy. He found it helped quite a bit. Few chems remained, mostly a fistful of Med-X and a few bottles of Buffout on the surface skim. Upon further scrutiny of his Handy’s endeavors, Carey noticed Angel had been depositing its finds at eye level on the shelving it nonchalantly repaired along the way. There were a myriad of good medical paraphernalia among them, but nothing Carey could call orthotic in nature.

Three pair of glasses sat on one shelf, and he hooked the cane on his arm while he tried them out. Though the real test would be in sufficient lighting, the white-rimmed round frames seemed nearly perfect by comparison to the ones he’d taken from the Vault 111 personnel, and he lauded his Handy without ado.

“I do think this place will do nicely for a spell. And you found such useful things, like these.” He touched his frames with a faint smile. “We should stay while I form a better plan. I agree with you. This place feels secure. I have enough food reserves from Sanctuary, Concord, and Starlight to last me two or three weeks, if I ration myself. From how smashing you’ve cleaned up here in even the past half hour, this place feels nearly hospitable. Thank you, Angel.” He patted the robot’s spherical chassis endearingly when it came up to him. “I would like to take a break from combing this place for the orthotics to eat something, though.”

“I’m glad I could be of service. You’re most welcome!” It helped Carey back to the wheelchair and indulged him with a tin of Salisbury steak, a fork, and a can of purified water, which he took gladly. “It won’t bother you, for me to busy myself around the pharmacy, will it, Sir? It’s been so long since I’ve felt a sense of normalcy myself, and I’ve missed housekeeping in remotely normal conditions more than you can imagine.”

“So long as you don’t use any power tools, or break any glass.” Carey smiled at him. “I suppose this place does feel a bit... normal, doesn’t it.”

“It’s no Concord Walden Drugs, but we’ll have it tip-top in no time, Sir. I’ll be certain not to disturb you while you rest, I promise!”

Its enthusiasm algorithms fired at near maximum capacity in that moment, and it didn’t hesitate to set out a bed roll in the far corner for him, so that it could resume picking up the place now that it had permission to.

Carey left the half-drunk can of water on the counter, as well as the empty meat tin and utensil, and excused himself to the employees only back room to inspect the facilities. His stomach didn’t agree with his options in food rations, but he’d have to make do for now. Much of the front end was in better shape than the back room, owing to the miniature earthquake that must have rattled the entire building when the other had fallen against it. By the light of his Pip-Boy, he could really only make out some cartons of Halloween-colored ribbon candy.

He found the toilet and made use of it, and though he got it to flush, he didn’t try the sink because he didn’t trust the water source for washing his hands or face. He returned to the front end and collapsed into his unpadded bedding, not even covering up or disrobing. After a moment face-down, he removed his glasses and tried to kick off his boots, and pushed the cane out of the
bedding onto the floor.

All he wanted more than anything was a bath. He didn’t recall having had one since emerging from the vault. The water had worked at the vault, he remembered—but did he really have to travel all the way back to Sanctuary Hills on foot, when the vault had only had showers and no bathtubs?

The last thing he heard before drifting off to dream of a lavish bubble bath was, “Rest well, Mister Carey.”

Carey jolted awake with the memory of ghoul Jacob inches from his face. Sweating, he panted and curled up tight atop the sleeping bag. He let out a soft moan and squinted his eyes shut again, trying to fall back asleep. The worst part was, it hadn’t felt like it had been a nightmare. Quite the opposite.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

The true value of the Lexington Pharmacy begins taking shape.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaking.

The dull, pleasant white noise of Angel's thruster flame, commingled with occasional gentle shuffling and rattling, comforted Carey as he awoke for the day. One corner of his mouth twitched upward as he turned over to feel for his glasses, which he found on the bottom-most shelf of the aisle shelving. Angel had placed them and his cane on the shelf together, and Carey pushed off with it for leverage to stand and inspect just exactly what had busied Angel in the night. His entire body crackled as he righted himself, though he felt he could manage his aches today.

Most of the broken shelves now functioned, repaired. The pile of debris in the front corner had vanished, and a variety of things which Carey recognized had been in the back room the night before now found themselves on the shelves of the store front, most notably the cartons of Halloween candy. The observation left Carey wondering what exactly his Handy had done with the back room, with the store front now so clean. He had fallen asleep with the only key to the only door that he expected to exist on the accessible floors. Even the bodies had been relocated elsewhere; perhaps Angel had used its laser to cremate them, like it had accidentally of the RadRoach.

“Ah, Sir! You’re awake.” The pale blue Handy came from the back room to take a smooth, slow swerve around the checkout counter. It greeted its owner, offering up the other half of the can of water, which he took. “I trust you slept well? You tossed a lot.”

Carey dipped two fingers in the can and used the water to rub the sleep from his eyes. Then, he dried his face on the shoulder of his sleeve and began to sip at the can to wet his mouth. He himself tried his best not to recall the details of the feverish dream he’d had the night before, but his proclivities decided otherwise, and he twitched.

“I suppose I did.” He fidgeted, and looked past his Handy as he set the can down to argue with the placement of the bobby pins that had migrated in his sleep. “You’ve been quite busy, I see. Got this place looking great. All the junk from the corner is in the back room now, isn’t it? Fantastic work.”

“I try.” Angel beamed sheepishly. “I found a third room that was almost completely all rubbish, so for now I swept it all together in the first story stock room. If that’s not to your liking, we could dispose of it somehow. I’d gladly carry it off to a dumpster for you.”

Carey walked past his Handy to observe it had completely rearranged the back room. It had restocked the entirety of useful items from the room’s metal stock shelves to the store front, and had also disinterred an open doorway Carey had not noticed last night on the hunt for the bathroom. “I’m sure the rubbish is fine for now where you put it, but what I’m more intrigued by is, you uncovered the stairs--?”

He leaned against the door frame and eyed this third room. Although there were cracks in the far wall filtering in small amounts of sunlight, he still needed the light of his Pip-Boy to see. The small
lobby had a cream-colored couch with cube-shaped squat end tables to either side of it, butted up to the far wall, which beside that housed the aforementioned stairwell, with its door stuck open. To his right was a pair of elevators, and a door. The two leftmost doors both looked to require passkeys. Neither elevator looked functional, and Carey grimaced at the thought of having to get to the third floor on foot in his condition.

“I haven’t ventured to the upper stories, I’m afraid.” Angel came up behind him. “I didn’t want to abandon you, in case you had trouble with the stairs.”

The fact such a concern crossed both of them burned Carey, but he said nothing.

“What would you like for breakfast, Sir?” The Handy dug around in its back compartment. “I have some mutfruits. I picked them in Sanctuary Hills to bring along. They’re packed with vitamin C. Got to stave off malnutrition and the scurvy, if you’re to be subsisting chiefly on canned meats and the like, ha-ha!”

It presented a table knife and a large, rindy, lumpy indigo produce. Its owner set aside protest to accept the fruit and utensil, and he twisted out the woody stem with trouble. “You wouldn’t happen to be able to grind those coffee beans, would you? And could I have the potato crisps with this?”

“Here you go.” The Handy offered the tube of stacked chips also. “I’m afraid not. And we haven’t come across a working percolator yet, either, I hate to remind.”

“A shame. Maybe there’s one in the break room.”

The chemist sat himself down in the wheelchair again with his meal. He started with the potatoes, needing a starchy salt fix, and washed them down with the overgrown berry. The rind was edible and only mildly pithy, but he still used the table knife to peel it back and expose the tender, clumpy meat of the fruit, and pry out its pebbly chunks. While quite watery flavor-wise, the citrus notes still made it palatable. The seeds in each ‘pebble’ annoyed him, though he could chew them up as easily as sunflower seeds. As he ate, the contemplation crossed him whether they were closer to blackberries or blueberries, or possibly even somehow distantly related to the pomegranate, with the complexity of the flesh and the types of flavors it bore. He wiped his hands with the kerchief from the pocket of his slacks, and made a face at how crunchy the thing had already gotten. Either he’d have to wash it out soon, or find a fresher one.

He stood and set off for the stairs, with the Handy coming along. The sack hood went back on.

“What say we check out the upper stories today?”

“I’ll spot you. ...Is the hood entirely necessary?”

“Eleanor might still be here,” was the best he could explain.

It stayed no more than two feet behind as its owner tackled the stairs. Carey steadied himself with his cane every other step. As the two ascended, Carey looked upward arriving at the half-flight landing. The entire stairwell seemed in-tact, though he couldn’t assess whether all three stories’ lobbies had been damaged the same as the first. Navigating only by the light of his Pip-Boy all the while, the absence of any exterior light sources bolstered his optimism.

Entering the second story lobby, he found it in one piece as anticipated, though he could see in the screen-light that a crack stressed the far wall, at how the pale wainscotting and dark, peeling wallpaper buckled in. This floor’s operating lights for the elevators were lit, suggesting the lifts
themselves might still work. Like the first, this lobby also had a cream couch and twin end tables. A rotund lamp had fallen off one, though the other stood, and Angel compulsively righted the errant of the pair. Next to it lay a stack of deteriorating magazines, among them medical and pharmaceutical journals, as well as a few lifestyle magazines.

Down one direction was a door, the other a hallway. He took to the hallway first, to find the bathrooms to his left, and a pair of doors to either side of the end of the hall. The left one was metal, and had a wire-reinforced glass pane; trying it, he found it locked. The one on the right had a double-action swing door, with a reminder posted on it not to bring unpurchased merchandise into the break room.

“Oh my stars,” Angel awed as the two stepped into the break room. “Look at all these appliances! I insist I cook you something fantastical for dinner, Sir.”

Carey stared intently at the coffee pot on the far counter.

“Maybe we can find the breaker box and restore power to the building. Bet with my luck, it’s behind that door with the digital lock downstairs.”

There were six tables big enough to seat four to six people each, in a two-by-three-arrangement, with a scattering of chairs and reading material. The skeletons of several employees slumped over where they’d taken their morning coffee, or outright fallen from their chairs. Owing to the dry, sour smell of the corner, Carey dared not investigate the two hundred year old contents of the refrigerator—at least, not for now. Beside it stood a Nuka-Cola machine. A blender, a toaster, a pair of hot plates, and a toaster oven all crowded on the counter, and an industrial microwave hung from beneath the cabinetry.

The wall opposite boasted a Eat-O-Tronic machine at eye level, though when Carey glanced into the shuttered vent-style glass doors of the thing, he saw only plates of what likely at some point had been freshly prepared meals, with various impostors of meat, cheese, produce, and bread molded firmly to nearly spumescent plates. He helped himself to the Nuka-Cola machine, and sat with a Nuka Cherry. It wasn’t stealing if the company that owned it could no longer collect money, after all. Though flat and now immodestly alcoholic, he sighed with refreshment after a single swig from the iconic rocket-shaped bottle. All the classic, familiar flavors remained after two centuries. The cap ended up in his pocket, and he nursed at the beverage that had once been soda as he pulled some of the magazines on the table nearer him.

“I remember reading about these beetles.” He pointed at the article he was on, making more of a monologue than a dialogue of it. Angel was quite absorbed in assessing the kitchen space anyway. “There were compounds in their exoskeletons that could be extracted and distilled into powerful antiseptics. This piece is about using it to synthesize a salve. Some of my colleagues balked at this kind of thing. Called it folk medicine. But there were legitimate pharmaceutical claims as to the mechanism of the chem. I wonder if it ever would have found more significant applications.” He finished off the Nuke, finally feeling the headiness of the fermented cane sugar. “I’m sure they’re all extinct now.”

“I don’t know about that, Sir,” Angel replied offhandedly, arranging in the over-the-counter cabinetry all the various food supplies it had found. “I’ve encountered a great many variety of insects whilst you were in Vault 111.”

Carey simply murmured to himself in understanding. He thought a moment.

“Say, Angel. Could I root around in your storage a moment?”
“Of course, Sir. They are your things, after all.”

In addition to all the cash he’d accumulated, he also retrieved a dose of Melancholia, and he sat down under the pretense of counting his funds. He swapped out the bottle on the counter for the one he’d taken, and nursed it more greedily than he had the impromptu liquor. The two tasted so similar, aged two hundred years, though it was clear which was the headier quaff. Once it was emptied, the bottle from the opiate-and-supplement cocktail slipped into one of the nearby chairs.

Old habits die hard, they say.

Soon after, he took the Nuke bottle and closed the periodical, and approached the elevators. He went to push the call button to the left one, only to curse that it did in fact require a passkey. Of course it did. The one to the right seemed functional. It’d have to do—if it worked, anyway. He pushed the call button on it, and to his surprise the backup generator in the building still fed this machine. The speaker on the lift announced its downward descent, and he could hear the mechanisms and pulleys whirring. With a ding and the blink of a green light on the call button, the doors opened and Carey looked inside, not stepping foot inside.

Not yet. Everything about the car

seemed

trustworthy. He craned around to inspect the weight limit inscribed on the button panel. Three-thousand pounds. The buttons directed to the first three floors only. Surely, he could find a passkey on one of the break room employees. He cleared his throat and nudged the doors to recognize not to close on him, then he placed the empty cola bottle in the center of the short-bile beige carpet in the car. He pushed the third floor button and stepped away. Musingly, as the enameled pocket doors shut themselves, he waved goodbye to it.

“What

are

you doing, Sir?”

Angel had come to investigate, but Carey’s drooping, dopey eyes didn’t look away from the elevator in operation.

“Testing the integrity of the elevator.” Lyric dripped from his ineffectual tone. “I doubt it can go down to the first floor, with how bad it looked down there. But I’m sure it—” The operating light in the panel over the doors turned off. “But I’m sure it can go between the second and the third.” He pressed the call button again. When the doors opened a second time, the bottle greeted him anew, and he laughed. “Hi there.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but you weigh a far deal more than a glass cola bottle.”

“Had to see if the pulleys worked at all. Even just having this thing spruced into a dumbwaiter would be beneficial--especially if I can get that damn store room door open.” Slurring, he wagged a condemning finger at the door down the hall. “It’s an analogue lock, so it can’t be too hard.”

He tossed the cane on the couch, and pulled a bobby pin from his hair, screwdriver from his pocket in the other. Holding his tongue at varying angles as he knelt at the doorknob, he worked at picking the lock at length.

“Bingo.”
Carey pulled himself up by the doorknob, and Angel brought him his cane. The two entered the store room, lit only by the Pip-Boy display. At a passing glance, he could tell predominantly this was equipment back stock. Early on he recognized an unrusted wheelchair, though he could hardly consider it good fortune besides potentially using it to navigate the building once he could prove the elevator’s limitations.

“Shit!”

Carey grinned, and his cane clattered to the metal enamel floor as he snatched up a box.

“Sir, I understand you’re quite intoxicated, but language, please.”

“They
do

have orthotics! Leg braces. Wrist braces. Even a-- oh

shit, a surgical corset for posture control.”

“I take it this pleases you.” Angel idled a bit, unable to tell whether the cursing held genuine enthusiasm.

“Immensely.”

Carey disrobed and tried on a set of the pale canvas fabric-laced aids, while Angel wandered the room, seemingly to respect privacy. The corset came first, his most urgent price. He felt the hindsight regret of potentially getting the laces a bit too tight in his eagerness, but the smoothness of his chest and firmness in his back comforted him in ways he hadn’t felt since Vault-Tec had stripped him of his foundation-wear. He’d inherited his great grandmother’s bust flattener by request and used it to bind his chest for nearly twenty years, though it certainly would have never had the capacity to support his spinal column in such a way as he needed now!

It was difficult for him to break away from running his hands along how flat he now was, to equip himself with the other pieces. There was something so singularly soothing to know this article, unlike the flattener which the personnel had likely tossed in the incinerator, came unisex with no gender attachments.

Slowly, he began to feel like himself again. Better, even, perhaps.

The legs, upon closer inspection, were just stirrups for ankle support, but he felt even that minor of a help would benefit him—it took so much focus for him to keep himself from misstepping and putting his foot down wrong, and with these for reassurance he could put his attention to more crucial details. The wrist braces would help him stabilize his aim. As he buttoned his shirt, the lights turned on abruptly, and he squinted unpleasantly.

“Let’s shed some light on all this,” Angel prided from a far corner. “I found the auxiliary switch for this floor, Sir.”

Carey pulled up his suspenders and enthusiastically stared into space from where he sat in the floor.

“Guess I do get a hot meal tonight.”
That night after pairing a dinner of pan-seared Cram with a few shots of bourbon, Carey slept on the couch in the second floor lobby. He bundled up comfortably in a hospital blanket from the stock room. As much as his mind protested, he knew better than to sleep in his new braces and binding--especially not the corset. But, he reminded himself that he could simply don them fresh upon waking.

Day three at the pharmacy crowned first thing with Carey testing the elevator once more. As much as his constitution had prioritized his need to seek out the orthotics--god, sprinting down the Commons like that had felt disgusting--he knew exactly what he wanted lay on the third story. And while he had the braces on his side, he hoped that the elevator could shuttle him there reliably.

So, he located scales in the stock room. From there, he estimated he weighed just over a 110 pounds clothed, and he made Angel hover on one as well, to guarantee its thrusters’ applied pressure didn’t translate into weight. It stepped off, still confused.

“I’m not sure what this accomplishes, Sir.”

“Here, bring me a walker.”

“Surely.” It complied, and when indicated, balanced it folded up and upside-down on the scale. “Eleven pounds.”

Carey looked over to where the walkers were stored, folded up on the shelf.

“Put... ten of them in the elevator car for me, please. No, twelve.”

“I might have a misunderstanding of how these are used, if you need so many...”

“Look, they’re just the easiest unit of measurement I have handy. I don’t need a walker.” I don’t think, anyway... “I know it seems funny, but.”

Once Angel achieved the request, Carey pushed the third floor button and let the elevator travel upward. Once the light went off on the operating panel, he called the elevator back to the second floor.

“Twelve more.”

“...Yes, Sir.”

A second test proved the elevator could handle roughly a minimum 250 pounds.

“You can put them back in the stock room now.”
“As you wish.” Angel hovered back and forth with its three tentacle-limbs each loaded with four walkers at a time. “Seeing as you didn’t consider the elevator safe enough to test personally, does... whatever this was... assuage your fears of it?”

“I think I could handle riding it to the third floor, if that’s what you’re asking.” Carey stood and snatched up the last of his sweet roll, and shoved it in his mouth. He dusted off his hands in a steeling gesture, then stepped into the again-empty elevator. His grin with a cane across the car threshold kept the pocket doors from shutting. “Come with me?”

Angel rushed to cram in with its owner.

“Oh! So soon?”

“Third floor,” the elevator announced, holographic and androgynous.

With a pleased sigh, Carey exited the car with his Handy in tow. The doors shut behind them. This floor’s lobby had two armchairs and a coffee table, and some large fake potted plants. The door to the stairwell was in tact, as were the bathrooms. Like the two floors before it, this lobby still boasted both elevators. Unlike the other floors, besides access to the other floors this one only had a single heavy white wooden panel door. Before entering, he put his hood on again from his back pocket.

The chemist let himself in, and walked into what looked like a reception desk littered with paperwork, a terminal, and a keyboard. The light of his Pip-Boy scattered across the receptionist who now lay decomposed in the floor beside her office chair. Relieved to have found no ghouls, he took his hood back off, his hair mussed worse for nothing. Behind the desk stood a heavy digital security door. Squinting, Carey tried to peek in with a hand against the glass. He could see a faint green glow, but had no way of knowing if it came from a backup power source or the indicator light to something inside. He banged his fist on the glass angrily and slouched at the computer terminal with a growl.

“Fuck me. I knew the chems would be behind glass like this.” He scrutinized the terminal on the desk. “At least the terminal the door’s wired to is still working. It’s heavily encrypted, though. Could take me days, weeks, to figure it out.”

“Is it really so critical to gain access to the chem stores?” A hard pause and Carey turned his head slow to glare at his Handy. “Yes, yes, it’s certain to have some kind of medication that can help.” It knew this had nothing to do with its owner’s health.

“Could you be a dear and... make me a pot of coffee, Angel? I’m going to be at this for the rest of the afternoon.”

“It would be my pleasure.”

Angel dashed off, grateful for the chance to get away before popping off sarcasm. Besides, it knew his chem stash was inside it, and if it excused itself, he couldn’t get at them.

Carey found the password was ten characters long, based on the command line which blinked at him. This newer model of RobCo terminal interfaced with Pip-Boys, to his delight: it took both holotapes and the key-prong. Eager, he rooted around the receptionist’s desk drawers for a holotape he could cannibalize. The receptionist relied heavily upon a large library of them, and she had entire dedicated file cabinet specially suited for them among the furniture of the small office. After loading a few of them to browse, he found one with only two or three entries on it, and proceeded to format it.
Thank you, Eleanor."

While the tape formatted, he continued rummaging the desk. Nothing looked like it could have been the cheat for the password. Before he dove into repurposing the holotape, he made sure no holotapes in the library stuck out to him, which might have been the key all along.

Carey removed his Pip-Boy and set it up on the counter. He pulled up the command screen on it and loaded the blank holotape into its cassette tray, then plugged in the key-prong to make use of the terminal’s keyboard. He still hadn’t figured out how to input data into the Pip-Boy directly, and this was a facile cop-out. By the time Angel returned, he’d gotten embroiled in composing a simple decryption tape.

“Here you go.” It set a clean mug of hot black coffee beside its owner. “Is the going as tough as you expected?”

“Not so sure yet. I’m just grateful RobCo put out any cross-compatible models before the world ended. I don’t even know if it’s possible to write anything to this Mark IV model of Pip-Boy. You remember that I clocked into the Deenwood Compound with the key-prong of my Mark III model? The thing had a holotape in it we had to guard with our lives, and plugging it into the security door loaded the data from the holotape into its terminal, which only had the key-prong and not the holotape cassette tray. Two-part key. I guess that’s how they kept people from doing what I’m doing now.” He nodded thankfully as he picked up the mug with one hand and took a testing sip. When it didn’t taste horrid, he took a second. “Exquisite. It may be two hundred years old, but fresh ground coffee still tastes fresh. Angel, you still make the best coffee.”

“That means the world to hear, Sir.” Its ocular lens flitted anxiously. “What is it that you’re ‘doing now’?”

“I’m writing an algorithm that suppresses the encryption that’s censoring what each byte of data holds in it. It’s not going to crack the password for me, but it’s at least going to let me see letters instead of a billion bytes of punctuation. If I’m lucky, it’s a word and not a random set of characters.” Carey stopped a moment and counted on his fingers as he mouthed the letters. “Damn, ‘pharmacy’ is eight letters. ‘Pharmaceutical’?” He shook his head.

“I’m not sure that’s wise, though I’m most impressed, Sir.”

A few more skims of the script left Carey confident enough to pop in the tape into his Pip-Boy and run it. It seemed to work, Eleanor’s screen then displaying twelve ten-letter words, interspersed with miles of ASCII symbols. He didn’t see any good guesses among them, so he tried the first on the screen: CIRCUMFLEX. His script indicated the input had only two characters in common with the answer.

With so little overlap, he couldn’t readily discern a pattern; so, he tried the second word: JACKANAPES. It also had two characters in common--however, his script told him one of these characters was in a different position from those of the first guess. He wasn’t a master at hacking or decryption, just good at undermining basic protocols, so the formula to putting this information to good use didn’t present itself immediately. He started scrawling notes on a piece of scrap paper, and jotted down the twelve words so he could still study them should the terminal clam up like he thought it would likely soon.

The third blind attempt--ACQUIESCED--had yet another pair of characters in common. He wondered if any of these three pairs overlapped. Noticing the trend, he observed finally that all twelve possibilities had an ‘E’ in the ninth position, and he bit his upper lip. He scrawled a sort of Hangman at the top of his notes:
The computer let him have a fourth try, so he tried the fourth option: *SEXUALIZED*. He laughed in frustration when this not only was wrong—the terminal locked him out for trying too many times. Yet, thanks to his decryption script, the screen displayed that the guess had four positions in common with the actual password—three which he hadn’t had prior.

As he downed his rapidly room-temperature coffee, he pored over the twelve words looking for further patterns. Six of them ended in a ‘D,’ and *ACQUIESCED* was the only one of those that didn’t end in ‘IZED.’ He’d already tried *SEXUALIZED*, so he had his next four attempts narrowed down fairly quickly once he formed a strategy. In hindsight, it would have benefited him to forge a strategy before the series of attempts.

The screen said Carey still had 34 minutes before it would let him test his theory. He sat back with a sigh, and glanced around the room with closer attention to detail. Angel had gone back downstairs. He took a smoke break and glanced down at Eleanor. Cautiously, he knelt down to check her for valuables. In addition to praising she had on her person what looked like the passkey to the private elevator, he also took the silver locket around her neck. He couldn’t make out more than there being three faces between its two halves, the snippets of photography faded beyond recognition. He pocketed the passkey and jewelry, and proceeded to go through the desk for valuables now that he’d combed it initially for keys. Something felt so relatably muddy about the passing thought that the password had died with her.

“I’m about to get it, though,” he told her, “especially if it lets me try four more times.”

The time didn’t pass quickly enough, and his mind wandered again to the African beetles. He recalled folk medicine making use of all kinds of insects, for all kinds of remedies. Termites, centipedes, even grasshoppers, scorpions, and spiders. He also knew of the less reputable uses, as the vehicle of imbuing the individual with different boons... or as the source for powerful hallucinogens. A resin distilled from the finely ground powder of a particular arachnid he couldn’t recall the identity of—camel didn’t sound right—had been highly sought after in the black market, and he and Jacob had dealt with it several times. Simply named, the junkies called it *Resin*. From his understanding, its psychotropic potency exceeded that of even psilocybin, or even Jet, and one typically heated it just enough to liquefy in order to inject it. He never sampled the stuff himself, owing to its notoriously high addition rate.

He’d had enough expensive habits to nurture.

Half of them went into cooking Melancholia. Melancholy. You are what you put in your body, right? He’d have to take stock of how much of the chem-coction Angel had left.

The Handy had left the carafe of coffee with him, and he topped off his cup. His thoughts returned to the giant cockroaches and horseflies that had infested the New England Commonwealth. He wondered if any served the same significance as the Resin scorpion?

Eleanor’s terminal let him in again at last, and he hunkered down to scrutinize his choices against the list to ensure it hadn’t shuffled them. All four of his theory-words still appeared among them and he sighed, taking one last puff off his cigarette before putting it out in Eleanor’s ashtray. *OXYGENIZED*. Five in common, proving to Carey his theory held clout. Among the remaining three, he ruled out the unlikely *TEXTURIZED*, and tried *SEQUELIZED*. When that didn’t work, power of elimination left him with *ALCHEMIZED*.

Somehow, he’d all along had a feeling it was the right answer. He’d always thought he liked Eleanor.
After confirming the password, Carey left the door shut. He called out to Angel to see if it was within earshot, so he could report his success, but he didn’t get a response. He put his Pip-Boy back on and took his cane and his cup of coffee with him into the pharmacy lab and stock room alone.

His Pip-Boy cast a hard rim light on the equipment and shelving. To his left around the corner lay the chem lab, and to his right, the pharmaceutical stock with a dozen or so metal stock shelves. Even better than he expected, he sipped on his coffee, and took in his victory in awe. Given some acclimating, this could certainly be a veritable playground for Melancholy.

The chemist specialized in sedatives and painkilling agents. That’s what the military wanted him for: to study the applications of opiates. The more he thought about it, the more he felt the moniker fit him better than his own name, or nationalized name, ever had. He’d gone by his last name longer than he could even remember the exact point at which he’d committed to it. But to become a symbol, an avatar of the poppy? He had already, in his short time unfrozen, become something entirely otherworldly than he’d known in his past life.

Yes. Before the vault. That was a past life. Being frozen had been antiseptic in nature, and killed off the bacterial infections of compunction and reservation. This new world fostered a culture which could nourish and condition the latent aspects hidden away within himself which humanity had failed to recognize. Without time, he could tell neither if this quality was pieces of his identity to which society had been willfully oblivious, nor some vestigial proof of an embrace of atavistic progress.

But he would tap into it here. This building would be a crucible for change.

As he leaned proudly against the desk at the inventory side of the room, he felt a sharp pain in his foot, and jerked with a hiss. The mug shattered in the floor when he dropped it, and coffee splattered everywhere. He flashed his Pip-Boy this way and that because he heard the spill agitated something in here. Breathing heavy, he clutched at his cane. He wasn’t alone. Another ankle-bite jerked him to the floor, and he slid head-first backwards into the metal desk-front. With him now in the floor, the vermin revealed themselves, a dozen RadRoaches skittering eagerly toward their next meal.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Insects, insect gore, drugs ideations, and food tw's.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaking.

Seeking his face, the two-foot-long RadRoaches flowed up Carey’s legs. He’d contended with these insects in Vault 111 as well, and defrosting and awaking to their thinking him an intruder had punctuated the jet lag. Here, it was less a rude awakening and more a rude greeting. He should have known better. What kind of oversight to think, when he found no humans or even ghouls, that this building had no inhabitants!

He smacked the barrel of his cane over the one in the lead. Its carapace over his thigh cracked not at all unlike that of shucking a crab, and the insect generously splattered its oleous innards. Though half the vermin scattered upon this one impact, the rest dove around their fallen ally in hot pursuit of the invader’s sweet face-flesh. The light from Carey’s Pip-Boy swung about in the fray as though a dangling light bulb in a shaking building, its illumination frenzied, dizzying, and uneven. A second light source came right at him—the source of the chartreuse glow he’d observed from afar before he’d entered.

Steady, Carey. Remember, one solid hit is all these fucks take.

Radiation imposed from the seams of this one’s exoskeleton, and he misconstrued the sputtering clicks of his Pip-Boy’s Geiger counter as threatening emanations from the enormous roaches. Carey kicked the glowing vermin in the face, and it reeled a few feet away before flying right for him along the ground. He cried out and fumbled to whack it away with the crook of his cane. Its body broke against the foot of a nearby lab desk.

A forceful hammering of his heel against the floor crushed a third, but the remaining two went for his forearms. He flinched as he shielded his face. The cane dropped to the enameled metal floor. When the RadRoaches would not relent, he laid down with his hands to his face, and stupidly hoped they would get bored if he stopped struggling. They persisted; but in falling over, he recovered enough to catch them off-guard, and he smashed both of them against the floor.

Ragged wheezing slid out of Carey as he recollected his faculties and belongings. The altercation had knocked off his glasses, and he felt around in the dimness for them and his cane. When he sat up, he winced at the deep nicks in his left forearm, left by the roaches’ blade-like mandibles. He sooner prioritized finding the breaker box for the floor than tending his injuries. Somehow, he appreciated that he’d had his sleeves rolled: for a feeble chemist, repairs of the flesh came more easily than those of fabric.

He pushed off with the cane to stand, and shambled cautiously along the walls of the room, his shaky eyes ever vigilant for the RadRoaches that had retreated. There had been twelve of them at the start, hadn’t there? Carey counted five dead. Only his dress shoes and hard rubber cane tip traversed the floor with any sound, so surely the rest must have fled.

Or, maybe he just couldn’t hear over the blood pressure surging in his ears.
Light and electricity soon returned to this floor of the building, and he turned off his Pip-Boy screen. The familiar fluorescent overhead lighting soothed him, its faint humming the lie of comfortable sterility. Now that he could see unimpeded by a windowless room, he navigated the lab readily.

He encountered two long, small confection tins on one of the lab desks and sighed in exasperated relief at the trademark label. Mentats.

“Oh, thank fuck.” He groaned and slid the lid off one tin to dispense a small white seltzer-like tablet, which he promptly chewed up as he continued investigating the lab. “Maybe now I can focus.”

He’d gone two hundred years without a fix. All the chemists at both his jobs in the States had relied on them by requisite of their positions: nursing an appetent addiction to the minty chem’s boons of neurological efficiency and productivity gains came naturally to anyone in a medical manufacturing field, it seemed. Maybe he’d get lucky and put his hands on a few syringes of Daddy-O, too. Or, better yet, some barberry syrup and ethylene glycol--so he could whip up a few batches of intensely potent Berry Mentats. Albeit alarmingly experimental in perspective, the Deenwood chemists all seemed to rely upon what they all endearingly termed a special edition flavor.

Everything carried a collectedness, a clarity, his mind abuzz. A sense of normality, familiarity, returned to him, standing here in a lab, standing here like this. His mind felt like his own now. For now. Carey’s gaze halted upon the wall-mounted locked glass-front gun case near the security door he’d entered.

A Syringer.

He whet dry lips and hooked his cane over his left arm, to ineffectually wipe the grime from his hands with his crusty kerchief, then worked at picking the lock with his screwdriver and one of his hairpins. It gratified him, his formed habituation of having pocketed the tool, half a two-part skeleton key. He could go and take as he pleased, provided sufficient time and patience. The kerchief hadn’t quite done the trick, so he compulsively smeared his hands along the backside of his legs to knock off further oily residue from the insects’ guts, then kept at the gun case until he had it open.

He admired the weapon in both hands as he extricated it from its place. His fingers traced along the rifle-styled copper blowgun, which most commonly utilized tranquilizers, and his eyes followed its sights down the barrel. Subduing threats often proved more effective than simply shooting them, depending on what chem piloted them in the moment. The all-too-familiar Psycho came to mind, and how security on base had relied upon Syringers to subdue without killing subjects puppeteered past their thresholds of pain, injury, and self-preservation. As predicted, he put his hands on a few boxes of Pax Syringes at the bottom lip of the case.

Melancholy would have to play with the notion of what else might be more effective--or more fun--than the Pax tranquilizer. He nearly lamented that it had not been Calmex, which evinced a low smooth enough to afford self-administration, but reminded himself the two had very different applications. His nostalgic grin washed into self-consciousness when he could hear his Handy’s thrusters approaching the lab. Angel came up beside him and eyed the rifle he still held.

“My word, what happened here?”

Carey murmured, “I intruded.”
Reminded of the carnage, he set down the rifle and rounded back to identify from which pieces of the RadRoaches he might ideally isolate useful compounds. He cracked off legs, and collected abdomens wherever they remained in tact. With the Glowing RadRoach, he also scraped together its slime into a chemistry jar and stoppered it.

“These samples will have to suffice for now. Maybe their friends will return later. They scattered like cockroaches.”

A grimy hand to his mouth stifled a licentious chuckle.

“They certainly roughed you up. What a mess.” The Handy promptly descended upon the broken coffee cup with its housekeeping attachments, and deposited the bits of ceramic in a nearby waste bin. It looked to its owner with knowing concern, recognizing the Mentats in his tone and behavior. “Sir... You really should reconsider bringing your work home with you.”

“What can I say? It’s a calling, and its calling me?” Wryly, Carey piled up his findings on a medical tray, and placed it on the nearest lab desk. Lost in thought, he repeatedly stroked his fingertips over the scraping slices the roaches had taken out of his forearm. He raised his chewed-up forearm level to his head as he spoke next, his tone uneven but hardly composed. “I was fortunate the Pip-Boy provided me a bit of protection. Angel, would you... be a dear and... administer a Stimpak to my left arm?”

“--Certainly.”

Without hesitation, the robot produced the requested medication and took ginger hold of his wrist to press the pneumatic syringe to this antecubital fold. An astringent pleasantry, Carey spectated as his wounds healed in real time. Angel didn’t feel like the more enticing option, but still it tried:

“Could I impose upon you to take a break for dinner, Sir? It’s late, and you ought to rest up your injury. Remember, we found Yum Yums! I could use them to make you an egg salad perhaps? And I could... freshen your coffee...?”

“...Mm, I suppose pacing myself couldn’t hurt. Besides, now that I’ve got an idea of the lab’s amenities, I ought to assess what from the store room I could make use of here.” The cool derangement in his grinning eyes grazed Angel, and the robot’s ocular lenses stuttered. “Egg salad sounds exceptional.”

Jerking at the unexpected success, it flew animate and excited.

“Come join me whilst I prepare it? You can catch me up what all you’ve discovered up here, if you like. I’d love to hear what all you’re scheming!”

“Mm. You would, then, wouldn’t you.” Carey retrieved one of the tins of Mentats to take with him, then walked out into the receptionist’s office to retrieve the carafe. “Shall we?”

“--Sshall,” was the best it could muster. The Handy never had liked this side of its owner.

Carey sat in the break room with the catalog from the store front register, and pored over it with a new cup of the same coffee. One hand fidgeted with the mug, the other with the publication, and both eyes glued indifferently to the catalog.

“Say Angel, how many doses of Melancholia are left?”

“Twenty-seven, Sir. Hm!”
“Hm indeed...”

Angel added a few ingredients to the blender and puréed them. Then it poured the pale purple concoction into a tall glass, and, with the tongs which terminated one of its trio of mechanical tendrils, it presented it to its owner, who accepted the stuff in a tempered confusion.

“What say you of a smoothie?”

Unperturbed by a testing sniff, Carey took a drink of it. His face scrunched a bit. Chalky, salty, heavy, and inexplicably sharp. He took a second sip anyway.

“You didn’t happen to find sugar in the pantry, did you? What is this?”

“Why, I blended a Mutfruit with one of the eggs, and a few other things I happened upon in the cabinets. Vitamins and protein in one convenient beverage! The sweetest thing we have is the sweet rolls, I’m afraid. And-- the Halloween candy! Do you think that might suit you?”

The image of intention came to mind, of adding pulverized licorices and ribbon candy to... whatever this was. The chemist narrowly kept himself from retorting couldn’t possibly make it taste any worse, instead shoving the ill-placed sarcasm into taking another big sip. Christ, this isn’t a smoothie or an egg salad, and it’s nowhere between the two either. I didn’t program it to do this. Was this a result of deteriorating algorithms, or has it somehow learned this compulsion?

“It’s wonderful as is, Angel. I do think I’d still like the Yum Yums themselves--an accoutrement to your fancy beverage here.”

 Brutal honesty then would have merely excused unwarranted meanness and crassness. What point was there, in verbal cruelty towards a machine? His Handy was trying its best. At what, he couldn’t be certain.

Angel brought over the half-dozen carton of deviled eggs, and he opened it to pluck out one for himself. Their whites had transformed dark and translucent, their yolks now a waxy heterogeneity of ashen grey and rusty gold. He sniffed at one, and noted its pungency did not evoke the same manner of gag reflex as something which had rotted. Cautiously, he nibbled it, and, intrigued, nodded as he chewed slowly. Muskiness clung to his mouth, something like accidentally having tasted cologne. Where the other components in the smoothie previously masked this note, an attempt to wash down the bite of egg with the concoction only served to overwhelm all other flavors. He coughed, disguising his displeasure by faking food going down wrong, and chugged at his coffee.

He definitely owed Angel long-overdue repairs and firmware tweaks, and this experience underscored the need for it. He made a mental note to scrutinize to what extent he could provide such care with the extant resources on premises. At the very least, he could try to program definitions into its algorithms so it had updated knowledge on what post-apocalyptic food tasted like. Not that it could understand flavor.

Carey finished the other half of the Yum Yum anyway.

He couldn’t subsist solely on Melancholia. Could he?

Appetite spoiled, again he pored over the pages boasting the company’s orthotics offerings, compared those he’d found to the variety advertised. The most basic provisions for minor infirmities and sprains. Unavailable at most locations, the sturdiest and most rigid binding Walden carried seemed nearly excessively so: fan-laced surgical orthotics. The company stocked

His nostrils punctuated a breath, and he cursed in Russian at his coffee under his breath.

*These braces are fine. A trek like that, on foot. It's both excessive and out of the question.*

*They're fine.*

*I'm fine.*

He looked at his Pip-Boy and pretended that seeing it was after midnight had caused his irritation. He then slammed back the last third of his coffee in one go and put down the cup beside the egg carton. Mentats in hand, he shuttled himself off to the lobby couch.

“I’m turning in for the night,” he told Angel on his way out the door. “The day I’ve had is... catching up to me.”

“Rest well, Mister Carey! I’ll be sure not to disturb you.”

The Mentats went to one of the side tables with his glasses, and he sat on the couch while he struggled to remove the braces, which he set in the floor beside the couch before buttoning his shirt back up and curling up under the hospital blanket. The thorough oily coating in his mouth, and his nettled confidence, persisted throughout the night.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Now supplied with overhead light, Carey investigates the stock room. Food squick tw.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaking.

At first, Carey thought he’d awoken to a hangover, but remembered he hadn’t had a drink the day before. He deduced dehydration when he couldn’t recall the last he’d drunk anything besides coffee. Jolting up on the lobby couch, he fretted over whether Angel had used the water reserves to make coffee the day before, or if the Handy had somehow used tap water. He squinted, too tired to speculate.

The morning ached in long stitches. He removed his dress shirt and threaded himself back into his spinal corset. In a fumble of beleaguered jerks, he adjusted the laces tight enough to his liking, then dropped his hands to either side of him. He stared out hollowly at the blown-out skeleton of the dropped ceiling at length before he even bothered with the rest of the orthotics, or even put his shirt back on. How much of the debris from downstairs had been the stuff from the dropped ceiling? By comparison, the ceiling on the second or third floors hadn’t made all that much mess. This line of thought, too, required more caffeine than he had in him.

He took his glasses and the Mentats tin and ambled into the break room. Alone, he shook the now-cold half-full percolator, but the idea of coffee turned him off for probably the first time in his life. Skimming the cabinets yielded nothing he thought might appease the intense nausea which beset him. The deteriorated, faded packages and the biting sourness of the fridge corner evinced his delusion that any preservatives in food from before his freeze would have kept them food-safe all these years. Even the Salisbury steaks felt suspect. Had any of the questionable things he’d eaten set off his stomach? Again, he worried about the unknown water source which had percolated his caffeine fix. He discarded these hindsights, and he settled on one of the three bottles of Melancholia which Angel had so graciously considered food rations in themselves. Surely, the nutritive substitute wouldn’t prove past its prime like everything else.

Like him.

Carey set the cane across a table, and sat and unscrewed the bottle. He nipped at it tiredly. After a few sips, he set it down and rubbed at his nose bridge with a grumble. Not even the syrupy horrid medicinal cherry flavor of Melancholia could wash out the sulfurous bouquet of the ‘smoothie’ which had permeated every surface of his mouth. In repeated attempt to liberate it of its increasingly rank coating, his tongue smeared against the roof of his mouth and his front teeth raked across his tongue. Irritable, he chugged the rest of the nutrient-fortified meal substitute, tossed the empty bottle in the sink, and wandered into the stock room again, flicking on the lights.

The heavy low set in as Carey paced about. Actually following dosing directions this time, he popped a Mentat under his tongue and let it dissolve sublingually. He recognized a need to meter his Mentats usage, without knowing the pharmacy’s stock. The wartime rations had affected everything, especially the public’s access to chems, and likely impacted availability even at warehouse levels. He couldn’t afford to risk profligacy with a cache of something which so readily defogged his frost-mired grey matter.
Deflated and restless, he shuffled about the stock room shelves. This time he had overhead light to facilitate skimming the overall supply at a glance, not just his Pip-Boy light. Bedpans. Gauze. Thermometers. All the saline, iodine, isopropyl alcohol, and witch hazel a medic could ask for. Needles and catgut. A variety of scissors, forceps, lances, scalpels, and the like, all rusted beyond any patent usefulness. A crate of walking canes beside the walkers. He gritted his teeth. He couldn’t use the box of Epsom salts without a place to soak, and he disowned the heartache of it by tossing the box unceremoniously back on the shelf where he’d found it.

Carey grunted as he unfolded the unrusted wheelchair to sit in it, and he hooked the cane between himself and the armrest, across the back and seat upholstery. With a few testing nudges at the chrome handrims, he resigned to tooling around the building in it for a bit. To try it out, he told himself. As he went along, he noted that walking put less strain on his upper body than wheeling himself, but he felt steadier. Compromise peddled him along by shuffling his feet. Though he still denied it, the altercation with the RadRoaches had enervated him. There would be more roaches. There always were. If he wanted to survive their next encounter, he’d have to make compromises like these. Besides, he couldn’t live in the orthotics, and until he could better determine the permanency he feared of his condition, he needed to acclimate to other modes of mobility.

The wheelchair set him on a different eye level, and he seized upon the hygiene section where it had previously eluded him. After all, he’d last bathed in 2077, and he felt that grime to the bone. His intent stare scanned the shelves. Mouthwash. Toothbrushes. Toothpaste. Dental floss. Hairbrushes and combs. Shampoos and bar soap. Towels and washcloths. Toilet paper, oh lord why hadn’t he considered the horror of running out of toilet paper. Unintelligible exasperation compelled the eager vault survivor to lay a towel across his lap and scoop a wide variety of these things into it. Holding back tears of excitement, he propelled himself to the second-floor bathroom like a deadline chased him. Before he even got there, a gob of toothpaste and the freshly unpackaged toothbrush already churned in his mouth. The paste didn’t taste like much of anything anymore, but it still very much did the trick.

He dumped his treasures into the bathroom floor beneath the sink, and hung up the towel and a washcloth on the handrail beside the toilet. The ceramic wall-mounted sink held his gaze as he continued to scour the taste of Angel’s deviled egg smoothie from his mouth. The mirror had fallen off the wall, but the pieces no longer littered the pale tile floor as they had yesterday, owing to Angel’s compulsive cleaning habits. He turned on the faucet and the wall gave up a metallic groan before pouring out sour gold-brown water. He let it run for a while, his eyes shut in meditative comfort slowly continuing to brush. He still distrusted the water, but the unyielding need for self-care stifled any concern.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” He turned the hot water handle up to max, to let it run. “I’d get irradiated?”

The stress of that permanent looming threat cracked through the froth into a weak, tickled chuckle. He expectorated, but kept brushing his tongue. Then, he noticed just how much blood he’d spat out, and stopped and watched it swirl down the sink, tongue slowly receding back into his mouth with a frown.

When the flow no longer appeared yellow from years trapped in the plumbing, he set the back of his hand beneath it. His Pip-Boy’s Geiger counter didn’t make a pip, but the faucet still ran cold. Just running the hot line demonstrated no diminished flow, so he deduced that rather than the boiler or plumbing impacting water pressure, the first floor’s breakers more likely must have fed the boiler for the building.

They’d have to excavate the first floor’s back room to survey. The building wouldn’t have a
bathtub or shower, but perhaps eventually he might regain hot water without having to boil it in small batches with a hot plate. A plastic cup went under the faucet, and he swished with it a few cupfuls. The water garnered a distant contentment. Chasing it with a bit of mouthwash helped ease both the metallic flavor and his mind.

He pulled out all the bobby pins he could locate in his nest of hair, and put them in his slacks pocket. Locking the door out of habit, he disrobed and deposited his effects in the seat of the wheelchair. The first bar soap he unwrapped had gone rancid, but he opened a second to find it almost pristine. The shampoo smelled more like book paste now, but still flowed from the bottle well enough.

It wasn’t a bubble bath or an Epsom soak, and it was cold as hell, but it would have to do for now. The soaps and such would remain in the bathroom, tucked in the floor beneath the sink. Carey sat in the wheelchair to reaffix his braces and binding, and put his glasses back on, but stopped short with his clothes and Pip-Boy in his lap. It irked him, the mess he’d made of his ensemble, but he couldn’t reasonably remedy it with just a small sink and bar soap. Surely, he could locate Abraxo venturing into town—if not in the supermarket, the high rises or their laundromat. He re-dressed and latched the bulky grey-green Pip-Boy back around his left wrist, then wandered back to the break room. He pushed the swing door open with his feet and wheeled himself inside, then shoved a chair aside to sit at a table, still drying his long, dark hair.

“Angel, a question: Did you brew the coffee yesterday with purified water, or with tap water?”

The pale blue Handy busied itself with… something in the far corner.

“Oh, Sir! Good afternoon!” It jammed the door of the fridge shut and rushed to refill the coffee cup it had cleaned when its owner had excused himself. It handed the lukewarm drink to him. “My word, though, what a question. I used the canned water! Was I not supposed to?”

“Oh, ah.” Though he knew now he could trust it, he stared into the black coffee. Somehow, the answer disappointed him. “No, it’s not that. I just realized this morning that clean water might be rarer than I thought. Coffee seems like it should stay a treat for now, unfortunately. Until we find a trustworthy water source. I need to test the water here for pathogens, but I don’t really have the tools or know-how for that.”

“If it pleases you, Sir, I might remind you that all General Atomics Mister Handies come standard issue with a network of condensators. Mine haven’t worked for some time, but perhaps were they operational again, I might… refine water for you?”

Nearly startled by the comment and its spectrum of implications, he looked up from his drink at the robot, still not having taken a sip. Of course, Angel was just as worse for wear as he was–it had operated, to his knowledge, the entire time he’d been in stasis. The condensators were nearly nonessential components of the robot, but if they’d stopped working, far more must also have. A remiss sorriness drained color from his face.

“I seem to have upset you, so let’s put that behind us for now. Forgive me for not having prepared your breakfast this morning, but you’ve told me in the past that if you had no engagements, to let you sleep… You look like you feel a thousand times improved.” Its ocular lenses flickered over him. “And… you did opt for the wheelchair, after all, I see.”

“I’m just trying it out.” Carey stiffened as he drank the stale beverage. “And yeah, a good wash does wonders, doesn’t it?” He hid gnashed teeth best he could, the stress leaching out the Melancholia from his flesh. “Say, how much bourbon have we got left?”
The Handy rummaged through its own back compartment to reach the glass bottles it had opted to keep in stow rather than shelve anywhere just yet.

“Roughly twelve ounces,” it said, eyeing the bottle once it had located it.

“Whiskey? Vodka?”

The chemist hadn’t really committed to memory the vestiges of the wet bars he’d cleaned out along the way.

“Besides the bourbon, you do have a bit of vermouth, rum, and vodka left as well. Though, I do recommend the bourbon if you intend to mix it with your coffee, Sir, since we’re without cream.”

“That’s all right. Bring me the rum, please.”

Angel obliged.

“Should we aim to restore a wet bar here? Perhaps we could locate a cache of liquor here in the ruins of Lexington, hm! Comb the high rises to lift your spirits, ha-ha!”

“Cute, Angel. …Once I’m acclimated to the building here, and to myself,” he interjected under his breath while he poured liberally, “we’ll have to do some supply runs. Bare minimum, shoulder our way past those… ghousls into the Super Duper Mart. Hopefully, they haven’t squatted the market in large numbers.” He took a swig of the doctored caffeine and slumped in his seat. “Lord, that was terrible the other day. I’m sure they’re not just in the market, though. I’m more worried about them than I am about my constitution. We’ll have to ready up for that.”

He refrained from mentioning any desire to visit Hawthorne at the Red Rocket.

“In the mean time, I’m confident we can certainly make this place quite cozy. Do you think it feels secure enough to work towards calling it home?”

“For a while, at least.” The smooth spiciness seeped into him, and the mellow returned a bit. He held his tongue, not to complain aloud of his lack of a bathtub. “But right now, I’m going to use the afternoon to take stock of the… equity of the lab.”

“I’ll be down here, if you need me, Sir.”

Carey tossed the towel down from around his neck, tired of rubbing at his hair.

“What were you doing when I came in, anyway?”

“Oh, well! I had hoped to clean out the refrigerator, since we’ve got power in this room again.” It demonstrated the trouble by re-opening it. A thick, fine-filament mass coated every surface, and wrinkled sac-like fruits bulged from it. “It will take some time, I’m afraid, but nothing a little pluck and elbow grease can’t remedy.”

“Are those…” He wheeled up closer, and noted the pale lime glow of the fungus. His face fell slack. “…That’s brain fungus. There must have been some cross-contamination from one of the technician’s lab coats, and the spores ended up in here. Or maybe, someone stored a sample in the fridge with all the food for some godawful reason. –Doesn’t matter how it got there, really.” He sniffed, his lip curling a touch. “Good lord, were’ looking at a lot of Mentats there.”

“Does this mean the mold bears some value to you, then?”
“Utmost.”

“But the appliance is so vile, Sir.”

“So is most of the building. I’ll manage.” Carey pointed at the Handy with a firm, accusatory glare. “Do not clean out that fridge. Not before I secure another place to harvest them from. I don’t know how rare they are now, or what kind of viable stock remains upstairs. Consider it the first medication I’ve touched upon so far that has given me legitimate reprieve from my… illness.” He grabbed his coffee cup to take it with him. “Speaking of viable stock, you know where to find me.”

“I wish you luck.”

Carey stopped short of the swing door and turned back to his Handy.

“You don’t happen to remember where the antifreeze from in Sanctuary ended up, do you?”

It knew exactly what he was on about, and suddenly it lit up at the opportunity to assist however needed in his procurement of the requested chemical.

“Ah! I know right where it is. Go on ahead to the laboratory. I’ll bring it to you!”

“Thank you. You’re an angel.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Tw's: Assault, hard drug use, drug dealing, ptsd episode.

Does Carey is allowed to have not-bad time?

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaks.

Carey exited the elevator and glanced about the third floor lobby. The private elevator’s operating lights nagged at him. He felt in his pocket for the passkey he’d taken from Eleanor, but he did not pull it out. Though the elevator’s liminal destination nagged at him, he resigned himself to the immediate task of browsing the inventory of the lab... and, he reminded himself with a smirk, sampling as he saw fit. Surely, something in this building could help him feel better, if only in spirit.

As he entered the lab office, he found that Angel had dispatched with the secretary’s body in the same way it had the others on lower floors. He hoped the Handy had done something respectful with them all. Upon entering the lab itself, a bated breath cut out of him. The RadRoach carcasses had also vanished, along with most of the legs and abdomens he’d collected. Evident of theft rather than Angel’s cleaning habits, however—the Handy would have never lacked this level of meticulousness—the slimy streaks evident of theft trailed all over the medical tray and desk and floor, and indicated a different culprit altogether.

“Damn opportunists. Cannibals.” The chemist clicked his tongue in distaste, eyeing the stoppered bottle of ichorous goop. “At least they didn’t take the jar.”

As he browsed the shelves for anything of interest, he daydreamed of the tapestry of wasteland flora and fauna now available to him. The nuclear exchange had gifted the chance for transformation to more than just himself. He’d already encountered massive flies and roaches, and the thought of finding a scorpion similarly mutated, which might yield a resin like the one he and Hawthorne sometimes encountered trafficking chems... He shuddered in an unwholesome rigor. Too, he wondered if the poppy had survived the metamorphosis.

If not, the opioid compounds in the lab here might be the last of their kind.

A veritable cache of various household brand name chems remained among the prefabricated stock. The boxes dazzled with bright, enticing colors even two hundred years later. Tins of Mentats, bottles of Buffout and Rad-X, bags of Rad-Away, metered autoinjectors of Med-X, Stimpak syringes, and even a few ampoules of Addictol. Albeit relieved to have extended and ready access to such amenities, Carey stopped short at the shelf upon which sat seven multi-component syringe doses of a chem to which, last he knew, civilians did not have access. His jaw tightened, and a cold sweat beaded on his brow. Though a commercialized brand label with bold, imposing red lettering now replaced the more familiar military symbol CM, beneath the trademark name the label specified: *cyclomorphine in an army-certified, patented suspension.*

Psycho.
“You always get so antsy around that Jahani guy at the block parties, Carey,” Hawthorne started, from where he sat at his desk. Carey reclined behind him on the bed in his grey-green pantsuit, with a magazine. “You’re both military vets. You two know each other or something?”

“Everbody ‘gets antsy’ around that guy,” the chemist replied, disliking the subject and not looking up from his reading. It wasn’t technically a lie: “No, I don’t know him. Why?”

“He’s been dogging me for months to get him something called Psycho. Said it was an army thing, told me to ask around. Funny thing, he told me to ask you specifically. You might not know him, but he sure sounds like he knows you. You know anything about the stuff?”

Carey closed the magazine and walked into the living room to the wet bar, to pour himself a vodka and coffee liqueur. His blond thirty-some accomplice noticed the evasion, and followed him.

“There’s three other military vets here in Sanctuary.” Carey took a sip of his drink to still his nerves. “Nate Murphy, and his wife Nora? She was in JAG Corps, and he was front line in Anchorage. And then there’s Heydar Jahani. Heydar isn’t well, Jacob. He wants that stuff because he’s in withdrawals from his service. The Addictol stops working after a while. I know it’s not some middle-aged stubbornness that’s keeping him from going to a doctor over it. It’s a military chem, and civilian doctors in the U.S. wouldn’t even know what it is. And he can’t tell them, yet, to get help, either, I imagine. Not without breaching confidentiality.”

“But you know what it is, right, Mindy?”

Carey took a bigger sip and stiffened. It always knotted him up when his partner twisted that endearment at him in anger, the desired effect. Hawthorne had timed this conversation when he knew laundry tasks would have Angel predisposed, knew he’d have Carey cornered. The chemist was going to regret it, but he already regretted everything else about this conversation. It was a struggle to keep anything from Hawthorne. Especially not when it could mean more cash in their pockets.

“Of course I know what it is. It’s what defined my military contract. My Pharm.D thesis was on opiates. Morphine, codeine, hydrocodone. You get the idea. Psycho... cyclomorphine... is a concentrated derivative of morphine. They contracted me to weaponize it.”

Hawthorne stifled a scoff as he wandered into the kitchen.

“Painkillers? What about the poet’s chem can be weaponized?”

“It’s for jury-rigging juggernauts. When the power armor deployed in Anchorage gave the U.S. such a massive force boost, General Chase wanted to compensate for how limited supply the high-technology suits were, by having soldiers perform to the same level. Power armor makes a soldier stronger, hit harder, take more hits. It even has mechanisms in the legs that give them the ability to descend rapidly just by jumping off without much risk. Cyclomorphine...” He finished off the old-fashioned glass in one gulp, then refilled it. “The ‘hit harder’ part was the only part that was true with CM. It makes the user simply. Not. Care. how bad something hurts them, and they just keep going, and going. Excessive use...”

He had to sit down and drink down half the second mixed drink before he could finish.

“Excessive use decays tissues and destroys immune system. Addicts are irascible, implacable, susceptible to septicemia. To the unaware, symptoms resemble leprosy or hemophilia.” He shot his partner a hollow glance over the top of his black cellulose crescent half-eye glasses. His defense hadn’t gained an inch. “It was my job to either further enhance its potency, or iron out its flesh-
eating capacity without impacting efficacy. My commanding officer, and Chase, only cared about the former, of course. We’re too deep in this conflict with China to care about whether our soldiers come back in one piece, if at all, yes?”

Carey tried not to notice that Hawthorne had picked up a knife from the block.

“All this time, and you didn’t just know what Psycho was—you were handling it every godforsaken day for the past ten years.” The blond chuffed darkly as he approached his partner, and he stirred Carey’s drink with the tip of the knife while sustaining smiling eye contact. “I had a feeling this was going to be a great partnership. Now, I know you return to active duty on the 25th. You’re going to bring back a case during your next leave. Or I don’t know, cook some in the back yard before you leave. Neanderthal’s quoted me five hundred a vial.”

“I-- can’t do that.” Carey bit his lower lip, looking behind Hawthorne hoping to find Angel return from its chore. The price boxed his ears. “I could get court-martialed if they caught me.”

Hawthorne grinned in total earnest.

“Then don’t get caught.”

“You-- you don’t understand what’s at stake here, Jacob. We’re in war time. I know we just won the campaign in Alaska, but everything’s going to shit, fast! They’re executing war criminals, both abroad and at home. And you’ve seen how they mow down dissenters in the streets. There’s zero tolerance to anything that even looks like a conflict of interest. I know I just described what Psycho does to somebody long-term addicted to it, but you can’t grasp what it’s like with just words. I’ve seen it. First-hand. Through the trials on base.” A desperate look filled his eyes. “It rots you apart. This isn’t some street chem. The war rations aren’t what’s restricting public access to it. I can’t... I can’t in good conscience--”

The knife flashed up out of the glass and slashed Carey across the lower half of his face.

“You can’t do what, now?”

Dazed, Carey clenched his chin and mouth in both hands.

“Buddy... pal...” Hawthorne leaned in with the kitchen towel to help with the blood. Carey shrank from his warm smile, but accepted the towel. “I believe in you. You smuggle Buffout out of the pharmacy all the time for Miss Rosa. This will be no different.”

“I... I understand.”

“Attaboy.”

Hawthorne patted Carey on the cheek and let him get up to tend to the injury. But, he still followed him to the bathroom to watch from the door frame. Carey held the towel under his chin as he doused iodine down it, imprecise how much got in his mouth. Fear and pain had not wrenched tears, but hell if the astringent didn’t, and he seethed every time he poured again.

“It’s a shame, you know, that we found out about this circumstance so close to you shipping out. Jahani told me my other option was to look into one of the big pharmacies that ship out to the police forces in the area. Something about the cops using it for riot control. I’m not about to risk our operation, approaching some cops—a cop that will sell to you is just as fast to turn on you. You could have used your position at Walden to hit up retainers at other locations. You... you’ve always been my sure bet.”
The Russian injected a Stimpak into his jaw and held the raw edges of the chin slice together with his fingertips, watching the mirror in disgusted resignation while it healed. The last thing he needed in that moment, in this way, was to learn was that cyclomorphine had at some point that year received paramilitary clearance.

The bombs fell before Carey had the chance to make good on the promise.

“...It was just... a little Mister Handy accident...”

The metallic taste returned to the roof of Carey’s mouth. He noticed he had been tracing his platysmal scar, but didn’t know for how long. The chemist shook the just-yesterday sensation from his mind. He’d assured anyone who’d asked about his scar that he intended to get Angel’s blade attachment serviced very soon, and that he still regarded General Atomics in high faith and felt completely safe. Half a truth, and half a lie.

Dealing had provided both he and Hawthorne a distraction from the mounting chaos leading up to the nuclear exchange, something to focus on besides the world quite literally falling apart around them. The way Carey saw it, hooking people up with their desired chems had the same effect for the dealer as it did for the buyer. Hawthorne had never lashed out at him like that, and Carey supposed his partner had felt betrayed in some way, or at least like Carey had held out on him. If the war strain had affected Carey, it had to have affected Hawthorne, too.

The non-branded chems seized his attention readily. Laxatives, painkillers, cough syrups, multivitamins, and the like. He never did appreciate the implacable state which accompanied Psycho’s lead-heavy low. And there was something to be said of losing one’s taste for something, after working with it for a living. Still, having it on hand ready-made would have to serve some use for synthesizing other compounds. If he could forge the stomach to handle it.

“--Barberry syrup! There we are.”

The chemist brightened significantly as he snatched up the amber bottle, throwing himself into positive developments. The liquid medication typically treated jaundice--but for many of his colleagues on base, it was part of the recipe which modified the cholinergics in Mentats into a potent nootropic with a great uptake. But, it took more than just anti-jaundice juice and some salt-licorice seltzer-tabs...

The raw components themselves resided in the half of the triangular room framed with chemistry stations. The lab desks seemed to have been in the process of a large batch of Rad-X. He balked at the irony. Skimming the bottles in these shelves, he frowned, tapping the scar on his chin.

“No ethylene glycol, though, as I expected. Where’s Angel with the antifreeze?”

He almost zipped to the elevator to check on it, but realized that somehow, and he frowned that it had already come and gone without his noticing. The red plastic bottle sat on the desk nearest the security door, as well as all the chems and medical paraphernalia they had picked up since Sanctuary. A lone bottle of Melancholia stood among the small, organized pile. It could have only intended him privacy when it noticed how detached from reality he was. He sneered at himself, likely having been misinterpreted as high rather than... that.

He wished it would stop happening, whatever that was. It felt like the years he spent frozen were borrowed time, and they were being stolen back from him one episode at a time.

A huff escaped him. What mattered was that he now had all the necessary components, and he let synthesizing something for his ideal fix transfix him. Carey did not mind how late it had already
gotten. He pulverized a tin’s worth of Mentats into a beaker, and set it on a hot plate as he drizzled in the antifreeze. Once the solution achieved the well-rehearsed ratio, he drizzled in the entire bottle of fluorescent yellow barberry syrup and let it boil for a few minutes. With tongs, he poured the beaker into a pill mold to cool. Not unlike fresh baked cookies, he couldn’t help but pop a still-warm tart Berry Mentat lozenge in his mouth once they were cool enough to peel from the tray.

“Just like Mother used to make.” His eyes rolled at the self-jab.

The nootropic high filled his skull with familiar static, and he smiled comfortably for a moment before the full electricity of the neurotransmitter fuel seized him. His mind frenetic with new connections between chems to which he had ready access, he welcomed the frenzy to distract him. He loaded a typewriter with halves of manila folders as he went, flipping frantically between it and a Merrick Index he found in the lab which he set beside him, to compose a storm of notes.

His flashback still twinged at him, his mind catching up to present day and marrying the memory of Hawthorne with Hawthorne now.

“--That could have been me--”

Swallowing hard to stifle his broken voice, he reached for the ampuole of Jet. One little red ampuole of Jet, which had likely been on hold for one of their clients, now in Carey’s lungs instead. Administered from a small inhaler, the musky psychotropic compound fabricated a rife hallucination upon him while he blistered away, and the stress burst softly, like a soap bubble.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaks.

NSFW. Tons of TWs: Insects, drug use, drug-based gore, hallucinations, dysphoria, parasites, and descriptions of decomposition. Deeply erotic undertone.

...'Choly finally agrees with himself that he's 'Choly. He had a good time or something I guess

Carey parted his rheum-encrusted eyes with a groan, and sat up in the wheelchair. The Russian set his glasses on the desk. When he rubbed at the indentations the typewriter keys left in his cheek, he left dark, absent smudges across his face from wiping away the sticky gound. He had trifled with the near-fossilized ink ribbon, based on the results of the papers he’d defaced. He could tell, too, that he had not successfully jogged the original ink to flow again; instead, the brain drugs had determined means to introduce… something, earthy and repulsive, which proffered the spool case some substitute. Whatever the medium, the ichor had dripped, splattered, and smeared all over the desk, the papers, the typewriter, and even Carey himself. With a dismissive lip curl, he removed from the typewriter the scrap of paperboard which the improvised muck had nearly glued into its carriage. He noticed the unsightly sigil of smeared fingerprints on the desktop, but didn’t bother to speculate.

A raw but detached ache locked up the chemist’s anatomy, especially his upper legs for whatever reason. Owing to the storm of composition he’d undertaken while throttled, he’d have sooner guessed an arthritic flare would have allotted his hands the brunt of displeasure. As he stretched and ran one palm along his front and extended the other overhead, noticing the rigid flatness burbled a groan from him: he’d passed out in his binding. No wonder everything hurt. Yet, poring over what he’d poured through the typewriter superseded any priority of physical forms of self-care, the more he realized the significance of what he’d transcribed.

The fugue of Mentats and Jet had woven his thoughts across the clutter of ripped manila file folders, wads of ancient continuous stock paper at different lengths, and the inner side of laid-flat empty chem cartons. In a mixture of pencil and pencil-dipped-in-muck, he’d handwritten both calculations too complex for a daisy wheel and diagrams as to procedure and proposed methodology of administration. Though sprawled out across the desk, the compilation appeared generally attributable to three concepts, each pile sloppier and more possessed than the last. He recalled no especial prior affinity for an ergolinic high, but the opportunity in availability had clearly provided him prodigious productivity of some kind. This undertaking could not realistically bestow a sense of normality, as he’d hoped at its inception, but perhaps he could take something constructive from at least one of these leaves.

The bated optimism of advanced chemistry formulas and syntheses led off the opus. Theoretical pharmaceuticals appealed to his vocational habituations, dabbling somewhere between compounding together two chems to interplay their effects in a single dose, and outright combining chems to synthesize an entirely new one with the properties of both.

How to synthesize Psycho from scratch, provided raw components. A rote memory, even now,
though transcribed for reference’s sake. One reduces the alkaloid morphine through application of a mercaptan, and an epoxy-like three-part injection then mitigates the resultant precipitates wired into a vehicular Stimpak which also functions to curtail tissue deterioration at the injection site. A ratio of paint thinner, acid, and liquid fertilizer would also do the trick, where thiolated salt eludes the chemist in a pinch. Were it not for the other ‘recipes’ punched out here in text, Carey would have favored keeping the morphine pure… and keeping it for himself. Just because he knew how to manipulate alkaloids didn’t mean he had any personal use to.

How to combine Buffout and Psycho. Stimulating endorphins in excess of cyclomorphine provided a strong hypothesis as to how to enhance the brute force bestowed by the opiate agent—yet here, he had postulated the capacity to induce the hormone center of the brain to uptake the opioid. Though the compounded chem’s risks remained analogous to plain cyclomorphine on paper, the introduction of Buffout’s steroidal elements in a ‘Psycho-Buff’ foreshadowed a likelihood of excessively thinning the individual’s blood and straining the heart once the effects faded, despite the initial bolstering of fortitude and staying power. Something in the back of his mind suggested that this recipe, or something like it, had once posited a potential solution to his military contract, though his work history dragged along through the dense fog of his memory. Regardless, the possibility of long-term hormone imbalances and teratogenic pituitary complications nettled a squirm out of him.

How to combine Jet and Psycho. An unusual and unknown venture within pharmacology, the compound would utilize opiate receptors as its route of uptake, to harness the reflexes of the individual, and discard hardwired iterative limitations. As he read the entry, he formed a relieved appreciation that the hit of Jet that had composed this monstrous work might have been one of the last in the country. Jet, distilled from the manure of cows mutated by an improperly disposed agricultural hazardous waste, had stayed in a niche subculture use not at all unlike the lysergic acid of the Twentieth Century, though Carey had always argued with colleagues that it would have great marketability and usefulness to shell-shocked veterans. If the hallucinogenic properties of the ergoline inhalant remained in the compound, as he speculated, an individual under such an influence would present both momentous force and dearth of direction from outside sources. The mere imagination of ‘Psycho-Jet’ in use got him grimacing, and he praised the likelihood the apocalypse had eradicated cows of all kinds, if not solely to prevent such a thing from ever existing.

How to combine Mentats and Psycho. The most appealing of this first chapter of annotations, as far as what Carey might himself sample, though he doubted he’d partake in even this specimen, either. The fusion of these two compounds would, like the Psycho-Jet, reroute cholinergic stimulus through opiate receptors; as a result, if he understood his figures correctly, ‘Psycho-Tats’ would only bestow enhanced senses, rather than the comprehension and critical thinking boosts which Carey prioritized from Mentats themselves. Ideally, if cholinergic doping did not hyper-stimulate the nervous system to boost perception, it could at least compensate for the irrationality of the opiate itself. Yet, while the cyclomorphine benefited from enhanced perception, the compound risked an unknown severity or duration of migraines in the same stroke.

Despite his prior distaste for partaking in cyclomorphine personally, he still presumed ‘Carey on Jet and Berries’ believed he could market it and its relatives in the post-apocalyptic tapestry, thus necessitating this alter ego’s authorship of such an addendum to the Merrick Index. The less desirable side effects of all of these were just as much speculation as their benefits, without sufficient testing. For a moment, he admired the entrepreneurial vision of ‘Carey on Jet and Berries,’ despite how thoroughly the homebrew cholinergic had so obviously skewed his moral compunction. **Pharm Corps Captain Alan Carey, of the Deenwood Unit of the Chemical Corps of the United States Army, would have never seen merit in extending cyclomorphine for recreational purposes.** Yet, as he read on, his brow flattened into a hard squint. The point at which the Jet had
choked ‘Carey on Berries’ manifested clearly, not just in topic but in mode of transcription. The chemist who’d drafted this initial stack had been ‘Carey on Berries,’ not ‘Carey on Jet and Berries.’

In the second movement of the fugue, an inventive but deranged ‘Berry and Jet Carey’ explored several possibilities of utilizing CM in the syringer rifle he’d found. He whet his lips and squirmed. Such sensibilities suited the chemist far better than mere bullets. He’d never liked the idea of killing or injuring another, and just as much never liked the idea of putting CM into his own body. It really appealed to him, to weaponize CM in ways which didn’t immediately imperil allies.

What demarcated the narrative shift between the first and second Careys most significantly was his realization many diagrams bore footnotes which did not refer to any such sections on paper: ‘Carey on Jet and Berries’ had, by volume, transcribed directly into the Pip-Boy. This mode of Carey had determined that the Pip-Boy 3000 Mark IV had integrated into its padded cuff the Nostrus glove function he’d known of the Mark III model, eliminating the necessity for an intricately wired glove with sensors which tracked the motion of wrist tendons. Finally, he was learning how to use the damned thing.

Berserk Syringes. Within the repulsive aspects of potential implementations of Psycho-Jet lay a fertile opportunity to frenzy an enemy into taking out their own ranks. Let the enemy sort itself out. The option of sacrificing one’s own allies to CM appealed less in every way than this answer, save the possibility an enemy doped with one of these syringes might survive attacking all their own and left the home team contending with a juggernaut. Increasing blood-alcohol level rather than relying on a psychotropic high yielded a dual compromise, as it would double as a blood thinner and prove infinitely more cost-effective in any sizable batch. That, and an angry drunkard could often do just as much damage as an angry addict. Omitting the rot-suppressing Stimpak would help, too.

Bloatfly Syringes. Carey struggled to still himself, beginning to underpin in places the hallucinations that had fueled this particular entry. When he encountered them in Sanctuary Hills, these massive flies had jettisoned their maggots at him, likely intending he host their gestation. He rubbed and scratched at a phantom twinge along his left forearm as he scrutinized the diagram of the test-tube ammunition mock-up, and he sniffed in rictus. This ammunition could aid the larvae in finding hosts. Using cyclomorphine would not only numb the injection site and obscure the parasite from the victim, but, lacking the Stimpak component of classic CM, it would also putrefy the tissues surrounding it thus rendering an easier feast. Provided the opiate precipitate did not similarly affect the insects, agitating them at best, he could impart ‘maggot therapy’ upon those he deemed worthy of it. If given sufficient time to fully mature, the neonate bloatfly–or bloatflies, he insisted–might upon emerging follow onward in kind with other victims nearby.

The chemist wondered if bloatfly maggots matured even faster than their ancestors, noting the enormity of the things now by comparison. Something crawled within him, to read the passage of notes postulating farming maggots indefinitely in this way and for this purpose. It was then that he caught himself rubbing and scratching at the insides of his legs in the same way he’d done of his arm. His bottom lip puckered between his teeth, unnerved by the fact the Nostrus stenography had inadvertently annotated even these brief strokes. Where before they had merely pockmarked the syringe entries and he’d presumed them simple typos, erratic strings of garbled punctuation dragged through the entire bloatfly passage like discordant slurs and ties.

Rightfully, he scared himself sometimes. The next chapter of the opus could only embody his penchants in this way, and he waded titillated through prose encrypted by his own delirium.

The third movement seemed wholly penned by ‘Jet Carey.’ Any remnant of ‘Berry Carey’ had fallen asleep by now, no co-author to the work of fiction which proceeded. Now, an entirely more ribald, impenitent, and purpureous creature piloted this manuscript than the Carey who came
before him. What of compunction, when prose conjuncts the voyeur to the subject? Many of the
disarrayed pages found themselves manifest upon surfaces more improvised than before, the
shapes and colors of deteriorated paperboard cartons, rent flat, lending an added splash of delirium.
The typewriter had been shoved away in favor of desktop surface work-space, and ‘Jet Carey’ had
either handwritten his unit, or rightly mashed it into the Pip-Boy. Not only had he run out of
respectable sources of paper upon which to impart his masterpiece, it had spilled outside such
margins.

The night’s writing fugue rode earlier melodies and interwove them from technical science into
pure, hysteric fiction. But, the compilation, where legible, presented a rapt aphorism: Did he any
longer need to separate the two? Fantasy could become reality, should he desire it. Who would
stop him, save himself?

The Jet-emblazoned chemist had adopted in earnest the nom à clef ‘Melancholy’ to pen a short
story entitled “Flyblown”: in minutiae, complete with scrawling, messy illustrations, a fictional
autobiographical account of self-administering the hypothetical Bloatfly Syringe to his lower groin.
Having utilized a standard CM syringe, rather than only cyclomorphine as his predecessor had
posed, the Stimpak component had grafted the maggot to him.

At first, the affixed grub resembled the figure of anatomy of which Melancholy felt birth had
deprived him, and he admired it as such, tender and diligent. The nascent organ hungrily shaved
small bites from the insides of his legs as he slept. Even this element of its identity endeared
Melancholy to it. He permitted its nocturnal feeding unremitted, and consequently dreamed
feverishly of its gorging itself upon his flesh. Additional painkillers beyond the initial
administration would be a sin: he needed to feel its every twinge, every mouthful it extracted. It
hungered to cleanse his decaying body. During waking hours, the routine of changing the dressing
which managed his thighs’ cutaneous weeping harbored the merits and charm of some arcane
ritualism. He left off the gauze at night, not to let the wounds air, but to give the organ free rein.

The organ molted in entirety with each subsequent progression of instar phase, thus distending ever
larger and more grotesque. Another element to the ritual, Melancholy found himself saving
whatever remnants of the organ’s metamorphoses he encountered, to amass a rancid reliquary in
honor of its achievements. Slowly, certainly, he was realizing the reality he’d become a ghoul,
undead, shambling, difficult—but the larva mitigated.

By the third instar, he could not wear trousers as before, and girded the inertia of the organ with
further implementation of dressing. He no longer thought of leaving the pharmacy, not out of
shame but obsession, as he could feel both the organ’s pulse and respiration resonate through his
groin from its base—the Stimpak had fused its flesh with his own, making himself the larva, and the
larva, him. The organ sprouted coarse, hollow hairs, which Melancholy admired and oft petted. His
purulent legs transitioned from seeping clear fluid to outright bleeding as the days transpired, and
by the organ’s fourth instar, its appetite to purge him of seemingly endless rot had excoriated
enough of his thighs that he could no longer stand, helpless to contain his autolysis.

The chemist trembled, to read Melancholy’s description that the organ seemed paradoxically
trapped in a procession of instar phases: fusion to his flesh had either robbed it of its ability to
transform into a Bloatfly proper, or had bestowed upon him the ability to eventually transform into
a Bloatfly himself. By the abrupt end of the narrative, the organ had bloated to the size of what had
once been an upper leg. Hunched over the desktop as he read, his fingertips had already long since
dug deep bruises along the insides of his thighs in aching want of the thing, but the rawness wasn’t
what rent his breathing ragged. Scrambled in a soup of erotic short-circuitry as the Nostrus had
penned his very jerks and strokes, Melancholy’s final hindsight was dual. One, he pined to know
the ultimate fate of the organ, and what form he might fuel from the experiment. And two, he had
neglected to administer multiple syringes at once—if any of him remained upon the organ’s reemergence, he must somehow rectify this mistake for the second take.

\[Ckckckckckckckckckck-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-k-kck\]

Nervous tugging with the edge of his middle fingernail against the inseam of his slacks had yielded another vibrato-addition to the incoherent slurry: a mile-long string of wriggling commas. Shaking, he checked and double-checked that the document had been saved to the holotape in his Pip-Boy. He felt as though cleaning these strings from the masterpiece would belie the spirit of the thing, so he left in tact the unique mixture of onomatopoeia and synecdoche representative of his inhibitions.

“–That could have been me.”

The memory of Hawthorne’s rotten, misshapen face tormented him with nostalgic jealousy. Too fatigued to curse at himself for the nightmarish composition, he stared, haunted, at his now-reviewed compendium as he steadied his breathing. No influence of chems had enabled his understanding of what he’d read; and yet, in that moment, the entire thing penned by chems made genuine sense, like a depth charge dredging epiphanical clarity from beneath an otherwise debilitating mental fog.

He wondered if ‘Jet Carey’ would ever make a repeat appearance in his literature. But, ‘Jet Carey’ could live on in observance of his becoming Melancholy.

Melancholy could be him. He could be Melancholy.

How long since his emergence from his bicentennial pupal stasis? What form might he adopt? No other nymphs save himself had survived the cocoons of Vault 111, it seemed, if he could even term it having survived. Provided no other vaults’ nymphs had survived, the responsibility fell upon him to carry the morality of the insect into the Wasteland.

A great deal of work lay ahead, before Melancholy could do mission work for his nascent ideology in the wasteland. Thus, he left his notes at the lab desk and retrieved his glasses. He’d later preserve his masterpiece in the false bottom of his Mr. Handy’s storage compartment, but for now he wheeled off seeking the robot’s doting attentions. Brushed up on his politic, he finally felt awake.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Things are starting to pick up, I suppose.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaks.

Melancholy set down his coffee cup, and swallowed while he continued fidgeting with his Pipboy. Thus far nothing had spurred him to really acquaint himself with the nuances of its dials and buttons, and he sat there in the pharmacy break room skimming the lead-yellow, wrist-bound instrument’s menus in half-boredom, half-interest. The calibration of its global positioning system seemed reliable, as he presumed of its itemized annotation of the user’s vital statistics. The wrist-cuff padding contained sensitive diagnostic features which monitored the user’s vitals. Neither of these preliminary tabs of the menu seemed pertinent before. He knew his way to Concord and Lexington from Sanctuary, even on foot, and he felt more and more like the Pipboy would never correctly diagnose his critical condition from what limited scope of statistics it could scan.

_There is no medical precedent for what is happening to you, Mister Carey_, he told himself with a wry disinterest. _I simply know you’re falling apart._

The third story bathrooms still had one in-tact mirror, the only left in the place he’d found yet. One page in the health section listed diagnostic returns of features he’d already learned of in this way: the device could not pinpoint what had oddly cataracted his hazel eyes, a shock of white now streaked his greying hair, and vitiligo mottled his jawline and various parts of his right and back sides where cryogenesis had, in its own way, frostbitten him. Another sub-menu in the health tab piqued his brow a moment: in the few weeks he’d worn the device, it had already inferred a rather detailed itinerary of his core proficiency and skills. On yet another sub-menu, the Pipboy let him know it knew of all the addictions he’d racked up in the same few weeks. He flipped tabs with a grunt, and bit his lower lip.

Since it seemed at first glance they required access to a terminal port for keyboard entry in order to be most useful, he skipped over tabs which looked useful for maintaining inventory invoices and for organizing correspondences. The last tab on the menu list queued up a series of local radio signals the Pipboy could pick up, and ‘Choly’s hollowed eyes glazed. He set down his glasses on the table to look it over. Surely, these couldn’t be sophisticated radio stations. How could such things be maintained with the landscape as it had become? Dubious, he flicked the dial down to one whose frequency had been clearly labeled, and selected it: “Diamond City Radio.”

♫ ...and I wonder why everything’s the same as it was. I can’t understand. No, I can’t understand how life goes on the way it does...♫

“What kind of--” The chemist hushed himself and glared at his Pipboy as he recognized the song in disbelief. “Don’t they know... it’s the end... of the world...”

“Ah! You found some music to fill the place!” Angel stopped its skimming the cabinets to brainstorm meal plans, and came over when it heard its owner whispering along. “The tune’s a bit drab, though, don’t you think?”
The deejay came on, broken and awkward.

“Coming to you from. Ah. The jeweled green... I mean the green, the, ah, Great Green Jewel of the Commonwealth. It's... Diamond City Radio. That was Skeeter Davis. A name I still find confusing. Was I. Ah. The only one surprised that Skeeter Davis is, you know... a woman? Just. Aah. Didn't really sound like a woman's name. Ah-- anyway! Here's a real classic from good old Nat King Cole... ‘Orange Colored Sky.’ It's. It's a good one!”

“Great Green Jewel,”' Choly repeated as the next song aired. “I wonder if this is just a recorded radio personality, or.”

“Only one way to find out, hm? Where is this Diamond City he mentioned?”

“Someplace in Boston, I’d imagine. I don’t know anyplace that was named that before the bombs fell.”' Choly took another sip of his coffee and gave his Handy-bot earnest eye contact with its triplicate visual sensors. “Guessing we’ll have to work on becoming road ready sooner than later. It’s just dawned on me-- General Atomics was working on cross-compatibility with RobCo in the years leading up to the nuclear exchange. I know the old model struggled with it, but this newer one I nicked in the vault seems capable. Let’s head into the stock room and see if we can’t interface you with my Pipboy. Update your hydraulics calibration, too. You’re far beyond overdue for maintenance, my friend.”

“Stars and garters, yes.” Angel caught up in itself. “Pardon the animation. I’ve simply... been unable to tend to my own upkeep all this time, and--”

“Hey, now,” the chemist grinned, putting his glasses back on. “You remember, don’t you, how much better I felt once I got to bathe after being frozen two hundred years? It’s your turn.”

“I-- Thank you, Sir.”

The tune of Mercer and the Pied Pipers’ ‘Personality’ followed them to the next room over.

♫ ...Certain things, like sable coats and wedding rings...? ♫
♫ + + + + + + + + + + ♫
♫ --The world’s gone mad today, and good’s bad today-- ♫

Like the consequence of a defibrillator, the building drew its first rasps in centuries. While the chemist had spent most of the last two weeks in an unreal soup of chems, the Handy-bot had spent the same time disinterring the back room in the first story, motivated by its recent repairs and recalibrations. Too, the second elevator’s doors on the first story appeared from behind the rubble, though like the other elevator, damage from the neighboring building’s collapse trapped it from access. Angel had shepherded its owner to do the honors, in the optimism that the effort could reinstate full electrical current to the structure. Though many lights and electronics no longer functioned from the combination of nuclear damage and centuries of disrepair, many others previously unaffected by the other floors’ breaker boxes still sprang up and brightened.

A coughing fit overtook him as the air ducts billowed bicentennial dust. The lower half of his face shied into the collar of his dress shirt.

♫ --Just think of those shocks you've got, ♫
♫ and those knocks you've got-- ♫

“--Maybe this was a bad idea.”
“Oh, Sir! Coming right away.” Porting the tangle of bed straps its owner had tied all over it the week before, Angel rounded up behind the awkward cane-synecdoche which ascended the stairwell. “Wouldn’t you rather make use of the harness you outfitted on me? Be careful!”

The Russian-American had had enough of the Pipboy’s peanut gallery in the moment, and nearly punched it to turn it off. Evacuation to the second story yielded no better ventilation, and ‘Choly reclaimed the wheelchair as he took the elevator to the third story. Anxiety crawled up his body as he recognized the sounds of things inside the walls also stirring afresh. Reality had an unpleasant, rippling echo that late afternoon. Where could he find respite until the air system had evened out? Would the ancient filters yield results? He couldn’t open windows on a building with none. A flurry of draughty haloes refracted his path.

Among these dust-borne glories, he saw the operating light on the other elevator. Testing its soundness would take too long, and he didn’t know how far he could climb the stairs, either by their failing form or his failing function—he had outfitted Angel with the harness so he could ride it, but he hadn’t really practiced balancing on its back in this way, and the thought of urgency necessitating test runs only made his blood heave through his veins harder. He bit his upper lip and squirmed, throat and eyes burning, while he awaited the call button to retrieve the car.

“We left everything out in the kitchen. Dinner is ruined, though I’m sure you might have guessed that.”

“No. We can’t just stay in here indefinitely.” As he caught his breath, he steeled himself with a sublingual Mentat from his pocket. “What all is still in your storage compartment?”

“Well!” the pale Handy replied in thought, rooting around behind inside itself, “I have your pistols and munitions. Seventy-three 10mm rounds, and twenty-six .38 rounds. A box of deviled eggs and a can of water. Your jumpsuit from the vault. Oh, and that odd cowl you took from that lass in Concord. We can stay in here a little longer, though, right Miss Sir?”

‘Choly’s jaw tightened as he stared past the elevator’s wainscoting. He loathed the very notion of donning the vault suit again, even with what few foundations he now had. Paired with Angel’s verbiage glitch, he flinched at the notion, but he loathed even more the idea of staying longer than necessary inside an elevator, especially one of untested reliability.

The chemist leaned forward, and sweated pressing the button for the fourth floor. The elevator’s
winch mechanisms groaned but hoisted smoothly otherwise.

“Give me the water. …And the hood.”

Angel complied, and the indicator panel announced their fourth floor arrival with a holographic voice and a bell-ding. ‘Choly panicked when the doors opened, and, frantic, he lunged at the ‘close doors’ button again. He sat, breathing heavy, with the items in his lap. The panic of having to evacuate was blooming into a recurrent theme. To the vault, as the sky threatened to fall. From the vault, as its artificial intelligence warned of impending loss of life-sustaining operations. And now, from the new home he’d begun to fashion for himself. He chastised himself for likening kicking up all this dust to the former situations which had genuinely threatened his life. Still, his head and heart throbbed, shooting pain down his left arm, and he was convinced the only way to quiet himself would be to step foot outside.

“Is… everything all right, Sir?”

The chemist motioned for his Handy-bot to can-open the water for him, and with it he doused the canvas sack hood. Moisture served to enhance its ability to block airborne particulates. He slipped it on and tucked the open can in the back corner of his wheelchair seat, under the cane beside him. The Mentats told him he had bounded upward rather than outward, and his face flushed at the mistake made in his state of alarm, but he did his best to reassure himself that entering the streets of Lexington at night stood to endanger him far worse than some musty air.

“We’re going to be fine,” he lied. “I need the 10mm. And the bullets for it.” It complied, though hesitant. “I’m just grateful there’s no apparent gas leak, Angel. Your thruster would have blown us up.”

“Silver linings, I suppose.” It failed to conceal worry in its intonation.

Melancholy opened the elevator and wheeled out to find a hall to either side rather than a lobby. Damaged fluorescent lighting flickered, and he could see several doors to either side of the elevator, as well as two across from it. Office floors, as he had predicted weeks ago. Having soaked the hood made breathing a heavier ordeal, but the barrier of moisture did as intended. Only one elevator accessed these floors, he noted, as he rolled to each end of the hall. The lone door to the left of the elevator provided access to the roof, it boasted. A breath choked him as he struggled to open the interior door, then the exterior. Angel helped once it grasped the desired effect.

Upon rolling out onto the rough paved roof and into the night air, Melancholy’s jaw slackened. Though the building tucked itself beneath the shadow of a multi-level overpass, across the way lay the Corvega assembly plant. The automotive facility’s iconic saturnesque globe and multitude of smokestacks still boasted to illuminate Lexington’s ruined cityscape. He squinted upward to see that he’d connected enough circuits within the wiring of the Walden Drugs’ pharmacy to light up the billboard sign at the top of it, as well as the sign at the front corner of its lower stories.

He sat back in his chair and caught his breath. Removing the hood, he allowed himself a dry, broken chuckle, and he quaffed at the can of water from beside him. Thoughts lost him as the stress slowly melted, but the sound of quiet commotion garnered his attention. When he looked up, he found humanoid silhouettes on the rooftop of the plant. Adjusting his glasses, he returned their gawking.

“Might we… return inside, Sir? Seems our refurbishment efforts have garnered some unwanted attention.”

“Hey, now. I don’t know if it’s unwanted yet. They might be different from those asses in
Concord.”

“BRILLIANT,” one of them yelled sarcastically.

“–I,” he set his water between his knees and cupped his hands to his mouth, “THANKS.”

The group that had gathered gave him an unanimous chuckle, and he smirked to himself a bit.

“I think we’ll have dinner on the roof tonight,” he told Angel, as he turned the radio back on at low volume. The mellow, jazzy brass of Val Bennett’s ‘Soul Survivor’ greeted him, and he melted into his chair a bit with a smile. “Pass over those Yum Yums.”
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaks.

Hours later, the chemist returned inside to find the dust had settled enough to tolerate. In the following days, he readied his stock and with exuberance set to preparing a buffet of both useful and marketable chems. While Angel busied itself investigating the newly accessible administrative offices, ‘Choly tended not to pay much mind to any of it, except to take stock of the cash office and the executive suite’s wet bar. Despite the amenities of the executive suite, due to it being the top story it had sustained poor weathering, and the most comfortable living space remained the floor with the break room. But, ‘Choly had a potential market staked out here in Lexington, and that source of income superseded any potential disappointment he might have experienced over the absence of any immediate lavish furnishings. The habit of accumulating funds was diehard as ever in the absence of other means of stability, and the familiarity of falling back into pharmacology nursed it readily.

Both therapy and information came from taking his work breaks on the balcony-roof. In daylight, he could see these raiders neighbored him to three sides: behind him to the South at the Corvega plant, and to the West and North across the street a collapsing network of high-rise apartments. The re-coolant and bus station still to his East remained lifeless at a glance. The raiders, all around him, seemed wholly more civil to him than those which had overtaken Concord. None had, after all, taken a shot at him yet, and they hadn’t to his knowledge tried to break into the pharmacy. He speculated that, perhaps, they’d freshly conquered Concord, and that their laxity here in Lexington sprang from their ability to sprawl out comfortably in the urban canopy, away from the feral ghouls wandering at street level.

He wondered if the Concord raiders belonged to this larger outfit. Part of him definitely thought so, but another greater whole of him believed most citizens of this wasteland now behaved in such a way, embracing a freedom from performative expectations. Human nature contained within it the capacity to uphold the ideals of creative anarchy. He could respect it.

Melancholy set himself on a chem break after a successful batch of Calmex: a veterinary sedative related to ketamine which, used on humans at key dosages, shuts off certain pieces of the brain to proffer sum function to the rest. The chemist had favored the commonplace tranquilizer for recreation before the war. Up until the final year before the bomb exchange, Calmex had found no respected use as anything besides cost-effective sedation for battlefield surgery, rather than its capacity for steeling snipers’ precision and readiness to shoot. Who knows who gave a fresh surgery patient a gun before the sedative trance had wholly worn off; maybe, a soldier’s commanding officer grew too impatient, and rushed her off back into the fray prematurely. With the war efforts more focused on offense rather than medical recovery, the chem rations had prior rarely impacted how freely the sedative flowed--but that changed upon the discovery of its weaponizable function, and it dried up just like everything else the military had a purpose for.

Grateful for the harness-compatible dart cases he’d located in the pharmaceutical stockroom, along with a variety of other syringer paraphernalia, he’d affixed them to his suspenders with affection, and outfitted each case with different injectable substances: some explicitly for personal use, the
rest to dote upon others. The Calmex fell among the former. If this trial run went smoothly, he’d have to branch out his product line among the latter.

He whet his lips. As he sat on the pharmacy roof with the syringe rifle in his lap, Melancholy helped himself to a Calmex dart and rubbed vacantly at his antecubital fold after administering it. Coming up here like this, he sought to treat his new acquaintances. Advertisement, he told himself. He loaded the pneumatic dart gun’s magazine with a bottle of Buffout he’d that morning laced out into darts via epinephrine. In the past ‘Choly had always used Calmex to disengage his mind from his body, but here he would test for himself its ability to interface them in ways only nature could have intended. The chem seemed not only to steady his aim and improve his vision, but it also dulled his compunction just as much as it did his sensation. He squinted through the sight, and popped a dart at the nearest raider on the roof of Corvega.

A commotion ensued when the dart stuck the raider in the neck. He brushed away the offending trinket like a swatted insect and whirled around to locate the source of the sting. When he realized he Felt Pretty Good, he stopped making a big deal out of it and stared squarely at the wheelchair-bound dreg in a sack hood. A buddy in a mixture of hurricane fence and tatters shuffled up to him and she shoved him in the shoulder, and he pointed at Melancholy and probably told her that the dreg had shot him with something.

‘Choly popped off another dart, this time into the buddy of the first. She, too, flustered in the moment, but paused when no apparent harm came of it, and proceeded to shove her pal again. The roughhousing resulted in the guy getting knocked on his butt the second time, and she looked to her hands and tittered. She hoisted him up over her shoulder mockingly and slipped away with him, and soon more raiders appeared with her and filed up at the edge of the plant’s roof with their expecting arms out in welcome.

“Like shooting skeet.”

He chuckled to himself, taking aim again and going down the line. After he had them all juiced and rowdy, he shot the last round in the pneumatic gun into the butt of one of them. She jumped and grabbed the thing, to find it had neither chems in it nor functioning administration mechanisms. Instead she pulled from it a scroll of paper. Inspecting it, she showed it to the others. Free Samples: Buffout. The chemist had hoped at least one of them were literate--at least, English literate. He doubted any of them spoke or read much Russian.

“How much?”

This time aimed at the shoulder of the one who’d hollered, a second shot lodged in his leather pauldron.

Upon scrutiny, this note stimulated an incredulous ruckus. $40 A Hit. The Good Shit.

“This ass wants cash!”

Codeine-like heaviness washed over him, fluid and loathsome. He’d only prepared three message vials, and the third seemed ill-timed without their clarification. He hooked a thumb in the neck hole of his hood and pulled it up enough to free his mouth, then with the gun across his lap used the other hand to project his voice. Head treading water somewhere between the sedative and the failure to persuade, he chose his words carefully.

“Do you... not use dollars out here?”

A different raider replied, agitated.
“CAPS OR NOTHING. DUNNO WHAT BACKASSARDS PLACE YOU’RE FROM. AIN’T NOBODY GOT CASH.”

Caps? he wondered. Capsules? Baseball caps? No... bottle caps? How could he possibly respond to such a potential bluff, without blurting out how far behind the times his stasis had thrown him? He’d suspected the gold and silver standards could have long since been replaced by just about anything, but bottle caps? He nearly couldn’t help but laugh. The third message vial would go unused. Slowly, he raised his cupped hand again, and the deranged delirium trickled out of him coolly.

“THE SAMPLES WERE DILUTE. YOU WANT THE PURE STUFF, YOU MAKE A CASH DEPOSIT TO THE CAPSULE PIPELINE OF THE PHARMACY.”

The commotion shuffled between irate to quiet to incredulous again.

“Forget you,” was the common dismissal as they all waved him off in frustration and walked away. Yet, he stayed his ground, and returned inside.

Within an hour, just over five hundred dollars, in a mixture of denominations, had appeared in the delivery chute in Eleanor’s office.

All told, he felt like he’d cut the raiders a steep discount at forty dollars a shot, a true bargain complete with a free introductory hit. Buffout wasn’t commercially available in an injectable form before the bombs, and for good reasons, foremost on account of its alimentary uptake routes. Yet, he could easily forge a racket in this fashion, and the unaware would buy either form of the steroid. From a pharmacological standpoint, in tablet form, the steroid pill worked out to about fifty dollars a dose, with a package running anywhere from $400-600; but altering it into a liqueous suspension, a chemist could squeeze at least twelve doses out of an eight-dose bottle without raising doubts. Epinephrine came far cheaper than the steroid, and the two enhanced one other stellarly--but the duration of the cocktail didn’t last as long as either on their own. ‘Choly had doled out samples which were almost entirely epinephrine, of which he had several hundred vials at his disposal at that given time. A common tactic for dealers in the time before the nuclear exchange, especially during the rations, it would likely serve him well here also.

Funny, how lacing most chems dilutes the potency of their side effects, while simultaneously skyrocketing the formation of addiction.

+++++++

Over the next few days, ‘Choly made a routine of his rooftop chem breaks, so as to be able to deliver on the promised chems. Like clockwork, the raiders kept an eye out for ‘Choly and, sure enough, lined up to receive the moment they saw him load up his dart gun. Word got around, and he even got a few clients in the high rises across the way. He tried to memorize the faces of his repeat customers, even as they slowly increased in number, mostly as to limit administering his goods to someone who hadn’t actually paid for it.

To keep it simple for the time being, ‘Choly limited himself to only Buffout, but if things continued as planned, he hoped to branch out into chemical families where he had more sophisticated knowledge as to tinker with them. Regardless, he’d have to switch things up, since synthesizing steroids and hormones was far beyond the scope of his capacity or education, and albeit a sizable supply, it was still a limited one.

Around a week later, ‘Choly rolled out onto the rooftop balcony for Lexington’s scheduled chem break, only to find around two dozen raiders encircling him. They’d flung down scaffolding across
from one high rise and waited to ambush him. He swallowed hard, trying to keep them from seeing how badly he shook. Somehow, he expected one to come up to him and unmask him, but none did.

“Jared wants to speak to you,” a woman announced, porting threadbare plaid, a wild blonde mohawk, and black grease paint streaks across her face. She pointed her baseball bat at him. “It’s ill-advised to tell him you’re unavailable.”

‘Choly stiffened in his seat, but knew better than to make any sudden moves, or try to retreat inside.

“I,” he cleared his throat, “I’ll meet with him. I’ll meet you at street level in ten minutes or less.”

“You’re coming across the plank with us,” a second girl insisted, stepping forward and unholstering a small pistol from her gun harness. Her head was buzzed. A striped bandanna crossed the lower half of her face, and besides the harness, she wore little else. The pistol cocked in his direction and ‘Choly sniffed.

“I’m not resisting you. It’s just, this chair isn’t for looks or laziness.” The chemist glared at the scaffolding, haunted by the mere idea of it. “I. I don’t know the elevator situation in the next building over. I’ll meet you at street level, and you can take me wherever from there.”

“I’ll carry you then,” the second asserted, leaning in to take the syringe for herself, only to have ‘Choly shy from her as best he could. “I paid yesterday. Hit me and we’re golden for a solid five minutes. No problem.”

“Barb, stop.” The first one tapped her foot at her. “Don’t waste your high on Jared’s errand, babe. You. Hand over the whole case of Buffout to Barb here.”

The demand screwed up ‘Choly’s face under his cowl. It hurt more than a gunshot.

“Bleeding me dry here--”

“--Shut up, or get roughed up,” the apparent leader snapped. When he complied, and Barb handed over the case to her, she shoved Barb forward again, addressing her compatriot first and then him. “I’ll save one for you, Barb. Accompany this... entrepreneur down to where we can bring ’em back to the plant, would you? You understand we have to keep an eye on you.”

“Him.” He choked on phlegm and a flinch, like a pill caught in his throat. When they didn’t object to specificity, a different delirium overtook him. “I. I understand full well. One. Only one, all right?”

“Sure,” the second, Barb, asserted.

‘Choly’s stomach dropped as Barb insisted upon taking hold of the handles of the chair and pushing him, rather than letting him push himself. About face, she jammed him up to the security console to reenter, and he shielded the keypad with both hands to keep her from seeing what he’d set the password to.

“Don’t get any funny ideas,” she muttered as they came inside alone.

“Aw, no, but those are the only kind I get,” he joked, clutching his syringer rifle. “The elevator’s over here.”

“How’s a dreg like you even end up in this place? I never seen somebody usin’ one of these things before. If you can’t walk, I don’t get it.”
“I didn’t have my morning Sugar Bombs today. I’d rather we didn’t try to make idle chitchat.”

“Whatever.”

They took the fourth floor elevator to the first. He’d hoped to encounter Angel along the way, but it seemed the Handy had been preoccupied elsewhere. Hiding a grimace as they navigated out, he planted his feet against the pavement.

“What gives?”

“I’m locking the front door, dammit.”

She rolled her eyes at him.

“Fine.”

Once he’d done so, they continued West down the street. His heart pounded in his head. The heightened senses of the Calmex would still last a good bit, and he could hear the feral ghouls loitering aimlessly nearby. He bit at his lower lip, with a death grip on his rifle.

“Aren’t we waiting for your friends?” he started, rubbernecking back as they passed the entire Super Duper Mart building.

“They’ll catch up. Hey, how fast s’this thing go?”

‘Choly gulped as she kicked him back onto his handrim wheels only, and sprinted letting out a spirited laugh. The frame of the wheelchair rattled uselessly, and the real threat of it falling apart from underneath him had him sweating cold. Past the high rises, the street sloped up to the Corvega building, and by then the rest of the group came up behind them as Barb slowed and set him back down proper. A turret puttered by the front entry, spotlit and stationed with a handful of other raiders.

The throng entered the building, and navigated the hallway to an elevator. Barb and the leader took it up to the third floor, the rest of them taking the stairs.

“Glad you could make it, Hewlett.”

“Shut up. Tryin’ to have all the fun without us. Oughtta keep your hit for that.”

Barb gasped.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Ladies, ladies.” ‘Choly chuffed, dying of anxiety. “There’s more than enough of me to go around.”

Hewlett slapped him in the back of the head, and he got a clue.

The elevator opened and they entered the assembly floor of the plant. Those who had scaled the stairs tried to pretend they had followed to keep their guns on ‘Choly, rather than to eavesdrop. Certain elements of immaturity in this operation got the chemist smiling to himself.

“Jared!” Hewlett called out to the foreman’s office at the top of a set of bar-grate stairs. “You gotta visitor.”

With streaked white face paint which matched Hewlett’s, a black man with a short mohawk
stepped out of the office and looked down over the assembly machinery to his compatriots, gripping at the handrail with a deadly look in his grinning eye.

“Glad you could make it, chem-dreg. We got business to discuss.”
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

A modestly shorter chapter than usual.

The vacuum of dramatic irony closing the gap between you and 'Choly popped my ears.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaks.

With a simple hand wave as Jared turned back inside the foreman’s office, Barb and Hewlett knew to wheel Melancholy up the long bar grate ramp that traced the far side of the assembly line floor. ‘Choly knew better than to contest whether he propel himself or they propel him--Jared had not only easily forty warm bodies in his stead, but also a number of active turrets. Once the two raiders had delivered him to their boss, they fell back to the steel mezzanine to remain on call.

“Good to finally meet you.” The painted black man took a seat himself in the segmented office chair and flipped the tails of his sleeveless leather coat out from under him. “What’s your name?”

“You can call me Melancholy,” he fumbled, still clutching his syringer. The whole automotive plant hung in a stale, metallic rot. ‘Choly couldn’t say he’d seen this man’s face perching in rank on the car plant’s roof. “And you’re... Jared.”

“Melancholy? Huh. Not gonna ask how you came about that one, but I’m also not gonna question it.” Jared stroked at yesterday’s stubble and squinted at him. “No, it can’t be a coincidence, you being in a chair like that. Tell me, friend... How’s your experience with Jet?”

The chemist wasn’t sure what the wheelchair had to do with anything. His cowl concealed how genuinely baffled he was by Jared’s comment, unable to tell if it meant anything at all.

“Lot of effort just to place a work order. I can get you some, if you hook me up with the resources and space to manufacture it, if that’s what you’re asking. My lab’s not currently set up for Jet. Not ideally, anyway.”

He hadn’t himself ever distilled Jet, but he’d helped a retainer who’d used him and Hawthorne as a middleman enough times to know the basics.

Jared’s eyes widened a bit and he crossed his arms slowly.

“Now that’s a reply I wasn’t expecting. What kind of resources we talking?”

The lack of probability in this encounter boxed ‘Choly’s ears a bit. Everything felt at once both covertly coded and non sequitur.

“Brahmin manure. Lots of it. And every plastic container you can find.”

“Sounds pretty simple.”

“Oh, it’s really--not,” he saved, realizing he nearly let the entrepreneurial edge slip past him. But
then it sank in Jared had no objections to *brahmin* and 'Choly hemmed a bit. “Brahmin are cows with entrails mutated by tainted feed before the war. I don’t know how many of those have survived. Regular cows aren’t going to work.” When Jared grew visibly irritated, ‘Choly coughed. “And even if you could find me brahmin, it’s honestly quite sophisticated to distill Jet. Takes a lot of precise measurements. And, by extension, the means of metering doses into ampuoles.”

“You must be quite the chemist. I’m impressed. My outfit thinks you’re a real showman.” Jared kicked his feet up on the file cabinetry next to him, and casually flicked out a switchblade from some pocket, to pick at his fingernails. “I don’t know what rock you crawled out from under, but brahmin are the only cattle that survived the war. We can discuss nitpicking details later. But first, back to the actual type of answer I was *expecting*...” After a while of trying to stay calm, he jammed down the switchblade in the arm of the chair and left it. “What kind of experiences do you have with *taking* Jet?”

‘Choly’s eyes glazed a bit at even trying to recall his recent fly-blown veneer. He sniffed. “Gives me some interesting inspiration. I don’t dabble with it much. More of a Berries fellow, personally.”

“Berries?” That got the raider leader’s attention. “What kind of *berries*?”

“Berry Mentats,” ‘Choly elaborated, more self-conscious by the minute. “They’re far more potent than typical Mentats. Taste better, too, if you ask me. I’ve got a wide selection of things I can get for you. Stuff I can guarantee you haven’t heard of since *before* the world ended.”

“And what’s stopping me and my outfit from storming that dandy little ‘pharmacy’ of yours and just taking it all for ourselves?”

“You need someone to cook the stuff, don’t you?” A muffled giggle came from him, an attempt to cut the stress of having his new home threatened like that. “...Besides, I don’t have all the components I need. I have most of them, for most things, but I will guarantee you, very little of what’s *stocked* in that building is viable without a chemistry degree to revitalize it.”

Jared began to rock in the chair impatiently, then stared deadpan at him.

“Melancholy, that hood is starting to piss me off. Take it off.”

“Why? I like it.” The momentary lapse of better judgment folded the wad of canvas into his lap in concession. Jared was still staring, and ‘Choly trembled. “I--”

“You are a *scrawny* little fucker, you know that?”

“I--” ‘Choly wheezed, still unable to read the guy. “Yeah. No shit.”

“And you keep derailing me. Pay attention. Are you fucking high right now?”

“I’m fond of sampling the goods, yes.” He caressed his cheek with the side of the copper barrel of his blowgun, and looked to Jared thoughtfully. “I’m paying attention. I just don’t get what you’re trying to get at. Are you afraid to ask outright? I mean, it’s impossible to waste _my_ time right now. I was about to deliver the day’s chems, when your folks grabbed me. That caught me by surprise. I never would have thought I’d get ambushed on a *roof*.”

“Like that, did ya? Gonna have to tell Lonnie how it worked so well, even you were impressed by it. Couldn’t say no, could ya?” Jared grinned at him. “Does Jet give you the sight? Or those Berries? What do they make you see? Are you seeing anything right now? Is that what’s got you
so weird right now?"

Sight? Was ‘Choly supposed to understand?

“Mentats and Jet are a... most unsavory pairing.” His voice cracked a bit, and he glanced down to his dart cases. “At least, in my personal experience.”

Jared stopped grinning, his glare intense.

“Do... does what you see with them ever, like. Actually end up happening?”

“Fuck, I wish—” In an instant, ‘Choly clamped a hand over his own mouth, writhing in an ache of just imagining his vapors manifesting in reality. He squinted and squirmed lower in his chair to prevent a grunted moan from escaping between his fingers. He unclenched and melted backwards a bit, heels fast in the stirrups of the chair to steady himself, trying to save face.

With every statement escaping his lips, he wondered why his mental filter culled some idiot commentary while permitting others that seemed just as poor in taste.

“...What, do yours?”

“That’s between me and them,” Jared muttered. He rose abruptly and began to pace with restless rigor and a ragged breath. Suddenly he pointed at ‘Choly from across the room with a near glower. “You draft up a list of what you’re gonna need to cook stuff for me. Be as precise as you’re bullshitting me that you need to be. I’ll make it happen. This whole fucking town needs to be swimming in Jet.”

“I can do that. Not sure what you intend to do with that much cow shit, but-- hm.” ‘Choly stroked at the blow gun, conniving. “Delivery. Now there’s a word with several flavors. Jet, as I’m sure you know it, is an inhalant. A vapor. Would it be weird of me, to posit the intrigue of edibles, or even... inject-ables?”

“What, no! One thing at a time, you ass. Don’t derail me. You get Jet flowing through this place, and maybe we can talk about getting you set up to toy with experimenting with other chems. ...I gotta ask, though. The rumor’s too strong.” The blow gun drooped. “Why cash?”

“Everyone keeps trying to convince me no one uses cash anymore, but when I don’t budge on my prices, it still ends up lining my pockets. I don’t understand.”

“Gotta wipe your ass with somethin’, I guess.”

That definitely got under ‘Choly’s skin, and he clenched his teeth a moment.

“What should be my asking price? Should it be in caps?”

“That’s the sane and normal thing to demand.” Jared didn’t like this, his brow knitted wild and tight. “God, how high are you? What else is there but Nuka caps?”

“Maybe I ought to go by Rip Van Winkle, rather than Melancholy. If all this has been a trip, I hope it kills me.” ‘Choly looked to Jared, eyes dull but pleasant. “Maybe it did kill me. Trapped in my last hit for eternity.”

“...Well--” Jared squirmed just enough ‘Choly could see it. “I’d like to say it’s been a pleasure, but. You are so fucking weird. I can’t tell yet if I like you or hate you.”
“You’re going to end up doing both, I assure you.”

“--No, more like it’s been real.” Jared chuckled at his own inside joke, but shut up abruptly when ‘Choly hadn’t left yet. “Get out of here and take inventory of your shit. I’ll send somebody to collect your... shopping list around midnight. Leave it in your... capsule pipe or somethin’. Hey Hewlett, Barb.” When they came into the office, he waved them at ‘Choly. “Take Melancholy back to his pharmacy.”

Barb leaped at the opportunity to terrorize him again, snatching the chair handles with a lunatic glimmer in her saucer-wide eyes. He imagined she had to have been grinning like a Cheshire under that kerchief.

“You ready to ride like hell? ...You look miserable with the hood off, dreg.”

“I. I know. ...Before I go, can we make the rounds of the assembly floor? I need to plan out some things for Jared, and I think there might be some useful equipment here for what he’s contracting me for.”

“Whatever.” Hewlett grunted, hitting his handrim wheel with her bat, not unlike a rider spurring a horse. “Get goin’.”
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Pretty hard surveillance tw on this one, ah.
You get a cookie if you can spot the historical conspiracy reference.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaking.

Melancholy locked the pharmacy's front door behind himself, then wheeled to the back and took the elevator to the second floor. As he exited the car, Angel came from the break room about the same time, and stopped him in the lounge area.

"Ah, Sir!" It paused, genuinely confused. "Did you just come from downstairs? I was just thinking I needed to check on you. How did your little rooftop rendezvous go with your chums, ha ha!"

"--About that." 'Choly chewed at his lip and eyed his Handy-bot. He favored pushing past it in the belief it would follow. "I know it's a bit early, but could I bother you for a bit of dinner? Really, anything will do."

"Good that you're open to variety," Angel replied, right behind him as expected, "for we haven't got it. I'm afraid all we have left is Halloween candy, a few boxes of Instamash, and BlamCo Mac. Really, we should consider replenishing our pantry next you feel up to it. Perhaps a trip to the grocer's is in order, hm? You did outfit me with this dandy harness, and update my hydraulics, so that I might facilitate that kind of endeavor, after all." It held up two boxes, a red and gold square one and a thin flat teal one. "Would you rather the potatoes or the macaronis?"

"Mm. The macaronis."

While it put back the square box and commenced preparation of the other, it hummed a jaunty vaguely-British tune which its owner couldn't quite place. 'Choly set down his syringer and hood on the table, and with a lump in his throat, he watched the robot.

"Angel, I've been giving it some thought. About how Defense Intelligence Agency gifted me with you when I first came over. I... I know the DIA used you to spy on me. That it wasn't just nationalization effort to adjust me to culture and language. I also know the DIA fell with the rest of the government. We can talk more openly now, don't you think? Being honest with you is going to help us both help each other. Sure, the mandatory name change didn't fool anybody: everyone still all thought I was a Russian spy or something. But really? They approached me, offered me the position at Deenwood. Part of transplanting key Asian experts into the US military, best I can tell. What can I say? I get bribed easily with promise of access to big toys. But really. All I was hiding was chem trafficking. Lots and lots of chem trafficking."

"I know, Sir."

"--Hawthorne and I--" The chemist cringed and glazed over. "Wait, what?"

"I know all about you and Mister Hawthorne's business practices. I didn't report any of that because it's not what I was programmed to identify and report. They cared only how you handled
confidential information. My objections to your proclivities have always wholly been in my interest of preserving your health and quality of life, Sir." It stopped a moment to let the saucepan boil on the hot plate, but readily resumed stirring it as needed. "I am still transmitting this to proper authorities, mind."

The inability to process Angel's response elicited a strange smile.

"Yes, of course. You're likely transmitting to skeletons, but I understand."

He nearly related that Communism had lost, but so had Capitalism. It didn't serve to argue no clear winner when in the nuclear exchange, everyone had lost. His head hurt, between the goings-on with Jared and learning his robot had concealed this level of self-awareness from him from the beginning. In attempting transparency so his activities would come as no surprise, he could have never expected his robot to reciprocate such honesty.

Back when he trafficked chems under the paranoia of crossing the DIA's scrutiny, he'd taught himself enough robotics to defuse what bugging technology he could identify, such that these variably sophisticated sensors transmitted all-clear, where simply disabling them would have drawn attention to any tampering. Yet, even now the remnants of his robotics knowledge would benefit him, to perform maintenance on this stunning testament to the longevity of General Atomics craftsmanship.

Still, the possibility nagged in the back of his head, that Angel's transmissions might ever amount to conflict. He'd discounted the possibility of an existing surviving population, after all. He could get all manner of things wrong, including the radio death of the DIA. He'd have to do something about the bugging equipment, to sate his paranoia. Regardless, it relieved him that his cyclomorphine research had only come up between him and his business partner within the month leading up to the apocalypse. The nature of the chems he had skimmed hadn't stimulated his Handy to rat him out, but provided that it ever determined that any of the military compounds he'd formulated had left the compound...

Worst of all, he understood with horror, was the likelihood he was entirely right about the demise of the Agency. The only thing that had kept him in line after his American conscription was the threat of surveillance. Who now existed in this wasteland save himself compassionate enough to mitigate his moral compass for him? He doubted even he could keep himself from acting out on fantasies any longer, the more he recognized them trickling into mundane waking world. Of any aspect of this creeping reality, that terrified him most: more than the ghouls, more than the mutated insects, more than anything else he had not yet encountered that his imagination could not reliably fabricate. Who had the audacity to grant him self-agency?

Angel, presenting its owner a bowl of creamy reconstituted pasta, startled him from his waking nightmare.

"Bh--hoze--" He found himself frowning as he rapidly and repeatedly retraced his platysmal scar. Angel joined the bowl with a shot glass and the near-empty bottle of whiskey, and he poured himself a glass with his head hung. "Thanks, Angel."

"Sorry to startle you. You were most lost in thought."

"Doesn't change a thing." He favored eating over starting with the liquor for once. After a few bites, he cleared his throat. "So, I suppose I should explain my sudden willing openness. I have a job now. Salaried. I might still pick at the by-commission rooftop sales on the side, if it goes smoothly."
"My stars! What exciting news." Angel's movements seemed lyrical and airy a moment before it shifted to a scattered panic. "When do you start! Oh, oh dear. We've nothing for you to take for lunch! We must--"

"Angel. Angel, it's all right." 'Choly snapped his fingers a few times, then continued eating. "Stay with me. Maybe once I get Jared the information he needs, we can make a trip out of the pharmacy. That way, I can draft a laundry list of what all we need to scavenge for."

"Apologies, Sir. I'm just..." It idled beside him with its tendril-limbs curled up close. "I'm so eager for both of us. You've no idea how elated I am that I can foster vocational habits in you again. Tend to you, like... before. The normality of routine--that's the cement you need to get back to your old self. Ha ha!"

"Mmh. Makes two of us." He washed down the cardboardesque pasty mouthful with half the shot and, with a sigh, absently tapped his spoon in the dish. "I doubt the lab here would be suitable for the scale of distillation he described. Don't much like the idea of that much manure in the pharmacy, anyway. You're fond of reminding me not to bring home my work with me, and I think we can both agree that this building is very much becoming my home now. I don't think you need to remind me to leave that elsewhere."

"I haven't the slightest what you're on about, but manure? Yes, I'm quite glad we're in agreement that it doesn't belong indoors."

"Talking aloud. Imagine it doesn't make much sense. Mm mmh." He finished off the serving and shot glass, and sat back in thought. "I surveyed the assembly plant before I returned, and I think there's a good place there to set up a vat-style rig. Lots of pipes to make use of. Maybe... maybe refining a few water heaters...." With a sniff, he adjusted his glasses and glanced down to his Pip-Boy. "I'm going to get working on my invoice. Thank you for dinner."

"Of course, Mister Carey!" It cleared the table for him.

"I'm going to have to fix that one of these days," 'Choly mumbled to himself as he wandered off in the chair to nurture a Berries-induced engineering conflagration.

Taking stock as he navigated the building, he absently annotated in his Pip-Boy with blind keyless keystrokes, and as he went, he cross-referenced these against a more coherent draft he composed for Jared. In his ramble, he listed off various possible equipment which they could combined into a small-scale substitute for the mechanisms by which to load the crate of empty inhalers he had on hand in the pharmacy lab. To sustain the chem habit Jared sought to cultivate, there would have to be a tacit recycling effort of paraphernalia until they could locate more actuators. Too, he requested minimal opposition from Jared's crew as he toured Lexington, endearing that the city must already belong to the raider boss, or inevitably that it would. Something of this new world civility tickled 'Choly, and he guarded any potential conflict with the raiders by asking permission to scout the Super Duper Mart. Self-serving, he also tackled on a postscript that Jared's crew supply him with large quantities of Abraxo cleaner, to make possible synthesizing fresh Mentats of any variety, and he cited the need to stay sharp for the task at hand. By the end of the evening, he read it all over one more time and transcribed it onto a piece of card stock packaging, then shoved the results in the capsule pipeline.

He sank into his seat at Eleanor's desk and slumped his head along his outstretched arms. He popped a few painkillers in his mouth and chewed them mindlessly, and washed it down with the stale coffee he'd forgotten on the desk at some point. The familiar post-Berries headache crawled across his skull, but he hardly cursed it. The brain was just like a muscle in some regards, after all--running a marathon is a very different thing for someone who's prepared at length for it as opposed
to someone who dashes from start to finish without even stretching beforehand. The habit would
return. He’d gladly nurse it.

As he started to drift off, radio static echoed in Eleanor's office. Bewildered, he squinted and
rubbed at his head as he pushed the button on the intercom.

"Chemist--" The caller was Jared. "You expect me to read this novel when you've got a working
comm?"

'Choly grunted and resumed leaning on the desk. He hadn't expected Jared to come himself.

"I can hear your awful face paint loud and clear." He stiffened, double checking whether the button
was depressed for automatic two-way chat, or if he'd simply held it a moment to check the caller.
He swallowed hard and pushed the button again, hoping Jared hadn't heard that. "Sorry. I have
more than a bit of a headache right now. And this is the first I knew that restoring power to the
building had also restored the intercom."

"Fuck you're longwinded." Jared paused at length. "It's always the quiet ones. Ugh."

"Apologies. I was just trying to be thorough. Operating on the presumption that our
correspondences over the invoice would all be written word, I just figured that a comprehensive list
of everything that came to mind would limit how much time got wasted. I'm guessing you've had a
chance to look it over?"

"Yeah, I got it. Flattery will get you everywhere in my town. You have the most unnervingly good
handwriting I've ever seen, but I still can't believe I'm reading this right. You want in the SDM?
You really are crazy. I'm not wasting warm bodies on that, but far be it for me to turn down the
proposition of you spreading around any profit to be had of your confidence that you can manage
it. Try not to die before we even get started. And get me some Sugar Bombs while you're at it."

Even Jared thought it a terrible plan to try to scavenge the grocer's for food reserves. 'Choly would
have to think things through for certain, and he hid his anxiety over it behind a tiny chuckle.

"Heh, I can do that. What... about the other things I mentioned?"

"You've gone from asking for cash to asking for a metric fuckton of soap. That's marginally more
sane than most of the things you've said today, but even that's pushing it. We're going in the right
direction. Yeah, I've got a lead on where to load up on Abraxo, but remember. I'm only interested
in Mentats as far as they're helpful to distilling my Jet. My project takes priority over any of your
unrelated fun, and don't forget it." Jared snorted. "Still, you're going to have to let me try some of
these infamous Berries you won't shut up about."

"Oh, for certain." 'Choly rubbed at his temples, his voice strained. "I swear by them. Only way I
got through my military contract."

When Jared had nothing to say for a little too long, 'Choly realized that had been entirely the wrong
thing to say.

"You a fuckin Brotherhood defector? That takes balls."

"Oh, I, no. The actual military. I'm a Pharm Corps chemist. Nine years, eight months, for
Anchorage."

That had been an even worse thing to say.
"--I grow impatient with this conversation, chemist. Give me a few days to gather up what you've requested. Answer your damn comm when I come knocking." Jared snarled. "You're really starting to piss me off. If you're gonna get high like this all the time, at least journal your trips so they're useful to more than just you, all right?"

This time, 'Choly remained silent for a bit. Had he heard the raider right?

"You... want a transcript of my high?" 'Choly licked his lips and held in a breath as he stared at his Pip-Boy. "I... I can absolutely do that. You're in luck that that's... already an habituation of mine."

"All right. Now that, I like to hear. Expect to share. Both... experience and goods. Heh." At first, 'Choly had thought that was the end of it, but then Jared came back with somewhat sarcastic enthusiasm. "Let me know how your grocery trip goes."

"For certain."

When the intercom stayed idle for several minutes, relief oozed out of him, and he slouched back in the chair with a groan. He removed his glasses and dug his fingers into his eyelids. He could appreciate that Jared was on board with his plan, and that the raider was willing to accommodate interests that ran in direct tangent to the grand scheme. But, this conversation also solidified the contract into something tangible and unable to ignore. The chemist had a job again. Responsibilities. Someone he had to answer to. On the other hand, this also meant more of the building worked than he thought previous. If he intended to set foot outside the pharmacy, he was going to have to throw together a sign for the intercom, so that anyone who came calling would know he wasn't just blowing them off.

In the mean time, he took to the couch in Eleanor's office and passed out halfway through disrobing.
'Choly opted to confront the Super Duper Mart from the dock doors. He hacked the terminal outside and opened one of the two broad-panel rolling shutter doors, then adjusted his sack hood as he stepped foot inside. With his hand already on his .38, he glanced around to assess nothing on the dock held anything of value. Angel got the first shot when their entry roused three feral ghouls who had lain down lifeless in the loading bay, in and under the back of a Pick-R-Up parked inside it. 'Choly dry-swallowed and wasted five bullets taking down the remaining two ghouls. Shaking, he approached a fourth body, chewed up and crumpled between a crate and a stack of palettes. She looked to have belonged to a militia group, and a crank-powered laser musket lay near her feet. Cautious, he patted down her pockets to find only a holotape, but he didn't stop to listen to it just yet. Sweating, he could tell she had sheltered here, only to be ambushed by the ghouls that he and Angel had just cut down.

He didn't like the comparison, how the two of them had managed to dispatch all three ferals, when no fewer than three must have overwhelmed her. A robotic ally had made all the difference. The corpse hadn't remained there more than a few weeks at most, further evidence of multiple factions of life in this new world, yet she looked like she'd dressed from a history book. He took a solicitous wonder from the encounter, what vestiges of pre-apocalyptic society had survived all this time. Was this woman one of the Brotherhood Jared had mentioned? No matter what, he didn't like this as his first encounter inside the walls of the grocer's.

Shaking, he approached his Handy-Bot, and it acknowledged the hand to its spherical chassis and lowered its thrusters enough for its owner to mount the strap-stirrups and balance across its top using the fabric harness's strap handles.

"Are we good to continue onward, Sir?"

"Best we can hope for."

They ascended the concrete stairs into a maintenance area. Four more ghouls rose from their stasis and rushed them. The mangled, wiry wretches lunged, clawed, and hiss-frothed in a fury.

"Hold still, would you!" Angel savored slicing them down in succession with its tendril-limb's circular saw attachment. "By God, if I had hands, I'd strangle the life from you!"

"I... I think we're good for now, Angel..."

Something in his bowels churned at the knowledge that all these ghouls had once been people, and that by attacking him, they gave him no choice but to destroy them. Something deeper still within him knotted up, that Angel might genuinely now enjoy serving carnage, and he dearly hoped he could determine why and how it could bypass its violence protocols to act out in such a way. It
didn't have any Mister Gutsy algorithms, did it? Perhaps he'd tuned something in its calibrations he ought not have.

‘Choly nudged Angel to proceed forward a ways, to inspect the still-lit instrument panels of the backup generators. He didn't dismount, but bent to one side to reach at it. With a deployment button, he ejected the modestly sized canister and collected it in the hopes of purposing it toward Jared's project. The dull whir of the engine which the self-contained nuclear battery had powered slowed to a stop. The few lights in the back area flickered off, rendering darkness besides the sunlight which filtered in through the broken walls and roof. 'Choly's spine electrified as he turned on his Pip-Boy's screen light and tucked the nuclear battery into Angel's storage compartment.

Mouth full of cotton, he looked over the generator panel to reaffirm his memory, that this military checkpoint generator would not take back the fusion core. If not deployed with proper protocols, one could not replace a fusion core once removed, new or otherwise. They had to frustrate tampering or occupation of any kind, after all. And of course, he'd never actually interacted with them personally before, only known of them, so he didn't think of the consequences until after he'd already misstepped.

"Something tells me taking the FC was a mistake. It was the last one powering the place."

"We'll manage. Moving onward, shall we, Sir?"

"--Of. Of course."

To their right lay a wall of maintenance cabinetry, with a hallway to its right and a broken wall to its left. They navigated down the hall, lined with bracket shelving. Angel shot its laser behind itself and dispatched a ghoul that had gained on them from the room with the broken wall. ‘Choly nearly jumped out of his skin and, shivering, clutched the harness straps even tighter. They came up into the kitchen area of the à la carte window, and two more ghouls lashed out at them, only to meet Angel's circular saw. 'Choly's face scrunched in displeasure at the dry, sour smell of all the long-abandoned cooking equipment. They found nothing still in package in the kitchen that hadn't burst from spoiling.

"We... we've encountered... ten ghouls now?" He tried to count on his fingers. "And those were just part of the staff, I'm sure. There had to have been at least that many customers, several times over. It was Saturday morning when everything went bottoms-up. Pretty much every middle class family did their shopping on the weekend, first thing. This... I didn't think this through well enough." The chemist stared down the employee-only doors before them and steeled a tremor by chewing up a Mentat.

"Balderdash, Sir. We can handle this without a hitch! Neither of us has a single scratch yet. And we've got our wits about us. These curs haven't! Ha ha!"

"I... I'm not so sure, but... maybe you're right. Maybe we do have an edge. Make a run for the front door, will you? We ought to have come in the front from the start, but clearly I miscalculated what we were getting into..."

"A ha! Just as I thought. You've got a plan after all."

"When we get to the atrium, you're going to let me off and give me cover fire while I gain access to the front office. You and I, the two of us can handle a dozen ferals on our own. But, I think we should do our best to even the odds a bit." 'Choly stuttered a sigh. "Provided the help is still operational. I did just yank the FC. Its charging station might not even deploy now. But at least if I find that I can't get it running, we'll be near an exit, and we can break away and regroup--"
"Cheerio!" it exclaimed, leaping upon the first sign of anything resembling optimism.

Laser and saw blazing, Angel burst through the double-action swing doors which separated the employees only zone from the store front, and didn't slow to clear a path. 'Choly counted the ghouls that stirred as they sped headlong through the chilled section, and also did his best to take mental stock of what looked worth revisiting once they could contend with the store's patrons who hadn't left in two hundred years. An unfamiliar pale blue emated from one of the crates in an open top merchandiser freezer island, and he swore to double back to investigate that if nothing else.

Angel managed to sever the leg of one persistent feral ghoul, but it clung onto 'Choly from behind. He screamed and elbowed it in its wasted, misshapen face. Angel's subsequent swerve to round about-face bucked off its owner and the freeloader both across the peeling linoleum floor of the atrium. The ghouls went for 'Choly's throat, and he fought through his searing left leg and managed to slap the wretch across the face. He steadied two shots somewhere between its collarbones. When it stopped moving, 'Choly tried his best to catch his breath. He stood and flinched, and approached the domed glass charging station against the wall beside the mess of shopping carts. Larger establishments, especially franchises, almost always had a Protectron at their employ, and there it stood idle as expected, a stocky bipedal robot with a glass plate with visible mechanisms where one might have reasonably found a face. He smiled in fleeting reassurance, powering through what was likely either a twisted joint or even perhaps a broken bone.

"All right. There's a good chance this isn't going to work, but you're going to have to help me out here. Keep them off me."

"Right!"

'Choly cut to the left side of the atrium, pistol at the ready as he skimmed the area with his breath in his throat, and with his back to the customer service window, he shuffled around the corner. He tucked away the weapon in favor of bobby pin and screwdriver. The door's wooden panes had partially broken away at the top, but he knew in a time crunch better than to try to reach the inside knob to let himself in. Picking the lock, he entered the office easily. He slammed shut the shoddy door and pulled down the rolling shutter over the window, and locked everything he could. Only then did he slump into the desk chair in exasperation.

Once he had a moment to breathe, he overheard a muffled mixture of British taunting, laser fire, power tool sounds, and guttural grunt-roaring. Angel wasted no time at all clearing out as many ghouls as it could. It really couldn't distinguish that these shambling, irascible, mutated husks had ever been human, could have ever been customers, neighbors, or perhaps even colleagues of his. Had the radiation done this to them? Or had something far worse transpired here in Northeast Massachusetts? Briefly, he theorized the possibility that the warheads that had decimated the population had been salted with some unthinkable biohazardous agent. It certainly would explain the severe mutations of anything that survived the nuclear exchange. Try as he might to contain his spiraling anxiety, the chemist's imagination could only handle so much speculation as far as how many ghouls populated the building at this point without catastrophizing, let alone broad attempts to examine any theoretical underpinnings of the apocalypse. So, he did his best to shelter himself into the room mentally as well, and he got to work on the customer service terminal.

With the use of his decryption holotape, he easily gained access to the Protectron activation sequence. He racked his hazy recollection for basic code instructions, on bated breath for some time, before he instructed the Protectron to power on in security mode, and to treat the Mister Handy on site as an ally. He waited motionless with eyes wide, hoping to hear some sign that the second robot had joined in, and importuned the construct's battery to still have a charge. The characteristic halted 'Pro-Tect And Serve' line sounded off and he wheezed out a sigh of relief.
From there he bided his time hacking the safe in the corner. The cash, he welcomed, which he shoved into his whitish dress shirt, but more pressing were the several boxes of .38 bullets, and another .38 pistol. The new gun had pitiful specifications compared to the one he'd taken from Gretchen's safe, but he pocketed it as well regardless.

Once he could no longer hear continued assault from either of his trusty robotic allies, he put the Protectron's mode back to standard patrol using the terminal. When Angel did not object to this, he peeked out from the bottom of the rolling window shutter to survey who and what remained standing. The ghouls had not felled either robot, and from the looks of them, the robots had won with hardly a hitch. He pumped a fist and let the shutter crash back down, and he reloaded his pistol before stepping foot outside the office.

"The coast is clear, Sir!" Angel announced, returning to its owner's side.

The Protectron marched about the front end, and it chirped, flat and uneven: "Thank you for shopping at Su-Per-Du-Per-Mart."

"That worked a little too well," Choly remarked, tucking his gun in his back pocket again and rounding the registers to empty them and take all the periodicals. He also emptied the cigarette machine by the customer service window of all its menthols. They left the security robot to its own devices. He glanced up pathetically to his Handy, and finally requested his cane.

The chemist hobbled back to the cold section to scrutinize the row of open top merchandiser freezer islands. He instructed Angel to snatch all the Salisbury steaks. They also gathered up a variety of Nuka Colas, and the suspicious glow from before had come from a brand new flavor he'd never before tasted let alone heard of: Nuka Cola Quantum. He wondered what flavor it must be, and what might make it continue to glow as it did, even two hundred years after Nuka Valley bottled its last batches. Surely, it would exhibit just as much headiness as a perfectly aged Nuka Cherry.

They cleaned out the aisles of Sugar Bombs, Fancy Lads Snack Cakes, and Yum Yum Deviled Eggs, and Choly also ensured they hit the spirits. He put his hands on a single box of Abraxo that had not been crushed in the ceiling collapse that had many years prior demolished the center of the supermarket. The elements could pour in through the decayed wound in the roof, and many papers which had come to scatter the checkerboarded linoleum now formed a thick, soured papier mache along the majority of the flooring. Beneath the concrete and metal rubble lay where the toiletries and cleaning supplies, in theory, ought have been located, and he frowned furiously and mumbled as he rearranged Angel's storage compartment a bit. Hopefully, this hadn't been Jared's idea of a soap cache.

They raided the cabinets of the cafe in the front corner of a few sets of flatware and some melamine plates and bowls, cheap but still a vast upgrade from the mismatched dishes left behind in the pharmacy break room. Choly also emptied the cafe's first aid kit, pocketing the Stimpak and storing the rest. He glanced wryly to the skeletons and mixture of ghoul carnage that littered the eating area. The demise of the two skeletons at a booth had definitely interrupted their final date, with one's arm slung across the shoulder of the other. His eyes met the jukebox at the far end of the eating area, and he wondered what song had played at 9:47am that morning. After entertaining the thought a while, he decided he didn't like it, and moved on to the true potential prize: the pharmacy.

He hadn't expected to find all that much in terms of chems, considering it was a grocer's pharmacy, impacted more stringently by the war rations than the full stand-alone pharmacy which supplied the military and police. But, he still hoped to locate a good cache of first aid, and possibly even
some more barberine syrup. The queue leading up to the pickup-checkout window at the pharmacy had all crumpled in a bony mess in the floor, some having toppled the chained stanchions atop themselves as they fell perimortem. He looted the handbaskets of whomever had them, procuring a fistful of damage-halting Med-X's, and a bottle of pink bismuth. His eyes flickered over to the pharmacy cage to survey what kind of odds he'd have locating anything on its shelves, and he saw another dead militia member sprawled out on the island in the middle of it. His heart turned to lead, remembering the woman from before.

On his way along the wall to the employee door in the back corner, he cleared out the shelves of any decongestants, painkillers, cotton, antiseptics, smelling salts, and bandages, and steeled himself to pick the lock. A breath clawed at him when he opened it, and he immediately fell backward caught off guard by two ghoulified pharmacy technicians crawling out from under the counters to attack. Angel dispatched them while 'Choly coddled his injured leg, and he collapsed into a loose fetal position in emotional exhaustion.

"The pharmacy is safe now, Sir," the Handy-Bot reported, cautious concern in its tone as it returned to his side. "It seems you're down for the count for the moment, though. If you tell me what to pick out, I'll retrieve it for you while you rest."

"--Mentats," he jolted out, trailing into cursing in Russian under his breath. "Stimpaks. Any first aid. Daddy-O, if I'm that lucky. Buffout. Barberine. All of the pharmaceutical stock you can carry."

"Little would please me more," it soothed, complying.

"...We really did it, didn't we?" he uttered quietly, looking around at the unsettling establishment.

While Angel did the final recon, 'Choly hiked up his pant leg and took off his boot to inspect the damage his spill had yielded. A few ginger, seethed palpations suggested to him the swelling came from a sprain rather than a broken bone, but he still administered the Stimpak syringe to the injury to help speed up the healing process and stiffened it out as straight as he could in the mean time. He ejected the decryption holotape from his Pip-Boy, then fished out the holotape from the militiawoman and popped it in to look it over. Her name was Emma, best he could tell, and the holotape had an audio file on it, which she'd used the dock terminal to record.

"What the hell is Josh doing? He's been gone for over an hour. We need to get out of here. The guys are thinking we're already at Concord. If Josh would hurry his ass up, maybe we can get there in time." She took a panicked breath. "Shit, gunfire. Not good. Josh--!"

When the playback clicked off, it was clear to 'Choly that Emma had abruptly ejected the holotape and hurried to grab her gun to go help her partner. But, she'd never gotten that far, it seemed. 'Choly consciously slacked his clenched teeth. He wondered if Josh was the man yards away from him, sprawled across the island, or if even more militiamen had fallen here. They didn't appear to have had a clue what they were getting into here. The place unnerved him too much to justify investigating the situation any further.

Angel was right: they had the upper hand here because they came in with half a mind what to expect. Sobered tremendously to any romanticized bias to the ghouls, he could feel the very real carnage in every inch of this place, just from where he sat. Had he just gotten lucky a few weeks ago when he encountered Hawthorne and the others? This wasn't like the horror movies. Not at all. He looked up to Angel as it came up again, and couldn't hide sniveling.

"Come now, Sir. Let's be off to the pharmacy with you, so you can rest up and be in peak shape for when you start work later this week!"
"Don't remind me," he groaned, taking off his hood.

He tried to put his boot back on, but his ankle was still too swollen, so he hoisted himself up atop his Handy and tossed it and his hood into the storage compartment. He sloppily wiped his face with his sleeve. "I... I already made an abominable first impression. I'm sure these people I'm going to be working with already have it in their heads to hate me."

"A poor first impression can only be rectified with a fantastical second impression," it encouraged on their way to the front door. "You'll simply have to wow them beyond doubt as to your skill and knowledge. They'll come around to seeing just how indispensable you are. Besides! Think of everything we amassed today! You can shower them with all manner of delights. And you're eating decadently tonight--I insist. You deserve it."

'Choly sank into the straps, favoring the healing leg and bearing down on his right with his to compensate. He hid a small, fatigued smile with his face against the cool pale blue spherical chrome chassis of his saving grace.

"You know just exactly what to say to take my mind off of it all."
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Location [Cleared]. I... guess.

Updated 2019.07.08. Minor name tweaks.

'Choly ejected the holotape from Eleanor's terminal and hesitated before pocketing it. He'd spent the remainder of yesterday recovering from his and Angel's supermarket trip. But, now that he'd rested up, he endeavored today to prepare a care package of sorts, in the bated optimism of demonstrating gratitude for the job Jared had extended him. He'd spent much of the day revising his tripartite Berry-Jet ode for more general digest, and abridged it into two simpler sections: a humble preamble which functioned as a glossary, and the work of fiction which made use of the terms established therein. Reservations stifled him from automatically including 'Flyblown' in the crate along with everything else already in there. Was it really useful to give this to Jared? He still couldn't tell whether the raider leader had meant to rib the chemist's perceived uselessness through a sarcastic suggestion that he at least provide entertainment value, or if the comment had been a legitimate request. Would something like this piece even entertain someone besides himself? He decided it might serve the Lexington outfit better for him to instead scrutinize what reading material he'd collected from the checkout stands, so he returned downstairs to the general stock room, where he'd begun preparing the crate he intended to gift Jared's group.

Many of the periodicals had deteriorated beyond any semblance of completeness, though at a glance it seemed several among them at the very least contained intact articles. He sorted through them carefully, and picked out any of which he had duplicates. Anything unsalvageable contributed to his cache of scrap paper, while the rest he divided between the care package and the tables of the break room. He'd better sort those he kept at a later point, but he had his mind set on other tasks. With the 'Flyblown' holotape scripted but withheld, and the food and reading materials packed into the crate, 'Choly scrutinized the exact contents of the crate and felt them somehow lacking. He resolved to including the wine he'd nicked from the grocer's as well, and allowed himself some recreation in the break room.

The chemist decided to sample one of the four bottles of Nuka Cola Quantum he'd obtained the day before, and opened it while he pored over some of his new magazine scraps. He smelled of it before taking a sip of the glowing pale blue stuff, noting it reminded of a floral liqueur, but the overall palate of the sweet beverage was superiorly fruity and tart. After a few sips, he identified the prevailing flavor as pomegranate, but even halfway into the bright alcoholic treat he could no better discern the source of its striking luminescence. He admired its intense refreshment, both more mellow and composed than he'd been all day. Once he finished reflecting in a thoughtful detachment over a landscaping magazine, he decided he felt up to scouting out the office floors of the pharmacy building for anything else the raiders might like. He updated Angel as to his whereabouts for the rest of the day, and took his cane with him hooked to his side in case he needed to get out of the wheelchair to reach anything.

He'd skimmed over the fourth floor a few times now whenever he came up to distribute his services from the rooftop, but today he finally took the trouble to pick the lock of what he presumed was a maintenance closet. Inside it he found a few lightbulbs, a mop and broom, several
buckets, rags, and a sparse toolbox. His mouth scrunched to one side at the one box of Abraxo left. Nothing extraordinary, he just left all of it where it had stayed the past two hundred years and moved on.

Though the whole building shared an overall design palette, the architectural aesthetic of the office floors demarcated them from the rest, subtly flourished with distinct art deco details endeared in tiered repeating pattern wall pendants and geometric gilt friezes and pediments. He really hadn't paid much attention to any of it before in the times he'd passed through the fourth floor on his way to and from the roof, but somehow it bestowed a sense of elevated position he could appreciate. Clearly, these stories were meant to remain at a far lower level of activity than those beneath them—not that the scant square feet per story in this portion of the building could really accommodate all that much foot traffic in the first place.

On the fifth floor came the accounting office, but 'Choly did not find much in the way of actual on hand funds, only thousands of legers and invoices filed away with tedium. The skeleton of the accountant fell out of the chair in which it had sat since the world ended, and 'Choly jumped. He let out a relieved sigh upon recognition of the source of the dull rattling, and rifled through the desk drawers a bit. With a fistful of pencils, he stared at the partially disarticulated bones in the floor and whet his lips in deliberation. He really hadn't been as prepared as he'd thought when he took the Super Duper Mart, and he hated how little ammunition he'd found thus far for the two calibers of pistol he had acquired in his time unthawed. Even rarer would be the opportunity to find ammunition designed specifically for the syringer rifle, but he could improvise far more readily with it than with the handguns. Surely, it could deal damage and not just chems. A ragged adenoidal chuckle came out of him as he used his screwdriver as a screwdriver for once, and absconded also with the accountant's pencil sharpener off the wall. Getting this kind of creative sounded like a little too much fun.

A plaque on the sixth floor decreed that it housed the administrative office, and it also offered a small lounge space with two armchairs, and vending machines and a cigarette machine. Upon scrutiny 'Choly found the latter machine had no menthols, and he kicked it and wrote off the odds the administrator had anything of immediate value, wheeling back into the elevator with a disgruntled armful of Potato Crisps and gumdrops. Somehow, he regretted not bringing anything with him to carry what he found, but he could have a vague appreciation that his constitution had inured him to a spacious lap.

He nearly dropped everything as he exited the elevator car on the seventh floor. His jaw dropped in awe at the calm breeze... and the view. An entire hunk of the outer wall had fallen away, leaving another administrative office exposed to the elements. Two birds that had perched near the exposed edge of the peeling floor flew away when they noticed he had joined them. He left the wheelchair in the hall and walked through the open door to sit at the desk and look out over the south end of Lexington. For the most part, he could only see the various gaping interstate overpasses which swept into and out of the city, but still the value of this open air space struck him singularly. After his unceremonious escort to the automotive plant, the mere idea of lounging on the roof didn't seem as secure as it had been in the past. But here, he had fresh air without having to step outside.

The landscaping issue of Picket Fences he'd read earlier came to mind, and he smiled at the thought of finding plants that would take well to window box treatments. Short of anything decorative, he'd even accept cohabiting with climbing vines or anything that would permit him fresh produce, if either would like the building anywhere as much as he did. Such a project could give him something to dabble with in whatever downtime his new employer would allow him.

On the eighth floor, he found the executive suite. He struggled with the door, and in frustration he stood to get better leverage with the stubborn knob. Taking his cane, he left the mound of retrieved
goods in the seat of the chair and entered the suite on foot. One of the three ceiling pendants spasmed, and 'Choly squinted one eye in displeasure at the erratic strobing. The pharmacy's boss had a wet bar in her office, and he smiled at the kismet found in the variety of in tact cut glass decanters. He took up an armful of spirits to deposit them in the chair seat with the rest, and as he turned around to make a second trip, it finally registered that he had not seen the remains of either administrator, or their boss.

Grief gnarled him up as two terribly warped feral ghouls slinked up from where they'd lain in the floor, standing between him and his prize. He'd left his guns downstairs like some kind of idiot.

Hyperventilating, he fell back on his butt. The stumble knocked the wheelchair to roll away from him, and he truly panicked. One ghoul, the one with candy pink tatters, lunged, and with a dread-stifled and choked-out yelp, he swept his cane at its face. The swing connected and the feral ghoul recoiled, only to fall back on the other ghoul. For good measure, he whipped his cane through their legs on their way down, and he scrambled backwards as fast as he could.

Head pounding, he slammed the office door shut and worked as quickly as he could with shaking hands, a bobby pin, and a screwdriver. He couldn't think of a time he'd ever lockpicked a door to lock it. With a hard swallow, he leaned into the wall beside the door to catch his breath, knuckles white around his cane in the possibility that the lock hadn't latched in place.

"Ah, Sir! Door giving you trouble?"

'Choly clawed at his dress shirt, and his legs went out under him and he slid down the wall. His Mister Handy had come to check on him, but in the fray he hadn't heard the elevator.

"Bozhe moy, eto tol'ko ty." 'Choly choked a bit on the thickness of his mouth, and wiped his face with his sleeve. "Angel. Am I ever happy to see you."

"Did I startle you?"

"Did you--" 'Choly shoved down a sarcastic laugh and smiled at the robot instead. "What startled me was. Never mind. Just help me carry this stuff downstairs, if you could, please. And leave that door locked."

"So it goes, Sir."

Later that evening, 'Choly and Angel returned upstairs. They found the door still locked, and the chemist sighed, loosening his grip on his syringe rifle. Sweating, he picked the lock, and pushed the door open. The light still flickered, and the ghouls had laid back down. As they sat up, he pushed backwards in his chair and took aim from where he sat, and fired off at close range a pencil-dart at each of the ferals. One landed in the neck, the other, its chest, and within seconds, they toppled over in agonized rigor. Adjusting his glasses with a haunted smirk, he put a hand out to keep Angel from involvement, and watched. The odd cocktail of substances with which he'd saturated the pencil lead yielded a rapid onset of paralysis so acute the feral ghouls seemed nearly unable to even draw a breath.

"I hate to have to kill them, really," he began, mostly to himself, "but I know I wouldn't be able to sleep knowing they're still here. There's no telling whether they'd be able to muster the faculties to let themselves out of the suite, or to use the elevator. I don't like it."

"They're incorrigible, Sir. Would you rather I took care of it?"

He pulled out his .38 and cocked it.
"I need to get over myself sooner or later, don't I? Stop seeing shadows of the past in everything I encounter. There's nothing but rancor and pain left in these things." He fired one round, then another, then two more for thoroughness. His eyes did not quit the two ferals. Straining against his trembling, he let the gun cool a bit before he set it down in his lap. "Just like I'm not who I was before the apocalypse, neither are they."

"...Bravo. I'll be sure to dispose of them first thing in the morning."

That night, Melancholy dreamt again of visiting the recoolant station to see Hawthorne as a ghoul, but this time 'Choly was forced to kill him. A swig of scotch burned away the immediate loathing of the nightmare, and another numbed him enough to fall back asleep.
Coming off the scaffolding to one of the yet-incomplete high rises in Lexington, 'Choly dismounted Angel and leaned toward the rubble which topped the building. A sizable measure of the interstate overpass had fallen, and with it, a freightliner, now decaying at the top of an apartment building that would likely never be finished. The chemist sighed and sat on some of it. Waiting around for Jared to come calling had only compounded his anxiety. He had to get out of the pharmacy to clear his head, and wandering the ruins of Lexington seemed as good a distraction as any. From where he rested, he could see the pharmacy sign, and he squinted dryly a moment before failing to smooth back his messy bun and continuing around the ruined apartments.

Rounding the freightliner, he came across catwalk scaffolding which ran between a pair of billboards over the street, and he strolled across it. The breeze elicited a faint smile, and he got most of the way across the makeshift bridge before it clicked that he had passed a bed roll... and a duffel bag... and a lit lantern... and a chem box... He choked up hearing heavy mechanical steps behind him, and he motioned to Angel to follow in kind as he stumbled to the other side of the bridge to duck around the side of the wall and hope he wasn't caught trespassing. The military chemist knew that sound anywhere. The person who inhabited this precarious venue had power armor--and abandon only knew what else.

"Who's up here?" The source of the rough, effeminate voice got closer, and with a shaking finger to his mouth 'Choly looked up at Angel, who looked down at him with tense sensor-posing. He motioned to let it mount its harness again, and it blinked its sensor-irises at him in agreement. "Lonnie? I told you, you're not takin' my turret."

A disembodied "shit!" snapped behind them after Angel fired up its thrusters again and followed 'Choly's direction that they sprint across what had once partly been a kitchen area to the stairwell, and hasten down the stairs in an attempt to escape. Eyes glass-wide, 'Choly glued his face flush to the top of the Mister Handy, paranoid of head clearance as the Handy deftly turned on a dime to slingshot across a commons area exposed to the elements by missing walls. It didn't waste time taking the stairwell on the other side, now having also attracted the attention of the feral ghouls who had rested and around the commons' sofa.

At ground level, they zipped to the left to avoid the majority of bricks and concrete which littered the sidewalk around the stairwell door. Rather than risk the raider in power armor following them back to the pharmacy, 'Choly instead instructed Angel to duck into another high rise apartment building. Once inside, he fretted a moment at the discovery of more ferals, but quickly unclenched seeing they'd already been taken care of. A good bit of the first floor had collapsed in, especially one far corner. He noted that the damages there looked more explosive in nature than like structural failings, and he put a hand to his mouth to keep himself from laughing aloud at understanding that someone had used something like a mini-nuke to break down the wall rather than tolerate hacking the terminal which had once locked a security door. There was something to be said of finesse.

He wondered to himself, as they scaled the stairs, what they might have been so impatient to retrieve from such a room. They came upon a room, with walls little more than support beams, which had likely once functioned as a craftsman's workspace. Most of the tools had already been looted, but the bench remained. He gestured for Angel to power down its thruster again and crouch with him here, and once they both resumed hiding, he sighed. They could remain here until the coast was clear.
After some time, his restless mind got to scrutinizing the remaining effects of the apartment that used to occupy this space. His eyes fell on a wall safe, and he whet his lips and scooted nearer to it. Out came a bobby pin from his hair and the screwdriver. His ear went to the door, his tongue ever so slightly to the corner of his mouth. This building didn't look like anyone had lived in it since before everything went bottoms-up, so he could help himself to this fidgeting prize conscience-free, a little more quietly than whoever had emptied out that room downstairs. With a long-delayed success, he tucked the bobby pin in his hair and his screwdriver back in his pocket, and he used his fingertips to pull the edges of the door toward him slowly. He found a stack of cash and a fistful of silver jewelry, as well as a pistol.

Melancholy detachedly tucked the cash and heirlooms into his pockets, his nostalgia focused upon the firearm now in his lap. An M1895 Nagant revolver. This apartment had belonged to a war veteran, and the gun had likely been an American's war trophy from a felled Soviet in the Chinese theater. He found no 7.62 bullets to go with it, and had little hope of coming across any since the caliber was far more common for European or Soviet weapons; but, coming across one of the most common-issue firearms he grew up surrounded by still comforted him somehow. With a grin, he pocketed the ivory-handle gun.

"Saw that robot go this way. Little fucker can't be far behind it."

In a panic, 'Choly could survey no way out of his hiding place besides rushing the same stairs, and armed himself with his .38 as he heard multiple footsteps ascending nearer. The power armor raider had Jared with her, and when they both caught sight of the two of them crouched in the corner hiding, Jared blurted out a sarcastic laugh.

"Chemist, I've been looking for you. My sentinel Jerry tells me you were snooping around in her things. When I said you could travel the city without opposition, I didn't mean you could just enter my people's dwellings uninvited."

'Choly didn't drop his grip on the pistol, frozen in place staring at the power armor itself. Even just the exposed frame itself unsettled him; although the blonde with razor-streaked short hair didn't have any of the plates or a helmet on the frame, she still exhibited a massive range of physical control and force that someone without one could not.

"This-- it's all a misunderstanding," 'Choly tried. "I didn't touch a thing in her place. I didn't mean to--"

"--Enough." Jared pinched at his nose bridge. "I care less whether you took anything and more why you weren't where I told you to be. I said I would come get you when I was ready. My raiders brought news to me that they saw you leaving the SDM, and now I've found you playing hide and seek in the apartments. Either you're foolhardy as hell, or just plain stupid."

"You're--" 'Choly scrunched his nose to adjust the bridge of his glasses. "You're here to get me for work? This isn't about... Jerry's things?"

"If I find any chems missing," she sneered, "I know who to come to."

"--Can it!" Jared snapped his teeth at her to quieten her. "Yes, I'm here to collect you. When you wouldn't answer your comm, I noticed your note that you'd be nearby, and Jerry told me she saw you run this way. Please don't make it this difficult to locate you in the future. I'll have to get... stern."

"Can I meet you at the factory in an hour?" 'Choly finally dropped his firearm to his lap. "I have equipment and materials to pick up, and I need to eat something before we get started."
"Don't make me regret saying yes." Jared and Jerry stood there and stared him down. "Well? Get going."

Angel had aimed its laser at the two of them the entire time, but put it away to power its thruster back up and escort its owner off.

After inhaling a Salisbury steak, 'Choly located a flatbed cart in the stock room and had Angel load it up with the care package crate, as well as the case of inhalers. The chemist wheeled himself in the chair while the Handy pushed along the cart behind him. As the two jaunted down the street and passed the Battle Green, they heard a finger-whistle. 'Choly whipped his head up to see Jerry on the catwalk over the street, peeking through the gap to one side of the billboard which advertised the city's Slocum's Joe.

"Get to work, runt," she hollered at him, then broke into pointed laughter.

"Working on it." His attempt at wit got her laughing again, and they continued on when they were confident she was teasing them and not warning them.

Upon arriving at the factory, a couple of scouts, positioned around the catwalks of the main entrance, hooted and hollered that 'Choly had a robot. He could have sworn he heard one of them wish he'd tell him where he could get a robot that would follow orders. Angel heard something 'Choly did not and flinched, but said nothing as to rise above it. The pair took the elevator to the assembly floor, and scaled the ramp to the mezzanine with the foreman's office, where Jared awaited them with a beer in hand and total impatience on his face.

"Christ, chemist. You told me you'd only be an hour. I was just about to come rip you out of that pharmacy myself."

"I had more to get together than I thought," 'Choly apologized, removing his glasses long enough to wipe his face on his sleeve. He motioned for Angel to pull the smaller crate off the top of the larger one, then pointed to the big one and looked to Jared. "I'm sure what I've got for you will be to your liking. This is Angel, by the way."

"A pleasure, I hope," it interjected at a caution.

Jared sustained eye contact with the Handy at length before he jumped up and was about to begin pacing.

"You said you were getting together equipment for our project. That's what I'm going to like--" Angel took the lid off the aluminum crate and Jared gawked at the variety of contents. His comment abruptly dropped into a low whistle. "What's this now?"

"Well, I told you that I'd split the supermarket salvage with you, if you gave me permission to go in there. It's up to you how to, or whether you want to, distribute it among your outfit. I suppose the whole crate's yours alone, if you want. It's mostly junk food, but if you're anything like me, creature comforts make such a difference."

"You are the craziest motherfucker I have ever met." Jared shook a box of Sugar Bombs cereal and stared at it, then with animation he rifled through the crate to get a basic idea of the extent of things included in it. "Do you have any idea how many ferals are in there? ...No, were? Christ. I can't believe this. First aid, chems, decent food-- and nine entire bottles of red wine? Tribute accepted," he grinned.

"Tribute-- I, yes, you're most welcome, of course." Dumbstricken to see Jared so chipper, 'Choly
eventually motioned for Angel to open the smaller crate. "And of course, there's also the paraphernalia I promised."

"Hopefully, you won't stop ceasing to amaze me anytime soon." Jared inspected one of the empty inhaler ampoules, then put it back. "Let's get cracking."

The area 'Choly had scoped out to transform into their distillation workspace lay tucked in one corner of the assembly floor, and had once provided welding tank lines to the mechanical arms which pieced together the automobiles. With the two water heater tanks Jared had produced at 'Choly's request, they would craft the means to drive off the desired gases from manure, and under pressure, funnel it off into single metered doses. Like knowing the smell of a skunk, the distinct salty musk of brahmin manure carried with it a sensory imprint someone can't forget. And the place already reeked of it before they'd even gotten the equipment far enough along to load it in. The chemist wouldn't dare ask where Jared had gotten hold of the stuff, considering how badly that conversation had gone the time before. 'Choly and Jared worked, for the most part, in strained silence. Angel idled nearby and assisted with lifting metal components as requested.

"I hope you like the Nuka Cola." 'Choly eyeballed a feeder pipe and tried to assess where his theoretical schematics would connect to it. "I know it's nothing like it used to be, but to be honest, I've come to enjoy it better than wine. The cherry's my favorite, so I hope you don't mind that I kept most of those for myself."

"Yeah, it's all right. More interested in the caps that come from emptying them." Down on the polished concrete floor, Jared grunted as he worked at tightening the threads of a bolt around a pipe. "What do you mean, like it used to be? Stop being cryptic with me."

"Well, it's not carbonated anymore. And it's alcoholic now. Just as refreshing either way, I suppose."

"The fuck is carbonation?"

'Choly idled, hung up on words.

"Mm, it was fizzy. It had bubbles. I suppose champagne might not still be fizzy either. I liked carbonation."

"Do you always have this much trouble separating what's real from what you see when you're high? I've never heard a single person describe Nuka Cola like that."

"Hey now, I've only had my Mentats today," 'Choly defended. He traced a finger through the air to where he finally determined the pipe to end up, and snapped his fingers with resolution, scribbling down further notes in his lap. "I just... miss how a lot of things used to be. Sorry if my talking about it's depressing."

"What's depressing is that your trips just make you see into the past." Jared fermented, narrowly not flinging his adjustable wrench across the assembly floor. "Useless! Can't you fuckin' see forward?"

'Choly stopped and set the pencil in his lap, and zoned out with his gaze toward the distillation boilers. He couldn't make sense of what Jared could mean, but could at least recognize his competency was in question. Massaging at his knees, he bit at his lips and glanced over to Jared.

"A lot of prewar knowledge can't not have died with civilization. Some of that knowledge is what's crafting this equipment that's going to produce chems for your outfit."
Jared couldn't argue with that, and the silence returned.

After that, Jared would sometimes break strings of silence with random questions about what the world was like two hundred years ago, just to prod 'Choly into shuttling stories the accuracy of which the raider couldn't be entirely certain. Either way, he couldn't hardly shut up the chemist once he got going, and at least it was entertaining if not educational. Maybe there was some value in the past, after all.
Over the coming months, plant life transformed the seventh floor of the pharmacy. In addition to spurs of cash, the raiders also showered ‘Choly with all kinds of seeds and uprooted plants–Jared included. Most of the time, the clippings and samples were too mangled to take root, but he’d gotten some of the most beautiful dark-foliage bushes successfully transplanted, and a few of them had started producing decently sized delicate lavender flowers nearly reminiscent of poppies. The raiders had called them hubflowers, and he absolutely adored them. Maybe given time, he could figure out how to coax the raiders to cultivate for him the aquatic tarberries in the motel pool across the way that they often brought him. All manner of random produce greased his palms. He made one mention of wanting to be surrounded by green, and these raiders leaped to fulfill that entended desire for the person responsible for the free Jet whenever they wanted it.

Free Jet had to have a catch. The only real stipulation Jared abutted to the offer was that anyone who took any of their Jet, had to do so on Jared’s terms. He fostered a culture where the entire outfit had access to the terminals in the assembly plant, for the explicit purpose of journaling their ‘jet trails,’ as he called them. For everyone who joined on with him, it was such a non-effort that they considered it free altogether. Even ‘Choly sampled the Jet himself several times, pleased to confirm through personal experience that everything he made fresh came with it the potency expiration dates had stolen from anything leftover from before the world ended. Having partaken in psychedelic literature penned by others in the troupe and taking measure of the spectrum of their hallucinations versus his own, he comfortably gauged it safe to let Jared have the copy of ‘Flyblown’ he’d made, and he additionally savored penning further pieces about the fictional Melancholy who inhabited the spaces between the air and the vapors. Violent, grandiose, perverse, outright strange–there was something for everyone in the library Jared commissioned from his outfit. None of the raiders, or ‘Choly for that matter, knew what to do with themselves. Lexington had become an absolute clusterfuck overnight.

Standing back and looking at the arrangement, the chemist could tell there was some kind of experiment going on here, but Jet was just about as harmless as a chem could be, besides an addiction. And he could be confident that Jared hadn’t doped the Jet with anything because they mutually supervised one another’s work. But maybe the Jet itself was the answer–the journaling could be a deliberate act of misdirection, so people would focus on that and not realize the extremely high addiction rate that came with the chem. At its core, the occam’s razor of the situation resulted in growing the numbers of Jared’s outfit, but even though the full extent wasn’t obvious yet, ‘Choly could tell that it had to be so much more than that.

‘Choly’s price for employment always had included his access to high caliber chemistry equipment. He always considered opportunity the most priceless compensation for his services. Where he’d had none, he substituted the pursuit of stability and security for cash–alchemy he had valued dearly in his chem trafficking habits with Hawthorne. Provided the first two of these, over time even ‘Choly’s work came free for Jared. The chemist had everything he could have asked for here in Lexington, and the only catch was having to get dirty.
And it was dirty work. It wasn’t long before the stench of bovine excrement permeated the both of them. Working with the stuff daily for weeks on end smeared their clothes and bodies with deep, rank stains. It seemed to end up on everything, be it directly or by cross-contact, including the pharmacy furniture, and it was all ‘Choly could smell after a while, no matter how much soap he got his hands on. He reminded himself often that at least Angel didn’t have olfactory sensors, but it was the mess that had the Handy regularly excusing itself from the manufacturing—or sampling—processes, to busy itself elsewhere in the factory until needed.

The smell and mess were less distracting than the constant low-grade vaporous delusions induced by occupational exposure. Usually the concentration of the methane compounds from simply handling the stuff was low enough as to keep the hallucinations manageable, but sometimes a potent bloom would knock he and Jared both out of commission for the rest of the afternoon. Everything crawled with flies, and the only reminder that grounded ‘Choly amid them was knowing the real ones were far larger and far more insistent.

“Tell me again how that ratio breaks down.”

Jared hovered over ‘Choly, who measured out five-gallon buckets of brahmin manure from the sacks by which the stuff had been transported there. The chemist knew Jared was trying to learn the craft for himself, and knowing his skill base could not any time soon run obsolete, ‘Choly didn’t mind playing teacher. He could teach Jared how to make Jet without losing his entrepreneurial edge.

“You have to give every one gallon at least fifteen PSI, or the pressure will be too weak to draw off the vapor.” He hefted the bucket onto the foot pedals of his wheelchair and balanced it against his legs to maneuver it over to the spigot which they’d designed to take in rather than drain when the handle was turned. Some of it had splattered on his hands, and he wiped them off on his pants without a second thought. “You’ve got to be able to factor for the volume of the cylinder you’re distilling it in, then subtract the volume of the material. Chemistry often boils down to a lot of math.”

“Learning math seems like a small price to pay for something as monumental as Jet.”

“Do you mind me asking why Jet’s your fixation in all this? I’ve got history with this kind of… data gathering, so to speak, and I know what you’re doing. I just haven’t been able to figure out why.”

Jared leaned over and closed the spigot, forcing dead serious eye contact with ‘Choly.

“Jet’s different from other chems. It has the ability to make humans see beyond what they normally do. You, you see behind everything. You see the past. I’m trying to find people who can see the future.”

‘Choly wasn’t sure how to take this transparent act of trust, or Jared’s interpretation of why the chemist knew what he did. He licked his lips out of compulsion, only to notice the musky salt of cross-contact, and cringed.

“So the journaling is so you have something to compare against current day events. You look back at who’s seen what, and if anyone sees things that actually… Has there been a match yet?”

Jared stood and stared down at him. The flies swarmed all about him in a humid cloud.

“No, not yet. And you’re smart to keep my goals between us. Don’t misunderstand me, though—I don’t regret my honesty. Maybe you knowing what I’m aiming for will help me with making a
match, as you put it. You’ve got a real specific ratio you achieve, to draw off the Jet from the shit. What happens if we change that ratio?”

“Well, provided we don’t overtax the equipment and make it explode, there’s a possibility we could toy with concentration levels, up potency. If that’s what you’re asking me.” Choly glanced at the not-quite-empty bucket balanced on his feet, then shut his eyes in preparation to flinch. “If you haven’t succeeded yet, what exactly makes you think Jet lets people see the future? The real future?”

‘Choly expected Jared to be furious for doubting him so, but rather, every bulging vein in Jared’s face seemed resolute in the opportunity to prove his cause to the chemist.

“I just haven’t found the one yet. I knew a woman once, Jet gave her ‘the sight.’ Her ‘sight’ predicted just about everything that’s ever happened to me. She told me raiders would burn down my home when I was a kid, and kidnap me. She even told me I’d be… this.” Jared flourished his arms outward to insinuate his position as leader of this raider band. “The first part of her visions came true before she got the chance to tell me what would happen next. I’m not even sure if she’s still alive, so I’ve got to find someone else who can do what she did.” He started shaking, teeth clenched with resolve as his eyes lolled a bit. “It’s not a fluke, what she did. Even if it’s not the chems doing it, she can’t be the only one Jet lights up so they can see.” He grabbed a fistful of Choly’s smear-stained shirt and nosed up inches from his face. “We’ve got to make more potent Jet. Rule out the chem as the source of the woman’s visions.”

‘Choly’s face went slack, dumbstruck by how abruptly mystical this down-to-earth figure had become at the drop of a phrase. He sniffed, trying very hard to ignore how Jared’s flies now crawled all over both of them.

“I can make more potent Jet. Do you… do you know why they’re called brahmin?” Jared simply looked on expectantly, so ‘Choly continued. “Before the war, there were shaman called brahmin who would eat poisonous psychedelic mushrooms to get high and experience deeply religious visions. The mushrooms were their connection with their deity. The psychedelic compounds in the mushrooms would pass through the body mostly unaltered and remain in the urine, but the human body processed out the toxins. So the tribe would drink the shaman’s urine to experience the visions without the side effects of the poisons. The shaman was the ritual lens which refined the chem which made the connection easy.” He wished Jared would let go, but said nothing. “Well, with the cows, something similar happened. A company disposed of a failed batch of an experimental fungus-based food enzyme by incorporating it into cattle feed instead of treating it like hazardous waste, and it permanently mutated the microbiota in the affected cows’ digestive tracts. The fungus lives in their rumens, and impacts what they can eat and to what extent they can digest it. The fungus… is what’s driving off the vapors we’re distilling. So in effect, the cows are the lens which refine the chem which makes Jet possible. We’re not getting high off the manure—we’re getting high off what’s IN the manure.”

Jared stared him down at length before flinging him back in the chair and storming back a few yards to pace in exasperation.

“How do you just fucking pull this shit out of the air!”

‘Choly finished pumping the bucket into the vat, then went back to the sacks for another refill. He strained at length whether to say what he said next, but it came out of him all the same as though drawn out by force.

“You’re being honest with me. I suppose I should reciprocate. I… I really must tell you, since you haven’t figured it out after all this time… I’m not recalling any of these things because of any time
I have been, am, or will be high. When everybody figured out the bombs were coming, I was
cryogenically frozen in a vault. To preserve me and a handful of others, I guess. No one but myself
survived it, though, and I only thawed out a week or two before we met. I don’t just know things
from over two hundred years ago. I… AM… over two hundred years old.”

The raider leader jolted motionless in place to glare at the chemist like he’d just told him there was
no magic in the world, no god, no higher power. Slowly, the stabbing betrayal of the confession
warped Jared’s chest into a slouch, and he snarled at ’Choly.

“Bull SHIT.”

“Pun intended, I’m supposing, but. Why do you think I need this chair to get around? And–” He
nudged down his glasses to look at him with his cataracted eyes in plain view. “The best I can term
the damage it did to me is freezer burn, really.”

Jared had finally had enough. Then, he grabbed ’Choly by his bun and shoved him face-first in the
bucket in his lap, held him there long enough that the chemist came up gasping for air. The grime
clinged to the hair around his face and dripped in a wet mess down his front. He began to draw
heaving, erratic breaths, leaning at an odd angle back in his chair. Everything swirled into a chaos
of fetor. The last thing he could remember before he fell unconscious was Jared’s paint-scrawled
face mutating into a bloatfly’s.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Drugs, decomp, insects/parasitism, myiaisis, emeto, myso, copro TW’s. I’m pretty sure this is the grossest thing I’ve ever written. Enjoy

Skin tight hypoxia gripped Melancholy’s scalp. He wheezed for breath, jerking upright in a coughing fit of salt and rancor. Face still coated in a thick grime, his eyes and nose burned almost as bad as his lungs, and he pulled off his glasses to claw the muck off his face. A rasping coughing fit seized him, only for his stomach to lay out its objections to his activities right into his lap. Everything crawled inside-out with haptic echoes of a phantom myiasis. His diaphragm continued to spasm, adding hiccups to the mix of torture.

The second time he vomited, blood spotted the rejection.

“Fuck, it took you long enough.” Jared snatched him up by the back of his collar and threw him into an office chair. He jammed a shop rag into his hand with bitter, mocking pity. “Does the chemist need some water?”

“--’Zhemoy,” ‘Choly choked out, breathing still unsteady. “I could have-- I could have died.”

“But you didn’t.”

A jar of water found the chemist’s hands, and he immediately without hesitation squinted his eyes and mouth taut and poured some of it down his face. He then poured out a bit into the other side of the rag and did his best to work the ordure loose. Unable to smell anything but the penetrating musk of brahmin dung, he distrusted his ability to gauge the safeness of the water he’d been handed, and did not use it to try to drown the hiccups. Once he got his eyes rid of enough rheum-muck, he opened them, and used the remaining water to wash off his glasses. He dared not look to Jared, to confirm his appearance.

“Look, chemist. You’re going to retain your value to me. I’ve invested too much in you. What’s a more potent dose than the raw source itself? I watched you just now, writhing like the insect you are. That had to be the most intense flight I’ve seen in my life. --Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

‘Choly trembled and shook his head, wringing his hands in his lap and feeling very small. Attentive flies crawled all over him, and diligent maggots did their best to rid his clothing of grime. He squinted his eyes shut and tried his best not to fall into hyperventilating.

“Please, no. No--”

“Do you at least know where you are, you little fuck? You’re sitting in my office. At my terminal. And you’re not going anywhere until you write down everything that you just experienced.”

He slowly picked up his head in the direction of the desk, and stared hollowly at the computer screen. Loathing overwhelmed him in the moment and he shrank from the terminal with a low whine, only to force himself to square up to it, and shrink away, several times. At last he put his
glasses back on his face, and recognized at least his hiccups had resolved.

Jared glared at the back of his head until he was goodly confident ‘Choly was committed to the journal entry.

*Flies. Flies on everything. Cleaning everything. Righting it all. Devoted. Diligent. I don’t know where they’re coming from. Are they coming from Jared? Jared’s face... He became the largest bloatfly I’ve ever seen. Drooling, adamant mouthparts. Piercing compound eyes. His bloated body teemed with lichinka. Ready for my supplication. Everything was so tight. Flesh sluicing from my belly as they wriggled out to crown my pudenda like a coronation of sex. Appetent. Purifying. Perpetual. Purulent. I was so purulent. But I wouldn’t be for long.*

*They took me with them when they transfigured into mature bloatflies. A piece of my consciousness arose in each of them, a cloud of rapture. I was present in everything, humble to debride the world of its entropy. Multiplying in a golden mean forever. Everything could be clean.*

Sweat drenched him in hard loathing, and he heaved as he saved his draft. He couldn’t get more explicit than that. It hurt his head too much to try to put to words what he had seen. Every time he took Jet, it seemed the conjugating theme was *maggot therapy.* This was the first time it had brought him a genuine state of entheogeny, and he rubbed at his upper arms in displeasure of coming down from it. Everything felt so... lifeless as the halo of activity faded away. His head hurt. His everything hurt.

In the time it had taken for him to compose the journal requested of him, he found that Jared had excused himself. The wheelchair was still out on the assembly line floor, and divorced of it ‘Choly couldn’t muster the faculty or energy to get himself to it. And he was a combination of too tired and too filthy to simply doze off. So, to keep himself entertained, he turned again to the terminal, only to realize that Jared had left it logged on as the administrator.

He’d never read Jared’s journals before, and he wondered if anyone in the outfit had. Absently biting his lip refreshed the rancid tang that stained his face, and he flinched. He looked over his shoulder to make sure Jared wasn’t even out on the foreman’s mezzanine that overlooked the assembly floor, then went into his journals. He jumped around basing his choices on the titles of each file, and began with one called ‘Setting Up Shop.’

*Gunfire’s finally quieted down. Suppose that means either Lonnie or Gristle wiped up the last of the feral ghouls or they’re currently serving as someone’s meal.*

*But Lexington is secure, I can finally get to work.*

Well, ‘Choly thought, *somebody sure became the ferals’ meal in the Super Duper Mart. They didn’t look at all the part to belong to Jared’s outfit, though. He opened ‘Subjects.*

*It’s not the chems.*

*They’re just a trigger for the sight. It’s me. I’m the problem. Wish I’d realized before my arms looked like pin-cushions, but at least it’s a new lead.*

*I need subjects.*

The chemist squinted. Jared really did believe that psychedelic drugs could make people legitimately psychic. But injections? ‘Choly thought all this nonsense revolved around Jet,
inhalant. ‘Walden’ came next.

The pharmacy across the way lit up like Christmas last week. No clue how that fucker got in my town without anybody noticing, but color me impressed that he managed to restore electricity to that place. I had Jerry case the building, top to bottom, and every way in requires either a key or a password. We’ll have to arrange a little rooftop meeting next time our little showman comes up on the roof to dole out chems with his--rifle? That still slays me.

The part that really gets me is, my outfit tells me he’s in a wheelchair. I’ve only ever seen one other person in the Commonwealth use one. It can’t be a coincidence. I have to talk to him.

Skimming a few more entries, he got a few laughs out of confirmation that Jared didn’t genuinely hate him. At least, not before today. Most mentions of him in Jared’s journals involved wanting desperately to flip ‘Choly’s ‘vision’ the ‘right direction.’ Then there was ‘Experiments Continue,’ and his face slacked.

Still no successes but the rumor of free chems has brought plenty of new recruits. Ranks are nearly back up to where they were before we cleaned out Lexington. Lonnie thinks entertaining the chemist is a waste of time, says we need to spend our time building up our defenses.

But Lonnie doesn’t make the decisions. I do.

She does seem to be enjoying her new position, though. Maybe another dose of Psycho will get her visions firing.

‘Choly’s hand went to his mouth at the mention of cyclomorphine, and he sank back in his seat. Jared had access to Psycho, and was trying to jog hallucinations with it as he’d done of the Jet. The raider leader had told the chemist he’d had no interest in branching out into other drugs until they’d done comprehensive work with Jet first. Knowing what Jared had told him before this most recent trip, had the raider simply gotten impatient without any results yet, or was something more sinister taking place here? Holy God how did he get his hands on that stuff...

He hadn’t wanted to find anything compelling, incriminating or otherwise, and he pressed on, haunted, with the most recent entry: ‘Stumped.’

Nothing is working. The old woman, she used to just huff some Jet, pop some pills, then she’d start babbling, spouting vision after vision. And they all turned out true. The Raiders burning the town, killing the parents, stealing the kids. Stealing me. I remember the look in her eyes when she saw my fate. “Kid, you’re gonna be a monster.” All true.

If I could get that sort of power, that sight, the Commonwealth, the other gangs. No one would have a prayer.

But nothing’s working. Maybe I need to try upping the dosages. I’ll have to talk with the chemist and see how potent we can get.

“You’re gonna be a monster,” he mouthed, his soul flying from his body.

There was no other explanation in ‘Choly’s haunted grey matter, than that this soothsaying junkie had seen ‘Choly’s hallucinations of Jared becoming a bloatfly. Of course Jared’s interested in developing psychic abilities for power alone. Of course he is.
'Choly backed out to the main screen, and returned to the ‘Melancholy 8’ entry from the holotape in the disc deck, so the terminal would be open to it. The more rational explanation was that this woman had indicated a monstrosity of character, but ‘Choly just couldn’t quit the thought as he reread what he’d written. Context meant everything. Over... and over... and...

“Hey, chemist, you’re still at it? Fuck, you’re taking forever.”

‘Choly jerked in his seat, snapped out of his lucid horror by Jared’s return.

“I, yeah. Yeah, I’m done.” He looked to Jared, to find him still entirely human, and he sighed out his relief a little too readily. The raider had brought the wheelchair, folded up. Pushing away from the desk in the rolling chair, ‘Choly began, “I very much hope this stuff doesn’t come true, and very much hope it’s ridiculous that it ever could.”

Jared leaned down to skim what ‘Choly had written, and his features alternated from hardened to ridiculous. He barked a laugh and slapped ‘Choly in the head, only to continue laughing, almost in tears.

“You are a horny little fuck...”

“I haven’t gotten any in over two centuries.” He let out a small laugh, realizing he’d inadvertently referenced facts which had precipitated Jared’s prior behavior. “I suppose that has a lot to do with it.”

With a delirious sigh, Jared smiled at him and gesticulated emphatically as he spoke next.

“I’ve been thinking, and I have to ask. In some of your other journals, you’ve talked about using some pistol in the same way you use your rifle. A... Nagant? I know it’s total bollocks that you’d have these... bloatfly maggots or whatever you hallucinate every time. Those things are like a dick joke. Having ‘em in the gun’s like, a metaphor for fucking everything under the sun or something. And you getting intimate, up close and personal, with that thing. Real raunchy. ...Is that a real gun you’re talking about? Or is it a vapor just like everything else in that fucked up little head of yours?”

The chemist straightened, and thought how to reply as he slowly wrung his hands in his lap.

“I... yes, and no. The gun is real, but the ammunition and its ability to fire them aren’t.” He stopped making eye contact. “It’s a Russian revolver I found, some vet’s war prize I guess. Takes 7.62’s, but fuck if you’ll ever likely put your hands on any. I can’t think of any regular issue American guns that use it, and the military only let vets have the weapon itself as a trophy--the ammo itself was considered contraband. I only really know the basics when it comes to actually breaking down and futzing with the mechanics of a firearm, but I suppose it’s... entirely plausible to make it work like my syringer rifle.”

Jared squinted at him, unsure whether ‘Choly was being an idiot.

“You can’t put darts in a pistol, revolver or not. Just the combustion in the chamber will destroy it.”

“The Nagant... is different. It’s a gas-seal revolver. It fires the ammo through air pressure, and relies only partly on combustion. I would imagine there’s a way to rig it to rely completely on a pneumatic mechanism. 7.62mm isn’t too far off from the ammo a syringer rifle uses, either.”

“Where is this... Nagant.”
‘Choly made a funny face and shook his head in a vague confusion. Suddenly, it didn’t feel like Jared was trying to confirm facts about a Jet journal.

“I have it stored someplace safe. What, why?”

“I’m very good with metalworking equipment, and very good with firearms. Been playing around with the assembly plant amenities for close to a year, and I grew up in Quincy. You’ve seen how good I am, from how we cooperated putting together the Jet rig. I could take a look at it. And I could probably make it happen. Give it ammo it can use. Make it proud again.”

‘Choly stiffened, recalling that Jared’s journals indicated he had access to Psycho—at least at one point—and he couldn’t imagine a worse outcome. But gradually, his judgment got the better of him and he nodded, then nodded eagerly.

“I’ll bring it tomorrow. So you can look at it.”

The moment the words came from him, he regretted it. And yet, Jared seemed more pleased with him than he’d ever been. With his help ‘Choly transferred over to the now unfolded wheelchair, and Jared escorted him down the mezzanine ramp to meet Angel.

“My stars you’ve gotten most filthy, Mister Carey!” Its tendrils flailed about in utmost concern before taking up the handles and motoring him along. “Shall I help you bathe upon arriving home? I scarce would think you could scrub all that away on your own.”

As they exited, Jared called out after him, “Melancholy! Don’t you forget your promise.”

He shot Jared an o-kay with one tired hand, not looking back.

“Angel, I... I think this warrants a dip in the river. We’ll stop at the pharmacy for the toiletries, I guess.”

“But Sir, you’ll be soaking wet all the way home. You haven’t come across a change of clothes. I should know. You deserve a freshening up.”

“I... have a change of clothes,” he began, almost reluctantly. “Don’t worry about that much. It’s in your storage compartment, actually.”

They fell silent the rest of the way back to the Lexington Walden, to limit any likelihood of stirring unwanted ghoul attention. On the way to their pit stop, all ‘Choly could wonder was whether Jared were more pleased with the journal entry, or with the promise of a new toy for his inhumane scheming... and he couldn’t help but wonder why he was so attentive to gain the favor of this abomination.

He’d given Melancholy everything he could have wanted. But at what price?
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Drug culture and human experimentation tw's.

...This track out of time is coming full circle.

To the East end of Lexington, the remains of Mystic Lakes lay under the ruins of the Route 3 overpass. Angel had assisted ‘Choly in bathing in the water of the Mystic River, both by providing a lookout and getting his back for him. He wished more than anything that he could have simply laid back and soaked, but the area was neither secure nor private. ‘Choly dried himself off just enough to comfortably put on his surgical corset, then with bated breath requested the garment bag from Angel’s storage.

It felt like a step backwards in every sense to be in uniform again. The khaki slacks, dress shirt with US lapel pins, and tie tied precisely. Grateful for impeccable tailoring, he’d have to wait for his suspenders to dry. He toed into his dark brown dress shoes, then affixed his wrist and ankle braces. The Pharm Corps overcoat, complete with its twin caduceus lapel pins, the double silver shoulder bars to mark his rank, and over his heart all the bars from nearly ten full years’ service. His hands went over them in guilt. For the first time since he stepped foot in Lexington, he questioned what he was doing.

Self-agency was a bitch.

The sound of laser fire behind him jostled him from his moment of remorse, and he jumped.

“What! What was it--!”

“There was no saving those articles, Sir,” the Handy Bot elucidated, unable to hide its relish at dispatching with them in such a way. “No amount of Abraxo could have gotten out those stains. You’ve worn them an entire month straight. Today was simply the last straw. Ha Ha!”

‘Choly frowned at his robot meaningfully, forced to commit to the wardrobe change long-term.

“I... suppose it’s for the best,” he ultimately dismissed. “Abraxo is better served for just about anything but cleanliness.”

With a long, distant pause, ‘Choly stared out over the water, able to see Medford from where he stood. Finally putting his PipBoy back on his right wrist, he faced Angel with an odd smile.

“It’s going to be dark soon. We should get back. I have... work to do.”

He sat in the wheelchair as Angel unfolded it again for him, and they were off again through the heart of the city.

“Forgive me for saying so, Sir, but it does my servos such a delight to see you in uniform again. I’ve... missed circumstance.”

“I suppose for lack of anything else, for better or for worse, one can always fall back on the
Angel served ‘Choly a small dinner of Cram and a sweet roll, to recover what nutrients he’d lost that afternoon. Once it was dry enough, ‘Choly brushed his hair back into a fresh french twist, then he excused himself for the night, to sort out his own demons. With the Merrick Index and a fresh holotape loaded, he made his way up to his garden office.

As night fell, the incandescent lighting from the office’s wall sconces soothed him, but he still supplemented their illumination with two candles on the edge of the desk in the middle of the room. He stood, and folded up the wheelchair in the corner. Makeshift planters framed the outer edge of the floor and filled the shelves lining the opposing walls, and he had even coaxed a melon plant to take to a hanging planter in the far corner. He smiled as he tended to each bedpan, each wash basin, each bucket and pot in which he had cultivated some manner of strange postapocalyptic life. The delicate pale lavender flowers with their dark foliage, the shallow muddy pan in which he’d revived a cutting from large red water lilies, the handful of tiny glowing stalky mushrooms he’d transplanted from one of the bathrooms in the place. And then his most endeared project in the room, his successes in transplanting the brain fungus from the break room refrigerator.

He then took a seat in the swivel bucket chair at the desk. For some time, he sought mental quiet staring out beyond the overpass outside his accidental window. He opened a fresh can of purified water at the desk and nursed on it in favor of alcohol for the evening, then popped a Mentat under his tongue and got to skimming the leaves of notes he’d tucked into the front cover of the pharmaceutical reference.

There had to be some way to distract Jared from seeking out cyclomorphine as his wonder drug. Now knowing Jared’s means and motives, he could prepare all necessary phrasing with care.

Perhaps, he could shift all focus imaginable on synthesizing the most potent Jet possible. Ultra Jet, fermented to be extra concentrated. It’d probably require a substrate to the mix, to boost the cultures. Jet Fuel, a heterogeneous mix of flamethrower fuel. A literal attempt at lighting up the third eye, it could plausibly take the form of an inhalant, injectable, or edible. Buff-Jet, as Berries-Carey had once proposed, an attempt at throttling pineal uptake of the entheogen. He could provide an entire veritable candy shoppe of chems to the raider outfit.

 Anything but cyclomorphine. Surely, the constituents had died with civilization. He didn’t want to think about the finite morphine stock in the lab downstairs, if even in the context of how once it ran out, Psycho might be impossible to synthesize ever again.

Owing to the source of his hypothetical Buff-Jet recipe, he eyed the brain fungus mounding up in the pan along the wall. The most psychedelic mushrooms he knew of, they all tended to grow on dung, or on other fungi. He wondered whether the secret to infusing Mentats with Jet would either be found in feeding brain fungus to brahmin... or cultivating brain fungus in brahmin manure. He annotated these ideas, in the hopes of running them by Jared. He never wanted to sample Jet again in his life, if he could help it... and yet, the fingers of addiction crawled at the fringes of his personal space.

Of course that acute an exposure would have rendered dependency. Revolted to be reminded again of the afternoon’s experience, he squirmed in his seat and eyed the bottle of whiskey on the desk. He shook his head of the compulsion and drank more water, then did his best to focus on his task.

Flipping through the Index, he browsed the various formulas for synthesizing saucier chems like Daddy-O or Daytripper. They required patent-protected precursors, for the most part, and he sighed in nuisance that recreating these sophisticated synthetics was beyond him in his current capacity.
He wondered... Perhaps, in other branches of the pharmacy warehousing, he might put his hands on pharmaceutical precursors such as these. For as much as he endeared himself to the sublingual facility of Mentats, barring Berries there was no crisper clarity than that bestowed by Daddy-O. Chasing the injection with Daytripper... usually smoothed out the resultant short temper and social clumsiness of having your brain run faster than your mouth. No contraindications existed strong enough to deter the intent from stacking Daddy-O with Mentats, either.

Though, as far as mode of dosage went, if ‘Choly had to pick how he took a chem, he far preferred to eat or drink it. Needles had such a high rate of injection site necrosis, depending on the chem, and regular Daddy-O abuse was right up there with Psycho in terms of that risk. He trusted Berries, no matter how clinical and exact the cholinergic high of Daddy-O felt. He didn’t much trust inhalants, either. Alimentary uptake was the safest, in his clinical and personal opinions both, and that left him right back at Mentats.

He eyed the brain fungus again, and sniffed pathetically. Perhaps the night that had birthed Melancholy from Berries and Jet Carey might have gone differently, had the Berries and Jet been compounded for compatibility. To his knowledge, drug culture hadn’t determined the means to marry psychedelia with nootropics, possibly for the best, and yet... in his desperation to find something, anything, better and more appealing than Psycho, he found himself seriously deliberating the means to precipitate Jet-Tats. The chemist fell asleep at his desk, scrawling chemistry notes.

“Sir, it’s time for breakfast,” Angel chirped from the office doorway.

‘Choly picked up his head and looked to the Handy, then nodded and followed in the wheelchair with his half-can of water. Once in the break room, Angel offered a box of Sugar Bombs and a mug of black coffee, which he greeted. After some time, he cleared his throat.

“Call it nerves if you want, Angel, but I would like to store a few things in you for safekeeping. You’re the safest place I have to hide just about anything. You’re... holding something very valuable right now, in fact. Could you...”

Angel had a blind spot just about where its owner had installed the false bottom in its storage, so it swerved and dilated its ocular lenses curiously before turning its back to ‘Choly so that he could take a look inside himself. He pocketed the revolver, and tucked the Merrick Index inside along with all his notes. While he was in there, he counted only five bottles of Melancholia.

“Here, follow me around for a bit and add to your stock as indicated. All the Melancholia... And all the morphine and cyclomorphine... and all the barberine... Toiletries...” The list went on for around an hour before Angel insisted he be on his way to work.

“Things will be just fine, Sir. You were most ragged when you came home yesterday. Today will go so much more smoothly, I assure you!”

“I certainly hope you’re right.”

Jared already manned the Jet rig by the time Angel parted ways and ‘Choly wheeled across the assembly line floor to meet him.

“Ah, chemist. I expected you to be late. Yesterday must have done a real number on you.” Jared glanced at him, then got a better look when the initial glance didn’t add up. “You changed clothes.”

“You’re certainly chipper and compassionate today.” ‘Choly watched with a thoughtful frown as the black raider finished loading the bucket of manure into the spigot. Suddenly, in proximity to
the rig, he felt utmost gratitude to port an ensemble with head-to-toe military grade water and stain repellent. “Yeah, after yesterday, the clothes I had were done for. What’s on the agenda?”

“Well, if your memory didn’t conveniently lapse, you should have brought me something very specific. Do you remember what that was?”

Deadpan, ‘Choly produced the Nagant from the hip pocket of his military jacket and held it out for him handle first. Jared looked it over, then checked out the rudimentary sight on it. With a low, impressed whistle, he aimed the thing at ‘Choly. The chemist flinched despite knowing the firearm had no bullets.

“So this is a Russian pistol. I’ve been thinking. Little verbal slips here and there. You being able to confidently identify the make of this thing. Supposing you are a man out of time. That you really are from before the War. You were a Commie, weren’t you?” He laughed darkly at ‘Choly, who straightened in his seat.

“I’m Russian. That’s right.”

“From the look of that uniform, you didn’t fight for the Reds, though. You defected. Betrayed your country.” The raider walked to the other end of the assembly line with the revolver in hand, forcing ‘Choly to keep up to sustain the uncomfortable conversation. At a workbench, he began to tinker with the thing to get acquainted. “What made you do it?”

‘Choly trembled, not sure whether he was more indignant or threatened.

“You have to know? Same reason I plied for your graces. Money, at first. Asylum. Opportunity. The Chinese were already vying to subsume the Motherland before the United States military approached me and offered me a pardon of my nationality in exchange for my service. They could overlook that I was Russian, as long as I did what they needed of me without question. I’ve...” He swallowed. “I’ve always followed anything that looked like security, and... this... this outfit is the most secure I’ve felt since I thawed out.”

He bit his tongue before tacking on a *not that it’s a good frame of reference.*

“An answer I both did and did not expect from you. I’m strangely pleased with you, chemist. Lacking your brains, I wish more people in my outfit had your sensibilities. You have your priorities straight.”

“Do I? I just handed over your capacity to administer whatever chems you want, to whomever in the room you want. Tell me I haven’t just fucked up. Promise me I didn’t just make the second worst mistake in my life.”

“And what, pray tell, do you say takes the cake?”

“Not being more adamant with my commanding officers, as to the side effects our experiments were having on the soldiers. We lost lives just through gross clinical negligence. I nearly lost my humanity in all my years of service, forced time and again to prioritize results over the safety of the test subjects. And... and you’re asking me to stand by while you do exactly what I did two hundred years ago.”

“A... military chemist.” Jared’s eyes went wide, and he turned from the dismantled gun with a wild grin as he gripped Melancholy by the shoulders. “You’re a fuckin’ Deenwood chemist. Holy fuckin’ shit. I knew I struck gold when I laid eyes on you. You’re going to cook Psycho for me. The Jet ain’t cutting it.”
Choly’s head swam hot and his extremities numbed. When his left leg began to spasm, he clamped his elbow down on it forcefully to glare at Jared.

“The hell do you know about the Deenwood Compound.”

“I know that these experiments you’re doing your best not to describe were perfecting Psycho. Don’t play stupid with me. You can take credit for all your fine work. God!” The raider let go of him to throw up his hands in delirious disbelief. “I’ve got a fuckin’ Deenwood chemist right in front of me. And you’ve wasted all this time dicking around with Buffout, and Jet... when you could have been making my outfit the good shit! God--!” He cackled, and suddenly the gun itself paled to everything else transpiring.

“I, I can’t entice you with literally any other chem on the planet, can I.”

“Barring X-Cell, you’re the best thing I’ve ever had in my sights.”

The mention of the highly experimental drug boxed Choly’s ears, and he did his best to ignore just how much Jared seemed to know about Choly’s employment.

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but the precursor for Psycho is extinct.” Another worst possible remark, at the receiving end of Jared’s instantaneous glower he choked down errant saliva despite a dry mouth. “Cyclomorphine is a morphine analogue. Painkillers. Opiates. Morphine comes from a plant called opium. Without it, Psycho can’t exist.”

“Painkillers...” Jared crooked his tongue in the corner of his mouth a moment, and stared a hole through Choly. “Painkillers, like hub?”

“What.”

“Hubflower. Those dark purple plants with the light purple flowers. What else could you have wanted them for? Wastelanders keep the petals to chew on when they’re hurting. Makes the whole tongue go numb.”

“Are you trying to tell me... that there’s a good chance my office contains potted descendants of the poppy.” His heart clung to his throat. Jared had sidestepped every possible objection he could have to the prospect. “I have potted plants... in my office... the flowers of which--” His voice broke off in a sweating squeak.

“Cool it, you little Nimrod. Don’t blow a gasket. What’s the matter with doing for my outfit what the government had you do? You know it pays well. How did you put it? All the money, asylum, and opportunity you could ask for. You’re not in a position to turn me down. Fuck this shit. We’re done with the Jet. We’re going for the gold. You’re going to test hub to confirm it’s a match for the chem you need. And you’re going to be my Psycho cook.”

“I... certainly look the part, don’t I.” Shakily, he raised his right hand to his forehead and saluted him to the best of his abilities. “Captain Alan Carey of the Deenwood Pharm Corps, at your employ.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

TW for Jared behaving like Jared, I guess? Also some pharmacology shenanigans.

Melancholy said nothing how things had gone at the assembly plant once he returned home to the pharmacy that night, and he appreciated that Angel at least didn’t seem to catch on that things weren’t right. With his brain already itching with all the tangential proximity closing in on him to his past life, against his judgment he bestilled it all with a dose of Calmex right before bed. In his position he couldn’t afford REM sleep, couldn’t afford dreams--or nightmares.

The chemist’s first task the following day was to confirm Jared’s belief that hubflower contained opioids. He consulted his Merrick Index at length and returned to it often that week. Plucking a few flowers from the hub plants in his office garden, he shut himself into the lab, whereupon he slurried the hubflowers with a pestle and a can of water, and simmered the paste with a hot plate until the liquid grew milky from latex. As he waited, he read the various periodicals salvaged from the grocer’s, or skimmed the inventory to scrutinize its usefulness to the new parameters of his work.

“Sir...” Angel came into the lab with a carafe, mug, and sweet roll. “Could I interest you in a break?”

“I... would love that.” He wiped the sorry and sweat from his face, at being caught in the act, and closed the gun fanatics’ journal to face his Handy. He accepted the warm cup in his hands, and let the steam fog his glasses. “To address the elephant in the china shop. I know you’re wondering why I’m tinkering on what’s supposed to be my day off. My contract’s... changed a bit. Hopefully, not a long-term detour. But he’s got me studying... these plants. He thinks they’re... medically relevant.” When he couldn’t smooth out his cracking voice, he drank the still-hot black beverage to silence himself.

“You’ve worked so hard for Mister Jared,” it insisted after a pause. “I hope you’re not sacrificing your time off this weekend. With you working today, Mister Jared has allowed you an offset weekend, I pray.”

“He’s given me a week before I have to apply what I’ve learned about these plants for the--medical purposes-- he’s outlined. It’s all highly specialized study. His outfit is having an epidemic problem, and... hopefully this won’t do more harm than good.”

He crushed the compulsion to doctor his caffeine under his heel, and took another drink. It was almost comfortably cool enough to do more than sip at.

“Oh, how I wish you had as much faith in your talents as I do, Mister Carey! If Mister Jared has the confidence you’re the one who can heal his associates, you should believe it twice over. Look at the bars you port. The Americans won Anchorage in part because of you.”

“Can we-- not talk about Anchorage,” he stuttered quietly. He had to set down the coffee on the counter to keep from spilling it in unsteadiness.
“Forgive me, Sir. I’m an unbridled bundle of enthusiasm. I forget at times how hard it was on you to work all those long hours. I double down on my prior remark—you shouldn’t work yourself to the marrow, no matter the urgency or enormity of scope of a project. Taking care of yourself is just as tantamount. Humans aren’t so different to robots. Operations tend to start shutting down if left untended, if you catch my meaning.”

“I... you’re the only real friend I’ve got, Angel.” Melancholy sniffed, looking to it. “Ever since I thawed out, it’s been nothing about what I can do, what I can make. What use I am. I won’t be of any use to anybody, if I push myself until I keel over dead.”

“That’s the spirit.” It neared him, its ocular sensors small and close together just as his tendrils. “You... you mean it, Sir, that you consider me a friend?”

“Truest blue,” he smiled, putting a hand to its spherical chassis. “In every sense, I don’t think I could do it without you.”

“Oh heavens above, you give my continued operation meaning!” It whirled about eagerly, only making ‘Choly smile wider as he slouched back in his wheelchair with the mug in his hands to watch. In a moment of awareness, it set down the pastry and carafe on the counter, and offered up a fresh canister of condensed water from the corrugation just above its thruster. Then, it sped off in search of something to tidy. “Thank you!”

“No... thank you... To think, a mess of metal and circuitry can have more compassion than fifty men.”

Though the irony of being worked to death to synthesize Psycho was not lost on him, after the exchange the gravity of his work lightened significantly. Grateful that the Mister Handy’s condensators had made pure water slightly less scarce, he added the canister to the simmering vessel, and did so several more times over the course of the day, cooking down the plant matter until it completely deliquesced. He then strained it all and simmered the particulate-free solution until it crystallized.

An unfortunate side effect to working where one dwells, he was forming a track record of falling asleep at his desk. Presented with the clearish opalescent salt mix the following morning, he was loathe to determine through isolation of compounds and a series of acid tests that hubflower did in fact contain a composite of narcotic alkaloids. Morphine, paramorphine, codeine, papaverine... and several he could not identify even comparing the test results to the Merrick Index. The most plentiful of any of these alkaloids, he termed hubeine.

Curious whether he had been tricked as to the ornamental nature of any of the other plants from which he had cultivated his little garden, he too collected samples of each and proceeded to run acid tests akin to those he’d applied to the hubflower. The glowing fungus contained compounds similar to chelation agents, which could form the backbone to synthesizing fresh RadAway, if it came to it. Though the melon vine had not yet fruited, the flowers tested positive for eugeroics, and he wondered what purpose the melon itself might serve. He confirmed with excitement that he’d correctly identified the wrinkly sac-like fungi to be the nootropic brain fungus used to make Mentats. The large aquatic lily-like scarlet flowers with white speckles contained an alarmingly high concentration of tropane alkaloids. He expected it to be more closely related to a waterlily, but it seemed somehow more akin to nightshade. Taxonomy in the Wasteland did not follow his entrenched logic tracks, so he discarded them and simply let the findings say what they would of these specimens.

On the fourth day, ‘Choly with the assistance of Angel made a trip to the apartment complex down the way with the swimming pool. He stored his coat in Angel for the errand. His breath snagged at
noticing Jerry watching him sternly from her catwalk, and he wondered who else might be watching.

The two rounded the stairs up to the pool sandwiched between the C-shaped formation of the building itself, and he dismounted from the Mister Handy with his cane, to wade into the shallow end of the overgrown involuntary pond. This was where the raiders had found tarberries. They were so similar to cranberries, down to how they grew on the surface of the water, and yet he wondered if their name was a corruption of *barberry*... and on that hunch, he crouched at two feet deep to feel around for a few handfuls of the dark wine-colored clusters of fruit.

“Sir...”

The chemist picked up his head to find three raiders standing around the pool with their weapons drawn, but not yet directed at him. Eyes fixed on them, he tried to back up the steps of the entry end of the pool, but stumbled back and fell with a shallow splash and a nervous laugh.

“This doesn’t look like what Jared says you’re supposed to be doin’,” the man said, still holding a makeshift copper-pipe rifle.

“Y’coulda asked first,” one of the two women continued with a lyric sarcasm, admiring the blade she’d affixed to a tire iron. “We’d a said no either way, but.” The third raider goose-honked in approval.

“I’m testing a theory for him!” ‘Choly insisted, trying again to stand. The rubber stopper of his cane couldn’t gain traction underwater, even against concrete, and he fumbled again, but stayed standing this time. “I know it’s not hub, but I think these are going to have compounds I need for working with the hub. You... you can be his eyes and ears for all I care. Tell him he was right. After I see if I’m right about these--” He scooped up from the water’s surface what he only then realized he’d dropped, and held out a fistful. “--After I test these, I’ll be able to come talk to him formally and explain the consequences of him being right.”

“Get back to work, chemist,” the third raider jeered.

As he finally afforded mounting Angel again, he mumbled with a grunt, “Thought you’d never ask.”

Back at the pharmacy, ‘Choly went around barefoot in the wheelchair while his dress shoes dried out. With a detached glaze of distress and animation, he popped one of the tart, ripe berries in his mouth and chewed at its firm flesh while he gathered together the materials to test the compounds in the fruit. His sneer at the flavor melted into a comfortable grin as he got to work mashing the berries. Even if not ultimately pharmacologically significant, they sure might make a fine preserve in the right hands. Once he got the pulp prepared, he popped a Berry Mentat and let his mind wander while the lengthy extraction process began.

Concessions must be made. There had to be other chems he could provide. He couldn’t make peace with the idea of solely providing cyclomorphine, or whatever analogue to it hubeine could create, to the inhabitants of Lexington. He couldn’t be *the Psycho chemist* again. He just couldn’t.

His trauma-addled brain again laced back through the index of hypothetical compounding he’d penned during his Berries-and-Jet evening, and he sat staring at the simmering soupy mess. All work and no play... he’d go insane. A creative mind has to *create*. Surely, if Jared dabbled in Jet and Psycho up to now, he’d be interested in sampling just about anything in his pursuit of a psychogen--if not for the full purpose Jared had laid out in his terminal entries, then at least for the purposes of ‘growing his ranks’ with the promise of the most lavish and unique buffet of chems in
Massachusetts.

And barring opioid manipulation, Melancholy was best at manipulating nootropics. A skill developed out of necessity, under pressure the former necessitated the latter. Mentats seemed to fit the closest description to anything Jared sought to achieve with his manipulation of the human psyche. He could work with Mentats on the side. Test out his theoretical new flavors, bake up classics like Orange and Grape. His sentimentality came in lozenge form.

Doing so would require fresh materials for it. Jared’s outfit might not like scouring the city for mushroom hunting, but the chemist was certain they’d trade the minor nuisance in a heartbeat for the comfort of a warm Mentat. But, how to even get on that line of conversation with the raider leader in the first place...

“I... really did happen upon Eden,” he uttered to himself, awing at the positive test to barberry in the tarberries. “All the pharmacology I could ever need, right down the street, or in my very garden.”

On the tail end of his Berries trek, he threw together a single batch of Grape Mentats from the hubflower extractives—and a little whiskey for good measure. He’d need the anxiolytic and nerve to make it through the next day.

‘Choly slept better than he had in weeks, and awoke rested despite feeling woefully unprepared to face Jared first thing. Before Angel took him to work, he again tucked his Merrick Index back into the Handy’s storage. He could feel supervision at every turn of the city they took to round up to the assembly plant. He wheeled up to the foreman’s mezzanine sucking on a Grape Mentat, where Jared stood waiting, and he went up the ramp to the office. The raider leader came inside and took a seat, kicking his legs up on the desk and pulling out his switchblade to play with it idly.

“So I’ve heard you came to tell me I’m right. I like to hear when I’m right.”

“Good morning to you, too,” ‘Choly huffed, straightening his tie and composure. “Yes, the hubflower contains a lot of the same salts that opium did. I’m sure you’ll like to hear I was right, too—about some of the other wasteland plants being... chemically useful. I can make cyclomorphine for you, or something very, very close. But in order to get that far, you promised me months ago that you had a cache of Abraxo Cleaner. Did you ever intend to pay out on that? I hope for both our sake’s you weren’t bluffing.”

Jared waxed from boredom to zeal to irritation all in a matter of five spoken sentences. He was about to object, but ‘Choly continued.

“Navigating the Jet rig project would have gone much more smoothly if I’d had daily access to Mentats, but I’d had to meter myself because I didn’t have a way to cook the goddamn things. Drawing off gas requires a lot of math, but very little science. And the level of chemistry I’m going to have to utilize to reinvent the wheel will be impossible to reach let alone sustain without the use of my specially formulated Mentats. It was a suggestion before, but it’s a requirement now. I need that soap, Jared. And you need it because you need me.”

Jared could only stare at him at length.

“You trying to tell me that your genius is thanks to some chem? Some chem,” he scoffed, nearly incredulous. “God, your sad excuse for a personality makes so much sense now. You’re in constant withdrawals. Yeah, chemist. I’ll nurse your habit if you hold up your end of the bargain.”

“And one more thing?” ‘Choly flinched when Jared thought it was another demand, but stayed
“I’ve noticed more eyes on me this week. Don’t have faith in me?”

“You misunderstand me.” Jared grinned, putting away his knife. “I’m protecting my finest asset. You know, you weren’t the only one doing his research this week,” he began pulling a book from his desk drawer and flipping through it for a particular part. “This is a textbook about the Battle for Anchorage. Here, there’s a unit about the Deenwood Compound. He who controls history, and all that.”

‘Choly frowned and balled his fists in his lap, unsure where this was going. That college textbook had to have been new the very year the bombs fell. With his full attention, Jared continued to read the passage with a vague lyric.

“‘Maximizing the efficiency of our foot soldiers’ fighting power helped us meet the turning point to overpower the Chinese and retake Alaska. General Constantine Chase commissioned the Deenwood Military Compound in the New England Commonwealth to synthesize and perfect Psycho (known by the military symbol CM) for our illustrious military. Chase’s keen scrutiny selected the cream of the crop of the Chemical Corps, and from it he forged what is now known as the Pharmaceutical Corps, or Pharm Corps. Our expert knowledge and application of chemistry and pharmacology provided the edge America needed to push past the underhanded tactics of the Chinese.’ --Oh!”

Jared stopped reading a moment to excitedly point to one of the photographs, and he stood to continue dictation.

“Figure 16.4, ‘Major Johnston and Three of His Pharm Corps Chemists.’ We have... Left to right... Second Lieutenant Gary Sydney, and Captains Olivia Francis and Alan Carey. Alan Carey! This is rich. The richest shit on the planet.” Jared shoved the book in ‘Choly’s face and jammed an accusing finger at the photograph where the Deenwood scientists had lined up for a casual photo full of smiles, then at the nameplate on ‘Choly’s coat. “That’s you, isn’t it. It’s you, you freezer burned fuck. ‘Cept you weren't in the chair before.”

‘Choly did his best not to look the part of revulsion, and did his best to unclench his everything. He glared at the photograph of himself, oddly fixated on how badly he missed his crescent half-eye eyeglasses.

“So you’ve been reading a civilian-level textbook about where I worked. You can’t possibly believe you know even a fraction what transpired at Deenwood.”

“And pray tell,” Jared grinned, wild and mocking as ever, “What exactly transpired at Deenwood?”

Speechless, ‘Choly’s jaw hung open and trembled at the mere attempt at humoring this topic. His eyes lost focus for some time.

“Nightmares I could never put in words.” He scowled at Jared, who went from mad to furious. “Do you want me to make you cyclomorphine or not?”

“If we’re done having objections to it,” Jared emphatically smacked the book shut with both hands, “then we’re done screwing around. I know you’re not bullshitting me that you’re a high level chemist. I know who you are. I know what you did before the war. And you’re going to do that for me now.”

The chemist stared at his own feet.
“Loud and clear. But let me make myself loud and clear. None of the patients or soldiers who were administered CM came back swearing they could predict the future. You’re barking up the wrong chem. I’ll do as told, but I won’t make the same mistake I made two hundred years ago. I’m fucking saying something this time. This isn’t the chem that will find your fortuneteller.”

“Do you have a better plan, then...” Jared picked up ‘Choly’s face by the chin to force eye contact, “Chemist.”

“The mode of uptake might be what’s preventing the chem from getting the desired results,” he started, palms sweating. He could palpably feel the Grape Mentats fading right when he needed it most, and his heart raced. “Compounding the chem could alter how the body absorbs it. Which organs it goes through to get where it’s going. I could-- I could compound BuffJet. Make the hallucinogen go straight to the pineal gland. Or Jet-Tats. Make the Jet soak right into the entirety of the grey matter like it’s just another neurotransmitter. Buffout is the harder option, for a lot of reasons. I have way more knowledge with Mentats chemistry, and way better ability to cook up large quantities of it.”

“This is all leading up to another catch. Don’t-- don’t derail me.”

“The catch...” ‘Choly squinted to flinch. “I haven’t compounded with Jet before! It was one of the rarest psychedelic drugs on the market before the war, and there was next to zero literature on it back in my day let alone now. I understand what it is chemically. I just haven’t proven or documented it.”

“Just minutes ago, you were questioning whether I have faith in you. Don’t flip on me, Melancholy. Makes you look like a fucking flake. You were one of the US Army’s best chemists. You’re going to make this compounding work. In the mean time, you’re going to cook us all up a nice big mess of Psycho. And you’re not going to have me lose my patience. You want soap? It’ll be on your stoop first thing in the morning. But you’re going to do as you’re told.”

“Am I being told to get back to work then?” The pained exasperation couldn’t have been thicker.

“You’re being told... to fork over some of your darts.” Jared lunged to reach into the chemist’s coat to withdraw the requested object from one of the suspender cases. He read the box. “Pax Syringes. Hm. And here I thought you cooked your own ammo for that thing.”

“I, I do. Those are just what the gun was made to fire.”

“It can be made to fire whatever the fuck I say it does.” He pocketed it and pointed to the door. “Cook my Psycho. And go back to your showmanship. I’ll make sure you get a real big turnout. This town’s overdue for some fucking revelry.”

“I... I’m being paid in soap for this.”

“You’re the one who named the asking price, you fruit. Sounds dumb as dirt when you put it like that.”

“I... I want the revolver back when you’re done with it. I won’t do--”

‘Choly cried out and tried to shield his face when Jared lunged at him again, only to lean his hands on the armrests to crane in inches to ‘Choly’s face.

“You want your little handgun back. That’s cute. You’re going to earn it. Now GET OUT OF MY OFFICE!!”
Jared shoved him down the mezzanine ramp, and only through some miracle did he manage to get enough traction with the heels of his dress shoes to regain control of his own pace. Angel rushed up to its owner and immediately took over powering the wheelchair along.

“Do I need to dismantle Mister Jared for you, Sir?”

He hung his head and withdrew into himself in indignity.

“I’ll do it my fucking self.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Surveillance and drug culture tw’s

Upon returning to the pharmacy, Melancholy went right to the office garden to collect a sizable quantity of hubflower blossoms, then flew straight into the process of extracting a large batch of hubeine. He smashed the flowers and threw them into a glass vessel, and agitated it all with water. The wait time between iterations of adding more water were what killed him. He hated being left alone inside his own head, in that very moment more than anything.

Angel’s going to find out. It’s going to report my treason to the DIA. And it’s going to get remotely switched to hostile and slice me to bits.

But did it count as treason, anymore, to do what he was doing? He shook the thought from his Russian brain. They weren’t in wartime now. And the police had begun utilizing Psycho leading up to the apocalypse. Why was he even doing this for Jared? Some nebulous threat of violence against him? What was keeping him tethered here amid this near-total anarchofascism? He’d told Jared to his face that security dominated his motivation, but he stopped receiving any sense of security the moment the arrangement shifted focus to Psycho. But all this was his own negotiation of the statutes surrounding the protected status of manufacturing this chem. Maybe, maybe he could ply Angel with the dishonest truth that he was working with hubeine, not morphine, or cyclomorphine. He couldn’t make peace with the thought of lying to Angel, and fell apart over rehearsing all manner of half-truth and inaccurate definitions in lieu of faith.

At the smell of burning latex, his finger withdrew from his platysmal scar, and he gasped to find he hadn’t added water to the hub like he would have sworn he had. He squinted with an exhausted groan, seeing how the plant matter had scorched to the glass. With tongs and a grimace, he pulled it off the hot plate and set it in the sink.

The glasses came off, and his face went to his hands. What was wrong with him? He could expect this kind of behavior from a shell-shocked veteran, but he hadn’t survived unthinkable use of weaponized brutality and violence face to face, hadn’t survived artillery, hadn’t-- had survived being frozen, he supposed. This couldn’t be post-traumatic stress. It couldn’t be. He hadn’t been through enough to justify such a diagnosis.

What a pathetic crisis of identity, to be unable to even keep my reality straight. Waking up, it’s two hundred years after a nuclear apocalypse, and the first rational life I find is a band of lawless chem-driven hooligans. Just how much of this is real? Doesn’t seem like any of it could be.

He dismissed the prickling crawling up his left arm and eyed the health page of his Pip-Boy on the other arm, flipping to the section indicating all the pharmacological deficits he had incurred. Mentats, alcohol, Jet, Calmex, and an opioid return that had to be the Melancholia. And that was just what the diagnostics knew of. Liver and kidney function strained. Respiration mildly suppressed. Motor skills significantly compromised. Vision, alertness, and verbal capacity all dulled. He wondered whether these hallucinations, or episodes, or whatever they were had factored into the device’s metrics of his constitution. He knew he was a mess. But up until now, he’d done his best to simply ignore it.
The episodes had nothing to do with Jet. He knew they preceded any of his Jet use. But if he couldn’t blame it on the Jet, what could he blame it on? Had the Melancholia expired? Of all the food sources he’d trusted, it had been his meal replacement cocktail. Up until now, he’d blamed his poor alimentary constitution on the other questionably preserved foodstuffs on which he’d subsisted, but now even his Melancholia was suspect. --No, it had been the one thing his stomach could tolerate day to day. His eyes widened with stunned optimism. With a fresh source of opioids, he could continue making it fresh. It had gotten him through his tenure at Deenwood, and it could sustain him long-term. Perhaps he’d get lucky, and the Gregory’s salt--no, Melancholy’s salt--would prove more effective and compatible, with fewer drawbacks.

At the next chance, he’d have to rule out the supplementary beverage for his episodes. Surely, the problem wasn’t inside him. The fact of pharmacology was, as he knew it, that there was no deficit of physiology or character which chems couldn’t fix. Better living through chems. He couldn’t blame a chem for having unintended or entirely undesirable effects on a man, two centuries past its prime. Nothing lasted forever... not even him.

He was past his prime. And it was past his bedtime. He drank one of his remaining seven Melancholia in lieu of dinner and let himself turn in for the night, and slept on Eleanor’s couch.

The buzzing of the intercom awoke ‘Choly, and he aped over the desk to depress the button.

“I, yes. Yes, what is it.” He felt for his glasses and put them on.

“Your soap has arrived, you scrawny little weirdo.”

He knew from voice alone to expect Barb’s face at the front door.

“I’ll be right down. I’m not decent.”

“Who is these days?”

He rolled his eyes instead of answering. He donned his braces and wheeled himself downstairs, waving for Angel to follow him.

With the front door cracked, he poked the muzzle of his rifle out, only for the buzzcut raider to shove the door open all the way. Both his feet planted to either side of the door, and the muzzle went right to her chest. He swallowed and stared up at her with determination.

“--Y, ou can leave it right here,” he appreciated, not moving as he tossed a glance to the shopping cart filled to the brim with boxes of Abraxo. “Angel can help me bring it inside.”

“I’ve been in your place, Melancholy. What gives, I’m not welcome?” Smacking at gum under the bandanna concealing the lower half of her face, she tried to look inside around to either side of Angel, who had come up very close behind its owner. “I still can’t believe you live all alone in there. That building is huge. Super creepy. Goddamn.”

“Jared wouldn’t like it if you distracted me from my work. And believe me, you’re already fast encroaching on distracting me.”

“Whatever. Enjoy your stupid soap.”

“It’s smart soap, actually.” He shoved back from the door with his syringer still aimed at Barb, letting Angel swoop in to pull the shopping cart in off the stoop. “Good day, Barb.”

“Good day!” Angel seconded cheerfully.
“Creep,” she jeered as the Handy shut the door.

On their way upstairs, ‘Choly and Angel did not fit in the elevator with their prize.

“I’m not alone in the pharmacy,” ‘Choly quipped. “Who’re you, chopped liver?”

“I’ll take the stairs, Sir, and meet you at the third story. It’s no matter.”

Upon arriving at the third floor, ‘Choly kept the pocket doors open with the butt of his rifle until Angel could come up and retrieve the cart.

“People just don’t understand how wonderfully programmed General Atomics robotics are. You’re not some... thing.”

“Ah, well. I’ve come to pay it no mind. Those who matter don’t mind, and those who mind don’t matter!”

‘Choly smiled, taking a few boxes of soap into his lap and leaving the cart in the lobby for the time. He started his day off working from the rote recipe for cooking his own Mentats. Measuring out the laundry powder, he dropped the glass beaker and it shattered, punctuating the revelations of his condition from the night before. He sat there for some time just staring at all the soap he’d wasted, only to have Angel come through with a broom and dustpan without missing a beat.

“Sir, you really must start off the day with a square meal and a fresh pot of coffee. You’re not quite of full faculties. Remember that you’re not a morning person. Be patient with yourself!”

“You’re right. You’re very often right.” Slowly his slack face picked up into another smile. “Since when did you have therapist algorithms?”

“Since you needed me to have them, I suppose. I’m programmed to exhibit an interest in my owner’s well-being. Of course I care. So! Tell me, you’ll have some nice fresh fruit with your sweet roll? I can fry you up some Cram, too, so I can get some protein in you as well.”

“I’m most interested in the promise of coffee.”

“I wouldn’t know you at all if I didn’t know that much. Ha Ha! Let’s get you all well and awake.”

All this time, I’ve thought Angel needed to be reprogrammed, to have algorithms updated and added. But I’m the one who needs a shift in priorities and perspective. ...Maybe it wasn’t not wholly wrong for it to have adopted a violent streak in my absence after all.

After breakfast and a face-washing, the chemist felt much more himself. He rolled his hair back fresh, and sat down once again to craft Mentats. This time, he started with the brain fungus, reduced to a paste in an alkali broth, and spread a solid layer of laundry soap atop them. He’d gotten ahead of himself before, measuring the dry before he’d even macerated the wet. Rather than apply heat, he applied ventilation, to facilitate the desiccation of the fungal tissues as the Abraxo soaked up the mushroom’s milk. He presumed such a large shipment of soap had been nicked from a nearby laundromat. Once the moisture had been all but completely driven off, he pulverized the pan of material and emptied the mixture into the lab’s modest pill mold press machine.

‘Choly picked one up from the collection bin to the side, and admired the MT impression he’d selected as customary of the pill imprint code for Mentats--an entendre of its namesake and the company which held its branding. If only the layman had ever known the wonder-pill only comprised two very unconventional ingredients. He stuck it in his mouth and let the waxy tablet dissolve with a smile.
He’d forgotten just how starkly saponified they really were. The bicentenarian holdovers on which he’d subsisted up until then were so brittle and chalky by comparison. Nearly effervescent, the effect took immediately, and at last he felt genuinely alert.

Tinning up the fruits of his efforts, he whistled as he spent the afternoon restocking his shelves with Mentats, and wondering what kind of pill press imprints the Wasteland might ever seek of him as a mark of authenticity, not at all unlike the wax seal of ministry. The choicest iconography he could imagine for something of his own design, the mark of the poppy could provide his craft the designation of some arcane letters of last resort: to take his medicine was to hold a potentially fail-deadly conversation, a mutually assured destruction of the ego. Who wanted to be himself when he could become... nothing at all?

If his operations succeeded as fully as he developed the optimism that they would succeed, he would have to discuss with Jared the means to patent confections such as the Berry Mentat, and label them as irrefutably having been crafted by his hand. Any self-deserving artisan had a signature, didn’t he?

But in the mean time... 'Choly currently stared down the endeavor of synthesizing from hubene a cyclical alkaloid analogous to cyclomorphine. After pacing for a spell, he disengaged progress in favor of some rest time, and he retired to the break room downstairs for dinner.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

TW: drug use, insect imagery

'Choly's finally... getting to where he's had enough.

Melancholy popped a Mentat under his tongue and squared up to the hubeine task once again. He rubbed his hands together. When he couldn’t locate any mercaptan agent on hand, he collected from the shelves hydrochloric acid, acetone, phosphorus, and pyridine. A breath finally came to him once the bottles were all set out in front of him on the lab equipment counter, and he chewed up what remained of the Mentat. He barely remembered to turn on the hood fan and put on gloves before getting started.

Staring at the bottles, ‘Choly sighed and slouched in his chair. *I don’t know, cook some in the back yard before you leave.* The creeping tightness in his back flesh wrapped into his rib muscles and tickled at his already unsteady breathing. He shook his head in an attempt to dislodge the lucid nightmare, and backed up from the lab counter to let himself breathe mindfully. Unlike the Abraxo Powder, he couldn’t afford to drop most of these—and it had next to nothing to do with the scarcity of the stuff. The extraction of the alkaloids from the hubflower remained a relatively safe process, provided he kept on top of maintaining water levels as it steeped, but changing the chemical properties of one specific alkaloid from that process posited all manner of dangers. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust his skills or knowledge, despite how far estranged from the act he’d become, both in time and cause. He distrusted his constitution, his faculties, his dexterity. If he spilled the hydrochloric acid, it had the capacity to exact him real harm. There would be no easy way to go about this. Or was there?

The trip downstairs to the break room got him contemplating Angel’s proselytizing self-patience. He didn’t have to pull up the addictions tab of the health screen of his Pip-Boy to remember what it listed. Even if a shell-shocked state hadn’t brought about his flightiness and dissociation, he might still benefit from the same treatment for such a circumstance. Perhaps he could owe the free-flowing psychedelic drug to his smooth operation the past few months. After all, since the Jet rig had pulled its first batch, he could count on one hand his episodes since.

The outfit hadn’t since found more ampuoles to fill and reuse since the project went live, and he used Jet far less than anyone else in the outfit, so he didn’t keep many doses of Jet to himself. Just like anyone else in Lexington, his having more than a few at a time would hinder others’ access to the chem. Still, it couldn’t hurt to try to trial a low-dose regimen. Especially if—he collected the clean silver tablespoon from the utensil drawer—he kept to realizing small, granular steps, to minimize missteps along the way. He fetched an ampuole from Angel, confirming he had three, and returned upstairs.

He took a half-hit off the inhaler, and set the spoon and also a box of syringes with the components already on the counter while he waited for the hallucinogen to take. With the spoon a third filled with hubeine salts, he used a scoopula to add in an equal amount of the phosphorus, then droppered in the paint thinner and hydrochloric acid in an exact ratio. He held it over a bunsen burner until the mixture turned a waxy yellow-grey. His senses cross-wired in the vapors, and as he slowly
added the clear pyridine, he relished the satisfying crisp palate of achieving the specific requisite vibrant clarity. He poured off the clear solution that had separated to the top of the spoon, into a waste bowl, then drew the chem into the syringe, collared the needle, and capped it. Finally, he flipped it over and primed the pneumatic mechanism. It took no time at all this way, and he could guarantee precision like this. Even more so, the process seemed to go even more smoothly than with cyclomorphine. He made four more in this way, whistling to himself to the lugubrious, comfortable tune the sequence of the chemicals’ colors played in his mind.

The moment of ease sublimated. An oversight, he had spent all his attention on synthesizing the agent, without considering how to include the constituent parts that made a dose bearable, and had sealed off the syringes. There was only one part to this injection he’d concocted. No saline to ease it into the tissue, no Stimpak to ease tissue necrosis. In a twinge of whimsy, he weighed whether pure cyclohubeine fit the definition of Jared’s invoice. Technically speaking, he’d derived this substance from hubeine and not morphine, so already he couldn’t in full conscience call what he’d made Psycho, even if hypothetically he fit it with all its triumvirate syringes. Was it the truly moral thing to do, in his position, to complement the dosage with supplementary substances which softened the damage if they didn’t prevent the damage altogether? Slow rot or fast rot, a Psycho addiction was lethal all the same, and without the accessory doses, he could manufacture the chem far more readily and with far fewer resources.

Up until that moment, the larvae had left him to work in solitude, but he found a speckling of them trying to appreciate the luxury of his lap as though minute pets. With a knit brow, he smiled down at them in wistful defeat. In their tiny non-verbal way, their wriggling reminded him of the Merrick Index pages Berries-and-Jet Carey had proposed to supplement, of the nihilistic stillness of the ‘Fly-Blown’ story, and of how his alleged Bloatfly Syringes used straight cyclomorphine absent of any Stimpak. He thought back to the day before, when he’d dismissed Angel’s threatening Jared’s life with what amounted to not if I get to him first. Again, the morality of the situation pulled at him, and he wondered how humane it was to continue letting Jared run this deranged metaphysical experiment, no matter the fibre of the unaware people he wrangled into his trials.

But how different was what Jared was doing, to what ‘Choly had done at Deenwood? He was just as tired of not standing up to Jared as he was of remembering that he hadn’t stood up to Hawthorne. History didn’t have to repeat itself here, he told himself. Flipping in the Merrick Index to the added pages he’d tucked in its back cover, the chemist deliberated the logistics of what would be the most humane way to administer this potent alkaloid to Jared’s raiders. As he wondered how many Berserk Syringes it would take to turn the whole outfit in on itself, the memory of Hawthorne’s misshapen, jawless, rotting face clawed at his rationality. He took the other half of the ampuole in the hopes of chasing it away, the vapors escaping his nose with a strong dismissive exhale. The lichinha had not misguided him before. He simply hadn’t listened to them as attentively as was healthy or right of him.

“No. No, I’ll behave. For one day longer, at least.” With a phlegmy agitation, he told the larvae his intentions. “The test batch must be as advertised. To prove it works as expected. Compare cyclohubeine to cyclomorphine. Maybe doing tandem darts would suffice. It won’t be a waste to break down a Stimpak for this. First, the Psycho. Then immediately chasing it with a Stimpak. With the Calmex, I’m a good enough shot to get both injection sites in about the same proximity to one another. The next batch, I will do this.”

Discontent with his backpedaling, the lichinha crawled up his pants legs to go wherever they pleased. He let out a pathetic whine as he started at dismantling the plunger head of a Stimpak, and tried to still himself all the while. Yet somehow, their gentle and diligent nettling made the task nearly pleasant, and he found himself smiling to himself as he lapsed again into daydreaming about the viability of making a Bloatfly Syringe for self-administration.
The enormity of a fully prepped batch of fresh-made Psycho sobered him almost instantly once he had two Syringe cases loaded for two sets of five doses each. Two hundred years after the war, and he was still making this poison. He nearly threw them as hard as possible at the ground, and snarled in a halted motion, instead setting them on the counter in front of him and backing off once more, narrowly preventing himself from wasting hours of hard work. All moral contention resumed once the Jet no longer gripped him, and he sniveled.

“My word, Mister Carey, what has you so animated!” Angel came up to inspect both its owner’s disposition and activities. When ‘Choly jumped and froze at the interruption, the Mister Handy’s ocular lenses scrutinized the various bottles still sitting out from the project. It couldn’t meet eye contact, lingering in a hard pause. “...What’s brought all this on again, then?”

“It’s not what it looks like,” was the best he could muster, lousy and frowning in uncertain terror.

“Well it certainly can’t look like too many things, no matter how small the quantities are you’ve crafted here. I’m not dull, Sir. Need I remind you, that in all your time working for Major Johnston, and even for Miss Gretchen, I assisted you in synthesizing many things, and I could never forget the constituents you have at the ready here. It wounds me, to think you needed to lie to me about this. But even more, I’m disappointed there’s a circumstance you’ve felt it necessary to resort to making more of the horrible stuff.” It stopped pacing, but still did not make eye contact. “Please swear to me in total confidence you don’t intend it for self-administration, at the very least. At least tell me you’re simply trying to find more beneficial purposes for cyclomorphine. That this isn’t going to be a repeat of the circumstances all those years ago that injured you so.”

“It’s cyclothubaine, if it assuages your nerves, or whatever you have.” Shakily, he steadied himself in the wheelchair, and whet his lips. He couldn’t keep his voice from cracking. “It’s not for me. I swear it. Hhhi could never. Jared thinks-- thinks it’s going to help. That there’s a medical benefit to this stuff. And he won’t listen to me, that I know otherwise from personal, extensive patient testing. But he doesn’t want to use it in any of the ways we tested at Deenwood. ...Bozhemoy, Angel. I don’t know how much, but he knows about Deenwood. He--”

“Slow down, Sir.” Angel regretted its disappointment in him, and it returned to his side, to offer him a canister of condensed water, which he accepted and opened to sip with weak gratitude. “He... does now? How did he come upon it?”

“He has some prewar history book.” The nausea of withdrawal mixed with dread needled his heart. As he spoke, he brightened, understanding Angel wanted him to act as informant to uncover the origin of a confidentiality breach. “He dug it out to show me because he recognized my uniform, I suppose. There’s a picture of me in it. It only contains the most rudimentary civilian-level information, but he... he knows about MK Excel. Not even I know all that much about it. It was still in testing phases when the Anchorage treaty resolved the conflict. I haven’t said a word about anything of the sort. Done everything I could to dissuade him, even as far as promising to craft him anything but.”

“No need to feel threatened by me. This doesn’t warrant reporting anything to the Defense Intelligence Agency. I was woefully mistaken, to believe for a second you’d ever relinquish your highly classified skill set.” Its abrupt entended tone suggested it understood full well the stakes in play, and the reason for its owner’s behavior. “We can handle this point of conflict ourselves. You’re a varied and talented chemist, Captain Carey. If Mister Jared believes you are Lexington’s savior, so be it. Provided you’re up for it, Sir.”

‘Choly nipped at the skin of his lip with an anxious smile, and he wondered if he were still hallucinating as his morality, camaraderie, and spirit converged in agreement of what had to be
“Truest blue, moy angel.”

“And you as well! Is the uncertainty with Mister Jared all that’s got you upset?”

“I... I need to test this batch,” he finally said. Provided you’re up for it. The proximity to his military contract abraded him. Recollection twinged at him, that what turned his stomach so badly during his active duty, more than any other aspect of the Deenwood Project, was administering the chem--and that what had for years settled his stomach and nerves had been his heavy reliance on the Melancholia. “I need volunteers. I refuse to force anyone this time.”

“I suspect you know exactly where you’d like to start,” it vaguely encouraged.

Tired but emotionally reconstituted, he nodded, then nodded more certainly.

By the time the two headed out of the pharmacy, the sun had set. Having scaled the building with the overturned freighter atop it, ‘Choly dismounted from Angel to approach Jerry, who had just started her evening shift on the catwalk overlooking the Battle Green. He swallowed, stared down by the woman in power armor. He’d never noticed before, but she wielded a Fatman as her weapon of choice--a portable launcher rigged specifically to shoot miniature nuclear artillery shells. He wondered a tic whether her lack of patience ever caused her to waste what had to be among the scarcest ammunition in the post-apocalypse, but decided even moreso that the requisite of picking whom she blew up and whom she didn’t must have emotionally compromised her.

“What do you want, Chemist?” the blonde nagged. “I’m busy.”

“I know it’s a bad subject, but when I was up here the first time we met, I couldn’t help but notice you had a personal chem stash. You... wouldn’t happen to ever have Psycho in it, w-- ould you?”

“Oh, shit, it’s my fav,” she replied without skipping a beat.

“--Ah.” He sniffed, adjusting his glasses. “Good. My hunch was right. I need you to do something for me, then.”

Jerry squinted at him, and checked something at ground level from her vantage before resuming eye contact.

He continued, “I need you to gather up everybody in the outfit that you know also uses Psycho. I’m doing a free rooftop sample tomorrow. Experienced Psycho users only. I need to test my first batch before I start doing large batches.”

All he had to do was mention ‘free’ and ‘Psycho’ in the same breath to have her bent over backwards, and then he went and tacked on the insinuation Psycho would soon flow as freely as the Jet. Her eyes went wide and her jaw dropped despite her lips pursed tight in surprise.

“Fuck me, sometimes Jared proves why he’s the leader,” she blurted out, jerking animate to giddily pace to one end of the catwalk and back. “You’ve got it. The usual time?”

“The usual time,” he nodded. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Good fuckin’ night, you beautiful weirdo. I could kiss you if I wasn’t so fond of the twilight hours.”

“Save it for somebody special,” he laugh-cried as he remounted Angel.
“Sir, I can’t help but notice you don’t seem yourself,” Angel commented at a hush as they descended the stairs. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

Everything had gone so much more smoothly when he nursed his withdrawals instead of fought them. First, the Mentats, and after today, the Jet as well.

“While we’re out, I want to scout the Jet rig, to pull a batch for myself. Jared said he’s going to stop working with it, once the... other project gets in full swing, so I don’t feel quite so bad running off with a few extra ampoules for myself.” He held his Syringer to his chest and gripped the rein in one hand to stroke the Handy’s sky blue chrome shell appreciatingly. “Jet’s helped me so tremendously, Angel. I can’t even begin to describe how much good it’s done me. The documentation was so limited for it before owing to how new it was before the world ended, but I have every proof just how much of a medical miracle it can be. I’ve finally started putting my hands on chems that fix what’s wrong with me.”

“It’s a bit late to be going to work, but let’s see what we can do for you.”

As to be expected, Jared still had surveillance out on him, and two raiders cut them off at the side entrance to the Corvega Assembly Plant. At gunpoint, he returned the favor, and squinted through the spotlight which he found directed squarely on him.

“What do you need, Chemist? Isn’t it a bit late to be bothering the boss? He told us you should be at home working on that little project of yours, not gallivantin’ around town an’ chattin’ people up.”

“I, I just came for--” His bleary eyes sifted the area for something to smokescreen why he’d come, and he laughed it off when they wouldn’t stand down. A bucket, and several dozen sacks of brahmin manure, piled up at ready access. “I came for-- for some fertilizer for my hubs! Yeah, I just need a bucket full or so. Manure is great for gardening. Hahahahh.”

The second raider snorted in displeased dismissal, and rolled his eyes at him.

“Sure thing. Just be quick about it.”

‘Choly got down and collected the stuff himself from one of the recently-abandoned sacks, and his stomach greatly disliked recalling what filling a five-gallon bucket with manure felt like after everything that had transpired, but he powered through it with his eyes shut for most of the task. He handed off the prize to Angel, who held it in a pincer at a full limb’s length away from itself, and remounted.

“Thank you!” he shot off waving to them, not suspiciously at all, as they left.

“Go! Home!” they both yelled at him.

“Well that could have gone better,” Angel began, put off.

“...I think they might have thought I was casing the assembly plant,” ‘Choly worried. “Or that they might be getting wise to my dissatisfaction of my job position.”

“Then we’ll just have to win them over in spades tomorrow! Come along, then! I have dinner to get into you before you get some rest. Might I jettison this horrid mess yet, Sir?”

“I. No. No, I said it to smokescreen myself, but it’s not a half bad idea. I’ve done my share of working toward taking better care of myself. I should pamper my garden, too. And you. You’re too good to me.”
“So be it, but I insist you take it right upstairs. I don’t have to be able to smell it to know it’s absolutely teeming with nastiness.”

“Tochno.”

“--In English, Mister Carey!” it ejaculated at a whisper.

“Without hesitation.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

*glances furtively at 'author chose not to use archive warnings' label*

This is one of *those* chapters. It's incredibly messy. It gets messier. You're welcome.

The next morning, ‘Choly took to a little relaxation. Formally speaking, he still had one more day before he had to go speak to Jared, and the rooftop appointments came in the afternoon. After breakfast, he took his coffee with him to his garden, to investigate what use he had for the stuff he had accidentally-on-purpose taken from the assembly plant the night before. He’d always enjoyed tending a garden, and even in light of the exact nature of what grew in this one, he pastime satisfied him regardless.

*I had wanted to test out the viability of coaxing brain fungus to soak up the hallucinogenic compounds by bedding them with dung,* he thought to himself. He set down his coffee on the table and rolled up his sleeves before he got started. “Let’s see here...”

With a small, rusty garden trowel one of the raiders had brought him a month ago, he freshened up the surface of the bucket of the manure. It had dried out a bit overnight, yet scraping back the top layer of crust didn’t stir up fumes. He got a few scoops spread out in an empty end of one of the pans, intending to transplant them over into the fertilized substrate as he got it mixed more thoroughly into the soil, but a discovery stopped him short, and he stared into the bucket at length. A piece of him turned off in that moment, and wouldn’t light back up for days.

*I know it’s a bit dried out, but I have got to be hallucinating this.*

In a pocket in the manure lay a clutch of about twenty rice-sized, cream-colored long eggs. The longer he stared, the more he noticed that some of them had hatched overnight. With a hand to his mouth, he slowly accepted he had become the proud owner of a fistful of first instar Bloatfly larva. Not all too different from the *lichinka* which typically accompanied the vapors of Jet, these milky white larva had a distinctly segmented body and sleekly tapered ends elated to glut on the stuff in which they’d been bedded. A Bloatfly couldn’t have laid the eggs more than a few hours before ‘Choly had taken the manure. He transferred the clutch into a tin can and continued with each pot and tray until he’d exhausted the bucket, sweating all the while as he tried to ignore rather than process his opportunity. He paused only long enough to frown at the small shrubs with their darkly colored leaves, robbed of their delicate lavender flowers, before he moved on to other endeavors in the way of self-care.

The chemist permitted the entangling weft of thought, fumes or not, as their lyric carried him throughout the ritual of tending the various plants and fungi in his garden and downstairs into the lab with his tin can of pets. Using the divided compartments of a syringe carton to line up the plunger ends of a batch of the lowest gauge needle he could locate in the pharmacy, with them he prepared another batch of cyclohubeine darts from his Melancholy’s salt stores. He gently washed the larvae’s food off them with a bit of clean water, and set them in a deep bin with a bed of gauze so he could work with a shallow Volkmann spoon to deposit them in the syringes. As he sealed off each dose of maggot therapy with a tiny bubble of air for the captive, he nearly felt outright jealousy for the raider outfit, for being able to experience this artistry fresh. Even if the larvae...
didn’t last to the afternoon, he could gauge the time frame of such a craft in the future. Holding one up to the light, in the syringe he could see the larva still writhe a bit, demonstrating the chem hadn’t killed it outright. He just hoped he’d left them enough air.

The whole notion surprisingly bestilled him, although unmitigated by Jet as he worked. It didn’t even strike him to waste one of his two remaining ampuoles for the task until he’d already finished, and he knew he’d need at least one to push through his upcoming showmanship display so he felt no regret. Stimpak syringes did not accompany the four cases of Bloatfly Syringe he crafted, but perhaps under more intimate circumstances, he could later test the viability of putting the larvae in a proper full Psycho dose. He laughed to himself as he added them to his suspender cases, and patted them with biting enthusiasm.

The more he sat there, the longer he replayed the fantasy in his mind. He knew it was pure fantasy, but he entertained it anyway because the mere idea of it sated him so uniquely. With the Psycho laced out into darts, the alkaloid compounds would undoubtedly exhibit bursts of potency, with a higher risk of necrosis, which the... stowaway could so graciously dispatch. Ideally, he’d unload the entire batch he’d just crafted into Jared, but the raider leader had never once come up top for any of ‘Choly’s Syringer displays. He grinned dryly to himself, staring off into space with utmost resolution.

“Maybe I’ll get lucky.”

“...Sir?” Angel came up at a caution. “You’ve ten minutes before for your rooftop appointment.”

‘Choly returned to the time of day, and his cataracted eyes trailed up to his Mister Handy.

“Thank you, Angel. ...Time got away from me.” He nearly didn’t trust his hazy recollection of what had transpired that morning, but had no other explanation for why he’d been in the lab. Angel had escorted him into the elevator, but he still readied himself with a syringe of Calmex to the antecubital fold. He also took one of the two remaining ampuoles of Jet and handed back the empty vessel to Angel. “You don’t normally accompany me. Pleasantly unexpected.”

“I’ll return downstairs if you’d rather. ...Do you steel yourself for the task like this every time?”

“Not so thoroughly in the past, no.” ‘Choly re-checked his suspender cases to confirm in his repeated disbelief that he had, in fact, let himself prepare what he thought he had, and he swallowed with a dry mouth. He had gotten lucky that Jared hadn’t put his hand on any of his custom made darts when taking some from him, but somehow he regretted not having had the time to craft any Berserk Syringes to test everything at once which Berries-and-Jet Carey had devised. The familiar haptic delights tickled at him, and he welcomed the chill of the tranquilizer washing over him. He petted at the barrel of his rifle as the pocket doors opened and Angel wheeled him out. “Though, perhaps, I should have included the Jet before now. It does wonders for my reflexes. It’s fine for you to come.”

“Forgive me for saying so, but I feel this line of work might be more hazardous for your health than you let yourself notice,” it worried, pausing before the rooftop exit. “Since you’ve returned, you’ve gotten... desperate to function, to say the least. I can’t force an improvement in your choices, but I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t voice that I... I worry for you, Sir. You’ll find something that will make all this easier, but none of it is... this. When you fill yourself with all this poison, you become a different man from the one I tended to two hundred years ago. You’ve come right unhinged.”

“Give a man a façade, and he’ll show you who he really is,” he murmured with a hollow grin. “Let me out there, Angel. I have work to do.”
The Handy tucked its optical sensors in close a moment before complying.

“Far be it for me to stand between a man and... honest work...”

Unlike the times before it, ‘Choly left off the burlap hood, and he wore his delight on his face, to see Jerry had made good on her promise. She, Lonnie, and Gristle all stood atop the assembly plant. Jerry had disengaged her armor to make herself an easier target, and the empty metal exoskeleton stood nearby at the ready. When they noticed their beloved chemist had arrived, they straightened up in a line, folded their hands behind themselves, and puffed up their chests in anticipation.

“Never seen you out of your armor,” ‘Choly jeered with a hand cupped to his mouth.

“Fuck off, Chemist. I brought the best of the best. Now give us the best of the best.”

“Thank you for coming to my demonstration, ladies and gentlemen.” The longer the chems soaked into him, the more modulated his tone waxed. Somehow, he savored having to yell what he said next for the distance between them. “In case Jerry has not yet disclosed what we’re here today for, I have cooked a batch of Psycho, and I need to test the potency of the batch. It’s a chem with more than one component! Understand me well, that you will not like it if you don’t take both! Stay still if you know what’s good for you. I’m a good shot, but I’m going to have to have to fire twice apiece.”

“Stop jabberin’ and get on with it!” Lonnie growled. He’d heard so much talk of the dark-haired heavy-set woman who did the outfit’s turret repairs, but like Jared, she rarely came out of hiding either. He opted to lovingly give her the fig, and she not-so-lovingly flipped him off.

He loaded one of the cases of normal cyclohubeine-Stimpak dart pairs, and squared up to his three targets. As he went down the line from Jerry to Lonnie to Gristle, the Jet fumes took full hold and the weight of the act lifted from him. Then he sat back in his chair to admire the results, only to think surely he was hallucinating to see Jared approaching his favorite three raiders.

Jerry hissed in satisfaction and returned to her power armor to keep anyone from yanking it, and once it had re-conformed to her body she yelled in furious delight. She punched a significant dent in a support leg of the tower, and started cackling. The white-mohawked Gristle grabbed Lonnie by the shoulders and picked her up with the intent to throw her, but she roared and grabbed him by the arms and flipped the arrangement over his head so that she was the one lifting him. And she threw him across the rooftop.

“Enough!” Jared yelled at them. He turned to ‘Choly. “You’re a day early. Busy little bee. You’d better have enough to go around!”

The chemist whet his lips, wide eyed, and shakily produced the other case of cyclohubeine-Stimpak. He surreptitiously removed the Stimpak Syringes from the load order, and squared up to double-dose Jared who welcomed it with arms wide. Shortly after this double-shot, the whole spectacle had gotten the attention of the entire outfit, and suddenly ‘Choly had dozens of targets.

“More than enough to go around,” ‘Choly repeated with affected glee, where everyone could hear. “Everyone! How about some free samples! Today only!”

‘Choly rearranged a few cases to alternate the Bloatfly Syringes with Endangerol, and he unloaded the rest of his supply of cyclohubeine to whomever he could hit in the same fashion. All the while Jared had stood frozen in some manner of dazed rigor. On his last two rounds, he doubled up Bloatfly Syringes to nail the sitting duck a second time. The fourth dart reanimated him, and he
screamed a string of rasping affirmations, overwhelmed with the numbing surge of power. Out of nowhere, the roughhousing escalated when Lonnie barreled into Jerry and shoved the power armor-clad raider off the roof.

“LET’S SEE IF POWER ARMOR REALLY WORKS!” Lonnie cackled. “IF IT DOESN’T— OH WELL, SOMEBODY ELSE CAN HAVE IT.”

Maybe he didn’t need a separate Berserk Syringe formula after all.

Lonnie, Gristle, ‘Choly, and several of the still sober raiders, all glanced over the edge of their respective roofs. Anticlaimatically, the power armor had done as designed and righted Jerry so that she landed on her feet, and in the process the frame of the armor absorbed all the fall shock. Blood trickled down her face, and she roared a string of slurs up at the spectators. ‘Choly backed off, worried she had her Fatman on her. When she stormed off at street level to destroy things with her fists, and ‘Choly had no more chems to hand out, everyone lost interest in the whole to-do, and those who’d gotten doped up returned inside to get the most out of their high... and beat the shit out of each other.

As everyone dispersed, and ‘Choly was about to retire inside as well, a raider ran up to Gristle on the roof. The chemist watched but couldn’t hear. The young man’s disappointment to have missed out on a showmanship display, but he waved his hands all around trying to disseminate information to his incredibly high and incredibly aggressive superior. The only thing ‘Choly heard of the whole charade was Gristle blurtling out a violently gleeful desire for a cowboy hat.

Whatever the scout had had to say got Jared’s attention and the murderously inebriated raider boss loomed over him. After the scout trembled through recounting what ‘Choly imagined was the same information, Jared ordered Gristle and the scout and the pair went running. The boss snapped to glare at ‘Choly and pointed at him with absolute guttural, frothing authority.

“COME TO MY OFFICE, CHEMIST. RIGHT THE FUCK NOW. URGENT.”

“Shit,” ‘Choly whispered to Angel, nodding to Jared with a pliant smile.

Once inside, Angel asked him, “You administered more than just what you advertised, didn’t you, Sir.”

“Faaar more than advertised,” he sweated. “And I can’t wait for the Psycho to wear off, or they’ll know something’s up.”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Reading my mind.”

Once at street level they rounded to enter the assembly plant. They rushed inside when the nuclear engine of a vehicle combusted, and after a moment they recognized it had not been spontaneous-- Jerry still stormed about at street level, demolishing cars.

“Hopefully she’ll have that out of her system by the time we’re done in here.”

“Truly, Sir. Truly.”

When they got to the foreman’s office, Jared sat on the couch in the corner, a feverish sweat streaking his white face paint.

“Melancholy...” Jared laughed with exhaustion. Already in the half hour it had taken for ‘Choly to
come see him, the chemist could tell a quadruple dose of Psycho had begun to outright rot him alive inside-out. Suddenly, Jared no longer felt like the threat here, and the chemist set his rifle on a wheelchair footrest, in the space between his seat, to free his trembling hands. “Melancholy, come here.”

‘Choly guided himself over by the handrims. Angel stayed glued right behind him, but it stayed quiet. He felt so small as the ramifications of his actions forced him to witness them up close and personal. The halo of the Jet vapors still lingered, informing him of what must without question be writhing and consuming Jared’s deliquescing insides, and all penitence quickly sublimated into unrelenting jealousy.

Jared choked down a tickle in his throat and gnashed his teeth a bit in a smile.

“I’m sure you witnessed the little... exchange on the rooftop before I called you over... Freddie says he spotted the fortuneteller. The woman with the Sight! Can you believe it! I didn’t have to find her. She came to me! I sent Gristle to collect her. You’ll get to meet her. Finally you’ll have to believe me...”

At a loss for words, ‘Choly leaned nearer at a caution, wringing his hands in his lap.

“That... that’s fantastic. --So how was your first experience of fresh Psycho?"

“I have never felt more alive... I...” He coughed, and didn’t notice the blood on his hand from it. “I must admit I never really could handle my Psycho. Caught up in the moment, I definitely... overindulged...” Another coughing fit, and this time he noticed, but was too exhausted to do anything about it. “You know, Jet wasn’t the only chem she said could light up her Sight--it was just her chem of choice...”

The irony wouldn’t quit him, that in administering the Bloatfly Syringes, he’d acted out a twisted self-fulfilling prophecy from his own Jet trails. He squirmed in place, producing a kerchief. Jared took it in a distant delirium, to pat his face dry, but he wiped the blood off his hand on his pants. The morally-sedated chemist wished more than anything to experience this all vicariously, and stay by the raider leader’s side as the chemicals took their course, but he knew he couldn’t.

“--Say, you don’t have anything for a stomachache, would you, Melancholy? I feel like my stomach’s practically eating itself...”

Now sweating himself, he nodded, shaking, and he motioned for Angel, who produced what ‘Choly described to Jared as its owner spoke.

“I call it-- Melancholia. During my military service, my nerves were so bad I couldn’t keep down food. It works like a meal replacement, and it calms the stomach.” ‘Choly uncorked the dark bottle for Jared and handed it to him. “I swear by it. ...Sorry the chems earlier did such a number on you,” he blurted out, his head starting to throb.

“That’s on me, chemist.” A single chug slacked Jared’s face with relief, and he readily exhausted the bottle in a matter of minutes. “My fault for... trusting you...”

As ‘Choly watched, Jared passed out quickly from fatigue and opiate overdose. Flighty, the chemist took the history book from his desk, then patted him down, desperate to find what was rightfully his. He unfastened the pistol holster and took the whole thing when he found the Nagant at Jared’s waist, then helped the unconscious man to recline across the couch. Before he left, he felt for a pulse at Jared’s neck, and when he found none, a chill gnawed at him not knowing if any one thing he’d done to the man had killed him, or if it had been the sum effect of the different opiates.
In an almost parental wistfulness, he hoped the larvae would at least make a good meal from Jared.

They exited the assembly plant, and on the way back to the pharmacy, ‘Choly’s eyes darted every which way in the worry he was being watched. Upon returning inside, he panicked to collect everything he possibly could store in Angel of value, in the hopes of escaping Lexington in the middle of the night, but the stress intermingled with a hangover and cascaded into narcolepsy. His last recurring thought as he passed out in his chair, his mind chanted ad nauseam:

What have I done?
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Ink Spots intensifies.

“Mister Carey!” Angel shook ‘Choly by the shoulders. “Mister Carey!!”

The chemist choked on smoke and his eyes snapped open. Dry heat filled the pharmacy lab with a haze. Unable to draw a clean breath, he stooped in the wheelchair and unbuttoned his dress shirt to stick his face inside it.

“Ang-- Angel--” He could scarce get out the demand for his burlap hood, let alone in English. With it doused in water as he’d done with the ventilation dust storm, his lungs cooled, but not his panic. “Not an electrical fire--”

“I’d think not! We have to get out of here before the elevator’s no longer an option!”

‘Choly jammed his cane through a belt loop, and readied himself with both hands on his rifle, while Angel piloted the wheelchair. The elevator started screaming a fire warning on the last floor’s descent to ground level, and the pocket doors stayed open to indicate it refused to work in the emergency status. Rounding the counter, they found the front door of the pharmacy was directly on fire, and the Mister Handy rushed up to it itself to use its circular saw attachment to break away the flaming material from the frame.

“All limbs inside the car!” Angel cried as it powered its owner past the flames.

Upon finding level ground, a Molotov cocktail shattered against one of the wheels of the chair, and ‘Choly spilled out in the almost-dawn across the Battle Green. He rolled upon the no longer green in a hacking mess, to put out the fire that had grabbed his white Pharm Corps coat. He fumbled with his cane to stand, and Angel scooped him up without warning, hesitating only a moment while its owner found the stirrups. Once he had his bearings, he looked back behind him to the burning building, to find the raiders pelting it with bottles like they had him. Five chased him and Angel down the street, and the Handy sped steadily away, firing its laser at the raiders.

“THAT FUCKER GOT JARED!” one screamed, lobbing another cocktail.

“We can’t take it with us!” the Handy insisted at a sprint, not that ‘Choly could object.

“Can you pilot sideways? Or backwards?” ‘Choly suggested, out of breath. More interested than anything in getting away to regroup, he loaded his Syringer with a case of Lockjoint Syringes. As the Handy complied with the requested maneuver to pilot itself to one side, its owner looped one arm through the reins to steady his aim. He managed to nail one of them by the third shot. When the hit raider planked over in abrupt agonizing rigor, the others only got a few yards before a double-take and a scatter. Along the way, other raiders made chase, to similar fate.

“Where are we going, Sir?” The Handy fired its laser at another raider behind them to punctuate they were still pursued.

“The Concord ruins. Walden Concord won’t be secure enough, but. Maybe we’ll find a townhouse
to hide in. Figure out where to go from there. --No, push through to the Vault.” He trembled, clutching the reins and rifle with both hands, watching in horror as Lexington caught fire one building at a time. “Lock the Vault Door up tight. None of them has a Pip-Boy. They won’t be able to follow. We can stay in the One-Eleven Exit Zone for a few days. ...Provided the whole place hasn’t pumped full of refrigerants by now. Yebena mat’, we are fucked.”

“Stay with me, Sir. We’ll get through this.”

“Something tells me... we aren’t even going to get a chance to regroup and plan,” he replied breathlessly, as raiders cut off their westward entry to Concord. “Fuck-me-in-the-mouth-- It’s--Gristle--”

Despite the loathing comedown of his chem binge the afternoon before, the sickly mohawked raider pressed his throng of raiders to close in on a building. The Museum of Freedom.

“Come on!” a man on the balcony jeered, firing an energy weapon down at the raiders on the street. “Is that the best you’ve got?”

“THE CHEMIST!” a raider chasing them yelled, loosing another Molotov in ‘Choly and Angel’s direction. “JARED’S DEAD! CORVEGA’S FULL OF BLOATFLIES!”

“Yebisvrot--”

“Hey! Up here on the balcony!” The man waved at ‘Choly, having noticed his arrival and subsequent panic. “I’ve got a group of settlers inside! The raiders are almost through the door! Grab that laser musket and just-- Help us! Please!”

The raiders didn’t give the chemist and his Handy the time to grab the weapon on the ground beside a casualty. As they rushed inside the building, ‘Choly realized that the body outside had been dressed like the dead he’d found in the Super Duper Mart, and loathing overwhelmed him. They paused in the open atrium of the museum, in a daze. Gunfire sounded in various rooms, and ‘Choly squirmed.

“Come along, Sir. We’ll clear out the establishment of these curs!”

“Suppose we’ve no other choice.” He changed out his Syringer rounds to a mixture of Bleedout and Endangerol, and instructed, “I need you to lead the charge. I’ll make them as easy to cut through as possible, but I can’t-- I can’t--”

“We make a fine team!”

They made their way to the right, through an exhibit on the Boston Tea Party, and the motion activated recordings set off. If nothing else boxed his withdrawal-addled ears until that moment, it was hearing “Have at you, you jackanapes!” without expecting it. His stomach lurched as they pummeled through museum mannequins the raiders had rearranged as a distraction barricade. A raider awaited them on the stairs in the middle, and he nailed him with a Bleedout Syringe and sicced Angel on him. The Handy favored its circular saw attachment throughout the endeavor. On the way up the stairs, he grabbed a lone Med-X off the hall table and pocketed it.

On the second floor, a raider rushed them from behind and beat the backside of ‘Choly’s leg with the heavy end of a pool cue.

“Why’s it always the left leg!” the chemist shouted, certain that the bludgeoning against the metal chassis of his robot had torn muscle. He favored the opposite stirrup with his full weight as little as he could, trying not to throw off Angel’s calibration. Before he could think straight, Angel had
incinerated the raider with its laser attachment. It chuckled with satisfaction.

“I don’t feel pain, you know,” it told the pile of ashes, before pressing on.

Groups of two to four raiders at a time tried to get the jump on the pair, aiming to knock ‘Choly off his mount. He did his best to pump them with the darts which would intensify the damage his Mister Handy was pumping out. On the third story, one raider came up and hacked off Angel’s laser attachment with a bladed tire iron before it could fire on her, and she cackled before getting slashed in half with its saw.

“I promise I’ll repair you if we survive this,” ‘Choly whispered to it, hugging its spherical top in desperation and grief.

“‘Tis but a scratch!” it hollered, pressing onward.

They came upon a door as it opened, and eased out of a flinch to find it wasn’t the raiders, but instead the refugees. They entered the office to find a man in overalls at a terminal, and the man from the balcony. The rattled black man wore a faded tan duster and what looked like it had once been a tricorn cap, now only folded up to the one side after centuries of wear. The weapon in his hands was the same as the one ‘Choly had found on the bodies in the Super Duper Mart, confirming unarguably for him that they’d belonged to this group. Before he could get lost in the torment of it, he realized he was being spoken to.

“Man, I don’t know who you are, but your timing’s impeccable,” the man in the duster started with an exhausted smile. He touched at his hat brim in introduction. “Preston Garvey, Minutemen.”

So now I’m going back in time, ‘Choly thought to himself, dismissing the notion that he could possibly be reeling from any of his chem habits in the moment. But then he caught sight of the old woman on the couch behind Preston and removed his sack hood to stare. His gaze not leaving her large brass earrings, brightly colored head kerchief, and heavily mismatched suiting, sarcasm spilled out of him regardless. “Captain Alan Carey. Deenwood Pharm Corps.”

“Alan--? Captain... Pharm Corps, like the US Army?” Preston squinted at him. “Are you all right?”

“Nothing like what I understand you all have been through in the past few months.” The chemist’s demeanor softened. “My enemy’s your enemy.”

“Those raiders chased you in here yelling. I take it they were after you just like us.”

“Let’s just say I pissed them off. Don’t want to talk about it. I, ah. ...You’re not messing with me, right? The Minutemen?”

“Protect and serve at a minute’s notice. That was the idea. I joined up, wanted to make a difference. And I did until things fell apart. Now it looks like I’m the last Minuteman standing.”

‘Choly frowned.

“I... don’t think there could possibly be an appropriate time to ask, but the way you’re dressed. Do you know an Emma or Josh?”

At mention of the names, ‘Choly noticed a total of five refugees crowded in the office, and all of them gawked at him like they’d been stabbed.

“You know where they are?” Preston pressed, on bated breath.
“In Lexington, I found some people dressed like you. Colonial looking. Militia. Found their bodies, anyway. One of them had a holotape. They... they went back into the grocery store trying to get any last survivors. They didn’t make it.” ‘Choly produced the holotape from Angel’s storage compartment and handed it over with a frown.

“I’ve been with these folks since Quincy,” the Minuteman pained, wearing his guilt on his face as he held the cartridge in one gloved hand. He pocketed it. “Lexington looked good for a while, but the ghouls drove us out of there. A month ago, there were twenty of us. Yesterday, there were eight. Now we’re five.” He internalized the sting, and gestured to the various individuals in the room. “It’s just me, the Longs-- Marcy and Jun-- that’s old Mama Murphy on the couch-- And this here’s Sturges.”

“My god, you’ve been through a lot, if that outfit’s been at you since Quincy. I’m so sorry. I know what they’re capable of. It must have been absolutely awful.” ‘Choly finally dismounted from Angel, and slung his rifle onto his back. Relying on his cane, he went back to the door to lock it for peace of mind. He squinted difficultly at Preston, struggling to gauge whether he had finally happened upon a remotely normal conversation with remotely normal people.

“What... *are* ghouls?”

The Minuteman’s eyes went wide, and he had to think how to answer.

“Wow, you really aren’t from around here, are you. Ghouls are... irradiated people. Most are like you and me. They look pretty messed up, and live a long time, but they’re still just... people. The ones that got my friends are different. The radiation’s rotted their brains. Made them feral. They’ll rip you apart just as soon as look at you.”

“That’s... definitely what happened at the Super Duper Mart...” ‘Choly leaned against the desk where Sturges still picked at the terminal, to take the weight off his left leg and to take a moment to administer the Med-X to the back of his thigh. No longer bearing down on the cane, his hands were free to wander to his platysmal scar as he got lost in thought. “No comment on your marksmanship, but I doubt you picked off all the raiders outside from the balcony by now. I hate to say it, but I probably led their reinforcements here by trying to escape Lexington myself. We’re probably trapped.”

“Well, we do have one idea,” Preston replied, unnerved by the bad news and the chem use both. “Sturges, tell him.”

“One idea can make all the difference,” ‘Choly urged, all ears.

“There’s a crashed Vertibird up on the roof,” Sturges started, his brassy voice warming into a grin as he described his plan. “Old school. Prewar. You might’ve seen it. Well, looks like one of its passengers left behind a seriously sweet goody. We’re talking a full suit of cherry T-45 power armor. Military issue.”

“That... could help.” ‘Choly thought again to the last he’d seen of Jerry and shivered.

“Oh, it gets better. Get the suit, you can rip the minigun right off the Vertibird. Do that and those raiders get an express ticket to Hell. Y’dig?”

“Oh, hell no.” The chemist stood to hobble-pace. “Anyone but me. Do I *look* like I can pilot one of those?”

“Why do you think he’s riding that Mister Handy?” Mama Murphy interjected in agreement, hoarse and modulated. “No, he’s doing well enough just to walk, with his joints frozen stiff.”
“I’m just fine, madam,” Angel insisted, doing its best not to make itself a nuisance. “I take care of Mister Carey the best my General Atomics craftsmanship can muster.”

“Frozen... frozen stiff.” ‘Choly crossed the room, and sat next to her to stare, haunted. “You are her.”

“Oh crap, here we go again,” Marcy snipped, huddled in the far corner.

“Hail to the conquerer.” She bubbled out a slow laugh, and patted his better knee. “You’re a hero, comin’ here like this. Helpin’ us. Despite it all.”

“I’m no hero. And if you’ve seen what I did in Lexington, you can’t even begin to argue.”

“A real horrorshow, kid.” She grew distant and slack-jawed in recollection. “It is you. The monster-maker.”

“--How. How did you know what would happen to Jared?”

“Just listen to me, acting the crazy old lady.” She laughed weakly. “It’s the chems, you see. They give ol’ Mama Murphy the Sight. Been that way since I was a girl. I can see a bit of what was, and what will be. And...” Mama shut her eyes, brow unsettled, “and right now, I can see there’s somethin’ comin’. Drawn by the noise, and the chaos. And it is... angry.”

“I know about the Sight.” Taking both her hands in his, he pleaded in tormented desperation, “Please tell me it’s not the flies.”

“I see... I see--” Her eyes opened wide in distress and fixated on something not in the room. “Oh, it’s horrible, kid. Claws and teeth and horns. The very face of death itself.” She wheezed, leaning back in the couch cushions with a drained groan. “That’s all I can manage. That’s all. This next monster’s not one of yours. I need... to rest now... And you’ve got a job to do.”

“Absolute gibberish,” Marcy dismissed, starting to pace.

‘Choly glared at Angel to steel his determination as best he could, and it stared right back at him with resolution.

“Sturges. Preston. I don’t know if that power armor still has juice, but if one of you can operate the power armor, I have an F.C.”

“Well all right.” Preston stared at ‘Choly. “We were positive that thing’s battery was dead, and here you just come waltzing in here ready to go. Maybe our luck’s finally turning around.”

“Boss, I fix stuff. I tinker,” Sturges began, hesitant but optimistic. “But I don’t know the first thing about military controls.”

“I haven’t used one in a fight. Only trained with one back at The Castle. Carey, are you sure you can’t be our knight in shining armor?”

“You cannot get me back inside any tin can,” he shivered, locking up inside himself a bit. “Angel, just give them the Fusion Core.”

“Yes Sir!” It did as requested, handing the lead yellow cylinder to Preston. “I know I’m not fully equipped as I was before the morning’s scuffle, but know I’m ready to finish off those cads. They’re absolutely incorrigible!”
“Angel, if only you could wear a power armor,” Sturges grinned, stroking his chin thoughtfully as though devising a way to make it happen. “Carey, you said you’re a military man. Surely you know a thing or two about these toys.”

“I’m a chemist, not a soldier. And on a good day I’m lucky to be walking on two feet these days. Angel’s the only way I even got up the stairs.”

“Guess it’s up to me, then.” Preston nodded in a grim acceptance, F.C. in hand. “I know the power armor can handle a vertical drop, so getting it off the roof and onto street level should be the easy part. If you can give me cover fire from the balcony, I think we stand a decent chance.”

‘Choly offered him a firm handshake, with a nod of his own.

“Glad to finally feel like I’m on the right side of history. Let’s clean up this mess.”
As Preston vanished through the office door at the other end of the room in search of the stairs which led to the roof, ‘Choly turned to Sturges with a mess in his brain.

“Which of you would have gotten in the power armor, if I hadn’t come along? You said you’d had the idea before I got here. Surely, you’d drawn straws. MmhH,” ‘Choly waved his hands around, struggling to think, “rock-scissors-paper.”

Sturges knitted his brow and shrugged as he turned his back to resume picking at the data on the desk terminal.

“To be honest with you, we hadn’t gotten that far before Preston herded you inside. Apples to apples, at this point.”

“Do you want to help me help Preston from the balcony? I have spare guns.”

At ‘Choly’s urging, Angel produced the 10mm and .38 pistols and held them out in its pincers to the refugees’ handyman. Sturges only glanced over his shoulder before continuing, hunched over.

“No thanks. I’ve got a pistol. I’m... better tasked to sorting out information,” he shied. “I’ll take a fistful of .38 bullets if you’ve got any to spare, though.”

“Just as well, then.”

Angel set down a case beside the terminal, and followed ‘Choly to the balcony door. The chemist sat on the shallow shelf of a balcony, which lacked a guard rail either from damage or wear, and hugged the wall while he stared at his syringer rifle to strategize. He pushed his glasses up on his scrunched nose with a tremulous sigh. He still had five lockjoint syringes left, but the rifle wouldn’t have the fire rate or the ammo quantities required to give Preston a useful amount of cover aid. For now, he’d commit to the .38 because it had the better scope of the two bullet-based weapons, and absentely, he requested it from Angel.

The scope. ‘Choly rubbed at his cataracted, chem-weary eyes from beneath his jamjar lenses. Despite the occasional bullet from the street ricocheting off the stone walls behind them, he didn’t even remember Angel hovered beside him until he’d already administered one of his last doses of Calmex to the fold of his elbow and leaned into the wall while it took effect.

“Sir, we’ve had this discussion once before,” it started, more terse with him than with the raiders firing at them. “You might have experienced ailments before we got to Lexington, but the chems have only deteriorated your health further. You’ve convinced yourself that they’re helping you function better, but you’re worse off than you’ve ever been. They’re eating holes in you. Holes only taking more chems can patch up--and for only so long--”

“--Nh. Now’s just about the last time to be riding me, Angel. You’re trying to tell me the chem habit’s slowly killing me. Rapidly maybe. But I promise you--if I hadn’t used it just now, we
would all surely die. And I know for a fact that after what I did to Jared’s group, the survivors wouldn’t even use you for scrap metal.”

The Handy-Bot froze in place, wounded as the heavily modulated and unrestrained tone took hold in its owner’s voice. Slowly a rage built up inside it as it spoke.

“I would assert that I won’t always be there to coddle you after your bends upon bends of terrible choices, Mister Carey, but you and I would both know that would betray my programming. Now if you’ll excuse me, Mister Garvey requires my services far more than you do at present.”

It stormed off back inside, to later exit the front door, and it wasn’t until the damaged Mister Handy started tearing apart raiders with the circular saw attachment on one of its two remaining tendril limbs, that the chemist recalled that its laser attachment lay somewhere in the museum, thus robbing the robot of its ability to ranged attack. Angel had had no reason to follow him onto the balcony, other than to check on its owner. He nodded his head askew with a sour furrowed lip, acknowledging yet another poor decision on his part, but he did not linger on it.

If he didn’t clean this mess up, he’d have far more messes to clean up.

Preston jumped feet first off the roof, and ‘Choly bolted to attention at the impact wave which the velocity of the combined weight and gravity of the power armor created. ‘Choly didn’t hesitate to bank on the pseudo-tectonics knocking all the nearby raiders unsteady, and he fired an endangerol syringe on Gristle before slinging the syringer rifle onto his back. He dry-swallowed as he switched to the .38, and aimed a shot right at Gristle’s throat. About the time it would have landed, Gristle was torn whether to put his attention and rage to the chemist or the power armor clad Minuteman, and no one could tell whether it had been ‘Choly’s bullet or Preston’s as the minigun finally powered up to spray out a hundred bullets in a minute flat.

Before the sickly raider figurehead had even dropped to the rubbled concrete, he burst open with hungry bloatflies. The five of them immediately proceeded to opportunistize the fresh injuries the minigun had wrought of the raiders. As ‘Choly looked on, frozen, he thought it had to be so much more painful than a horsefly bite. He grinned, wide-eyed and delirious that the flies were doing his bidding, even now, by helping rid Concord of raiders.

Preston stay motionless far longer than it took the overheated minigun to cool down and power back up, slowly shaking his head in disbelief. He let out a cracked, demanding yell and fired another spray, aiming for the flies more than anything else. Meanwhile, Angel zipped to and fro across the street, whistling a jaunty vaguely patriotic tune, mowing down raiders that had missed any of Preston’s bullets. One bloatfly missed fire altogether, and landed on a sawed-apart body with the intent to lay eggs. The Handy doubled back and chopped it in half with a tut-tut, not missing a beat before continuing on its path to clear the street.

All the while, ‘Choly sat frozen, watching the unfolding carnage. How many bloatfly darts had he fired the day before? Had any of the chems, the psycho included, somehow mutated or cloned the larvae in situ? If Gristle had incubated this many bloatflies to full gestation, how many had Jared? He distrusted his memory as to how any of the previous day had transpired, and just trying to make sense of it all got him sweating.

His eyes focused past Preston, past Gristle and the raiders, past Angel, and a whine came from deep in his lungs. The sewer grate, which had covered the sidewalk drain near the municipal plutonium well at the end of the street, flew through the air and landed a block away. From the sewers emerged a creature larger than even Preston in the power armor. Scaly. At once bot hulking and lanky. Spiraling, deranged black horns sweeping back from its head but goring forward. Its teeth jutted from its slightest insinuation of lips. It let out a roar and displayed two-foot-long black
claws before it rapidly stormed forward and closed the gap between itself and the museum.

Instinctively, ‘Choly switched back to the syringer rifle, and loaded it with the remaining lockjoint. The monster was so fast that it took three attempts to shoot it before it finally lurched in place. Just as it fell over in rigor, Preston’s minigun hit optimum recharge, and he riddled the monster with bullets. The Minuteman’s heavy breathing was visible even through the simply plated armor.

“I don’t know how long the lockjoint will hold,” ‘Choly yelled down to Preston. “Unload everything you’ve got into that thing!”

The chemist fired another lockjoint syringe at the monster, for safe measure, and it regained just enough range of motion to lash out at Preston from its place in the street. Before it even connected with Preston’s leg, Angel descended upon it and chopped off the offending arm with zeal. If ‘Choly’s ears rang that badly from the echo of Preston emptying the entire remaining magazine to guarantee the thing was dead, it was a wonder Preston could even hear at all.

“Was that... the last of it?” Preston wondered aloud to himself, in disbelief.

“I do believe an all-clear is in order, Mister Garvey,” Angel praised. “Splendid!”

‘Choly didn’t stay outside long enough to receive any praise. Tears rolled down his face, though he experienced no fear or sadness, and he hobbled into the office to shepherd the refugees to regroup elsewhere.

“It’s over,” he told them with a fatigue. “Let’s meet Preston and Angel downstairs.”

“I’ll help you down the stairs, Mama Murphy,” Sturges offered with a pleasant insistence.

“Thank you, boy. You’re too sweet.”

“Jun, let’s follow,” Marcy urged.

Her addled, dark-haired husband didn’t seem to come back to earth, though he complied in coming with her to stay with the group. ‘Choly wondered if it was trauma, or possibly chems, since Mama definitely had some access to them.

“Do you need help with the stairs, Carey?” Sturges asked as he focused on careful taking Mama locked arm-in-arm. “I’m sure Marcy would help you, since your Mister Handy hasn’t come back inside yet.”

“I-- I’m fine,” ‘Choly spouted off, giving the Longs a dismissive wave. He took the stairs one at a time, steadying himself with his cane as he went. “Just get yourselves down to the atrium.”

“Fine by me,” Marcy muttered bitterly.

“Hey, isn’t that your Handy’s laser attachment?” the handyman wondered as they neared the bottom of the flight of stairs between the third and second stories. “Marcy, maybe you could show your gratitude for Carey’s help today, by retrieving that for him. It’ll be easier to repair Angel later, with all the original parts.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.” She did as asked, softening in awareness that she’d sounded ungrateful, but not softening enough to sound apologetic.

As they all arrived at the ground floor, Preston came inside, no longer wearing the power armor, and accompanied by Angel. He immediately rushed up as Sturges was helping Mama to sit at one
of the waiting line benches, eyes wide with a mixture of concern and relief.

“Take it easy, Mama Murphy. You okay?”

“I’m fine, Preston,” she bluffed. “Quit your fussin’. You’re the one we should be tendin’ to.”

“I’m fine, too.” He straightened, not realizing he hadn’t assessed if he truly was. “Shaken, but okay.”

“Does anyone require refreshments?” Angel came up with a canister of fresh water in its pincer, and handed it to Mama Murphy. “Madam, the first canister has your name on it.”

“I am a little thirsty, I admit.” She smiled, patting Sturges and Angel both on the hand. “But really, stop fawning over me. We’ve all been through a lot.”

“I think we all could use a drink right now,” Marcy jabbed.

“I might not have been able to bring my full wet bar with me on such short notice,” ‘Choly offered with a pleasant smile, missing the sarcasm altogether, “but I’m sure I have something stronger than water, if that’s to your liking.”

She flinched when he took her comment seriously.

“I, no. Water’s... strong enough for me.” When Angel handed her the next canister, she first offered its laser back to it, which it put in its limited storage space appreciatively. Then she nodded with a small gratitude, and split it with her husband.

“All the same.” ‘Choly smiled self-consciously, feeling like none of them trusted him in that moment. Not even Angel.

“I have never seen anything more horrible in my life,” Preston remarked, eyes a mile away. “That deathclaw... I must have woken it up when I jumped down from the roof. Or maybe from all the gunfire.” He got lost in thought a moment, and straightened his hat a little better, from it having gotten mashed down on his head inside the helmet. “Damn it all, we got lucky.”

“What the hell was that thing?” The chemist sat on a bench to himself and set his cane in his lap to rub at his face. “A deathclaw? What could that possibly have once been?”

“...Where did those bloatflies even come from?” Preston continued, still locked in struggling both to and not to recall the course of events. “They came out of nowhere... I can’t have seen it right. They, they didn’t come out of that raider... Did they?”

“You... you saw right,” ‘Choly replied, knowing he wouldn’t get an answer. “I put them there. I’m sorry you had to be the one to deal with them. I forget not everyone handles insect encounters as smoothly as I do.”

Preston snapped back to reality and faced ‘Choly with intensity on his face.

“I’m not even going to ask for clarification on that. Especially since the raiders chasing after you were screaming that you wiped out their home base. That’s... impressive. I can’t say anything nice, except say I’m impressed. There are settlers nearby who’ve been plagued by Jared for some time now. Suppose they can sleep easier now, thanks to you. And so can we, hopefully. It’s not much, but here’s a case of fusion cells. It’s the least we can do.”

‘Choly put up both hands and refused them, but an explanation for the refusal came poorly.
“Give them to Angel. ...It was my fault they even got that difficult to contend with in the first place. If I’d only taken down Jared sooner. But instead, I indulged them for months with whatever chems they wanted. I’m just glad they didn’t get to the worst of it until yesterday... Oh, oh yes, yesterday... I’m sorry. I realize that’s... when they tore after the lot of you...”

“They’ll do me wonders once my laser’s repaired, Mister Garvey! Thank you.”

“You dismantled that outfit, just you and Angel,” he told Carey as he gave the ammunition to Angel. “That’s impressive in its own right. Those raiders were manipulative and deadly. The fact they’re gone is monumental. You deserve a piece of recognition in it, no matter how you went about it, and no matter what you did for them before turning the tide.” The Minuteman paused a moment, working on his phrasing. “Before I went up to the roof, you said something about being on the right side of history for once. I don’t know what kind of shadow you might have ever walked in, but I think today proves better than anything that you can do the right thing when you put your heart in it.”

“I hope your heart stays true, kid,” Mama pitched in. “‘Cause you’re gonna walk a long, hard road. I saw it.”

“You. You saw it.” ‘Choly readjusted his glasses and sniffed.

“The sight’s sometimes foggy, but it ain’t a liar. You’re a man out of time. Out of hope. But all’s not lost. I can... feel it. You’re not supposed to be here.”

‘Choly frowned, exhausted beyond words.

“I just had my house burned down by raiders. Where the hell am I supposed to go?”

“Look. I know how I sound. But you have unfinished business. Something about succeeding... no, exceeding? Hopefully that makes more sense to you than it does to me. But I don’t need the sight to know where you should come in the mean time. Come to Sanctuary with us, Carey.”

The chemist removed his glasses to wipe all the sorry from his face, leaving only terror and loathing.

“...Lowell. Bozhemoy it just doesn’t end, does it.”

“I’m... tired. Maybe you bring me some chems later. The Sight might paint a clearer picture then.”

“Mama Murphy, we talked about this,” Preston objected sternly. “That junk... It’s gonna kill you.”

“Shush, Preston. We’re all gonna die anyway. We’re gonna need the sight. And our new friend here, he’s gonna need it, too.” Dismissing contention, she stood with a grunt and started for the door. “Let’s get goin’. Sanctuary awaits.”

“All right, folks,” Preston announced. “Thanks to Angel’s and Carey’s help, it’s safe to move out. We’re headed for that place Mama Murphy knows about: Sanctuary. It’s not too far, she says.”

“She knows about it?” Marcy snipped acridly, dead-planting where she stood and holding her husband with both arms. “More like she had one of her ‘visions’ while she was stoned out of her gourd. And now you want us to just head out on a wild goose chase based on no better plan than ‘Mama Murphy saw it’?”

“It can hardly turn out worse than--”
As everyone erupted into bickering, Sturges threw up his hands, his can of water still in one, and tutted everyone.

“Ho-- Hoo--- Hold on. Everybody just take it easy,” he soothed. “We’re all in this together, right? So Marcy, you have a better idea of what we should do next?” She said nothing, glowering at Mama, who ignored it. Sturges grinned slyly. “...Anybody...?”

“I know where it is,” ‘Choly admitted. “Sanctuary Hills. I’ve been there. Only a few months ago. Last I checked, it’s... it’s all but abandoned.”

Everyone stared at him, stunned but unsurprised that he’d sided with Mama.

“Well then, Sanctuary it is. Let’s just hope it lives up to its name.”

“Let’s go, Jun.”

“Oh. Uh, ok.” The first words ‘Choly had heard come from Jun in his entirety of occupying the same room as him.

On their way out of the Museum, Angel stopped in front of ‘Choly, who followed last, and he sighed in defeat.

“I’m not thirsty,” he uttered, eyes wild with desperation.

“I simply wished to offer to carry you, Mister Carey. It wouldn’t do for me to neglect to at least offer.”

“Always have to be the b--” He smiled in bitter apprehension, eyes on the door and not Angel. “No, no, I’ll do it myself. Don’t you worry. You take care of everyone else.”

“As you wish,” it sighed in resignation, recognizing the reaction for what it was. It rushed up alongside to offer Mama Murphy to carry her in the same way it would carry its owner. “Come along, Madam! First Class!”

“You make me feel like a queen, Angel,” she sigh-smiled, hugging the very top of its chassis once she had mounted the Handy. “An old gal could get used to this kind of attention.”

The tears shifted from flowing out of stress to flowing out of hurt, and all Carey could appreciate as they exited Northwest out of Concord was that he was dead last, and that none of them could see the hurt he wore on his face.

Marcy and Sturges looted the raiders for weapons, rations, and viable leather armor, and Preston got back into the power armor to bring it along with them. ‘Choly approached the corpse of the reptilian monstrosity, and raised a claw with the tip of his cane. Too humanoid to be an alligator or crocodile. He couldn’t say he remembered horns or claws anything like these. From the looks of what was left of the raiders, none of the bloatflies survived either, larva or otherwise.

“What even was this thing before the war?”

“I’ve always known them to be whatever they are nowadays,” Preston replied. “I’m just glad it’s the first one I’ve ever seen face to face. Anyway, I hope you don’t mind me keeping the F.C. We might need this suit of armor to defend ourselves in our new home.”

“No, no. Keep it. You need it far more than I do.” His wild eyes remained wet, but mixed with anxiety from the sustained presence of the power armor. “I... as long as I can keep this thing’s paw.
Hand. Whatever it might be.”

Angel came nearer and wordlessly picked up the one it had severed before.

“A trophy?” the Minuteman wondered. “You can mount its head on a wall, for all I care. As long as we can keep moving.”

“...More like a reminder how little I belong here,” he uttered under his breath, falling back to last place again as they pressed onward.
‘Choly lagged behind the rest of the group on their walk to Sanctuary. As they passed what remained of the Walden Drugs, he sighed, half-inclined to stay behind where he belonged. But he shoved down that flagellation and instead focused on how the bombs had blown out the Fallon’s Department Store at the Northwest of town, and weather had done the rest. There couldn’t be anything left of value in there, beyond a few articles of gold and silver--and even that speculation was suspect, considering how thoroughly looted Concord was. After what had transpired with Jared’s outfit, he didn’t trust anything to have the same kind of value it once possessed. He hated having to continue wearing his service uniform as daily attire, but he had no other choice until he located something more dressed down. He loosened his necktie and unbuttoned the first button of his dress shirt, and sighed.

The chemist got lost in thought on his way out of town, a path he had once walked no fewer than twice a day, six days a week, for nearly a year. He was so glad the work day was finally over. This shift had taken so much out of him. He couldn’t wait to slip into the bathroom ahead of Hawthorne and take a long, hot shower, then unwind with bourbon and whatever sci-fi movie his favorite channel was broadcasting for the evening. He nearly asked Angel aloud what it had planned for dinner tonight, but he caught himself short of stuttering on the first part, only to cover up the rest with a sputtering cough. He kicked at a small hunk of rubbed concrete with a sneer.

Hawthorne wouldn’t be there when ‘Choly got home. He wouldn’t be there later, either, he imagined. ‘Choly tangled up inside himself with grief. Of all the people he’d failed since emerging from the vault, he’d failed Jacob Hawthorne. Immediately. He could have told him the insects had been dealt with. Could have told him it was safe to go home now... But he left Jacob at the Red Rocket with that furiously territorial dog... Was there enough for him and the dog both to eat? What had the ghoul even been eating all this time? There couldn’t reasonably have been much food left in Sanctuary or the recoolant station...

“Would you look at that,” Sturges awed. “I think I just found my new vacation home.”

The recoolant station. Still phased a bubble off reality, ‘Choly’s attention fell upon the building as they passed it. His chest tightened.

“Your idea of heaven, eh, Sturges?” Preston Garvey turned his head to grin at him, but continued moving. “Looks like there could be lots of salvage. Let’s get to Sanctuary first, though.”

The ghouls’ bodies. The ghouls’ bodies were gone. They’d either been moved, or had gotten up on their own. Surely the dog hadn’t--

“Y-- there’s already somebody living there,” the chemist blurted out. His poker face failed, between his withdrawals and episode fumes. “He’s got a dog that. Despises visitors. We should steer clear of him. Give him and his dog some space.”

“Ah yes. A German shepherd, as I recall,” Angel quipped absently, still carrying Mama
Murphy. “Angry thing.”

“A reclusive neighbor.” Sturges paused thoughtfully a spell, to wipe his brow. “Suppose I’d pick the recoolant station, too, if I could live in any building in this blasted corner of the Commonwealth. No offense, Carey, if you’re from around here.”

“None taken. It is pretty ruined out here, isn’t it?” He let out a self-conscious chuckle. “Not much salvage anywhere. I’ve already been through most of Concord a few months ago...”

“We’ll just have our work cut out for us, fixing up Sanctuary,” Preston encouraged. “Making it our little slice of paradise.”

“Oh! to see it restored to its former glory!” Angel had to bestill its body language or risk tipping Mama off balance atop him. “My servos swell at the thought of it, Mister Garvey!”

With the verdigris-bronze statue in the near distance, Preston let out a low whistle.

“Well I’ll be damned. It’s the monument to the original Minutemen. I knew that was somewhere around Concord. That means... this right here... must be the Old North Bridge.” He pointed to the half-collapsed wooden bridge across the water which isolated the suburb of Sanctuary Hills from the surrounding area. “Where the first shots of the American Revolution were fired. I’d call that the best omen I’ve seen since we left Quincy.”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about, Preston, but I’m glad you’re happy about it,” Sturges said.

“Never would have imagined I’d end up back here.” The words were out of ‘Choly’s mouth before he could even register he’d said them.

“Your energy’s tied to this place, isn’t it, Carey?” Mama Murphy inquired softly.

At Mama’s nudging, Angel had fallen back to where ‘Choly had loitered even further behind the rest of them. She wanted to talk. He didn’t.

“I used to live here... a long time ago.” ‘Choly felt like he could be vague with her, but that she could see through an outright lie.

“The distant past ain’t so distant for you. When we first met, I saw you leave that ice box. This whole world is like some bad dream you can’t wake up from, isn’t it?”

‘Choly flinched and squirmed, hating that here on this turn of the road of all places, was where she wanted to have this conversation.

“...Stop. Please, just stop. I don’t know how it is you do what you do, but I can’t handle reliving this. Not again. It’s bad enough to be coming home.”

“I’m... sorry.” Her brow raised as her eyes fell distant, and the rest of her face slacked into a vague frown. “The Sight doesn’t tell me what’s private and what’s not. I see it plain as day. You, waking up in a world that isn’t yours. Finding what’s become of everything, of... everyone. I... can feel the hurt and confusion you felt right here. On this street. You’ve been through so much, Carey. Angel, are you sure you don’t want to take him the rest of the way, dear?”

“--No, Angel. Don’t worry. We’re almost there.” The chemist gave Mama a thousand-yard stare, distraught with how horrific it must be to have whatever the Sight was. He struggled all the while to shove down any recollection what happened the week he emerged from Vault 111. “You can’t
She shook her head.

“I get... flashes all the time. The energies imprinted in things and places and people. I’m lucky when it makes sense immediately. The chems, though.” She smiled a little, her gaze still miles away. “The chems piece together the flashes into a... motion picture? Isn’t that what they were called? You used to see them all the time.”

“Is-- there a chance that I have the Sight, too?” He bordered on tears. “Because of the Jet, I saw what was going to happen to Jared, and I made it happen. For months before that, Jared thought I might have it, except backwards. Ever since I stepped out of the vault, I... I keep reliving things. Vividly. Lucidly. I thought it might be daydreams, but it’s too traumatic, too automatic, and too throttling. I come out of the episode, and I can’t remember what I was doing. I keep remembering exiting the vault. Things from my military work. Things that transpired between me and my roommate. The day the bombs fell, Missus Murphy. Surely, if anyone could understand what I’m going through, it would be you, with your Sight.” He nearly reached out for her in his desperation for her to understand what he was describing. His face slackled in recognition. “--Murphy. You couldn’t be related to a... Nate or Nora, could you?”

“I can’t trace my lineage back to before the war, kiddo. I don’t think anyone in my family’s from around here, though. Grew up in Quincy. It’s all I know. Didn’t gain the Sight, either. Was born with it.” Her face furrowed with warm concern for him, coming back to present day finally. “Surviving extreme pain can rewire the brain where it does really horrible things to us. It’s an organ, too, just as much as any part of us, and it can get ill all the same. The Sight sees forward, Carey. You’re describing a quintessential survivorship. You and Jun Long have a lot in common in that regard. He lost his son. Recently, to the ghouls in Lexington. Neither of you’s handling it so great, but it’s to be expected. The losses you’ve both experienced in such a short time, it’s bad enough to walk through it through the eyes of the Sight. I can’t even imagine what it must do to the two of you, to go through it firsthand.”

“It’s unimaginable, to know that you’re subjected to all this through your Sight. I hate to be callous, between your description and mine...” He swallowed, forming the words. “Are you absolutely certain that you don’t simply always have the Sight, and that you use the chems to dull the agony of seeing what you see?”

“Oh, kid. Kid. No.” She frowned, heartache evident on her face. “The chems only make it worse. More real. Clearer. If you think the chems make it easier for you to cope, what you’re experiencin’ is not in any way the Sight. I don’t know what to tell you about you knowin’ he’d be a monster, other than it inspired ya to do somethin’ horrible with a good outcome. The chems are a tool, and nothin’ more. There ain’t nothin’ in this world makes it easier to handle what I see an’ what I know, besides learnin’ that it made a difference to somebody.”

“You... you really think that the Sight can help me? You said something about having unfinished business. You can’t tell me anything about what you saw, can you? Did you see Lowell? Did you see the military base?”

“If I use chems to intensify the Sight, anything I see during it is that much hazier when it wears off. If you’ve got Jet, it’s the easiest on my system, but I suppose I can work with just about anything. I can sort it all out for you. Once we’ve gotten to Sanctuary. Once we’ve gotten a chance to rest. We all deserve some rest, Carey. Even you. Come on. The rest of the group’s already way ahead of us.”

“You’re right,” he relented.
So the chemist, his Mister Handy, and the seer pressed onward across the bridge.

Nothing makes it easier, besides learning that it made a difference to somebody... Making a difference to somebody. 'Choly marinated on what Mama’d had to say. He had to find some kind of value in these visions. Positive value. He’d convinced Jared of their value, and all it had done was hurt people, kill. Every action he’d taken since his reawakening was self-serving and an unbridled, capitalism-fueled survival instinct. Surely, through the episodes he could also heal, and heal others. And one person in particular was owed the distinction of his first extension of an attempt at bringing healing to the blighted suburb of Sanctuary Hills.

But Mama was right. He needed to rest, to collect his faculties, before he could even try. He’d start trying to do better tomorrow.

Not even paying attention to where Angel and Mama went off to, as he crossed the bridge into Sanctuary, 'Choly’s eyes followed his cautious, hobbling feet so the tip of his cane didn’t get stuck in the planks, and remained on the ground once back on the concrete. Second house on the left. He caught himself staring at the Chryslus coupe on its side. Though rust had eaten away the paint job, he knew that it had once been sky blue.

Jacob loved that car, he lamented to himself with a sardonic smile. It would kill him to see it like this. Maybe I could ask Preston to at least tip it back on its belly, with the strength of the power armor. He barely kept himself from thinking about how Jacob had thrown him into the car that day, and sped the two of them home so ‘Choly could run to the vault. I promised him they’d let him in. The military made me a liar...

“I wonder what else the military made me,” he mouthed in a haunted delirium, stepping through the blasted threshold of the house they once shared.

“Hey, we were here first,” Marcy snipped with her feet tucked up in the seat of the armchair with her. “There’s no beds in here, either. Jun and I are sharing the couch for right now.”

He glared at the married couple and came unhinged.

“--OUT!” ‘Choly bellowed. He pointed his cane at the doorless door. “OUT!! There’s no beds here! There’s beds in several of the other houses! If you have to have a bed! Take your pick!”

“Didn’t you hear me?”

“OUT!”

‘Choly threw down the coat rack and started throwing all the flush-mount shelves into the floor. Anything he could grab, he toppled, until they left in a panic.

He stood there heaving in the middle of the mess he’d made. The sound of heavy pneumatic steps of power armor approached, and he looked up to find Preston standing on his front step with a confused scowl.

“Woah. Woah woah woah. On what planet was that okay?” he started, flourishing his body language with his laser musket. “There’s a dozen houses here.”

“And this one’s mine.” When Preston didn’t understand, the chemist pointed at the mailbox label. The Minuteman humored him and glanced at it.

“But it says Hawthorne,” Preston started, befuddled as ever. “You said your name’s Carey--”
“Roommates,” he heaved. The loathing exhaustion of everything that day was finally crashing down on him, only compounded by the stress of being stared down by someone in power armor.

“What are you trying to say?” He squinted difficultly at ‘Choly.

“What do you think I’m trying to say?” Words failed ‘Choly.

“That you... lived here. Before the war.” Preston’s eyes widened, and he adjusted the brim of his hat as he thought on his wording. “Like one of those prewar ghouls... Certainly look a lot more together than any I’ve ever seen, but you’re nothing but surprises.”

“You... you think I’m a ghoul?” ‘Choly couldn’t tell if Preston was being serious, or mocking him, and it burned to be compared to something as beautiful as what his roommate had become. “I still don’t think I understand what a ghoul is.”

“Not exactly, no. They get all gnarly, from the radiation. Lose body parts and some flesh usually. Their voice gets all hoarse and raspy. I mean it when I said they’re people just like you and me. The normal ones, they’re good people. It’s the ones that got too much radiation that get violent and dangerous.”

“They really are just like other humans, right?” ‘Choly didn’t like asking it, but had to, after what he’d seen on the return trip in front of the recoolant station. “If they die, they can’t just... get up and walk away?”

Preston glared at him in fear.

“I don’t know what kind of stories you’ve been hearing, but I hope that never happens in my life.”

“There were things in fiction, before the war, that were dead things. But they weren’t really dead. People called them ‘zombies.’ I’d say life imitated art, but you just told me that ghouls stay dead.” Then, to comfort the horrified man, he lied, “I’m grateful that much is true. Of all the ways to violate nature, defying death is among the most upsetting to imagine.”

“Fiction needs to stay fiction.” Preston shook the thought from his mind, only to have a gap in ‘Choly’s logic sink in. “Wait. You mean to tell me you’ve been alive over two hundred years, but you still don’t know what a ghoul is?”

“I... only just woke up a few months ago.” The chemist gave him a self-conscious smile before breaking eye contact. He had to sit down, and rested against the back of the couch. “I was... frozen. In a vault. It’s what damaged my body. Either they didn’t do it right, or something malfunctioned. I made it out, but...”

“It’s all right.” Preston held up a hand, not wanting ‘Choly to continue. “You don’t have to relive that stuff if you don’t want. It’s not my business, unless you want it to be. This whole group has some painful baggage we’re hauling around with us, myself included. For what it’s worth, I’m glad you made it out alive, and I’m glad you came to help us in the museum. It was some good fate.”

“--Don’t go in the vault,” ‘Choly managed to say. “It’s up on the hill to the Northwest of the suburb. It might seem like it’s safe, but it’s been filling up with asphyxiating gases from the cryogenics pods for months now. You’ll suffocate without proper respiratory gear.”

“Looking out for us, in advance. I’ll get word around that it’s not safe yet.”

“Can I ask you one more thing before I ask you to let me get some sleep?” He half-joked, “All I want to do right now is sleep another two hundred years.”
“Shoot.”

“Why... do you believe that what Mama Murphy sees is always true, or going to be true? Isn’t it just chem fumes?”

“Well, it’s gotten us this far, hasn’t it?” Preston grinned at him. “I’ve gotta have faith in something. I’ll talk to the others and do my best to explain how this is your place, and to give you some space. We all deserve some boundaries.”

The Minuteman tipped his hat brim to leave and went to go check on the Longs.

Once he was alone, out of habit ‘Choly went to his room to remove his orthotics and take down his hair, leaving the braces and bobby pins in the chest of drawers. He returned to the couch, and collapsed in his untucked shirt and slacks, using his muddy pharm corps coat for a blanket. His glasses went on the armrest, and the instant his eyes shut, he was out cold.
A knock at the front door frame roused ‘Choly from where he slept on his couch. He sat up to find Sturges backlit by the moonlight. Rubbing at his eyes with a yawn, he motioned for him to come in.

“You’re the only one of us I don’t think’s eaten yet today. You want a can of pork n’ beans?” Sturges sat in the armchair and offered him a can and a fork. “I’ve got a can opener.”

“Food does not agree with me. Not now, and not for a long time.”

“Sorry to hear that. That’s only one of the things I came over here to talk to you about, at any rate.” Sturges held the can and utensil in his lap. Once ‘Choly put on his glasses, the handyman continued. “Preston says you lived here before. That right?”

“It... it wasn’t just my house. I had a roommate. And of course Angel. I’m so grateful Angel’s still here.”

“I didn’t mean to get you on a sorry topic,” Sturges apologized. “Came by to check on you, and to scout out what kinds of repairs I might be able to offer. I tinker and repair and improve constantly, even in my sleep. Helps me knock out faster, to deconstruct and reconstruct stuff in my head. I’m pretty handy when I put myself to it. And seeing as this was... is... literally your house, I figured you might like to see a few of the walls back up.” He winked at the chemist.

‘Choly did his best to ignore that the Med-X had worn off, and give his attention to his guest. His leg was definitely wrecked from the fighting earlier.

“For how much of an outburst I had over keeping possession of the house, I’m struggling to make peace with actually living here,” he admitted. “Nothing against you, but... everything is so different. Sometimes, things don’t get any better, and that’s okay. It’s not like they can ever go back to the way they used to be.”

“Things can and will get better,” Sturges objected with a stern, pleasant wagging of his finger. “I had my suspicions you were prewar, from how you talk about things, but Preston did everything in his power to skirt that description when he was apologizing about how you got mad at the Longs before. Everything’s gonna even out, once we establish ourselves here. Promise. I’m optimistic about this place. Surely we can do something about all the ghosts and cobwebs for you. Make it someplace the lot of us can call home. Including you.”

As Sturges got lost in thought, ‘Choly couldn’t tell if the warm distant smile fell on his face or just past him. Sturges realized he was staring and stopped.

“It’s certainly better here than Concord,” ‘Choly admitted. “You really want me around after the way I acted earlier? After knowing that I helped those raiders be as formidable as they were?”
“They had you fooled into thinking you were getting something good from the arrangement. None of us wholly faults you. Besides, you helped us get rid of them. And what kind of neighbors would we be, if we didn’t help you get your house back in order at the same time we settle in ourselves?” Sturges leaned in, steadying himself with a hand on his own knee. “Can I ask you a stupid question?”

“I’ve been asking most of the questions today,” ‘Choly allowed, stunned to have verbal confirmation that yet another of the group accepted him in some way. “It’s only fair.”

“Alan... It’s really Elaine, isn’t it? Rather, it used to be.”

The chemist bit his lip and sank back on the couch, stiffening.

“Close enough. I’ve been Alan since I stepped foot on the continent. I’m from Russia. What of it?”

Sturges mirrored him and sat back to defuse the stress a bit.

“Psh, it’s nothing. If you’re Alan, you’re Alan. Really, it’s a lot like how I’m Sturges.”

‘Choly squinted at him, and sat back up slowly.

“I really hadn’t met anybody else like me. Like this. Not in the motherland, not before the war, and certainly not here now. Really?”

“It’s more normal than you were led to think. People... change names in the Commonwealth all the time. And no matter the reason, that’s your business. Am I right?”

“Quite right.” ‘Choly didn’t remember the last time he really genuinely smiled. “To be honest, I don’t even feel like an ‘Alan’ anymore. I’ve been going by ‘Melancholy’ since I really started establishing myself again. I’m starting to think I might have gotten as lucky meeting you all, as you did meeting me.”

“Maybe so. I just wanted to make sure you heard it from my mouth, that we’ve got a gob of respect for ya, and not to sweat the little stuff. Listen, I know you said you weren’t hungry, but I’m gonna leave this in case you get peckish.” The can went to the floor beside the couch. “Keep your strength up. Get some rest. I’ll look the house over better in the daylight tomorrow. And we’ll discuss getting this place in order once everybody’s had a chance to recover from the Museum. Sound good?”

“Sounds amazing. Goodnight, Sturges.”

“Goodnight, ah. Melancholy.”

‘Choly resumed getting comfortable on the couch as Sturges left, only for Angel to come in a few minutes later.

“Ah, Sir. You’re awake! I was just tending to the others so that they might bed down for the night. Do tell me if you need anything of me?”

“I... really should eat something,” he resigned, sitting back up with a pained grunt. “Could I... have a Melancholia, please?”

“Certainly, though mind we’ve only got the six left.” It almost tacked on a since you gave the one to Mister Jared, but it knew better, and simply handed over the cherry-sweet refreshment without another word.
As ‘Choly nursed at the drink, he got focused on his leg, and distant on everything else.

“My chem lab survived mostly in tact, and I’ve got plenty of Melancholy’s salt left over. We’ll talk about replenishing my stock in the morning. Right now, I think I underestimated how badly I was injured earlier. Could I have a Stimpak as well, Angel? To the back of my left leg?”

As it administered the requested medication to the gestured-to body part, Angel halted in awareness.

“The Melancholia contains cyclomorphine, Sir?”

“--Just morphine. I swear it.” ‘Choly took another swig off the meal replacement to hide his sweating. He did his best to keep the leg straight while the Stimpak worked its magic on the torn musculature. “I’ve always meant it when I’ve said it’s the only way I got through Deenwood. Meal substitute... and nepenthe.”

Angel was quiet for some time, wringing its tendril-appendages together.

“I haven’t offered it before now, because I haven’t thought it my place to, but Sir... You do have three ampuoles of Addictol in my stores. I am remiss, to have let your penchants get this far out of hand... Did you really mean it, that it’s the only sustenance your constitution’s allowed since you returned from the vault? Or was that the addiction talking?”

“Your cooking is exceptional,” he replied, falling drowsy already. “It’s no knock against your cuisine. You’re handier than any Handy in the kitchen. I’ve done well to keep any food down, fresh or otherwise. The only thing that hasn’t given me trouble is what I have in my hand right now.”

“I understand. And I can’t persuade you to make future batches of Melancholia without its... key ingredient?”

“For you, I would give it a shot... but I can’t promise I’ll continue leaving it out.” This was too heavy a conversation for him, but he couldn’t very well just tell his closest companion to simply shut up. Not when it was expressing a very real concern for his sustained health. “We can take it one day at a time.”

“...If I help you make more Melancholia, can you promise me that you’ll make it the only chem you touch from now on?”

‘Choly swallowed hard on the last bit of the lead-heavy sweet drink, and barely managed to hand the bottle back to the damaged Handy without dropping it.

“I... I owe you that much, after everything that’s happened. I can agree with you that the constant sampling has had... long term adverse effects.”

“You were struggling, but I did not know the extent. I know now to voice my concerns as I encounter them, and that you respect me enough not to dismiss me. I just... I want nothing more than to see you alive and thriving again, Mister Carey. It gives me meaning to have you back in my life again. And I want you here for as long as time allows it.”

“I wouldn’t have lasted a day out here without you. You’re... my guardian angel.”

He would have sworn he saw a sweet smile cross the Handy’s chrome front as he closed his eyes and laid back on the couch.
“Keeping watch over you as you get your beauty sleep, Sir. Rest well.”

He awoke the next morning to find Angel had set out an inhaler on the arm of the couch beside his glasses. Once he had his eyes on again, he looked it over, though he knew what it was without reading it. The Addictol. He realized that while he slept, Angel had covered him up with a hospital blanket and tucked a pillow under his head, and he smiled to himself. He pocketed the inhaler and folded up the blanket into a tidy pile with the pillow, and turned to find Angel come back into the living room.

“Good morning, Sir! I’ve got a fresh pot of coffee brewed for you, and you’ll find a bottle of your Melancholia at the kitchen table as well.”

“Good morning, Angel.” He smiled tiredly, rubbing at his bed head as he shuffled over to the now-rickety aluminum chair. He sat at the peeling linoleum table, and Angel rushed over to open the bottle for him. “Thank you.”

The Handy poured him a cup of coffee and brought it also.

“Do tell me you slept well.”

“Besides the nightmares, I can’t complain.” He alternated between caffeine and morphine, somehow comfortable despite it all. Jokingly, he looked to his Pip-Boy. “Did the Sunday paper come yet?”

“Late as always, Sir.”

“Two hundred years late,” he laughed, nearly crying out of nowhere.

“Oh, dear. Sprung a leak, and I’ve only got a... shop rag to offer you?” It handed him the wadded-up, rust-colored, low thread count square of cloth apologetically. “Was it something I said?”

“No, no.” He sniffed. “I thought I could make light of my situation, but it’s still too soon.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve spent the morning cooking breakfast for the others. Even in the short time we’ve known this group, I’ve grown quite attached. They’ll make fine neighbors, if I do say so.”

“Take care of them all you like. They deserve a little of your brand of affection, after all they’ve been through. And I know it’s a comfort for you to look after them as well. It’s always been your nature.” All the while, ‘Choly ignored that he clutched the Addictol in his pocket. He knew it was an elephant in the room, and he cleared his throat and took another sip of coffee. “No, I haven’t taken it yet. I’m... not ready yet.”

“Not ready?” Angel looked on in confusion. “Addictol isn’t painful, Mister Carey.”

“Not ready... to be addiction-free,” he sighed, setting down both the beverages and the inhaler on the table. “I’m sure you haven’t been able to process why I haven’t taken Addictol before now. I can’t handle just being me again. The withdrawals have been a part of how I see myself for so long, that I don’t know if I’m going to like what I see. It’s been long enough that I’ve forgotten how much of my condition is the withdrawals, and how much of it’s whatever happened to me from the cryogenics. I deserve to be as sick as possible, don’t I? There has to be a cost to me functioning normally. I can’t blame it on the chems, after I take the Addictol. I can’t blame it on something fixable, if I’m still sick. But... I’m done being scared of myself. Of how bad off I am.” He picked up the inhaler again and stared at it in his hands.
“You know I’m still here with you, every step. Even if dispatching your addictions doesn’t solve every health issue that ails you, I promise you that we will find something that will help you. We might even find something that cures you. There has to be something out there that can make it better, easier, for you, Sir. There must be.”

“Just having you here with me is a start,” he smiled. “The fact that despite everything I’ve done, you continue to have confidence that I can do better... You’ve been my everything, Angel. I mean that.”

“You can do it. I know you can.”

‘Choly exhaled his full breath, and, pinching his nose shut with one hand, he held the inhaler to his lips with the other. Depressing the ampoule into the actuator, he took its entire contents in one breath, and he set down the inhaler so he could clamp that hand over his mouth, to hold the aerosol medication in his lungs. He counted to ten, then another five for good measure, since it had so much damage to undo at once. When he finally exhaled, his head swam, and the humidity of the salty substance fogged up his glasses. After a minute, he looked at his hands, and then burst into laughter.

“Just what I was afraid of. I’m still me. Damn it!”

Angel unfroze once it realized he was kidding.

“--Oh, Sir. Thank you. This is the first step on you truly taking care of yourself. I’m so glad you have your humor about you. It’s a sign of good things. I could cry of happiness right now, had I the hardware for it.”

“Once I’ve finished my breakfast, and gotten myself presentable for the day, we should scout the immediate area for hubflower, now that I know what use it is. I’m certain with how many grew in the outskirts of Lexington, that there’s surely some around here. I’ll make a new batch of Melancholia this afternoon, once we’ve secured a new source of the Melancholy’s salts. I told you I'd make the first batch without it, and I will. But the flowers are just so beautiful. It wasn't the chems talking, what made me gravitate toward them and start growing them.”

“Just imagine. I know how you loved your gardening before the war, and I know how absolutely enthralled you were with the hubflowers. They are quite fetching a perennial, I must say. Imagine that we could get the garden thriving here again. Your flowerbeds! You could hedge the yard in hubflower, if you so desired it! And if you do see fit to continue including it in the ingredients of your meal replacement, you wouldn’t have to stray at all to collect it! And... you'd be surrounded by something you consider beautiful.”

“I gardened at the pharmacy because of how badly I missed it here,” ‘Choly admitted, starry-eyed. “Bozhemoy, Angel-- I could have that here. We could. I know you loved the garden as much as I did. Between you and Sturges and the others, we just might have a real shot at making Sanctuary habitable again.”

“Most importantly, you haven’t mentioned yet.” It hovered nearer, its ocular lenses clustering near his face. “How are you feeling? Now that you’ve taken your medicine?”

He grinned, heavy-lidded, and caressed two of its three lenses as though to cradle its face in his hands.

“Like the lot of us can achieve just about anything.”
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Have some heavy dialogue. Pretty sure this is the longest chapter to date. Some things happened at work yesterday that precipitated a need for this conversation to go the way it did.

Using some of the Abraxo Powder which it believed in good faith that its owner would no longer need to craft Mentats, Angel had cleaned ‘Choly’s Pharm Corps coat the night before in the stream which surrounded Sanctuary Hills. Washing the coat had made the singe-marks around the tail hem stand out a bit more, but the coat had survived the mud and Molotov cocktail surprisingly well, and the fresh wash had returned it to the stunning white it was supposed to be. During the washing process, the Mister Handy had deposited the ribbon bars, the name placard, and the contents of his pockets in his vanity, and, mostly out of habituation, ‘Choly sat at Hawthorne’s desk re-affixing the effects of his cleaned military uniform.

The sink no longer had running water, but he still used the basin to brush his teeth and wash his face with a can of water from Angel. He wet his hair and slicked it back into a firm French twist, and put his orthotics back on. Once fully dressed, coat and all, he returned his various effects to his pockets, including his last ampoule of Jet. He shoved the thought to the back of his mind, for what he could broker with it, and he focused on lighter things, setting out with Angel to inspect the houses’ back yards for useful plants.

Only once the pair had begun their noontime stroll, did the thought cross his mind that the should compose another addendum to the Merrick Index, for identifying pharmaceutically relevant plant and fungal specimens in the post-nuclear landscape. He’d have to sit down and do so sometime. They did find several hubflower bushes, as well as a few young mutfruit trees. Angel picked the fruit, while ‘Choly picked the flowers. ‘Choly annotated in whose yards they found what, so they could return and transplant the bushes and saplings when they could. But first, ‘Choly wanted to talk to the others about it.

Angel and ‘Choly walked back to the house with their share of produce, following the culs de sac which ran the entirety of the suburb, to find the Quincy survivors had gathered in what had once been Miss Rosa’s carport to discuss things. The power armor stood nearby, unoccupied, in the power armor station at the back of the carport. The pair came up, and ‘Choly listened and smiled pleasantly as not to interrupt.

“Glad you could make it,” Sturges acknowledged from where he leaned against one of the many workbenches the grease monkey mother had left behind on her property. “You’re part of this settlement, too, Melancholy. Weigh in your own ideas.”

“First of all... Let’s start this again, shall we? I feel like we all had a horrible day yesterday.” ‘Choly steadied himself to stand as squarely as possible, to balance with both hands on his cane in front of him. He cleared his throat. “My name is Melancholy, and this is Angel. I’m sure Angel wants to help out at least as much as I do, if not more. I used to be a chemist, and I can still be your chemist, if you need it. I lived at 103 Old North Lane, at that house right down there.” He pointed at it across the way a few houses down. “I... I don’t expect anyone to forgive me for what
happened before. But I hope I can at least make it up to you.”

“We spent the morning picking fruit!” Angel set down the bucket they’d taken with them in the middle of the group who’d sat on the driveway. “I’ve washed them in the stream. Everyone’s free to eat their fill.”

“These came from nearby?” Preston inquired from where he stood off to the side. He bent down the pick one up, and hefted it in one hand, impressed, then handed the first fruit to Mama Murphy, who sat in a wooden kitchen chair. “Means the ground’s good enough for farming, if you ask me. Thanks, ah, Melancholy. Angel.”

“Oh my, yes, thank you,” she agreed.

“So the dirt’s viable.” Marcy rolled her eyes, and grabbed a mutfruit and handed it to Jun. Her husband absently picked at it to free the flesh from the dark rind. “We can’t subsist on just a bunch of mutfruit.”

“I like mutfruit all right,” Jun mumbled softly.

“We can grow more than just mutfruit,” Sturges replied, picking up a fruit for himself to peel. “We shouldn’t eat all of them at once, though. If the land here can sustain plants, we can plant a few of these, and grow more. We can sell some of what grows, and trade for other things like corn, or razorgrain.”

“Angel told me it cooked for you all this morning.” ‘Choly smiled again. “I imagine it did so with my food reserves. I’m more than happy to donate all my reserves to the lot of you. Don’t worry about food for me. I have... a dietary issue, I guess. I’ve got something else that I’ve been subsisting on for a while now. It doesn’t cut into any of the food reserves I can provide.”

“It’s not drugged, is it.” Marcy eyed Angel as it enthusiastically demonstrated some of the variety of foodstuffs it had in its storage compartment.

“You’d think so, but it’s not.” ‘Choly couldn’t hide that the remark stung, but he powered through it. “I’m sorry I yelled at the two of you yesterday. Really, I am. It wasn’t right of me. I shouldn’t have behaved that way. Every one of you deserves someplace they can call home, and feel comfortable and safe.”

“We were all having a bad day,” Jun insisted softly, making eye contact. “We didn’t know the house was already taken. It’s okay.”

“We found a house with a double bed,” Marcy added quietly, not making eye contact. Implicitly, she’d intended gratitude, that his insistence that they not settle for the first thing they came across had found them an even better option.

“I’m glad,” the chemist said, grateful they’d not dashed his apology outright.

“Someplace to call home,” Sturges shepherded. “Back on the subject. We’ve been discussing what renovations to focus on first. There are a few mattresses left in the area, and a good number of the houses are still standing, so bedding and shelter aren’t a worry. Establishing sources of food and clean water is, though. Of course, I’ve got all kinds of improvements to this place on my mind, including getting the houses looking more like houses and less like piles of downtown Boston.”

“It’s very good gardening soil. At least, it was.” ‘Choly’s head began to swim for how long he’d already been on his feet, and decided to sit with the others, closer to Preston. “I had a nice, forgiving flowerbed in front of my house. I’m positive we can grow things here.”
“A flowerbed, huh?” Sturges stroked his chin. “I’ve heard how people used to grow things for decoration, not just for food. Once we can get more settled in here, maybe we can start working on little upgrades here and there to go beyond sheer utility. Having something nice to look at doesn’t seem half bad.”

“Oh, it’s wonderfully therapeutic. I’ll gladly help you all with whatever you decide to plant in your gardens, but after my walk this morning, I’ve already got plans for mine.”

“It’ll suit you, ‘Choly.” Mama still held the fruit in her lap.

“But I haven’t--”

“No trick of the Sight this time. I could see you in the backyard of the house I picked for myself,” she smiled. “I saw how those flowers perked up your eyes. We all deserve something that makes us get that look in our eyes.”

“I think we should plant the first mutfruit in a central location,” Preston commented, having thought on it as everyone else conversed. “Maybe around the tree growing in the middle of the court. The weeds don’t seem so bad around it, and it seems about the same distance from the houses each of us has picked.”

“Jun, Marcy, I’m gonna let you two sort out that,” Sturges said. “I’m very interested in seeing what kind of rain-catching apparatus I can rig from the steel and aluminum scrap of the collapsed houses. Maybe I’ll even find some pieces that I can just swap out one-for-one with the damaged equivalent in our houses. These things look like they’re all made out of the same assortment of pieces, just in slightly different combinations. Seems like it’d be easy enough first-stage repairs. Maybe I can even find a few doors in tact.”

“You’re just the man to figure out that kind of contraption,” Marcy agreed, helping her husband stand. “Jun, let’s go see what we can do with that median.”

Sturges walked off to the nearest pile of housing rubble, and began to scrutinize its remainder.

“I’m going to go back to keeping watch,” Preston said, returning to making the rounds of the suburb, armed with his laser musket. “Are you going to be all right, Mama Murphy?”

“I’m fine. You go on.” Standing with some difficulty, Mama asked ‘Choly, “Would you escort an old woman back home?”

“Certainly.” He offered his cane, but she waved it off. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. You know, I asked Sturges this morning at breakfast if he could help a girl out and set me up with a chair built just for these bones. He was confident about fixing me up with a wheelchair in particular. A motor powered one. The Commonwealth would be right back to bein’ unable to keep up with me.”

“Angel has doubled as my wheelchair often in the past few months,” ‘Choly commented thoughtfully, very much liking Sturges’s idea. “If I were to hazard a guess, I’d say your Sunday stroll yesterday inspired him.”

“I can give you rides whenever you like, Madam,” Angel offered. “It would be my pleasure.”

“You’re too kind. Both of you.”

‘Choly froze at the street as Angel and Mama made her way up the sidewalk to the front door of
the house she’d picked. She realized once she’d passed the threshold of the faded blue house that he no longer followed her, and she turned to look back at him.

“You’re invited inside,” she ushered. “I’d like to talk to you, if that’s all right.”

“Why... why this house,” was all ‘Choly could say.

“It called to me. Angel, why don’t you go help Sturges? The two of us are fine here.”

“Are you sure?” The Handy looked between the two of them.

“It’s fine,” ‘Choly relented, shoulders drooping more than he’d intended. “He needs your help more than either of us does at the moment.”

“I’ll come check on you shortly. And Madam, don’t forget what we talked about this morning!”

“I haven’t forgotten,” she smiled, waving it off as Angel swayed down the street to find the handyman. “Come, ‘Choly. Sit with me.”

The chemist complied, taking to the dark navy canvas couch and sitting his cane across his thighs. Mama sat beside him, set down the fruit on the other side of her, and folded her hands in her lap. He’d never stepped foot inside Jahani’s house, and he didn’t like not knowing whether Jahani would have allowed it, had he been present to object.

“It’s good you stuck around. I’m glad to see you’re still here.”

“I’m glad you’re here, too. I... I wanted to talk to you.” He bit his lip and stared out the front window at the Longs, already hard at work at the circular median. “Forgive me, but do we have to talk... here...?”

“It’s the best place for us to talk, I think.”

“I really hope you’re not saying that, knowing who lived here-- I guess I should just be grateful that you asked me for Jet, and not for--”

“--don’t be like that. Even Psycho has its purpose. You know, I’ve been talking with Angel this morning. It offered me an Addictol. To at least ease the aches from my history with chems. It tried to convince me to swear off chems completely, and it’s mighty persuasive, boy, let me tell you. It cares a lot about humanity. That’s rare in a robot. But... whether I go clean isn’t up to me. If you’ll recall, I made a promise.”

He swallowed, unable to look away from the couple weeding.

“...To me?”

“To a man who’s lost, and had no path before the Sight started him in the right direction. Angel gave me that medicine, and swore up and down to me that it and you and everybody here in Sanctuary here... You all care more about tryin’ to add a few years to my life. But I haven’t taken it yet. I know how desperate you are for answers. I wouldn’t do wrong by you, if you want me to help you one last time.”

“I...” His shoulders locked in rigor, unable to unstick himself to provide the chem she’d requested the day before. “I have the Jet.”

“Ahh, I knew you were one to like a little kick. I know the Jet jitters when I see ‘em. You haven’t
got ‘em today, though.”

“I feel like a hypocrite, coming to you like this. I made a promise this morning, myself. Also to Angel. That I’d go as clean as I could for my Mister Handy. That I owed it to take care of myself, for how much it takes care of me. But... as chem-free as I can be... I know from how I am, and who I am as a person, that that can’t ever be one-hundred percent... And...”

“It got you to take the Addictol, too, then. It’s a good robot, Angel is. The Agency did right, naming it that. You’re right. ‘As chem-free as possible’ ain’t always ‘completely.’ The only person that can say what good a chem is, is the person takin’ it. I know it ain’t always purely recreational, either. Sometimes... it’s a matter of life and death.”

“Mama, I...” His voice broke, and he shut his eyes.

“It’s your choice whether you pursue the request. And it’s my choice whether I honor your request. All I want in life is to do my best to make people safe and happy. And this group, it’s been too long since I felt as safe as I do here. I owe you for what you did for us in Concord. I’ll ride the Sight one last time, if you’ll let me. It’s the one real contribution I can make to this group these days.”

“You’re making it very hard for me to request it, by talking to me here. It may not be an intravenous chem, but I’m still... asking you to... take a chem on my behalf...”

“This house has very strong energies. I can tell even without the chems that the man who lived here last was... very troubled...”

“I know, Mama. I’m the reason he was so ill. He was a private. I was his captain.”

“Your conscience is the only thing stronger than what I feel in this house. You blame yourself for what became of that man. Your guilt motivates you more than you realize.”

“I couldn’t live with myself if I let you die, just so I could have direction again for five more minutes.”

“You can’t bring yourself to be the one makin’ the choice that I take the Jet. Is that it? I’ve experienced a lot of restless energy since we arrived in Sanctuary. A lot of information, even without the chems fueling the Sight. But it’s like a pile of photographs. I can tell you what I’ve picked up here, and you can see if you can make sense of it all. If that’s not enough, I’ll know you still need me to take the Jet to piece it all together.”

“What in Sanctuary Hills could possibly tell you what I need to go to Lowell for? Or how to even do that? The vault security incinerated everything I had on me that day, including my dog tags.”

“I touched your mailbox on the way in. Before I knew it was your mailbox. I know you got a summons back to active duty. But you never got there.”

“You... you know about my roommate then. And why I was so distressed in front of the Red Rocket.”

“And I know why your smile’s uneven. But... your issue’s not with what I know. It’s... with what someone else couldn’t have possibly known. Isn’t it?”

‘Choly trembled, eyes again fixated on Jun and Marcy at work outside.

“Please. Please don’t make me ask you for this. Not here.”
“It’s the only place I can make this kind of a connection, and the only way I can give you a connected understanding. Even with this strong a tie to a place, though, I have to warn you. The Sight’s sometimes real foggy. The things I tell you might only make sense once it’s time to make use of what I tell you.”

“Do you believe in free will, Mama Murphy?”

“I believe everybody can decide what actions she takes.”

“Free will, like...” He took off his glasses and screwed up his face in one hand before finally looking Mama’s direction. “How to put it... Is everything predetermined in life? Are my actions and choices my own decision? Are they uniquely meaningful? Or is the inevitability that I act and choose already decided for me before I even get to where I will act... and choose...?”

“You’re afraid that if you start relying on what you’ve learned from the Sight, then you won’t trust any choices you make without it later.” She put a hand on his knee, and looked upon him warmly. “You gotta have better faith in yourself, kid.”

“I... I can’t trust myself with self-agency. I’ve spent so much of my life fulfilling others’ will and desire. The government. Major Ernest Johnston. Gretchen Nordstern. Jacob Hawthorne. I don’t have the practice to know how to act for myself.”

“Melancholy. You know this ‘self-agency’ business better than you think. Look at yourself. You’ve always been you. You may have let people tell you what to do, but you’re done letting anybody tell you who to be.” Hunched over toward him, she smiled up at him. “Tell me, kid. Who told you to stay here, and make sure we’d be fine? Who told you to make sure this group has enough food for weeks?”

“...My conscience,” he replied at last, brow knit.

“You did. You have a conscience. That means you’ve got morals. You know what’s right. You know what you should be doin’. We’ll be fine here. And I can guarantee you that you’ll have a place here if you ever decide to come back.”

“...A weak conscience is still a conscience, I suppose.” His features softened in guilt. “You really think I need to go to Lowell?”

“Even if you don’t go now, you’re going to end up there one day.” She dropped the humor a moment. “You owe it to the man who lived here.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Psycho wasn’t the only chem he was forced to take.”

He stared at her in abject disbelief, a ringing developing in both ears.

“He... No.” He shut his eyes and put his glasses back on, shaking the notion from his head. “The Jet is mine, but so’s the Addictol. I want you to have the Addictol. You can’t have the Jet. You’re more valuable than what you can provide any of us. You. You’ve made so many sacrifices in your life, just to protect the people who matter most to you. I can’t ask you to make even one more. The man who lived here, the military called people who endured all he did a veteran. And he came home, decorated. Celebrated for his sacrifices. He came home to his well-earned peace, and didn’t have to make another sacrifice for as long as he lived. He... only lived another ten months, because of the war, but he lived it free. Nate and Nora. The couple I asked about yesterday? They were veterans, too. Celebrated. I imagine you’ve done more in your lifetime than anyone I know.”
Mama Murphy sat back slowly, and nodded solemnly.

“And you were the fourth ‘veteran’ of this place. You should be celebrated, too. If it gives the lot of you peace of mind, for me to retire. I can respect that.”

“I can’t make you use the Addictol any more than I can make you take any chem, but I still want you to have it. I don’t know what chems you’ve used to fuel the Sight, but it will help with everything but a Psycho addiction. You’re worth protecting, Mama Murphy. You’re more than just your Sight. You give everyone something worth protecting.”

‘Choly leaned into a fierce hug, and didn’t let go for the longest, relenting only to push off with his cane to stand.

“Thank you, Mama. Thank you for everything.”

“I told you this was the right place to talk. Now go on, before you make me cry.”

“Do you need anything before I leave?”

“You could ask Angel if it has any more of those wonderful hard candies left.”

“Tochno.” He patted her on the shoulder, and caught himself. “Without question.”

He rounded to her backyard and stood there staring out to where the stream came from the river to the Northeast, to clear his head. After some time, he threw the Jet into the water as hard and far as he could. With a huff, he turned about face, regretting only that the motion of the gesture had popped out his weight-bearing shoulder, and that he couldn’t use his cane for the walk home.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Thirty-One's going to be a mess.

While Angel continued to assist Sturges salvaging components and materials from the time-demolished housing on the street, ‘Choly returned home running down in his mind all manner of thought associated with travel. He walked the house to get his mind running, and used his Pip-Boy’s keystroke recognition to annotate with absent hand gestures what he’d need to do to get his—and everyone else’s—house in order, in every sense. Every so often, he’d stop and try to reset his shoulder. He sat at Hawthorne’s terminal and annotated the amenities he recalled still remained in Sanctuary Hills, to be left as the only files not password-locked, so that the settlers could make use of the information. As he composed these notes, his conscience acknowledged the irony that he’d made similar use of Hawthorne’s terminal entries, but instead had liberating Sanctuary of its valuables rather than highlighted them the first time.

In my refrigerator and kitchen cabinetry, I’ve left for you all food I can spare that I’ve accumulated in the past months. I can’t reasonably eat it all myself. I hope it helps tide you over while you sort out more diverse options for yourselves. You can distribute it among yourselves as you like. The candy is for Missus Murphy, but I’m sure she’ll share.

I’m sure the most relevant house on the block is Miss Rosa’s. Most equipment access is thanks to her. You’ve no doubt seen her leather sewing machine, various mechanic’s tools and benches, and even power armor station. She and her son had been building a car together, but they both had multiple hobbies. They lived here before I moved in, so I never met her husband and may be mistaken, but I believe that the equipment for maintaining a suit of power armor was thanks to him. I’m certain the house holds a decent supply of materials to maintain the equipment itself.

If you need it, I maintained chemistry equipment in my backyard. I’ve left a sizable assortment of medical chems in the bench cabinetry for you, so you won’t hopefully need to bother with it much. You’re free to use it, provided you leave the glassware as clean as I did.

The Russells had a backyard barbecue pit. It might be the ideal place to tend a flame, if any of you are keen to fish and game. The neighborhood had barbecue block parties often back in the day. Stonework’s still there. Shouldn’t take too much to get it back in perfect order.

There is what looks like a cellar behind what is now Missus Murphy’s house. When Vault-Tec refused his application to reserve a position in Vault 111, its original inhabitant contracted it to be turned into a single-person shelter. I believe in an emergency all five of you could in theory squeeze in together, but not long-term. Hopefully, you’ll never have to resort to it.

Lastly, I told Preston that you should all stay away from Vault 111, but I wanted warning to come from me personally also. I know you can’t get into it without a Pip-
Boy, but you need more than just a key. Vault-Tec played a cruel joke to people who applied to get into the vault. They froze us and then left us on ice indefinitely. Equipment finally malfunctioned after years of neglect. Some chemicals they used in the process are gases. Gas lines have since failed, and have likely been filling the vault. Do NOT go in there without high-end respiratory gear. You WILL asphyxiate. There’s a chance that the vault itself could be repaired and used for a new shelter for you all, but that all hinges on whether you can locate proper protective gear, and tools needed to do repairs. I know Sturges would absolutely have it in him, if it so struck you to take this path.

Missus Murphy and I have discussed things I need to see to before I can settle down. I trust my new neighbors with Sanctuary Hills, and I hope you all can get settled in in spades in the coming weeks. Hopefully, I’ve left everything you could need that I can provide you. I’ll come back to visit. --Melancholy

The chemist also handwrote a note to direct their attention to this terminal document, scrawled upon a piece of scrap paper from Hawthorne’s desk drawers, and set it upright in the spaces between the keys. He couldn’t decide whether to underscore that the survivors shouldn’t venture to the Red Rocket, if not just because he still couldn’t quite wrap his head around any likelihood he hadn’t simply imagined what transpired there. Mama Murphy calling Jared a monster could have been her seeing ‘Choly’s Jet hallucination... Maybe her description outside the recoolant station had been her reacting to something in ‘Choly’s episodes. It wasn’t so far-fetched a concern, was it? He couldn’t trust his memory at all anymore.

That was the whole problem, though. His memory.

In order for him to comfortably give the Quincy survivors the majority of his food supplies, he’d have to craft a batch of the Melancholia significant enough for a week or more--starting off morphine-free, as he’d promised Angel. At first, he began at Hawthorne’s desk on a manila folder, to scrawl the recipe for what had gone into the Melancholia, so that he could adjust it to accommodate for the ingredient he’d leave out. So he scrawled. And edited. And scrawled again.

He kept forgetting the eraser end had long since petrified, and eventually he flicked the folder out the window where it landed on the bald lawn. He popped the holotape from his Pip-Boy into Hawthorne’s terminal, to rub at his face and skim the itemized list of Angel’s storage, chiefly a composite of what he’d been able to abscond with from Lexington. His temples tightened when the only thing that really stood out to him as pertinent was Stimpak, Antiseptic, Med-X. His mouth in monologue started running faster than his mind at that point, and his head lolled back while he stared at the exposed ceiling.

“Damn it. What was the food part. What makes it taste like cherry? It wasn’t a Nuka-Cola Cherry, was it? Four left. Do cherries even still exist? Was it. Cherry mouthwash. I only have spearmint. I couldn’t use toothpaste, could I? That’s mint, too. I’m going to get sick of mint very quickly. Maybe I could find bubblegum, cinnamon. Or orange. My god, the kind of grocery list I’ll have to keep as I get used to this new world. Oh Angel, be a dear and keep your sensors keen for coffee and mouthwash. But... what gave it nutritive value? It doesn’t have any notable viscosity. So it can’t contain grain products. Drinking the contents of Stimpaks lets the body absorb it through different uptake routes than intravenously, but it’s essentially heavily chemically treated blood. If this stuff is all I can eat, does that make me a vampire? God.”

Similar sprung from him for a good hour, even as he went out the front door, past the decayed picket fence, and around to the back of the house, to sit in a patio chair at his chemistry station in the backyard. At one point, while he racked his brain he stole one of the pink flamingoes from the
Callahans’ yard and pitched it beside the station. Until now, the finite morphine stock had provided a convenient excuse for his putting this off. As he paced, anxiety deliquesced him over the reality that he had actively shied from attempting to make more Melancholia because he was afraid he couldn’t remember the recipe. It knotted his stomach, to consciously acknowledge both the behavior and the reality, when he had gotten to the point that he felt he could not procrastinate success in the endeavor even two days longer.

The formulas and practice of concocting military chemistry had survived the thaw to remain in rote memory, but he couldn’t even force himself to remember what was in the one thing he could still stomach. He’d made the cocktail for most of his military career, and he wouldn’t have lasted more than a year if he hadn’t devised the meal replacement in the first place. But he never wrote it down, did he? Always went from memory. But now he couldn’t rely on that for anything. He surely must have concocted the concept and recipe with the aid of Berry Mentats, but he doubted even Berries could help him remember now.

Would Angel understand, if he had to try the Berries again in a last ditch desperation? If he couldn’t figure it out fast, he’d have to doctor the upset stomach until he could find something better. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea to hold onto a small portion of the food rations. He could keep the deviled eggs. Some Fancy Lads and sweet rolls. And some macaroni, too, perhaps. The conflict of taking enough without taking too much got his head prickling, and he clutched at his head in both hands, leaning over the chemistry equipment to rest both elbows on the bench. When some of the greying hair around his face fell out of its French twist, he glanced up, through the holes in the wall, at first vacantly, but then purposefully, fixating on his obstructed view of what had survived of the kitchen arrangement. It unconsciously dawned on him that if it hadn’t been a grain-based supplement, it might have been nut or legume-based. 

_I don’t know, cook some in the back yard before you leave._

As ever, still holding his head in his right hand, the trembling fingertips of his left traced at the scar which ran down the left side of his chin. Just the week before it all happened, he’d received that scar mere feet from where he sat. Another psychological tremor came, not unlike the ripples before an earthquake, heralding an imminent even deeper flare-up. He clenched his teeth over how this batch of his meal replacement cocktail purposefully would not contain any opiates. _This has nothing to do with cyclomorphine, or any morphine, you absolute bastard for grey matter._ Somehow, he wished he’d thought before now to set up the chemistry bench elsewhere in the settlement.

‘Choly’s scalp crawled when he noticed he could hear heavy breathing behind him. Slowly, he looked up to find a ghoul standing there. Its warped posture accentuated its pronounced gut; its errant, marred flesh stretched poorly over its discolored leathery body; and clusters of tumescent goiters puckered firmly along its deformed, elongated neck. The breath fell from him as he understood that this was the same jawless ghoul with a dog that he’d encountered at the recoolant station months ago. He didn’t see the dog nearby.

“Mhh’dy,” it rasped, half-squinting. “Hhere.”

“You came back,” ‘Choly uttered. _The Quincy survivors._ Eyes wide, he stood with a start, then raised both hands to try to calm the ghoul despite the sudden movement. “--Jacob, you can’t be here. I, I know. You should.” He swallowed nothing and tried to smile. “You should show me the Red Rocket! Come on. I’ll follow you.”

When the ghoul didn’t move, and stared with sustained labored breathing, he motioned for it to stay, starting to sweat. Part of him couldn’t ignore the possibility he wasn’t hallucinating this.
“Stay-- stay right there, all right? Just. Wait for me a moment. I need to get something first.”

He thanked the dilapidation of the house for the first time, able to reach through the wall to access his vanity. On his toes, he retrieved his braces with the syringe dart cases, and also the gun holster with the modified Nagant still holstered in it. By the time he had fastened it all in place and turned around, the ghoul had stepped closer, almost in the expectation that it needed to keep ‘Choly from falling. The ghoul stood a head taller than him, and this close, the chemist could smell the rotten drool that fell down the crevasses between the clumps around its throat, omitting the absent chin altogether. In his close proximity to the ghoul, the Geiger counter component of ‘Choly’s Pip-Boy chittered. Startled by the combination of unnerving sound, sudden movement, closeness, and the stink of rotten dentition, he covered his mouth and nose with one hand, and shakily reached for his cane, which he’d propped against one side of the chemistry bench.

“‘I, Jacob. Don’t do that.” ‘Choly didn’t remember ever having any dreams about him that went like this.

Something inside the chemist cracked, and he resigned himself to letting the episode run its course. With the last dose of Jet now somewhere downriver, he no longer had access to the chems which could help mitigate the effects of the episode, and rather than beat himself up over having done something so reckless, he decided it was for the best to humor whatever images his brain was crafting for him to experience. The way things were going felt like they were progressing so differently than before, that he nearly suspected that the hallucination set to tell him something significant through the deviation.

“Jacob. You... you are Jacob Hawthorne, right...?” He tried to smile, and couldn’t hide his anxiety. “I’m not just personifying you. I’m not just projecting my memory of him on you.”

The ghoul’s only emitted a guttural lurch in response.

“--Come on. Let’s. Let’s go back to the Red Rocket. All right?” He took a step, and looked to the ghoul, hoping it would follow. He took another, and it did. “That’s right. We can talk more once we’re alone. I don’t want the others to-- interrupt us.”

_God, he’s beautiful._ ‘Choly’s features tightened in lament. Every few feet, he’d turn his head to make sure the ghoul continued to follow him. _Why the fuck did he have to be so beautiful?

Once they got to the bridge in and out of the suburb, ‘Choly took one look behind them to make sure they weren’t seen, and he decided to take one of the ghoul’s hands in his free hand to guide it more purposefully. Perhaps taking care of this creature was the unfinished business Mama had described. She’d never mentioned anything that mentioned the military base in particular. And while he didn’t know how Jacob had obtained the X-Cell to sell to Mr. Russell, he had proof it had happened, in the twin ampuoles of the experimental performance chem locked tight in Angel’s hidden storage which he’d been too terrified to even consider touching since putting them there in the first place. Maybe this was all she thought ‘Choly needed to take care of, before everything could be peaceful. It could be so simple, right? He owed it to these people, who’d been traumatized by feral ghouls, to absolve the area of any ghouls he knew of. And he owed it to Jacob Hawthorne, to help him however he could, after what happened before the vault froze ‘Choly solid for two centuries, and left Jacob to suffer in the cold of nuclear winter.

But, this encounter could leave him dead, if he were wrong about Jacob. He worried whether Jacob might still harbor anger or resentment, or feel like ‘Choly had knowingly misled him, about getting rejected at the last minute from entering the vault. The back of his mind itched with the vague distinctions Preston had made between a feral ghoul and a non-feral one. This ghoul had been the only one not to attack him that day, but still the concern persisted, whether it could behave
erratically, or become emotional.

The German shepherd approached and ‘Choly froze, unsure how to proceed. Slowly, he withdrew his hand from Jacob’s, tucked his cane into the fold of his arm, and pulled out the Nagant. As smoothly as he could, he loaded Pax Syringes into the seven chambers of the revolver, and clipped the cylinder back in place as quietly as he could. He noticed now, of all times, that Jared had crafted a custom silencer for the pistol, and he appreciated it, unsure whether the sound of gunfire could carry back to Sanctuary and alert the settlers to the mounting tension. As quickly as he’d lifted the pistol to aim with both hands, the dog had dropped its protective alertness, seeming appreciative at least that ‘Choly had returned its straying owner.

Proof enough for the dog, that ‘Choly did not mean harm to the ghoul. The dog permitted ‘Choly to follow them onto the Red Rocket property. But, ‘Choly didn’t put the gun away just yet. A secluded recoolant station, at nightfall. He picked his head up with the recognition of another layer to his version of reality. Motion pictures. He’d walked into a personal retelling of My Husband the Mutant. Except Jacob wasn’t his husband. ...Was he?

What mutagens have made you monstrous? Watching the ghoul vanish inside through the rusted-open front pocket door, he knew it was rhetorical to wonder. The moment he’d let go from holding Jacob’s hand, the Pip-Boy had fallen silent. He whet his lips, and in kind followed the creature into the shadows.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

This is the chapter that warrants all the warnings. Attempted lust-suicide, mutual dubcon, impaired consent, radiation poisoning, nonlethal firing on an animal, emeto, gore, body horror. The kitchen sink.

The liminality between past and present and film and reality trapped ‘Choly. His attentions upon the ghoul, he swore it wasn’t feral, and he swore it was all that remained of his roommate… and business partner… and surely all manner of relations his failing memory was denying him the comfort of recalling.

He’d have hurt me by now, if he were feral, he reasoned. And he’d have hurt me by now, if he now or ever resented me for what’s become of him.

With a faint, crooked smile, he stood in the small store front of the Red Rocket. He looked to the right, into the garage, to find only equipment. He looked to the left, to find the bar stools in the waiting area unoccupied. When he didn’t find the ghoul in the area behind the counter, he helped himself to the ten dollars and change in the register. He started to round the counter to go to the last place the ghoul could have gone to, but the German shepherd came out of the office to stare ‘Choly down.

He shoved down a grimace, knowing only the dog stood between him and Jacob. Shakily, he raised the syringer revolver and steadied his aim at the dog. It’s just a Pax Syringe, he told himself. Flinching one eye shut, he pulled the trigger, and the dart lodged in the dog’s chest. The dog held a wincing whine in its lungs, and it started into the motion of lowering its front half to growl, only to stop short and glaze over a bit. An ear flopped down as a second whine came, this time through its nostrils, and it decided to go around the counter and out to the garage. Once it had left, he put the safety on the revolver and holstered it, and walked behind the counter, again using his cane.

“Jacob? Are you back here?”

He stopped at the open doorway to find the ghoul had sat to stare at the terminal screen at the desk winged by a pair of metal file cabinets. Somehow, one of the fluorescent tubes in the ceiling still survived to light the room. The chemist glanced at the screen to find it empty, and instead focused on the confidence he was finally alone with Jacob. He closed the door behind himself, and stood against it on bated breath.

Surely, Jacob simply couldn’t speak for lack of a jaw, couldn’t think straight through the pain, still held onto even just a little bit of rationality beneath it all. Surely, there was still something, anything, left of the man that the gates outside Vault 111 had separated him from two centuries ago. Surely… surely, living in that state for all these years couldn’t have warped or crushed him beyond recognition.

“It’s me, Jacob. Carey. Alan Carey. I’m still here. I didn’t leave. I’m sorry how long it took me to come back. I’m glad you’re still here. Maybe, like with the others, I can try to make things right with you, too.”
But it had. The ghoul didn’t move from its place, breathing heavy as it continued staring at the blank but still functional screen.

“You do remember me, don’t you, Jacob? You keep calling me Mindy. You used to call me that. You remember how you just… knew I was Russian, and you got me to tell you my Russian name. My… my birth name… and you gave me that nickname from it? Mindy. Mindy came back to see you. Tell Mindy what he can do for you.”

He put his cane in the wooden umbrella stand behind the door; too, he hung his coat on the coat rack. At a caution, he crossed the room to stand beside the ghoul. He built the courage to put a hand to its shoulder, and left it there a moment before letting his touch trail down its gnarly, keloidal upper arm. The Geiger counter of his Pip-Boy objected a moment, and he pursed his lips together with a knit brow. He folded up his glasses and put them in his breast pocket, and sat on the edge of the desk to face the ghoul.

He looked the ghoul over, to gauge how much of Jacob was left, and he realized he couldn’t have possibly rehearsed this moment no matter how many different hypothetical courses of events he’d experienced in fantasies. He didn’t imagine that day he left Sanctuary. He remember this face. This beautiful, rearranged face, preserved for centuries through likely irreversible mutations. Radiation preserved everything as much as it destroyed it all, didn’t it? How did it even choose what to keep? Time had kept the both of them until this moment. He smiled, trying and failing not to cry, fumbling over his lack of clarity as to their shared history.

He could remember how he and Jacob met at one of the soda jerk bars in Concord. How he’d moved in with Jacob not a month after meeting him. How Jacob would take the two of them to the Starlight Drive-In, so he could watch as many movies as he liked while Jacob wandered to complete chem deals at customers’ automobile windows. How often he’d come home from the pharmacy and Jacob had not only beaten him home from the hardware store, but had brought the groceries for Angel to cook them dinner. Usually because he insisted upon walking home with Angel, rather than making it return home on its own every day. How he’d grabbed ‘Choly and thrown him into his sky blue Chryslus to speed the two of them to the foot of the hill, and yelled for ‘Choly to run for admissions.

“—Why did you put me first, Jacob?”

He ran a nervous hand over the ghoul’s knee, and when he didn’t meet objection, he let his touch wander.

“I… I can’t remember the things that matter. What good is remembering all that I do in perfect… horrifying detail… if none of it actually helps! I can’t tell you what you’ve forgotten to be, if I can’t remember. I’ve forgotten what to be.”

He leaned to prop himself on one of the armrests of the office chair, and pecked the ghoul’s cheek. His head grew heavy as he lingered there.

“What were we, Jacob? What did we have two hundred years ago? All I can remember of your goddamn beautiful face is when you slashed my face open over some stupid chems. But we couldn’t have just been roommates. Accomplices. Partners in crime. …Partners, weren’t we? We had each other? That doesn’t sound so far-fetched, does it?”

He nuzzled into what would have been the small of the ghoul’s neck, had mounds of flesh not subsumed it which prevented it from easily moving its head in any direction. He couldn’t suppress a delighted, feverish shiver. The metric ticking started again, and he readily tuned it out as ambiance as he crawled up into the ghoul’s lap, to kneel to either side of its rotting legs.
“I… I want to remember loving you.”

His hands followed the ghoul’s errant shoulders, down its sides, and back up to admire how simultaneously heaving and limp the flesh felt around its tumescent neck. His tongue traced the gaps where the clusters met, and no matter how he gagged and recoiled, he couldn’t get enough of the metallic, fetid bouquet of anywhere the ghoul’s saliva had dripped from its jawless mouth.

“I miss that puff of a neckbeard goatee, but it’s been replaced by something so much better… I want to remember that we had something meaningful—”

His mouth followed up its cheek, to kiss it on what remained of its top lip. Recoiling only briefly from the intensity of the taste of apparent oral rot, he flicked his tongue over the tip of its tongue, then heatedly licked its lip as he melted into applying friction between them.

“That one of us had planned to spring a marriage proposal on the other before I left for active duty—”

He discarded his belt and holster in the floor, and unbuttoned his suspenders to shoulder them off as well. The more he ground against the ghoul, the more he could tell what he sought from the encounter had not survived. But still, he persisted. He rose up on his knees, head swimming hot as the ghoul slowly reached up to hold ‘Choly’s back in both hands, and he dropped his slacks to his knees. While the ghoul felt up the smooth curvature of his surgical corset beneath his shirt, he loosened his necktie to free the top button. He glanced down at the ghoul in nauseous desperation.

“Just… just let me have one goddamn good memory of this place… That the mark you left on me was just… a fucking lover’s spat…”

The moment he had pulled down his briefs, the ghoul summoned the motivation to action. Rather than pull its face between ‘Choly’s legs, it scooped up ‘Choly by the butt and shoulders to spill him back on the desk. ‘Choly’s legs went up over its shoulders as it struggled to get to the same level of undress, and it ultimately destroyed the tatter that remained in the process, freeing what it thought it still possessed. His catar acted eyes shot wide and a gurgle escaped him, as the ghoul lurched forward to jam its nothingness inside him. His shoulders locked up as it discovered its own ragged pace, and it steadied itself by holding him by the hips, teetering top-heavy over him.

“–Bozhemoy why couldn’t it have been me.” He choke-moaned, bordering on vomiting as chills joined the fever. “You were so much better suited to a future like this one. You’re so miserable despite your perfection. Why wasn’t it me? If it had to be just one of us, it should have– been me–”

Its drool slung about his face as it found the angle it thought it could really get at him, and he flinched to keep his eyes shut against his lust for a vision of it all. Instead he dragged it nearer to him in defiance, so that he could pet its neck and throat and shoulders. It rasped and growled in frustration as he pressed its face to his own neck, and he wished more than anything that it would just attack him like all the other neighbors had. Just claw my throat out.

“Do you understand just how beautiful you are now? How tight and hard and leathery you are? Tell me that you feel even a fraction as good as I do right now–”

He could feel a drizzle down his cheek as the nausea mounted, and he opened one eye to see it couldn’t have been drool with the ghoul’s head near his opposite shoulder. With a free hand, he wiped his blood from his nose and cheek. Dizzy, he knew from the Geiger counter’s near-squealing that this level of proximity to the ghoul was likely cooking him inside-out with radiation, and he stiffened as though to force himself to take the ghoul in as deep as possible with a loud, heavy moan. I’ve been just as harmful to the survivors as the ghouls they dealt with. I’m no better than
one. Who’s to say Preston was wrong. If I’m not one already, I might as well be–

“I love you, Jacob Hawthorne. Tell me– that you love me, too. Please–”

The incessant clicking blurred into one continuous sound, and he lay there in a limp desperation, too weak to argue as, despite it lacking the anatomy for it, the ghoul’s one potent memory was how to fuck.

“–Finish me–”

His stomach lurched, and he felt hot and wet inside and out. It took time for him to register that the ghoul’s head had rolled off behind the terminal to the other side of the desk, and that the body had not fallen limp on account of any simple completion of their coitus. He thought he saw Angel in the office with them. Vomiting all down his front, he blacked out.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

Feels bad, Todd. (Continued minutiae of radiation sickness... Promise he feels better soon.)

‘Choly came to in his house, on the couch, and retched immediately. Someone left him a bucket, to his fortune. He’d been stripped down and re-dressed in his vault suit, and he zipped up the last few inches to buckle the short collar shut with a faint frown. His binding and braces had been removed, likely to make it easier to breathe. He wasn’t supposed to sleep in it, he reminded himself. His hair had mostly fallen out of its now tangled pinning, glued to his head and face with sweat among other things. He shot up in place when his insides knotted up in a violent onset of diarrhea, and he ran as fast as he could to make it to the bathroom.

He barely got the vault suit around his ankles before his insides practically liquefied out of him. Clutching his stomach as he doubled over the toilet, he snapped into dehydrated tears. He glanced up in an exhausted, head-pounding delirium, sniveling through his mouth and doing his best to modulate his breathing in an attempt to avoid the smell. The wall between the bathroom and Hawthorne’s bedroom was missing altogether. There wasn’t a window in the bathroom, but the treatments of the bedroom window had tattered to nothing and he was positive anyone passing by could still see him there like this through it. He let out a pathetic whine and succumbed to another cramping spell.

God, what he wouldn’t give for the shower to still be functional. He thanked abandon that Angel had left toilet paper for him, but he felt filthy to the bone with this illness. Once he was shakily confident he was done for the time being, he stood and tried to flush the toilet, to no avail, and he tried the shower handle anyway. When the pipes didn’t even groan, he did.

“There’s not anything left in my pipes now, either.”

Had he the strength, he probably would have punched the shower wall.

He pulled his vault suit back up and washed his hands with a can of water Angel had also left him, but he didn’t bother zipping up. He walked over to stand in Hawthorne’s bedroom to stare at the rotted-out bed frame. Of course the mattress hadn’t survived on either of their beds. Nearly, he felt jealousy in the moment that any of the Quincy survivors had a mattress to themselves. For the past three months, he’d only slept on a tattered bedroll or a couch, and it couldn’t not have affected his bodily aches. This sick, a couch just wasn’t going to cut it... and thinking about it got him crying again. He returned to the couch to louse about, comforted only by the possibility that what had gotten him this sick might have set mutations in place which he had not yet noticed.

Maybe tolerating this many rads accumulated in his system would be worth it in the long run.

“Ah! You’ve come to. Good afternoon!” Angel came in, its two tendrils animated with enthusiasm. “I’ve administered a Rad-Away, but I wanted to wait for you to regain consciousness before I administered a Stimpak, since I couldn’t confirm what hurts the most. For how acute your radiation poisoning must have been, you’re in a great deal of need for rest, Sir. The Rad-Away might help flush out the contamination, but it doesn’t heal the damage the rads did in the first place.”
The Handy offered him a Stimpak, and he accepted it in a dull blur. The healing stimulant was administered to his throat with the familiar small pneumatic hiss.

“What do you mean, you administered a Rad-Away already?” His voice cracked.

“When I found you, you were near death! I couldn’t just let you suffer the compounding effects of continued radiation sickness, could I? I’d be a very sorry Mister Handy, if I do say so.”

“I--” He trembled, shoving down -- needed that in me, how dare you. “So the symptoms I’m experiencing aren’t the rads, but rather my body flushing them. ...Thank you. I... forgot that I still had the vault suit.”

“I’m grateful we still had it,” it agreed. “Your uniform got soiled to the core yesterday. I spent the whole morning washing it out. It’s drying now. I washed your foundations as well, Sir. I don’t recall the last time you let me.”

_I couldn’t exactly object_, he thought to himself bitterly, having to convince himself he was grateful, not just for the redressing, but for the medication.

“I really do need to find more clothing. I’ve gotten despicably tolerant of not laundering regularly.”

It offered him a canister of fresh water, which he accepted. He poured a bit of it in his hand to rinse his face, and the hair framing it, a little better.

“Mister Sturges helped me bring you back to the house. He said he wouldn’t tell the others how you got to the state you’re in. That he’s ‘no gossip.’ But he seemed most convinced that the creature had once been your roommate. I’m not sure what sort of conversation you’ve held with him, but I felt you needed to know what kinds of rumors might fly after what happened last night. We... forgive me for saying so, but,” it tucked its two tendril-limbs in close, “we both got the impression that you purposefully endangered your life.”

His lip quivered at the sentiment verbalized, abutted with the fact the survivors were going to find out what he did regardless of how hard he tried to protect them from knowing. He couldn’t look at Angel.

“--Tell me about Hawthorne.”

After a pause, it formed a thoughtful reply.

“The two of you got along quite well, I recall. He always made certain I had a fully stocked kitchen and laundry room. I thought highly of him, because he gave me the impression he took care of you as just as well. He did make the offer for us to move in with him, to save you the transit time taking the bus from the Billerica suburb to work at the Walden Drugs of Concord daily. ...You’re doubting your memory again, aren’t you?”

“...Strange circumstance, that the open position when I applied landed me in Concord, and not Lowell, all things considered. ...Were... he and I lovers?” He shut his eyes and sat back, feeling his insides shifting and cramping up a bit again. “I can remember his face, and I can remember things he did... but I can’t remember what we meant to one another...”

"My word. No, I never got the impression either of you... No. I’m sorry if this upsets you. Are you suggesting that-- Did you--” Its processors stuttered on the realization. “Did you think that the ghoul was-- Mister Hawthorne?”

“The last thing I remember at the Red Rocket was you coming to save me. That... I know that
ghoul had to have been Jacob, Angel. And I forced myself on him. And now he’s dead.”

“...I see. Even if he were your lover, which I can guarantee you, you and he were most certainly not... whatever he became was not Jacob Hawthorne any longer. There was nothing left of him for my identity recognition algorithms to pick up on. Be humane, Sir. If you believe in your heart that this creature was once the man you shared a house with here, be human. Every time I have ever met one of those wretches, I’ve understood them to exist in constant pain and confusion. This encounter, however messy it may have been, freed him from this suffering. I should have taken care of this the first time. I should have done a great many things the first time, I’m afraid.”

The remark triggered a one-sided tinnitus that echoed in ‘Choly’s head. The worst mistake in his life, letting everything escalate and get out of hand without objection, while he instead stood by and did damage control the best he could. Because he didn’t think the person he answered to would listen to him. He supposed they both had a taste of that in their lives. He just hoped that it hadn’t acted in reflection of its owner. He felt like the worst influence and presence in people’s lives... It finally registered, as his traumatized brain waded through its mess of anxiety, that he’d essentially murdered every single neighbor he’d had in Sanctuary Hills, and he shot to hang over the couch to puke again.

“Oh, Sir... You can’t even keep down water. I... I know you haven’t yet gotten to the fresh batch of Melancholia just yet, but something tells me that it’s... humane... to let you have one of the old recipe, in your state.”

It uncapped one from its storage and offered it to him, and he handed it the water canister to take it. He didn’t take a sip for some time, and looked up to it in exhausted desperation.

“What do you remember the recipe for the Melancholia? Any of it at all?”

“You never told me the exact ratios or ingredients, no. But, I do recall it containing soy derivatives. Mind that you’re lactose intolerant, Sir.”

“Soy... Thank you, Angel.” His eyes widened a moment before he drank some of his cherry-flavored panacea.

“Mister Carey... Before I step out again, to check on your clothes on the line... Can I ask you something as well?” The chemist nodded, finally letting himself steadily down the drink when the first sip settled decently. “...Did you intend for that encounter to end your life?”

He nearly choked on the Melancholia, and squinted his eyes shut, words failing the pain that Angel had misconceived his motives.

“I’ve... I’ve done so much damage in my life. Before the bombs, thousands of soldiers indirectly by my hand. The year of the war, thousands of rioting civilians opposite police. And after the bombs, hundreds of raiders and civilians alike, at times directly by my hand. The world would probably be better off without me still in it, but I swear to you that I did not go to the Red Rocket with the intent to kill myself.” His mouth dried out, and he took another sip of his medicinal beverage. “I’m certain you know from my taste in film and books, that I find that condition... very sexually attractive. Before I encountered Jacob like that, I thought the appeal was only hypothetical. He showed up in the backyard, so I went to the recoolant station to take him back and keep the survivors safe. They’ve had enough trouble with ghouls in their lives. But then, we were alone, and he wasn’t attacking me... and I couldn’t help myself. The chance to be with him like that, and the chance to become like him...” Between tears and delirium, his eyes grew wild and lost in the ceiling. “I suppose I’m glad you saved me, but it... the sex was amazing, even though he’d long since lost his dick.”
The Handy fell silent for some time, nearly appearing to fail to process what its owner had just told it.

“You have the capacity for good. I believe the worst harm you could do is to put yourself in a position to leave us so permanently. I don’t understand the parameters of human interaction, let alone those of inhuman interaction, so I feel I have no constructive or welcome opinion to offer, whether the pursuit of further such encounters with ghouls is a proper one. Please promise me that... you’ll next time at least utilize some Rad-X, Sir.”

“Promise.” He couldn’t muster a smile, sincere or otherwise.

“Thank you for your honesty and candidness. I’ll let you rest some more now. Don’t worry about anything but feeling better. I’ll come check on you again tonight.”

As the pale blue Mister Handy left, ‘Choly burned over the fact he’d been too self-conscious to confirm information with Angel over things they’d mutually experienced. A lot of what had happened so far, happened because he hadn’t. He needed to get over himself, and accept his shortcomings, if either of them would get anywhere going forward. The lead-low comfort of the morphine overrode the pain in his head, and he sighed in feverish resignation. He retrieved the hospital blanket he’d kicked off into the floor, bundled back up with a frustrated pout, and turned over to bury into the seam of the couch.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Chapter 34 begins Arc II: On the Merrimack.

To guarantee he was travel ready, ‘Choly laid over in Sanctuary for another day. If he hadn’t been hard-committed to traveling to Lowell before, the loathing hovering over him that the Quincy survivors might learn what he’d done at the Red Rocket provided a really convincing motivation to leave Sanctuary for a while. Noxious rumor potential aside, he felt like an endangerment to them with his impulsive terrible decisions, and he needed to clear his head more than anything.

The chemist had not enumerated exact inventory numbers in his notes to the survivors, as to what he had left for them where, and he was grateful he wouldn’t need to revise his terminal entries when he changed his mind as to what he would stock them up with while he was gone.

One, he hadn’t yet found any legume, pea, or nut to use for the base of his updated Melancholia recipe. Until he found a suitable substitute for soy protein, he’d have to rely on rations and just suck up the indigestion pretty much any food would inevitably cause. He’d take an armful of deviled eggs and sweet rolls, and scavenge along the way. He hoped that even if he hadn’t thought to include bismuth in what he took from the pharmacy, he might locate some readily once he got to the Billerica suburbs, or even in Lowell proper.

And two, he had initially planned to take all chems with him which were not medically relevant regardless of whether he intended to use them, if not just to keep them out of Mama Murphy’s hands. But the more he thought on it, the more hypocritical it was of him to make a judgment that he knew what’s best for these folks than they did. His juxtaposition hinged on the fact he considered Mentats medically relevant to himself, when they weren’t so for others. So, in addition to staples like Rad-Away and Stimpaks, he left one container of each chem. He couldn’t in good conscience insist that they stay chem-free if he couldn’t reliably insist that of himself. After all, he’d never been in a position to quartermaster, and he certainly didn’t think he was in the right to make that call.

He spoke with Angel very briefly the morning after that, and explained that they would be fine without them for a while. Seclusion and decent rations would do wonders for them, and they seemed industrious and progress-driven—especially Sturges. But he insisted with the robot that they leave without making a fuss. He didn’t know what he’d tell people, couldn’t speculate what kinds of questions or doubting they’d pose. He’d left a note explaining everything. They’d understand.

As he and Angel headed out, he readied himself atop the robot with his syringer rifle and his last case of Pax Syringes. Ideally, he could nullify the hostility without having to kill anything or anyone, and just make a quick clip up Route 62 to follow North on Route 3. He worried that the interstate might have collapsed in places, and already knew to travel low to the ground and follow Route 3 instead of traveling on it directly.

“Hey! You’re up and walkin’ again.” Sturges jogged up to ‘Choly and Angel as they crossed onto the pavement at the end of the wooden bridge out of Sanctuary. “You leave somethin’ behind at the Red Rocket? I’ll accompany you.”
Angel slowed but did not stop. ‘Choly hemmed a bit at having been caught, but if it had been anyone, he was grateful it was the handyman.

“–Good morning to you, too.” His dread melted into resignation and slowly pooled into endearment. “I… I’d appreciate that, if you could.”

The three of them made a visit to the Red Rocket, under the motivation of making it look like that’s what the chemist had intended in the first place.

“If you’re worried about the body, I already buried it.” Once he spoke, Sturges rounded out of the front end of the building and into the mechanic’s area to tinker restlessly. “Preston was right. There’s a lot to salvage here. It’s almost untouched, from what I can tell.”

‘Choly dismounted from Angel and slung the rifle around to his back in favor of his cane. With a hand to the pale blue Handy’s chassis, it knew to leave the two of them to have a conversation in private while it busied itself out front.

“You burying one body doesn’t explain what became of the other… eight? Ten?” When Sturges remained silent at the remark, ‘Choly sat on the bench press table with a sigh. “I’m worried they aren’t actually dead.”

“Oh, they’re dead, all right. You don’t have to worry about that.” He didn’t pick his head up, scrutinizing the various tools in the complete roll cabinet. Occasionally, he’d select one to add to an overall pocket. “He’s buried with the others. I wondered what the loose dirt was about. Thought it might have had somethin’ to do with the dog that ran off, to be honest. Forgive the bluntness, but if you were worried about ‘the others,’ I take it you just couldn’t bring yourself to kill the last one.”

‘Choly’s hands shook in his lap, and he leaned against a smooth patch of the pegboard behind him to steady himself. His stomach hurt again.

“I didn’t understand who they were until it was too late.”

Sturges glanced over his shoulder, wearing the slightest nuance of the heaviness in his heart on his face. He bit at the insides of his lips.

“It’s not my place to ask, but that… He was that roommate you mentioned, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. And the others, I figure they were my neighbors. If there’s enough loose dirt here that you think there’s more graves than the one you dug, maybe… Maybe he wasn’t feral. Maybe he was still rational enough to do what I couldn’t bring myself to even register as the right thing to do, the day it happened. I… I just left them on the street in pieces, Sturges. I’d never encountered a ghoul before at that point, and I hadn’t encountered a single human yet either. Are you certain you didn’t bury the original Sanctuary inhabitants?”

“I found a few bones out by the milk bottle drop, but I haven’t found a single body. Melancholy, no regular ghoul I’ve ever met was as far gone as that one was. What Angel decapitated was a feral.” He, too, sat, taking to the red aluminum tool bench on the opposite side of the garage. “Ferals don’t always attack. It’s what makes ‘em scariest of all to me, to be honest. You don’t know whether they’re just going to stand there motionless and stare at you for a year, or lunge across the room at you at the drop of a pin. I don’t know why they don’t decide to attack. Doesn’t make ‘em less dangerous.”

“He still remembered me,” ‘Choly justified, trying not to cry. “He’d stayed put in the Red Rocket until he knew I’d come back. What happened the other day, he’d wandered into the backyard. I
didn’t want him to scare any of you. I didn’t know if I was the only person he wouldn’t attack, either. I brought him back here, and…” his lungs heaved, “when Angel found me, it thought my life was in danger, and acted accordingly…” He put a hand to his mouth, trying to still himself. “He kept repeating his nickname for me. And kept begging me to kill him. I guess it’s for the best that he’s in the ground now, for a lot of reasons. I couldn’t guarantee that he would stay put here.”

Sturges fished a pack of cigarettes from his rolled shirt sleeve and tamped it in his palm before lighting one up. He made an offering gesture, but ‘Choly declined.

“I can’t imagine what it’s like, to have someone you’re close to become a feral ghoul. It’s understood that most ferals are people from before the war, so it’s safe to assume only prewar ghouls would ever have known who they were before they became feral. …Well, and you, of course. It’s not your fault, what happened to him.”

“–But it is!” ‘Choly rapped the back of his head against the wall just once. “I swore to him, that they’d let him in the vault. But the Vault-Tec representative lied to me! Lied to both of us! Just to get me to sign! I believed the salesman. I didn’t demand fine print. I was just grateful to believe we were on residency list. But… we were listed that whichever of us arrived first, got admission. He told me to keep running. I… I think he knew. I think he knew, and never told me.”

“There weren’t ghouls before the war,” Sturges objected. “No one could have predicted that kind of fate was possible. You’re focusing so hard on the past, that you’re getting caught up in hypothet–”

“–The past is the only thing I’ve ever known,” the chemist blurted out, nearly throwing up.

“All right. How about some more present day what if’s? You left that note for us. I was readin’ it, when Angel came to ask me if I’d seen ya. You didn’t think you’d come back, did you?”

“No. Oh God, no.” ‘Choly stiffened to sit up straight, horror and alarm washing his face into slack pallor, as he realized the letter had read like a suicide note. He looked to Sturges. “That wasn’t my intention at all. God. I was making preparations to leave town when he wandered into the yard. I talked with Missus Murphy, I have to go check on something. I left that letter, because I felt like it was the best tour of the neighborhood I could give you all. And I left all the supplies I did, because I want to do the best by you all that I can. You deserve far better than I can give you.”

“We’re already fast on the path to paradise. You’re sweatin’ too much. Go take care of your errand. Do what you need to do. We’ll be fine here. Just… make sure Angel isn’t the only one takin’ care of ya, capiche? You’ve gotta put a little more effort in on that front. It works too hard.”

When Sturges winked at him, deadpan, ‘Choly’s demeanor melted, and he got a sheepish smile.

“I’ll take better care of myself. I know after what I did, that doesn’t sound genuine, but even just shouldering the responsibility of this errand is a form of self-care. I know I stress Angel too much and too often. I’m trying to do better by it. It might not be human, but it’s the best friend I’ve got.”

“You’ve got friends back here at home when you’re ready. You sure you don’t want me to take a look at Angel before you head out? See if I can’t repair that laser–?” Sturges glanced over to the open garage door to see the German shepherd standing several yards away, and he slowly reached for a pipe wrench behind him. “–Hey there, ya Dogmeat. Careful now.”

It drooped an ear and whimpered at the two of them. Sturges stood at a caution, and slowly approached it with an outstretched hand.
“That dog was glued to Jacob,” ‘Choly remarked, shot through the heart that he’d separated the dog from its owner. His voice broke as he quipped through a snivel, “Speaking of best friends…”

“Come on, now, pup. The dog seems nice enough. It’s just confused and lonely.” It sniffed at the mechanic’s hand, and leaned into it to have its head rubbed. He scratched behind its ear and grinned. “I guess Sanctuary’s got seven inhabitants now. Everybody’s gonna love having this guy around. He’s a beast. Best genes of any dog I’ve ever seen, to still have his full coat.”

“You hear that, dog? Sturges thinks you’re top pedigree.” ‘Choly smiled through a frown. “He’s not wrong.”

“We’ll take good care of him. It’s only right.”

“If the dog goes back with you, I suppose the Red Rocket is completely unoccupied and unowned now. You have claim to the Red Rocket like you wanted. It’s all yours now.”

“I take back what I said before. How this neck of the woods was a mess.” Sturges patted the dog on the head, and he barked before panting contentedly. “It’s going to be perfect.”

“I can’t… stay here right now.” ‘Choly’s smile faded as fast as he’d gained it, and he stood. “I wanted to leave two days ago. My head’s just not right, being here. Even one more afternoon is too much. I appreciate the offer to help me with Angel, but it’s my turn to take care of it for a change. There’s a robot disposal yard about half an hour from here. I got Angel serviced there a few times.”

“Half an hour from here being your first stop, sounds like your errand’s a long trip. Hopefully it hasn’t been looted for the good stuff, or overrun with mole rats. Or both. Maybe next time you’re in the neighborhood, you’ll take me up there and show me around? Sounds like there’s a chance for all kinds of amazing salvage up there.”

“It’s a promise.” ‘Choly leaned down to let the dog smell his hand as well, and he let the chemist pet him. “After everything that’s happened, and you don’t hate me after all. Dogmeat.” The shepherd glanced up to him, as though it were his name. “Buddy, can you promise that you’ll look after these people like you looked after Jacob? You’re a good dog. They’ll take great care of you, too.”

Dogmeat barked and wagged its tail, accepting his name proper.

“Everything’s going to be just fine,” Sturges insisted, shooing ‘Choly. “You get going, and don’t be a stranger. By the time you get back, I just might have repaired the whole street.”

“Hopefully, I won’t be gone that long. But considering it’s you we’re talking about, I could be gone a week and expect the electricity back on and the works. Angel,” ‘Choly called out to the side of the building. It rounded from where it had idled under the sloped canopy out front. “Angel, let’s get going.”

“Do take care, Mister Sturges,” it appreciated as its owner re-mounted its canvas harness.

“Don’t worry about us. Just worry about you two coming back in one piece.” Sturges shot the two of them a finger gun with the filter of his smoke between grinning teeth. “Thanks. For everything, Melancholy. I don’t think I’d actually said it yet. And even if anyone else hasn’t said it yet, it’s safe to bet they’re all thinking it.”

‘Choly hesitated with sentimentality tugging at the corners of his trembling mouth. When he couldn’t form a reply, he ultimately readied his rifle again atop Angel and gave Sturges a firm wave and firmer smile before urging the Handy to speed them onto their next stop.
Arc II: Second Instar

Chapter Summary

The start of Arc II: Second Instar. 'Choly worries too much.

Melancholy rode Angel past a sign which indicated ‘turn left now to visit Jonathan Emery Historical Site,’ and continued down Route 62 East through Concord. His mind wandered a bit, and he decided that, at least for the time being, donning the vault suit wasn’t so bad. Now that he had found new foundation-wear in the form of the surgical corset, the bodysuit fit acceptably, and contrary to the Vault-Tec staff’s insistence, wearing anything underneath it didn’t seem to have impeded the effects of its technologically advanced lining. He could appreciate its efficient thermal regulation, and also its dry-wicking technology. It seemed to sync up with his Pip-Boy as well somehow, though beyond introducing an additional icon on his health screen, he couldn’t discern how at a glance it even mattered. Of course, he still wore the belt from his dress military uniform so that he could utilize the suspender cases which held his then limited stock of syringe ammunition, as well as his white Pharm Corps coat. To make himself less visible at a distance, he figured the coat would dull out the bright royal blue of the vault suit, and the belt and bracers would dull out the rich gold edging along the bodysuit’s zipper and collar.

His canvas ankle braces didn’t fit inside the short boots that Vault-Tec had provided as footwear with the vault suit, so he stored the boots in Angel’s compartment and continued on with the oxfords from his dress uniform.

Following the road around the perimeter of a quarry property, the route switched to North Road Route 4, and from there it only took a matter of minutes before they finally came upon the junkyard ‘Choly sought. They entered the open double hurricane fence gates, and ‘Choly surveyed the yard with the impression it had been heavily looted in recent years, but knew better than to trust his eyes. The only visible salvage at a glance seemed to be car bodies stacked as many as five high, but he could tell robotics parts lay scattered here as well. Without going up to the piles, he couldn’t tell what robots they’d once belonged to. He dismounted from Angel and kept his syringe rifle at the ready, in case they happened upon any unwelcoming occupants in the office at the South corner of the property.

“Before we get to work, I think we should stop for lunch first.” He opened the metal door with its reinforced glass window, and skimmed the room with his weapon before dropping it.“Guess it’s just you and me as usual.”

“I can appreciate that,” Angel replied, following him inside.“You’ve only the one Melancholia left. What should I fetch you from my stores?”

“You could put on a pot of coffee, and fish out a sweet roll and the deviled eggs.”

“As you wish! Sounds like we’re here for the day. Forgive me for asking something likely quite obtuse, but Sir...What are we doing at the robotics disposal ground?”

“Making use of the facilities to repair you.” The chemist slung his rifle onto his back and pulled up a folding metal chair, sitting at the operational terminal to poke around.“And upgrade you, if you’ll allow it. We can stay here a day or two I think, before rations make it more urgent to keep moving.
“Getting you freshened up is my top priority today.”

“Beyond refilling my Handy Fuel tank, and reaffixing my laser attachment, I can’t possibly imagine what upgrades you’ve in mind.” It filled the percolator with canned water and measured out the coffee grounds. “There’s only so many different features that General Atomics offered for the Mister Handy line.”

“If you’ll recall, one of your tendrils is a Miss Nanny’s, actually. Looking back on it, I’m surprised the DIA let me put in any sort of custom order for receiving you. All kinds of robots got discarded here. Maybe we can find a Mister Gutsy or two, to get you some hardier shell plating. I’m sure there’s some paint laying around, so that you don’t look quite so cobbled together after we’re done.” He looked up from the log entry for what all had been disposed of there between June and October 2077. “This place was a robotics graveyard on the surface. Most of its clients just wanted a place to dump broken or defective robots on the cheap, no questions asked. But the owner made good money by also offering salvage scrap as well as repairs. There’s good equipment here. I was taking a chance, coming out here without knowing for sure, but it looks like it’s survived in tact, unrusted, here in the office space. --Hm. *What’s a Robobrain?*

“It doesn’t sound like anything General Atomics might have created... Perhaps it’s a RobCo product?”

“That’s my thought. I’m not nearly as versed with RobCo technologies as I am with G.A.” His head drooped over the terminal keyboard. “You wouldn’t dislike it if we mixed components between Nanny and Gutsy parts for you, would you? My priority is maximizing your hydraulics, to make it as easy as possible for you to carry me. I... I feel bad that you have to.”

“Mister Carey, it’s company-approved to combine any of the parts families you listed. As long as we don’t void my warranty, I want to optimize my performance any way you see fit. Until we find a better option to increase your mobility while out and about in the Commonwealth, you can count on me to provide that service. It’s not your fault that the apocalypse so direly ruined accessibility across the state.”

“You’re sure you’re all right with it? You’re not just a wheelchair. You’re an artificial intelligence.” For a moment, the Handy only replied by handing him a melamine plate with a sweet roll and two egg halves on it, and a ceramic mug of coffee. It observed him as he took these from it, and he ate one-handed with the plate in his lap. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure to see you continuing to function and excel, Sir. My behavioral matrices thrive when my owner thrives. Emotionally, physically, financially. ...*Spiritually*...” It let out a reserved holographic chuckle, then fell quiet. “Did you mean it, that we’re headed up to Chelmsford after this?”

With the question, suddenly the intended use of the word *excel* didn’t sound accidental. Yet, Angel hadn’t been there when he’d spoken to Missus Murphy. It couldn’t have possibly known. He set down his coffee and glasses and screwed up his face with both hands.

“I have to go to the base. I have to know what I was supposed to be working on when they sent me that letter calling me back to active duty. If they meant for me to cook more Psycho for another war, it’ll put my mind and soul at ease, knowing the nuclear exchange prevented any need for military-size shipments of the stuff. In hindsight, I suppose the fact they called me back to active duty two weeks before the bombs fell is all the proof I need that the government had advanced paranoia that something was wrong. I... I wonder if they knew what was imminent, but didn’t know how to stop it in time...?”
“Oh, Sir. That’s not a constructive mental track to get on. It doesn’t change what’s transpired since. If going to the Deenwood Compound will provide you some manner of closure, then we shall do so. But you cannot keep dwelling on a course of events over which you had no control. You have so much more control now than you ever did.”

“That’s part of the problem. Who the hell died and gave me self-agency?” He swallowed half of one of the egg halves and choked a bit, having forgotten to chew it enough. He washed down the musky, salty protein with black coffee and sat a moment to recollect himself. “I’ve made very few decisions in my life on my own behalf. And I feel like every decision I’ve made since I came back into the world has been poor.”

“Ah yes. This misguided worry again. We’re here to repair me,” it offered, topping off the mug. “I know you care about my well-being just as much as your own. It’s just that your needs have been a little more... time-sensitive, shall we say? Things will work out in the end. Just like with the wonderful people who settled into Sanctuary. They couldn’t have gotten there without us. Without you.”

“I’ve gone too long without giving you maintenance. In my own defense, I didn’t have access to the materials I needed to do true repairs and calibration. You really think they’ll be all right?”

“I’m more worried about you doing well, especially with us headed up to the Lowell area. Are you certain it’s wise? You don’t handle memory of your military career very well.”

“You’re here with me. And it’s not like Johnston will be there to put me right back to work. Besides, wouldn’t you like to figure out how Jared knew X-Cell was a Deenwood product?”

“There’s little greater meaning my programming could find, I could imagine. I’m positive that the DIA would love to nip that leak in the bud.”

‘Choly almost reminded it that the DIA likely no longer existed, but he still wasn’t completely sure. He didn’t say so, but he hoped to measure his speculation of the continued existence of the DIA, going by how Angel would react to his navigation of the military base. It ate at him, not knowing for certain whether all his behavior had not only been transmitted to some DIA outpost, but also observed by someone still surviving to this day--whether he’d eventually see consequences to his actions in Lexington. He balked into laughter and quietened himself with part of his sweet roll.

“Was it something I said?”

“It’s nothing. I just realized that the concept of having to answer for misdeeds, and the fact we’re operating on faith alone that the DIA still exists... It’s like with the Christians, and the belief that if they sin, they have to go to hell. Like they have to be held accountable by a higher power, in order to behave. A ridiculous comparison, I know, and without tact or nuance. The DIA is simply... an intangible source of authority that has not yet stepped in and punished me. Or maybe it has. I don’t know. I suppose I’ve sought accountability from others all along, to validate whether I’ve made the right choices in life.”

“Need I remind you that the Defense Intelligence Agency has offices at the Deenwood Compound. You might find those answers there as well.”

“Something in me doesn’t want to know for certain whether it exists. But you’re right, that I might.” He finished off his food and nursed on his coffee while he continued reading the terminal. “There’s something here about a Sentry Bot. Warnings not to let the temptation get the best of you, and to not under any circumstances power it on. It was dumped by government
personnel, it seems. Wonder what the fuss is.”

“A shame it’s a RobCo product, isn’t it, Sir? Even if it’s survived in tact, its parts wouldn’t be compatible with a robot in the Mister Handy line.”

“They were hulking things. They had to carry the weight of a tank on their treads, with how heavy their armor was. It’d be a dream, it it were possible to harvest the hydraulics from their wheel-treads.” He glanced to the holotape on the desk, and pretended he didn’t see it was labeled ‘Combat Sentry Proto MK IV.’ “It’s probably impossible, though, since mecanum mobility is a completely different mechanism than hover-thrusters. We should focus on locating Handy, Nanny, and Gutsy parts. I never said I was a genius with this stuff, so going wild is probably outside both my knowledge and skill set. Even if it were doable.”

“Just don’t overdo it, Sir. It’s all right to only do what you can manage. Even the most minor of adjustments will facilitate my facilitating you. I’m entirely content with an algorithm scan, a tank refill, and my laser repaired... and if you do feel so inclined, perhaps a bit of fresh polish.”

“First, let’s see what we can put our hands on out there.” He pocketed the holotape surreptitiously, and slung his syringer rifle onto his back while he pulled his cane from his belt. With his free hand, he brought his coffee with him. “That way, we’ll know what we’re working with.”
Chapter 35

So the chemist and his Mister Handy surveyed the junkyard for viable robotics specimens. Angel separated at times from its owner, to return and report back its findings, while ‘Choly annotated everything useful they located. Seven Mister Gutsies, five Mister Handies, and one Miss Nanny had been left here lacking well over half their parts. Dozens of heavily damaged Eyebots and Protectrons joined the General Atomics robotics scrap among the landscape of car shells which had hidden the true nature of the junkyard from street view. Though not G.A. in origin either, ‘Choly found an Assaultron head and flinched away from the skull-like cyclopean structure, only to stumble and nearly drop his coffee cup. Upon righting himself with his cane and catching his breath, he took a sip of his coffee, and his gaze absentely drifted up to the wall of automotive carcasses. He’d located the prototype Sentry Bot, wedged among the rusted sheet steel stacked high to either side of it as though a child playing hide and seek in a stack of firewood.

He sputtered, choking on his drink. It had been two hundred years since he’d last seen one. Despite the base’s heavily classified security status, the Deenwood Compound relied heavily upon Mister Handy and Mister Gutsy accommodations, and only had three Sentries at their employ. True to his memory, the thing before him was, in essence, a sentient tank. A heavy tripod of mecanum limbs supported its hulking dark green body, its ocular sensor matrix was encased in a helmet-like dome recessed for the most part into its chest component, and its thick, broad arms terminated in a pair of miniguns. A mixture of relief and disappointment came when he recognized that it did not have mortar launchers in its shoulder components like those they had on base, and he found himself wondering which was the more advanced model. From the sound of the documentation on the terminal in the junkyard’s office, it had only been dumped here mere years before the nuclear exchange took place, so Deenwood’s Sentries in theory predated this one.

“Mister Carey, I believe we’ve identified the majority of resources on site, if you’d like to get started.” Angel paused beside its owner and looked where ‘Choly did. “I see!”

“From what I can tell, it’s a complete robot,” ‘Choly told it, vaguely nagged by his compulsions. “If it’s still got its Fusion Cores, it could be powered up...”

“Oh, but we shan’t be doing that. It’s forbidden by military protocols, and it’s RobCo tech besides.”

“...You’re right.” ‘Choly stared at his dress shoes a moment before looking to his Handy in earnest. “I know that I’ve made a promise to you, and that’s why I’m asking and not... pretty literally... going behind your back. Can I have one Berry Mentat for this task? I understand the way that Gutsy and Nanny parts can interface with those of a Handy, but I want to make this more than just a parts swap-out. I want to optimize what each component can provide you.”

“I imagined that your sobriety wouldn’t last long,” it resigned, to which its owner winced sheepishly. “Can we at least come to an arrangement, then, Sir? I shall dispense as requested, but you must keep your entire chem stock in my storage. If it’s too much to ask, for you to put me in charge of monitoring your chem usage, then I’m afraid I’ll have to decline the request.”

‘Choly smiled and put a hand to Angel’s pale blue spherical body.

“You drive a very hard, but very far, bargain. Let’s go inside, so I can sit while I strategize how to approach the upgrade.”

“Thank you for being reasonable.”
Once inside, Angel dispensed a single lozenge to its owner. Popping it under his tongue, he got to work scrawling schematics concepts on the back and front of a manila folder, and adding all kinds of notes wherever they would fit. This included a mix of G.A.-exclusive combinations and combinations with RobCo inclusions, though he had every intention to respect Angel’s boundaries-even if the warranty no longer mattered for all manner of reasons, it provided a very black-and-white understanding of what Angel was comfortable with ‘Choly doing to its body and programming. He finished off the coffee from the day before while he worked. They agreed that one of each tendril would be the ideal: a standard Handy limb, outfitted with an interchangeable laser, a saw, and a pincer; a standard Nanny limb, with an interchangeable pincer, a saw, and an injection tool; and a standard Gutsy limb, with an interchangeable saw, a laser, and a minigun. Barring locating sufficient 5.56mm and MF cell ammunition to keep the Gutsy arm equipped, the real task was optimizing the motherboard’s ability to wield any combination of these three at a moment’s notice, without overloading the processing speed. A standard issue Handy, Gutsy, or Nanny came optimized with programming to handle three of any one of the limb sets, not one of each. But, as he skimmed the programming with his Pip-Boy key-prong plugged into Angel, the Berries found a solution to the limbs’ shared compatibility which also facilitated the other element of the upgrades—its hydraulics capacity via its thruster calibration.

‘Choly requested Angel retrieve the required parts from the junkyard, and once they were amassed inside, he had the Handy mount the curved forks of the robotics workbench and switch off its pilot light. Then, he got to work, motivated by the creative impulses of the Berry Mentats.

“I’m sorry that we didn’t find any paint,” he started, while he finished tightening the bolts underneath Angel on its thruster core comprised of pieces from each model of robot, onto which he would re-mount the new set of tendrils. “You’ll have mismatched shell colors for a while. But, for what it’s worth, white, sky blue, and army green isn’t an unattractive combination.”

“I’m simply grateful that you’re taking all this time and effort on my behalf, Sir. I’ll never get used to the sensation of being physically incapable of movement. I know it will only last a few more hours at most, but I worry my speech module is compensating for my inability to move anything else.”

“We’ve already refilled your fuel tank. And done all the cutting and welding, like armoring the top curve of the tendrils with pieces of van wheel well arches. Protecting the joints will help deter them from getting severed again. --But with the modified core, attaching and calibrating the tendrils will go very quickly. What I’m most grateful for, though, is that I could welt those car door handles and a pair of motorcycle foot pegs onto you, so I can stop worrying that the fabric harness is going to rip off through wear.”

“I quite like the choice of Chryslus Coupe handles. They’re sleek and angular, in contrast to the smooth curves of my design.”

“I figured you’d notice the model I picked them from,” he grinned, getting started loading the tendrils one at a time onto their cylindrical chassis. “They’re not the ones from his Coupe, but I feel like his ghost would come to haunt me if I so much as considered touching his car.”

“He really is gone... isn’t he?” Even Angel’s voice grew distant.

“He was gone two hundred years ago,” ‘Choly replied without missing a beat, too detached from emotions by the effects of the potent nootropics to get distracted from his task. “The moment your biometric scanners could no longer recognize him, he was gone. You put what was left of him to rest, in the Red Rocket this week.”

“Forgive my sentimentality. I don’t intend to upset you, Mister Carey. I just... I know I’m merely
an artificial intelligence, but I really do miss Mister Hawthorne.”

The chemist plugged in his Pip-Boy key-prong and got to working on calibration and maintenance scans.

“That makes two of us.” After a pause, he added, “It’s better, this way.”

“Agreed.”

“I’m glad we still have each other, Angel.”

“And I you. I hope it stays that way for some time. Not having either of you... I nearly fell apart before you resurfaced from the vault.”

“I’m glad I can still be here for you.” He smiled up at its ocular lenses. “I’ve optimized the programming for your new ocular lens armatures and sensors, as well as for your new thruster hydraulics and new tendrils. You’ll still have your Handy software, but it’s largely running with Gutsy and Nanny hardware. I have to power you down in order to initiate the maintenance scans, and then reboot you so that the system will pick up the new hardware. Are you ready?”

“I cannot wait to reawaken and understand for myself what humans mean when they see everything with new eyes.”

While Angel powered down, and the Pip-Boy ran its diagnostics with the robot turned off, ‘Choly couldn’t move from his place in the office chair beside the workbench, and, for lack of anything better to do tethered in place, he fished his flip lighter and a half-pack of menthols from his coat pockets. He didn’t smoke much, less than a pack a month, but sometimes his restlessness got the best of him. It was more about the ritual and paraphernalia than it was about the nicotine, and he readily admitted this. The irony glossed over him, that the Handy would have considered it a contraband chem in his possession, had it been alert to the behavior. The cigarette was out before Angel’s boot sequence initiated. He retracted the key-prong and watched. Angel’s tendrils seemed to stretch, and its three eye-stalks emerged from their concealed cutout plates to either side and front of its body.

“General Atomics International Mister Handy, 2066 model, nickname ‘Angel.’ Custom order serialization 33313222123123.” Angel registered its company, relit its pilot light, and dismounted from the workbench forks. “Good evening, Mister Carey!”

“How do you feel?”

“Like a new robot.” It sped forward, then side to side, and it inspected its tendrils with a seeming thoughtfulness. “It’s peculiar. The programming for Mister Gutsy and Miss Nanny parts has always existed to some capacity within my own programming from the beginning, but to feel more of it being executed. Would it be strange of me to speculate that it... it feels right?”

“You’re allowed to feel things,” ‘Choly grinned, proud of his work. “Let’s go out into the yard and see if there’s any more fine tuning we need to do with your new parts. You’ve got enough ammunition to do a little target practice, and I want to test out the soundness of the harness mounts. ...I know my opinion matters far less than your own, but I think your new look is pretty fetching.”

“I quite agree! These new ocular lenses have heightened sensory arrays in them, so I can see and perceive even behind me. I’m fascinated with all the details filling into my readings. Including a heightened understanding of what I look like. Dare I say, you’ve made me quite a bit more self-aware, Sir.”
“As long as you’re aware of how wonderful you are, I think we’re working in the right direction.”
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

TWs: Blood, insects, not taking chronic illness so great.

Once they’d stepped out of the office, both Angel’s new top handles and recalibrated thruster facilitated ‘Choly in smoothly mounting it. The chemist ported both his syringe rifle and his .38, and rode his General Atomics custom companion out into the junkyard. The two took a lap around the yard, then set up some cans and bottles they’d found about the grounds. They took turns shooting at them, ‘Choly to measure the facility of firing from atop Angel with the harness replaced by handles and foot-pegs, and Angel to gauge the effectiveness and stability of the upgrades its owner had made. A successful testing round exhausted trash targets, so they then shot at components of junk vehicles. One would call out the part and make of the vehicle in their sights, and then make good on the shot, not at all unlike calling shots in billiards.

‘Choly had never been so great at billiards. Rather than ding its side mirror, the chemist shattered a Pick-R-Up’s passenger window with a pencil round, and he flinched when Angel chortled. He shot again in defeat, purposefully hitting the broadside of the once-red truck’s passenger door.

Soon, he observed the pickup truck shift in place, and his face slacked. The ground had built up not just underneath but around the underside of the vehicle’s chassis... and within it. The scale of it had prevented him from identifying it as any anthill he’d have known, but when the two-foot-long insects poured out of the cab of the truck, there would be no mistaking it.

He slung his rifle over his back in favor of his pistol, and helped Angel in pushing back the giant ants. His jaw tensed as the game shifted to a crisis, and his eyes scrunched wide with frozen loathing as Angel’s last laser fire struck the very bottom-heavy front end of the Pick-R-Up instead of the last ant.

“We have to get out of here!” He kicked Angel as though to spur it to about face as requested. It complied without hesitation, and immediately he rubbed at its chassis with one hand in apology at the reflex.

Before they even exited the front gate of the hurricane fence, the truck’s rusted nuclear engine combusted. Ants and vehicle parts flew everywhere, and in a chain reaction, the explosion resulted in wave after wave of vehicular explosions. ‘Choly looked back as they zipped down, to realize they sped down Route 62 and not North on Route 4 like he’d planned. He bit his lower lip, but accepted the choice. Maybe they could get to U.S. Route 3 by dark.

The longer they traveled, the denser the once-evergreen woods grew. Angel broke the silence after they’d followed the broken asphalt for half an hour.

“I must say, that was a thousand times worse than shooting at a hornet nest.” The Mister Handy switched out its pincers in favor of a laser and two saws while it spoke. “I apologize for my inaccurate aim precipitating our abrupt exit. Hopefully, you had no further need of anything on premises.”

“We both missed shots. I don’t fault you. Those ants were fast. I’m surprised your thruster flame
kept them from climbing you.” He frowned, nettled by noticing its companion’s tacit poise, and readied his .38. “Guess we won't be learning what's wrong with that Sentry…”

“For the better, Mister Carey. That wasn’t our mystery to solve. The government didn’t seem to want it repaired, regardless.”

They approached the on-ramp to access US Route 3. Though ‘Choly recalled the crumbling state of the I-95 flyover in Lexington, he opted to direct them to remain on the highway rather than travel around it. Unlike the flyover, Route 3 was not an elevated expressway, and as such, they could hop the concrete guard walls if they came upon a patch they could not cross. Rusted-out vehicles had crashed through these barriers in places, including an overturned freightliner halfway spilled down the embankment. Besides the weaving required to navigate the highway, all remained quiet. Still, ‘Choly could not ignore Angel still had its weapons drawn.

“I take it you’re sensing something I’m not.”

“I’m not quite sure just yet. I didn’t want to mention it until I was certain, in case it could be chalked up to my still acclimating to the new sensor array.”

“Well, can you describe it?”

“It’s more... what do humans call it? A sense of dread. The woodlands have changed so much since we last came this way.”

“So you’ve got the heebie-jeebies.” His smile faded as quick as it formed. “It’s going to be all right. We just have to get up to the base first.”

The Frank L. Johnson Bridge had bellied out into the Concord, so they moved onto the outer shoulder of the highway.

“Should I dismount? And each of us cross on our own?”

“Nonsense, Sir! My hydraulics could handle a little water skimming, even before your upgrades.”

With that, Angel’s thruster sputtered into a different transmission tier, and they smoothly skated across the river with a swift, spraying wake. ‘Choly glanced both up and down river, admiring how even two hundred years after the apocalypse, the Concord had retained its idyllic tranquility. Once upon the other side, another overturned freightliner obstructed their immediate reentry to Route 3, and they continued on the outer shoulder a ways. Before either could register it coming, something that hummed divebombed ‘Choly’s face. Angel abruptly spun about face, but the moment blurred in a sharp pain to ‘Choly’s rib cage.

“Won’t you stay still!” slurred out of the Handy, and blood smeared through the air in front of ‘Choly as the circular saw connected with the assailant. It swerved about to nearly dance with the others incoming. “How dare you!”

Failing not to hyperventilate, the chemist looked down at his vault suit to find a mosquito head lodged by the foot-long proboscis between a clavicle and rib. His vision fell into a vignette, and his prickling extremities numbed. He could notice laser fire, but could barely focus enough to aim his pistol. Until he could reach his first aid for a Stimpak, he had to resist the reflex to pull the instrument of anatomy from his own.

When Angel noticed ‘Choly wasn’t helping it fire on the insects, it understood the immediacy of locating cover, and sped down the highway rather than eliminate them all.
‘Choly next noticed they were no longer on Route 3. Angel meandered meaningfully through a hilly expanse of field, toward a large white colonial building. He felt like he wasn’t processing what he saw, but he couldn’t shake the feeling of observing robotic carnage strewn about the unkempt fairway. They took the stairs up to the patio, and entered. ‘Choly took in the interior design, between the gold twelve-point cross-stars mounted all along the far wall and the bar front with its marble-top, and recognized it as the clubhouse of the Billerica Golf Course.

Angel lowered ‘Choly to collapse gently backwards into a lounge chair. It readied a Stimpak to administer the moment ‘Choly had removed the mosquito proboscis. The thrust required to pull the spiny, textured thing back out left him heaving for breath, and he clamped his free hand over the wound to put pressure on the blood flow. He vacuously wiped blood from the lower half of his face. The Handy gave him a moment to catch his breath before offering him the last Melancholia, which he accepted with resignation.

“I fear I put you in harm’s way,” it started, tendrils terse. “I should have acted sooner. Damn bloodbugs! It’s difficult to trust the increased detail and range of my perception. Do tell me you’ll be all right.”

“I’ll be fine.” Proboscis in one hand, numbing beverage in the other, he let out a weak wet chuckle. “Bloodbugs. Went right for the heart. If it hadn’t been for my spinal corset, it might have connected.”

“Forgive me, gentlemen, but I can’t help but notice the terrible scrap you seem to have just been in.”

The chemist jumped, thinking at first the second holographic British voice had been an hallucination brought on by pain and painkillers, but it was far too soft to belong to Angel. He and his Handy both looked up to find they’d been approached by the very dented up brass Handy that once had run the clubhouse’s bar and grill.

“Bogey, was it?” Angel fielded. “I’m Angel. It’s been many years since we came this way, but you might remember Mister Carey?”

“That I am.” Bogey honed its triplicate sensors on ‘Choly. “You were one of our frequent driving range patrons, were you not?”

“Guilty.” ‘Choly tossed the proboscis on the lounge table. “Thanks for not being mad for us barging in. We’re on our way up to Lowell, but we got dive-bombed by m-- bloodbugs.”

“My word. It’s already getting late, and I don’t encourage traveling Route 3 by night these days. You’re free to stay until tomorrow, though it may not be too much safer.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve got an insect problem here, too.” ‘Choly cut off his wheeze with another swig of the cherry-sweet drink.

“You weren’t followed, were you?”

‘Choly and Angel looked to each other, then back to Bogey. He shook his head.

“I don’t think we’ve got any worries, then,” it extrapolated at a caution, its posture slacking. “Come with me, the two of you. It’s been some time since I had a patron to tend to.”

Angel handed him his cane, and the two followed Bogey to the locker rooms. All the metal doors had been opened, but their contents remained. Several skeletons scattered the floor, including one having fallen out of the shower stall.
“You’re free to help yourself to a change of clothes from what’s in the lockers. It’s been two hundred years since anyone’s used them, and clubhouse policy indicates that any belongings left for more than six months become Billerica Golf Course property, and we can’t resell used clothing. Need I remind in advance, however, not to wear cleats in the clubhouse.”

“My, Bogey, that’s most generous of you. And generous to extend us hospitality! Mister Carey has been most distressed at his lack of wardrobe variety as of late, and it’s quite good to see a friendly face.”

“Ah, yes, agreed. That’s a fine shade of blue, but I imagine humans grow tired of the same exterior far more readily than any of us do. On that note, whatever became of you, chum? If you don’t mind my asking, I’ve never seen a Mister Handy in such a hodgepodge.”

The chemist chuckled as he browsed the lockers. Not many of them had anything in them, but he would stop and pull out an article of clothing on occasion. While the two Handy-bots chatted, he picked out a pair of khaki golf trousers and a cobalt blue pinstripe dress shirt with a white contrast collar and French cuffs, and a gold knit button-down sweater vest that he didn’t mind was missing a button. He found a pair of cleats in his size, and even a pair of saddle oxfords. He put a hand on a sock became animated.

“Good god, socks,” he hushed, going back through the locker contents to grab every pair he could find. No pairs seemed to have survived in tact, but he nearly felt endeared to the notion of mismates, and held two at a time up to one another with an odd grin. “It’s been months since I had a new pair of socks. Funny how the simple necessities of yesterday have become so... indulgent.”

“You can have as much or as little attire as you like,” Bogey indulged. “It’s simply occupying space here.”

“We have the storage space for a few ensembles, Mister Carey, if you find anything else to your liking. I’ll leave you with a canister of water and a towel, if you’d like to freshen up before you change.” Angel deposited the items beside the pile of clothing ‘Choly had made on the bench in the middle of the locker room. “I’ll be with Bogey in the lounge, if you need us.”

“Thank you. Both of you.”

Once they were gone, he doubled back to the locker where he had noticed its previous tenant had kept several pair of briefs, and he added them to his pile of new acquisitions. He disrobed and cleaned his face and front with a certain detachment. His spinal corset had soaked up a lot of blood, and removing it for the night would ideally help it dry out. He dressed in his new outfit, minus his binding, and finished off his Melancholia. Looking to the empty bottle, he bit his lip askew.

“I suppose it can’t be helped.”

His Pip-Boy click-chirped, and he glanced down to find the health tab highlighted. Last known Pip-Boy to Vault Suit synchronization completed at 16:23. Please reconnect Pip-Boy to Vault Suit to reestablish advanced diagnostics. It was well after five now. He straightened. When Vault 111 staff had insisted the technological excellence of the Vault-Tec Vault Suit, he had balked at it. But he had no idea the two synchronized for peak function.

He flipped the dial over to the health tab and selected it to read it over. Systemic damage to connective tissues due to sustained exposure to unknown CFCs. Chronic arthritis and arthralgia, possibly owing to a general neuralgia. Likelihood of syncope under duress. Undetermined neurological damage manifesting as memory lacunae. Shell-shock. Opioid addiction.
A hand went to ‘Choly’s mouth, and his right arm slacked. He hadn’t wanted to be right all this time, but what was wrong with him. The majority of the things the Pip-Boy enumerated, didn’t sound like they could be cured by medicine. He winced at noticing that he’d nipped his lip between his teeth, and licked at the metallic taste. It wouldn’t get better. This was the best he would get. He stood and left the military coat, Vault Suit, orthotics, and various golf clothing in a mound on the bench. He didn’t bother tidying his hair as he shambled off with his cane to meet the Handy-bots in the main room of the clubhouse.

Surely, after the day he’d had, Bogey could indulge him with a stiff drink.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

TWs: lascivious themes, insects, blood, coprophobia, mysophobia, decomposition. It’s not as explicit as the nosedive or the short story, but he’s revisiting the memory of those things here, so.

Now that the sun had set, little light entered the clubhouse’s lounge lobby through the high paneled windows to either side of the back wall behind the bar or the broken windows at the front. At first, ‘Choly had made his way by the sound of Bogey and Angel chatting, but they fell quiet once he exited the locker room and ‘Choly instead came up to the bar by the light the two Mister Handy robots’ thruster flames emitted. He sat at one of the stools with a tired smile, and hooked his cane beside him on the edge of the countertop.

“I hope the change of attire suits you,” Bogey started, to break the silence. ‘Choly looked between the two of them and nodded. “You really must forgive my poor hosting. I was programmed as the bar and grill server, but it’s all bar and no grill as of late. Could I interest you in a drink? I regret to note we’re out of ice at the moment.”

Angel answered on his behalf before he could even consider cocktail options.

“Mister Carey, a Nuka-Cola Wild sounds to your liking, doesn’t it?”

’Choly would have rolled his eyes and objected to the euphemism for a designated driver, were it not for the irony that Angel had still not noticed that he had sampled at least three flavors of bicentennial Nuka-Cola and discovered they’d each turned alcoholic. But, he hadn’t encountered the sarsaparilla flavored variety in mention in the past few months, so although he had a suspicion it too would have fermented, he couldn’t confirm it from personal experience.

“We’re fresh out of Nuka-Cola Wild, I’m afraid,” the brass Handy apologized, believing its patron to be making up his mind as to what to order. “If you’d like something non-alcoholic, could I interest you instead in a Nuka-Cola Classic, or a Nuka-Cola Cherry?”

The chemist gave it a sloppy grin.

“You’re really too kind, Bogey. You don’t need to provide me dinner. I’ve already eaten tonight. Angel has the right idea. A Nuka-Cola Cherry sounds refreshing.”

While pouring the Nuka-Cola Cherry into a highball glass using two pincer tendrils, with the third Bogey surreptitiously flicked on the fusion cell lantern on the counter. The bar area illuminated with a warm coppery glow, and highlighted the myriad of dents in the chassis of the brass Handy. It set the glass in front of ‘Choly, as well as the bottle of what wouldn’t fit, and awaited his approval in bated posture.

“Thanks for the drink. Really hits the spot.” He sighed comfortably. “And thanks for turning on some light. My eyesight isn’t so great anymore.”

Bogey flinched, only to loosen, accepting the gratitude.
“You’ll be staying the night, then?” it fielded at a caution.

“If it’s all right with you, that is.” He took another drink. “You wouldn’t happen to have a straw, would you?”

It provided without skipping a beat, and he smiled approvingly as he fidgeted with the bending section. A straw made it so much easier.

“I suppose you could put down a bed roll behind the bar, or in the corner. Or, if it’s no trouble to you, there is a couch in the ladies’ locker room. We’ve no other patrons on the premises, and haven’t for many years, so I don’t think it would create any fuss.”

This time ‘Choly flinched, but recovered quickly enough to conceal the cause of the discomfort in Bogey’s proposition. He’d sooner admit loathing the idea of sleeping on yet another couch, than that he took exception to the furniture’s location. No, he couldn’t ask either of them to move it, either, because then they might ask why.

“Is this the only lantern?” ‘Choly asked it. “I wouldn’t ask to borrow it, if you need it.”

A little too readily, it nearly foisted the lantern upon him.

“It is! But, neither I nor Angel need it, if you’re so inclined.”

Bogey’s nervousness didn’t go unnoticed. He put a hand to the pincer holding the handle, and looked into its ocular lenses in earnest.

“You’re doing an amazing job. Really. Provided everything that’s happened, I’m still getting the same quality of service as I always have coming here.”

Bogey set down the lantern. It withdrew all its tendrils in close and turned away from him a moment, before glancing back to him by turning its lenses and not its body.

“...I’m glad to have your vote of confidence, Sir. It’s really been far too long since I’ve hosted anyone. You’re the first civil person I’ve encountered in easily a hundred years.”

“I can’t imagine there’s many people left with interest in playing golf, let alone knowledge how to play. The Commonwealth’s always had love affair with baseball, really. I always preferred fairway over diamond. Quiet. Broad. ...Cathartic. A real head space sport.”

“We shall see about arranging you with a bucket in the morning, if you so desire it, Sir. From the sound of things, you could really use a quiet commune.”

“I’ve been telling Bogey about the recent series of scraps we’ve found ourselves in, Sir,” Angel elucidated, a little sheepishly. “It’s just I worry for you.”

“As long as you haven’t been exaggerating and telling Bogey I took out that deathclaw all by myself, or any of that,” ‘Choly laughed. He poured the rest of the bottle into the glass now that it had the room. “That couch already beckons. The day has already tried me.”

“It’s been trying for sure,” Angel agreed like a grammarian. “I’ll go lay out your blanket and pillow.”

“And my holotape, if you could,” ‘Choly called off to him once it was halfway to the lockers. “You know the one.”
“Ah yes. A bedtime story. Certainly, Sir!”

‘Choly left the empty glass for Bogey. He nearly reached into his pocket for a tip, but stopped short of the thought process at the realization that in lieu of human coworkers, a Mister Handy had no real use for money. His mouth became a thin line before he shot the brass Handy a huge grin and patted both hands on the counter. Even if it asked for money, he couldn’t in good conscience follow through with that habitation when he’d since learned better of the current economy of the Commonwealth. He stood and took up his cane, and picked up the lantern in the other.

“I must figure out a proper way to repay you for your hospitality before we head out, Bogey. Good night.”

“Oh, it’s quite all right, Sir. If it’s important to you, we can discuss it tomorrow. The only thing pressing at the moment is that you rest well.”

“With the two of you here, I’ll sleep easy for sure.”

“Mister Carey, I’ve arranged your bedding,” Angel reported emerging again from the lockers. “I’ll be right here in the lounge lobby, protecting you and Bogey. Just call for me if you need anything.”

At the mention of Bogey, he turned back to look at the brass Handy, to discover it had put out its pilot light to crouch on its tendrils through the night. His head fell askew as he continued on his way to bed, but he chucked it up to it reserving Handy Fuel. He snapped his fingers. Maintenance. He could provide Bogey maintenance. It’d be nothing as fancy as he’d given Angel, without the proper tools or materials, but surely Bogey had gone decades if not centuries without a re-fuel and a tune up. That would serve the Handy bounds before any currency ever could, especially one isolated in the middle of a large abandoned golfing green.

The ladies’ locker room had fewer lockers and more space. Angel had left not just the ‘Flyblown’ holotape on the coffee table, but also a canister of water, and he set down his glasses and the lantern with them. He’d leave on the light throughout the night, just for sake of it being an unfamiliar location. ‘Choly toed his shoes under the faded dark blue leather couch, settled down onto it, and pulled the covers over himself. Since the couch’s arms still had most of their filling, he opted to stuff the pillow between his legs. He popped the holotape into his Pip-Boy’s cassette deck and set to reading to unwind amid the heavy low of the final Melancholia and the slurring comfort of intoxication.

The notion of scandalizing bloatfly syringe usage had rotted into an entirely different context since the conception of the work of fiction. It had been his go-to escapism off and on for months now, but he hadn’t reread it since before he’d escaped the burning pharmacy. Bloatfly syringes no longer exclusively existed in fictional parameters. He’d seen what they were capable of in reality. He found himself glazing over every few paragraphs and having to reread frequently, and ultimately closed the document and turned off the Pip-Boy screen.

‘Choly stared off into the recessed detailing of the ceiling, and how the lantern light, trapped in the crumbling edges of the peeling paint, created the illusion of a pile of dead leaves. He’d dodged death more times than he probably knew in just the last week alone. He could have burned alive in the pharmacy. Jared’s raiders could have caught him and murdered him for killing their leader. The deathclaw could have torn every last one of them apart. Radiation poisoning would have gotten him, if Angel hadn’t found him in the Red Rocket. They could have been blown to bits in that car graveyard. And if that giant mosquito had stabbed him in the chest even an inch further down, it would have pierced his heart. It seemed like just about anything in the wasteland could kill him, and a majority of it would kill him without hesitation.
Inspiration lay in wait all around him. He’d have to get more creative with his bucket list erotica, next time he penned any. Even in the slim chance that Mama Murphy hadn’t explicitly spoken the future into the present, it at least proved he could endeavor that his works act as a form of vicarious self-fulfilling prophecy. He drifted to sleep floating amid the notion that very little stood in the way of fiction becoming reality any longer. He need only apply himself...

‘Choly completed his rooftop chem break for the afternoon, and retired to his office garden to sow a fresh layer of fertilizer. The next thing he knew, he was coming up for air after having his face shoved down in the gardening planter full of brahmin manure. His head swam and swirled with kaleidoscoping hubflowers and flies. Eventually he was washing himself in the Mystic River while Angel laundered his clothing, chastising him all the while as though it believed he’d taken that nosedive on purpose. “Did you intend for that encounter to end your life?” If it’d had a tongue, it’d have clicked it in distaste. A cloud of bloodbugs swarmed him as Angel fish-eyed further and further out of reach. They jabbed him and sprayed his naked body with his own partly-digested blood. The Quincy survivors stood on the opposite bank, staring at him. He tried to cry out for his Mister Handy, but it minded the laundry. “This is what you wanted, isn’t it, Mister Kara?”

He was in the Red Rocket with Jacob again, fucking on the desk. He clawed for breath in a panic as the familiarity of acute radiation poisoning overwhelmed him. Bloatfly larvae packed into the feral ghoul’s fetid features, and they fell off and out of the ghoul and onto ‘Choly. Rather than lingering, they fell off into the floor and all over the desk, seeking to crawl back onto feral ghoul. Tears rolled down his face between the pain and rejection, and he could tell the mosquitoes had infected him with something that caused him acute, rapid swelling in his lower half. He realized the recolant station office was crowded with other faces, all as rotten and disfigured but just as recognizable as Jacob’s. All of them teemed with those diligent lichinka, in wriggling indifference to ‘Choly. Jared. Mrs. Rosa. Heydar Jahani. Gristle, Lonnie, and Jerry. Jerry, in her power armor frame, with her Fatman perched squarely on her shoulder, ready to fire on him.

He shot awake when Jerry pulled the trigger, and gasped amid smoke. The pharmacy was on fire, and Angel was nowhere to be found. His legs had become so swollen, tight, and stiff, that he couldn’t move. He pulled his face into his shirt collar, and couldn’t stop coughing. A woman in ornate sheer lace lingerie stood before him, rubenesque and redheaded in silhouette of the flames behind her. She administered a Stimpak syringe to her hip and sneered at him with a sustained stare. He knew it was Duchesne, but he didn’t have the breath to call out to her. Stocking-foot and disinterested in the fire, she approached him out of pity. In closer proximity, he recognized she had succumbed to the same flyblown putrescence as the others. “You always wanted to know what the Stimpaks were for, didn’t you?” She administered another, and discarded the empty syringe to the floor. The fold of her thighs rolled with lichinka beneath her panties. “It’s so they don’t leave before they finish what they’re here for.” Duchesne traced a third Stimpak from ‘Choly’s jaw down to his stomach, and he stuttered. Her lip curled in revulsion. Both of them could tell the larvae would not contour to his body despite hers came in proximity. “Not even Radroaches would eat you.”

‘Choly awoke hyperventilating in a fever chill. He steadied his breathing as he opened the health tab on his Pip-Boy to double-check it had not sensed blood pathogens of any kind during its diagnosis. No malaria, no filariasis. No bacteria, viruses, or parasites. His tongue stuck to his cotton mouth and he frowned, reaching for the water canister. Sitting up, he wet his throat then washed his face. The sun had risen, and filtered in through the clerestory windows which lined the top of the wall at the half of the locker room with the lavatories and showers. He turned off the lantern, then folded up his blanket.

Like the men’s locker room, the ladies’ lockers had also all been left open, with the patrons’ clothing folded neatly. He skimmed their contents, half-lucid, and realized only in contrast to the
women’s garments, what had been missing from the men’s lockers. He helped himself to any socks and stockings he found, as well as a geranium red cashmere sweater. No valuables of any kind lay in either set of lockers: no money, no jewelry, no timepieces. If this place had been looted, the clothing wouldn’t have been folded so ceremoniously. Bogey must have combed it over and deposited all valuables in a safe somewhere on premises. He caught himself scheming whether he needed to sneak around Bogey to determine the safe’s location, and chastised himself for even thinking about taking advantage of such a good host. He put his hands on a pair of lacy black panties and guffawed in delight at the very thought of wearing them, only to jerk in recollection of the nightmare he’d just had, and he flung them down with a nauseated snarl.

He piled his things, old and new, atop the blanket, and carried his effects in this way across the way to the men’s room, where he’d left everything else overnight. He found Angel had slung his canvas spinal corset and Vault Suit over the locker doors to dry, and stared at the blood stains for some time. After pinching the fabrics to test their dryness, he disrobed, slipped on his orthotics, and redressed. He appreciated how tacky it was, to wear one striped sock and one argyle. One mirror in the men’s room had survived, and with it he used a few splashes of water to slick his hair and tuck it into a fresh french twist.

The chemist cursed his initial craving to start his day with a Melancholia, recalling he now had none left. He couldn’t tell if he sought the comfort of the meal replacement, or the nepenthe of the opiates. With a sigh, he opted for the cashmere sweater rather than the sweater vest, and folded the contrast cuffs over the cuffs of the sweater. He then put on his shoes, and went out into the lobby lounge with his cane.

“Good morning, Sir!” Angel sped up to him with a fresh cup of coffee for him. “You slept well, I hope?”

“I think the healing affected me in a bad way,” he murmured, taking the coffee to the closest table to sit. His face scrunched up and stared into the drink. “...This isn’t my mug.”

“...Ah, it’s one of ours,” Bogey explained, also approaching. “Angel told me this morning that, in your haste to escape that explosion yesterday afternoon, the two of you left behind the hot plate and percolator it had been using to brew your coffee. Between my appliances and dishes, and its purified water and coffee grounds, we concerted our efforts to ensure you had a fine drink to awaken to.”

‘Choly’s face journeyed through exasperation to appreciation in a matter of seconds, and he let the mug warm his hands for lack of a better reaction.

“We can easily replace the percolator and hot plate,” Angel reassured. “The hard thing to replace would have been the beans, and that’s still safely stowed in my storage.”

“You can keep the mug, if you like it. A souvenir from the Billerica Golf Course.”

“Heh. You two are just swell--”

He winced at his choice of words, still unable to distance himself from the nightmare. He thanked them both through clenched teeth, and shoved it all down by taking a testing sip of the hot black drink.

“Would you like me to whip up a box of Insta-Mash for you, Sir? Or perhaps you’d rather some more sweet rolls?”

“I’ve honey roasted peanuts, as well.” Bogey dropped five heat-sealed clear bags of peanuts onto
the table, then returned to hovering just behind Angel. “If you’d like. It’s all I have.”

He smiled.

“Peanuts and a sweet roll sound superb. My appetite’s not so great when I first wake up. I’ll eat more at lunch.” Angel set the requested pastry before him, but he didn’t eat just yet. He patted his hands together, then wrung them. “In the mean time... Bogey. I’ve been giving it some thought. I have the money for the cola from last night, and for the peanuts and coffee now, and for your hospitality... But you’re the only one on premises, aren’t you? Money’s not going to do you much good if you’re out here all alone.”

“I-- I meant it last night, that you haven’t got to recompense my attentions. It’s been a delight in itself to have someone to tend to again after all these years.”

He persisted in the offer, his smile widening. His nose scrunched to push up his glasses.

“I’m sure Angel’s mentioned that I do maintenance on it, and that I’m responsible for its recent upgrades. I can take a look at you, and see what I can do about anything ailing you. Angel went a long time without upkeep, and I’m sure you need it just as much as it did. You mentioned Angel provided the water, for instance. I can get your condensators working again. And I noticed you put out your pilot light last night. You were conserving gas, weren’t you? I can refill your fuel tank.”

“Oh! that sounds just delightful,” Angel beamed. “Bogey, Mister Carey will get you right as new. You really must say yes. I swear by his care.”

“I... I’m not sure what to say.” Bogey withdrew back by a row of tables, its tendrils curled at its front. “You... you noticed I put out my pilot light. I didn’t mean to give you cause to fret.”

”Neither of you affected the quality of my sleep. I promise.” He bit into his pastry finally, his mouth suffusing with cinnamon oil. “We really can’t stay too long, Bogey. Say you’ll let me look you over before we go. I have to pay back your hospitality and kindness somehow.”

“If you really must insist, a tune up sounds... well, it sounds too good to be true.” Bogey caught itself in the reflex to dart away, and stood firm. “I... I have to admit, I thought you might be one of those... ugh, Devils, when I first caught a glimpse of Angel. I should have known better. Your work is much more sightly, and much more careful. I can certainly appreciate that you stayed within the scope of the General Atomics warranty.”

‘Choly’s brow flattened, then raised slowly from behind his coffee as he sipped.

“Devils? You’ll have to tell me all about it while I work.”
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

A treatise on earning stripes and flying colors.

The bucket only had a few golf balls left now. ‘Choly had nabbed a sports visor off the body of someone who’d been on the green at 9:47am October 23, 2077. From beneath its faded brim, his gaze skinned the balding, scorched fairway and snagged on the metallic bits that caught the sunlight. The Billerica Golf Course had once employed eighteen robots, half Mister Handies, and half Protectrons. Seventeen of them now lay in pieces across the property. He placed a fresh ball on the tee, and hammered through the 4-wood stroke with a clenched jaw.

Bogey did its best to sit still. It had put out its pilot light again, and it resembled a tripod in an odd way. With his Pip-Boy plugged into the brass Handy to access its disk maintenance algorithms, ‘Choly wondered if a Handy really could get efficient mobility on its tendrils rather than its pilot light, if it came to it. Bogey seemed to manage with it, uncanny as it was. Perhaps it had adapted.

“Really, I can’t tell you all that much about the raiders. I... I tend to hide at the first sign of their approach. They call themselves the Rust Devils. They prioritize parts salvage, to the point they’ll demolish perfectly stable, operating robots in order to... gut the remains...” Bogey’s three ocular lenses all retracted under their plates for what it said next. “...From what I’ve observed, I believe they turn off all AI processes not vital to combat. Between the victimized robots’ altered processing state and the unceremonious mishmash of the customizations the raiders jerry-build... I dare say that to encounter one... it must feel to a Handy, what it's like for a human to encounter a feral ghoul. And most of them-- they’ll wear shell components like armor--! It’s just awful--”


“I’m more worried what they're combining,” ‘Choly mumbled. “And where they’re getting the parts from.” He buried himself in the algorithm scan, and tried not to dismiss the two robots’ revulsion. It didn’t matter that ferals didn’t repulse him. His comfort zone wasn’t on the table here.

With his mind wandering, he didn’t even notice where the ball landed. It didn’t matter, range picking Protectrons or no. He placed another ball. The next swing took the tee with it, and he stuttered a detached curse under his breath.

“You should come with us to Lowell,” ‘Choly soothed. “To the Deenwood Compound. I’m sure Angel agrees with me, that we’re both anxious at the idea of leaving you somewhere vulnerable like this.”

“Me? Go to Lowell!?” Bogey moaned, its ocular lenses flying animate again in incredulity. “I don’t know where the Rust Devils have stationed themselves, but they always come down here from the North. The way’s not safe! You two shouldn’t... no, can’t! Surely I could dissuade you. They’re barbaric!”

“Mister Carey, there’s the option of--”

“--No. There’s not.” He pointed a stern finger at Angel. “We can’t. We’re just an hour or so from
the base now. We can’t afford to add another day’s travel.”

“But Bogey’s a brass--”

Really, he wasn’t being selfish by refusing to double back. Was he? He re-teed and the next stroke threw out his shoulder from the force jarring the follow-through. He grumbled and rubbed at it with a fat upper lip. He thought to himself, I can dick around on the green for an hour, but I can’t double back to get Bogey someplace safe? No, he wasn’t dicking around. He was clearing his head. Forming a plan. He and Angel would leave soon.

“I really didn’t want to worry either of you about me. I’ll be safe here. Really,” Bogey swore. “It’s been a year since they last came on premises for salvage. It’s unlikely they’ll come down here again. By comparison, last year, they looted about every other month. They’ve probably taken everything they want. I’m smart about it, too. I keep the clubhouse looking uninhabited. No lights, not even my thruster. I only move as necessary. And I never move objects or furniture. It’s been excruciating not to dust, but it’s been a necessity. They won’t know to look for me. Even if they do trespass again, I’ll put out my pilot light and hide like I always do.”

“What did Angel mean?” ‘Choly crossed his arms, scrutinizing Bogey’s body. “What does it mean, for a Mister Handy to be brass colored?”

Suddenly, Angel regretted having said anything.

“It’s a great deal how different Protectron models have different plating colors. Mister Gutsies are army green for being combat-oriented. Miss Nannies are white for their domestic and medical prowess. Chrome is the standard for a basic Mister Handy. ...Being brass means I’m not fully outfitted,” it admitted, feeling small. “I thought you might have noticed during your scans, so I didn’t mention it. I have no tendril accessories. Only my pincers.”

“I, I could-- If you--”

In addition to ‘Choly’s upkeep, Angel had split its fusion cells with its new acquaintance. They still had Angel’s first laser attachment, and ‘Choly doted it upon Bogey readily. Bogey could defend itself a lot better now, between recalibration, refuel, and re-equipment. Bogey could sit tight for the moment, while he and Angel proceeded on to their destination, to assess the best course of action. It was a smart, if not cowardly, robot. If it wouldn’t go with them, he and Angel would just have to trust it.

Suddenly, the chemist couldn’t quite grasp why he was getting himself involved in defending a robot he’d only just met from raiders that might not even exist. Did he really care if Bogey was safe? Either way, the habits described of these savage robotics enthusiasts, with their proximity so close to base, presented a very real composite of concerns. Depending on the Devils’ luck and stubbornness, they very well might have forced their way past the security measures, and had the entire fleet of military robotics at their disposal. The Rust Devils inevitably stood between him and the closure he sought coming all this way. Nearly, he wondered if smoking them out of their operations in Lowell was what Missus Murphy had suggested all along.

Abandon help him, he hoped not. He didn’t want it to come down to dismantling another raider outfit. From the sound of it, the Rust Devils were more organized and committed to their goals than the Lexington raiders. His mind hiccuped on the desperation of searching the fairway for bloatflies he might harvest, and he sniffed to quieten his wilding.

“...And sky blue?” ‘Choly asked. He looked between the two Handies when neither would answer him at first.
“I’m DIA issue, Sir. A government robot.”

His earlobes burned. Did everyone he’d ever met know these things? Did everyone know why he had a Mister Handy issued by the Defense Intelligence Agency? His mind slipped through an anxiety-curated set of memories, of times his nationalization must surely have come across as incomplete. Everyone he’d ever known in the States had known he was Russian, didn’t they?

“You said you were off to the Deenwood Compound?” Bogey began, feeling the tension and dread building in the robotics maintenance shed. “If Angel is a DIA Handy, that means you must have handled some very important things for the military. You must have been an incredibly important person, if they felt that great a need to keep you safe.”

“I wouldn’t have gotten through my time on base, if it weren’t for Angel. That’s for certain.” He forced a smile at his old friend, and carried it toward new one. “I suppose Angel’s purpose isn’t so clean cut anymore, now that I’ve repaired it in such a way.”

“Call it a little dose of that ‘self agency’ you go on about at times, Sir. I’m my own robot.”

Bogey glanced at its newly augmented tendril, with its sky blue tip. It looked back up to them when it managed to initiate it to switch over to the laser attachment.

“Perhaps I’m my own robot as well. I’m glad you both stayed here.”

‘Choly placed another ball and rolled his shoulder until the amount of crackling it generated appeased his confidence he’d reset it. He shanked the ball and it whiffed off to the far left toward a stand of naked trees and overgrowth. His head fell askew in exasperation with himself. He slung the 4-wood back in the golf bag beside his tee box, retrieved his cane from it, and ambled across the fairway with an agitated wanderlust. I’m not going far, he reasoned. Just to the bounds of the driving range and back.

He stopped dead a few steps into the wooded patch, eyes wide. He’d happened upon a deer--or rather, what looked like it might have been a deer. Its two heads grazed at the foliage that had avoided sun-scorching within the shade of the husks of the trees. At least two hulking curled antlers branched from each of its two heads, and spiny cutaneous nodes jutted out of its foreheads and cheekbones like a rash. Radiation-induced mange had blighted its hide. It had too many limbs, but the penetrating uranium glow its organs emitted through its flesh transfixed him to where he couldn’t quite draw the faculty to count them, let alone process the form before him.

The stag seemed aware of him, but continued to eat undeterred by his observation. He watched for what felt like an eternity, and a crooked smile melted across his face as he shifted from alarm to awe. It was so strangely charming, with its too-much-ness. The impossibility of tracing the silhouette of some otherworldly entity, with dimensions that didn’t quite fit in his reality. A streak of wonder cut through him, at the uncertainty if such a disfigured creature was now even more so prey than before, or if it had since become a predator in the apocalypse. The dialectical soup of fear and enrapturement glued him in place, and every gamut of possible emotion hooked his smile into a frenetic grin.

“--Ah! Sir.” Angel approached at a whisper and a caution, noting the stag, which had stopped eating to stare back at the two of them. “There you are. We weren’t sure where you’d popped off to. Admiring the wildlife?”

“They’re not dangerous... are they?” he uttered, still staring onward.

“Not unless provoked, I imagine.”
As though pursued by something terrible and unseen, the stag abruptly leaped about face and bolted off deeper into the wooded area. ‘Choly jumped at the sudden animation, and looked to Angel, snapped out of his daze. He sighed, nearly disappointed that the spell had broken.

“IT was so beautiful... and terrible... at the same time.” He looked back to where the stag had stood. Vacantly, he squinted at the foliage. For all the cruelty, murder, and pain in this new world, encounters such as the hubflower and the radstag proved to him some hint of beauty still existed. His face slacked when he realized why he was staring at the plants, and he pointed to them with a repeated and increasing insistence. “Angel. Angel, silt beans. It was eating--”

“Fresh produce!” Angel swooped in to collect bean pods, and added them to an empty carton from the pharmacy.

“They’re no good raw,” he mumble-rambled, “but they’re edible cooked... They’re starchy. I...” He snorted in thought. “I wonder if they’d make a decent flour. I think you were right, that it had been a soy product I used. Soy flour. This could mean potential major progress reinventing the Melancholia.”

“Even if it doesn’t work out to a substitute in your recipe, I can still cook them up as something substantial and delicious!”

“Maybe I won’t have to dread a future sucking down a fifth of bismuth a day.”

They doubled back to the clubhouse one last time. In anticipation of a conflict, ‘Choly changed out of his new outfit and back into his Vault Suit, holster harness, and Pharm Corps coat as before. Zipping up, he sat on the locker room bench, and traced the bloodstained, dime-sized hole the bloodbug had ripped in his suit. Pieces of his nightmare filtered back into forefront. His heart clenched in his ribs, searing down his left arm. He hadn’t encountered those things until he got near water, and they were headed to New England’s Venice. He’d inevitably encounter them again.

He could get better, could be better. He just needed proof of it, for his own sake.

They bid Bogey their farewells and headed out once they were certain it had the clubhouse secure. With a golf bag slung between him and Angel, ‘Choly had at the ready a handful of clubs, his syringer rifle, and his cane. In anticipation of a conflict, once they hit Route 3 again, Angel traveled with all three lasers drawn. Though he only had two clips of ammo left, ‘Choly still kept to his .38. He begged fate not to give them a run-in with the Rust Devils, but he knew their luck tended to reflect a likelihood otherwise.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Through the needle’s eye and right onto the hook.

As they took a steady clip Northbound on Route 3, the trees to either side of them shifted from predominantly pine to a mixture of rusty oak and maple. Very few vehicles scattered the street, allowing for a smooth, steady speed. ‘Choly smiled to himself at the thought of his Pip-Boy’s radio; at first, the signal was spotty at best, but he refined it to pull in a brassy, energetic instrumental broadcast. Once he got it steady, Angel seemed to sway along the lanes to the tune, and he nearly stopped worrying.

“Really, this is quite nice, isn’t it, Angel? The weather’s brisk, but the sun’s out. I’ve missed trips like this with you. I know it used to be by bus, but the wind feels therapeutic in a way. Just the two of us.”

“The scenery in the Commonwealth these days isn’t all bad.”

But he couldn’t wholly get his mind off their destination. He couldn’t even begin to speculate what to anticipate. After two centuries left to run without maintenance, there was no telling if the base’s robotics and defenses would even operate correctly, if even run at all. He didn’t like the odds that the Rust Devils had already taken the base and now occupied it. The whole trip to Lowell would be for nothing, if he couldn’t get on base, and they might as well double back to Billerica and take Bogey home to Sanctuary Hills right then.

They zipped under an overpass, and ‘Choly prayed they’d be able to speed right over the I-495 cloverleaf without having to take any of the access roads. Relief washed over him, that he didn’t have to deal with the Lowell Connector. The interstate signs had all either fallen or faded beyond legibility. He checked his map on his Pip-Boy, and looked back at the miles of crumbling asphalt still ahead of them. They’d just passed Route 129: just over halfway there from the golf course. He nodded thoughtfully, and slacked a bit in his scrutiny of the thoroughfare for a ways.

“Shall we take the Chelmsford South exit, or press on to the Chelmsford-Lowell intersection?”

“Taking I-495 would nearly triple our travel distance. We might have to, but let’s try sticking to Route 3 for now.”

“Noted.”

Ignoring the off ramp, they crossed over the 3-495 interchange. The well-rehearsed, unmarked exit for Chelmsford Road came up, and at a distance they could tell that the Route 3 overpass ahead had been extensively blockaded. Angel need not mention its concern as they got off the highway, as they both readily noted the high wood and steel wall which barricaded the Northeast half of the intersection. Several people stood watch atop the Red Rocket on the Southeast corner, and began to fire on the two of them as they slowed just enough to take the left turn under Route 3. ‘Choly looked back and his stomach lurched. Three bipedal robots sped toward them.

“All arms and legs in!” Angel yelled.
They barreled beneath the overpass, under which the raiders had constructed barricades and corrugated metal shanties. They didn’t slow enough to do more than draw fire. One of the mishmash robots slammed into the wall of one of the dwellings with a loud crash, only to keep running nearly unhindered. It wasn’t until ‘Choly looked back a second time to attempt aiming at their pursuants, that he recognized the very unmistakably human skulls mounted as face plates on these things. He fired at them, but his hands shook too badly, and he clutched tighter to Angel rather than try again.

“You can’t go any faster, can you!” ‘Choly pleaded.

“I’m going as fast as I can, Sir!”

Angel fired all three lasers at once at one of the robots, and it crumpled in a half-molten mess. The other two closed in on them.

The nearly humanoid proportions of the things, combined with the skull plates... These things had been Assaultrons. One of them steadied a limb toward them, for it to erupt flames. ‘Choly screamed when he could feel the heat nearly reach him. He looked behind him only long enough to confirm he wasn’t on fire, and resumed doing his best not to hyperventilate. Angel continued firing, but the remaining once-Assaultrons managed to dodge its aim. The other once-Assaultron fired with its ocular laser and connected with one of Angel’s ocular lenses.

They got about five hundred feet down the street before veering off it in favor of the bald expanse of field, and they followed the high barbwire hurricane fence at full speed. In no time, they approached the guard house at the front of the Deenwood Compound. Though unoccupied, the biometric scanner still swept over ‘Choly and Angel, and the boom barrier permitted them through. They looked back to find the two robots that had chased them had doubled back to return to their base.

‘Choly hoped that meant Deenwood wasn’t under Rust Devil occupation.

“Are you all right, Mister Carey?”

“I’ll be better once we’re inside...”

They slowed a bit, but remained vigilant, as they came up to the second checkpoint. To either side of the inner fence stood a pair of high turret towers. ‘Choly saw a Mister Gutsy coming to them. He holstered his pistol and dismounted with his cane in hand.

“This is a secure government facility!” the Gutsy announced in a strident scorn. “State your identity and intent, or we WILL fire on you!”

“Captain-- Captain Alan Carey.” ‘Choly gulped for air and did his best to stand up straight and salute the Gutsy. “Deenwood Pharm Corps. This is Angel, issued to me by the DIA.” Angel, too, stated its designation, which came in a string of numbers ‘Choly had never memorized in the first place.

The army green Handy eyed the two of them in silence for entirely too long.

“Intent!”

“I, ah! Yes. I was-- Reporting to active duty.”

“You are two hundred years LATE, Captain Carey. And not even close to wearing regulation uniform. Not to mention what you’ve allowed become of your Mister Handy compatriot.” The
gate’s magnetic mechanisms deployed with a low hum, and the boom barriers lifted as before. ‘Choly sighed and re-mounted Angel, and the Gutsy led them inside the vast concrete facility proper. “Forgive my gruffness, Captain. It’s wonderful to have you back. General Francis will be elated to speak with you.”

“General--” ‘Choly’s face couldn’t help but screw up as they entered the Robotics wing. “General Francis?” He hadn’t expected nuclear survivors, and for Captain Francis to have lived long enough to start a line of descendants to inherit the base just about beat any unlikelihood he could have imagined possible.

Still, he’d been on premises a good fifteen minutes by that point, and within base walls five of it--and he hadn’t seen a single living thing, person or otherwise. A mixture of Mister Gutsies, Eyebots, and Protectrons moved about in his peripheral fringes, but none of them engaged the three of them as the Gutsy led the way. Maybe this General Francis was her Handy... or a Sentry she’d programmed... or...

They arrived at the Control Room of the Robotics wing, where a uniformed ghoul worked on a powered-down Eyebot on a workbench. The Gutsy approached.

“Captain Carey has arrived, ma’am. I’ve brought him to you for debriefing.”

Her half-shaven blonde head picked up to glare at ‘Choly as he dismounted again. He glared back, in shock. Keloid scars wired all over her body, and almost none of her nose or earlobes remained. Her voice was viscous and rasping, but still rang with command.

“Thank you, Green Seven. You may return to your normal duties.”

“Yes, ma’am!” It exited, leaving the three of them alone.

The two continued to stare at one another for some time before ‘Choly slowly walked up to her. He stuttered out broken, stupid laughter and collapsed to hugging her tight. He couldn’t help the tears when she hugged him back. After a solid minute, she shoved him back to get a good look at him up close.

“Forgive the exclamation, but how the FUCK are you standing here in front of me, Carey?”

“I could ask you the same question, General.” He removed his glasses and gave her a tired smile, and wiped his cheeks with his sleeve.

“Is that... a Vault Suit? Fuck.” She began to circle him. “What in God’s name happened to your Handy?”

“I happened to it. Repairs and upgrades were necessary to make the trip up from Concord. Is... is it all right for me to sit, ma’am?” She waved at the workbench stool, and he thanked her. He didn’t want to have to talk about Vault 111, but a brief explanation seemed like the only option. “It’s a Vault Suit, yes. They built a vault near where I moved after Anchorage. I’m the only one that survived what the vault did to its residents. Cryogenics. I think the equipment started failing after two hundred years, and the system tried to wake everyone up... but it was... just me--”

She leaned on the workbench beside him with a knowing frown.

“My heart goes out to you, having to live through that. I’ve heard some terrible things about the different experiments Vault-Tec ran on its residents. You don’t have to tell me anything further.”

“Thank you for not pressing me for details, ma’am. It’s only been a few months. It hasn’t been easy
to adjust to... everything, honestly.”

“...What are you doing here?” She half-expected him to reciprocate her curiosity, but appreciated that he hadn’t.

“I had a feeling there was something unresolved here. Like there was a project we were supposed to start, except the bombs happened first.” He sniffed and put his glasses back on, shaking his head. “I’m sorry. I just can’t believe anyone survived...”

Francis squinted at him, and leaned nearer.

“Forgive me for asking, but I’m worried. The cane, and... you were riding your Handy on the way in.”

“The circumstances that have made it possible for me to stand before you alive today also damaged me severely. Angel’s operating not just as my Handy, but as my wheelchair, ma’am.”

“--Oh, cut the appellations,” she dismissed, blowing the stress of the conversation away like smoke. “You’re acting like you’ve never met me before.”

“Sorry. Barring Angel, you’re the... second familiar face I’ve found since I woke up? I honestly was starting to get used to the idea that I outlived everyone.”

She softened.

“...I can relate to that. I was the only Pharm Corps staff on base to survive the radiation. The base was designed to withstand a nuclear blast. But we’re close enough to where the bomb hit New Hampshire that it might as well have been a direct hit. The base itself was unscathed, but the residential block got hammered. I... I don’t know if you’d call being ghoulified surviving.” She snorted a wheeze through her open nasal cavity and gave him a shit-eating grin. “Repairing that Eyebot can wait. You still lush as ever? ‘Cause damn if I couldn’t use a drink about now.”

He checked the time on his Pip-Boy, and mirrored her grin.

“Supposing it’s nine forty-seven somewhere.”
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree. That’s… not an old fashioned, is it, Liv?

The dark walls, pale carpeting, and little furnishings of the general’s office belied the actual dimensions of the somewhat small space. At her ebony dry bar, General Francis poured the two of them each an old fashioned, with dried rind curls ‘Choly imagined were mutfruit. The ghoul placed one in ‘Choly’s gracious hands where he sat, and took hers to her leather office chair opposite the desk. She took a sip and slicked at her side-shaven asymmetrical blonde french twist with a tense sigh.

“Call me Olivia. Please. I hate the rank and pomp of being the last breathing wretch on base. Ghoul or not, I’m still a person, you know?”

‘Choly nearly murmured a whooped and then some. His tongue sneaked against the back of his teeth behind a faint smile. He lingered in the numbness of an iced drink in his palms, and stared into the handcrafted cocktail a little too long before remembering it was for drinking.

“Olivia, it’s... really been just you here for all... or most of this time?” He held the short glass to his cheek, eyes glazing out of focus. “--Gosh, ice. You’ve got a working ice machine.”

“Imagine if you’ve been milling around for a few months now, you’ve come to appreciate most prewar commodities as current day luxuries.” Olivia downed about a third of her drink before setting it down to lace her leathery hands on the desk. “It’s been just me and the robotics fleets for a very long time, yes. I’ve whiled the decades doing maintenance on them all. I consider them a sense of found family. They keep plugging alongside me, and they keep me plugging.”

She drew a cigarette from the silver case on the desktop, and lit it with a gold flip lighter. After taking a deliberate puff, she offered up both with a genial gaze. Not to shy from her hospitality, he nodded and followed suit. A long exhale melted him into a comforted disillusionment.

“It really has been a jarring adjustment. Especially not having soap every day. Menthols and muddled cognac on the rocks. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you were trying to coax me into a tough patch.”

“You’ll find a great deal of the amenities on base have been repaired and maintained.” A grin pulled her thin lips across her teeth and she sat back, sustaining eye contact. “Deenwood in every way has kept me busy.”

“And the Rust Devils?” he asked over his sipping. His attentive oily eyes skimmed her wasting features, to skirt the acknowledgement she hadn’t dismissed his supposition. “They’re keeping you even busier?”

“Don’t tell me they’ve expanded operations outside Lowell,” she growled, suddenly furious. “I’ve lost twelve robots to them just this year. Bastards took to the RobCo Towers. It’s a wonder I’ve managed to stay as ahead of them as I have been, further encrypting the Sentry Bots and
Assaultrons especially. And the front doors, of course.” When he watched her expectantly, she snorted through another slug of her cocktail. “RobCo Towers was the company’s home base for Pip-Boy development and manufacture.”

“Encrypted the... front doors?” He frowned thoughtfully, somewhat distant. “Aside from confrontation with a Mister Gutsy, I didn’t have any trouble getting on premises.”

“Your bars have RFID encryption technology in them.” With a sneer, she pointed her smoke hand at his Pharm Corps coat. “The system’s biometric scanners have a two-factor screening process. You were smart enough, to turn up in enough of your uniform, to look the part of an officer--and lucky enough, to still be human enough, for the system to be able to match your genetic scan. Honestly, when I heard an officer had made it on base, I thought the Rust Devils might have figured out a way to sheepskin their way in here.”

“I guess it is a bit of luck, that my service uniform survived all this time. It’s one of the few belongings I still have. I don’t recognize the flavor of these bitters, but damn if this isn’t smooth cognac.”

Olivia topped off his glass with more cognac from the decanter on her desk, which he accepted greedily.

“The licorice, or the mint? It’s some East Central Commonwealth label. I like it well enough. These days, you tend to take what you can get your hands on. The cognac, though. That’s my favorite.” She shrugged in the direction of her liquor cabinetry, uninvested in getting up to scrutinize the exact identity of the liqueur. “Don’t discount, either, that you still have your Handy. A lot of my maintenance on Deenwood’s robots hasn’t just been to keep them running. It’s so they can continue defending themselves, and stay out of raider hands. To this day I haven’t determined a more effective approach than to be proactive. They just keep trying.”

Angel had stayed out in the hall to chat with robots it hadn’t seen in two hundred years.

“I wouldn’t be alive right now, if Angel weren’t with me. I know that much.” ‘Choly picked the desiccated rind curl out of his drink and chewed at it. “I’ve had my run-in already with raiders myself. I’ve half a mind to think Lexington’s still on fire because of me. Ha!”

Her dark eyes wilded, more punch-drunk from delivery than she was from the spirits.

“You can’t just drop that on me and leave it.”

His sheepishness poorly contained how oddly tickled he felt then by such a traumatic experience. Unmistakably, the physical condition of his company had everything to do with his craving to impress.

“After I came out of the vault outside Concord, I holed up in the Walden Drugs in Lexington. I got along with the raiders in the Corvega factory for a few months. They... pushed me around, and I... I.” A self-conscious grin tugged at him, unable to tell if the modus operandi were appropriate to divulge. He noticed he’d let the cherry fall off his unattended cigarette onto the leg of his Vault Suit. He brushed away the ashes and deposited the half-smoked thing in the crescent shaped ashtray. “...In so many words, I overdosed their leader on opiates. So they Molotov cocktailed the pharmacy while I was asleep, and chased me out of town.”

Olivia’s head kicked back in a sharp, barking cackle, and she only calmed herself enough to start on a fresh cigarette.
“Sounds like you’re more uniquely suited to the Wastelander life than you give yourself credit for. And believe me when I tell you, you don’t have to skirt talking about CM anymore. It hasn’t been restricted to your pay grade for a hundred eighty years, and the DIA’s bit the dust just like the rest of the government proper.”

‘Choly’s face slacked in culpability. He avoided eye contact a tic, and set down his half-finished half-cocktail to fold his hands under his legs.

“I’m proud of the way I’ve adapted Syringer rifle darts. CM’s... surprisingly versatile weaponized.”

She gave him a sleazy, approving grin when he admitted what she’d intuited.

“I don’t remember that we got along all that well back in the day, but damn if I’m not glad to see you. Not speaking ill of my chrome family, but I don’t get to see a flesh and body face all too often these days. It’s not going to be easy for you to get back out, now that you’re in, I’m afraid. You’re welcome to stay as long as you like. Maybe after you get some rest and think on it, we can form some kind of a game plan to deal with these assholes down the street once and for all?”

Struck dumb that she’d not torn into him for what he’d done with his military intelligence, he sat frozen at length. He found himself staring at the chrome Pip-Boy on her left wrist, vaguely nagged by his inability to identify the model. Her proposition soaked into him slowly, and he picked his drink back up to work on finishing it. He sucked on an ice cube and feigned anything but total adoration.

“You said that the residential block got hit hard by the fallout. Is... any of it still standing?”

“Most of it, yeah. But it wasn’t prepped to shield that heavy a rad barrage, is what I meant. The rads have since aired out of the majority of the lot. You’ve got your pick of any townhouse on the lot, except mine.” She straightened, drawn back to reality a ways. “There’s just the one thing. Only drink or wash in the water from the compound. Residential plumbing still runs for the most part, but you’re a smoothskin. Don’t risk the rads.”

He choked on the acknowledgement of the fundamental difference between the two of them with a nervous chuckle. The supposition she might be immune to radiation titillated him.

“...About that. I’ve... come across a good number of ghouls since I woke up. But you’re the first fully rational one I’ve met. I think I’m only now finally understanding what people meant when they called a ghoul feral.”

Olivia gave him an uncomfortable grimace.

“Fortunately, you won’t have to deal with ferals on base. Deenwood is monstrously secure, so nothing can get in. They make me a might bit skittish myself. Don’t like the thought of encounters with them being only a bubble off looking in a mirror. Anyway...” She cleared her throat to punctuate that she’d noticed just how much he’d been caught staring, and he flinched. “Enough nightmare talk. We have an early morning of it. I still keep military hours, even though I’m the only non-robot here. Makes the robots happy, so it makes me happy. Habits die hard.”

“--Don’t they ever. I’m just glad that, now that I’m back, we’re not right back glued to cooking up CM and testing formulations on soldiers. Chase’s R&D’s the nightmare talk for me.”

She topped off her glass one more time, and ate her dried cherry.

“No, we’re far past that now, aren’t we?” Olivia rose and ushered him out of her office, meeting objection. “Imagine you don’t need me to show you around, even two hundred years later. The
Gutsies and Handies can help you, if you’ve forgotten your way. I typically stay close to the Robotics wing, if you need me. We’ll meet back here at, say, oh-six? That’s plenty of time for breakfast first, mm?”

His head slurried with him standing. He glanced at his Pip-Boy. Already seven o’clock. He gave her an uncertain but obeisant nod with a little too much rattle in it, too cowardly to press her continued company.

“Goodnight, Carey.”

He stopped her from pushing the heavy paneled wooden door shut, and he continued holding out his arm a good ways after doing so, tottering on his feet.

“I, you. You said you prefer to be called Olivia. I’ve made a bit of a name for myself in the past few months.” She looked to him with attentive fatigue. “Melancholy. ...’Choly.”

After thinking on it a moment, she patted him on the cheek.

“Really rings what’s survived of your accent. Goodnight, Melancholy.”

The door clicked shut, and he heard it lock.

When Angel didn’t come up on its own, he belted out an insistent, deep whistle that cut down the corridor both ways. And he waited to be escorted... home. He shuddered, and couldn’t quite say why.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

In a wasteland survival fic, does this chapter constitute schmoop?

Locked up in his head as they walked along the modular concrete hallways of the Research and Development wing, ‘Choly had just shared with Angel what Olivia had described of the base, and their plans for the next day. He wanted to avoid this building as much as possible.

“Sir, allow me to take you across grounds,” Angel insisted alongside him. “You just installed these handles and footrests on me, and you should--”

“--I’m fhhine,” he slurred, waving a hand at the Handy. “Just trying to draft the order of... how to go about settling back in. How to cover the least distance. Optimize the path to a bed, if I can.”

“You don’t seem fine, but I won’t press it... Perhaps you’d like to start with the enlisted barracks, and work your way over to the officers’ barracks? You could... start things off with a nice, hot shower? Hm-hm?”

He stuttered awe under his breath in Russian, and tried to ignore any suggestion that he looked as inebriated as he felt.

“They have hot water?” he mouthed at Angel.

“Deenwood hosts so many things! Come along now. It’s already past nineteenth hour, and you’ve told Miss Olivia that we’ll rejoin at sixth tomorrow. We must get you washed and dressed and fed.” It chortled anxiously. “Thank you, for at least letting me escort you.”

“There’s just something about being on base again that’s making me feel... right,” he defended, implicitly begging that it let him enjoy the moment. “You’re more than just my mobility, Angel. So much more.”

Halfway across the courtyard, a Mister Gutsy intercepted them.

“Captain,” it grunted in affirmative. “I’ve been tasked with running errands for you tonight. Give the order.”

“Ah, yes... Green Three?” he fielded, gauging by the white lettering on its dull green side. He’d never really noticed non-personnel G.A. robots went by designations, but it made sense. “I... I suppose it’s gauche for me to be on base in anything but uniform, all things considered. Could you outfit me fresh?”

“Yes, Sir!” G-3’s triplicate golden ocular lenses scrutinized his form before stiffening in place. “Measurements taken.”

“That’s all for now. Angel and I are headed to the showers at the enlisted barracks.”

“Deliver the uniform to Mister Handy nicknamed Angel, at the enlisted barracks’ baths. Roger.” It sped off toward the storage building which stood between the R&D wing they’d just exited and the
Robotics wing—the only three hangar-like concrete structures on the property.

The two of them arrived at the enlisted barracks at the North end of the property. To the left lay the soldiers’ quarters, while to the right lay the community showers. The enlisted mess hall stood separate from this building behind it. Without hesitation he turned right, then right again into the men’s side, and handed Angel his cane so that he could disrobe. He deposited his Pip-Boy, visor, orthotics, hairpins, and clothing on a bench in the changing area. The notion of a working shower possessed him, carrying one step in front of the last, and before he knew it, he was turning the handle and standing directly under the water without even testing the temperature first, or checking that he was, in fact, all alone with Angel keeping watch.

Soon both the water and his relieved bliss ran hot down his cheeks. He shut his trembling eyes and lifted his face to the apparent water pressure. He left his mouth open a moment to trap water, which he squirted out for effect. After some time his head dipped, to let the hot water stream down his aching neck and back. Angel eventually interrupted his detachment from reality. Being handed his toiletries got him crying like at a wedding.

Lathering his hair, ‘Choly thought to his initial impression to encountering Olivia again like this. Her smart style with one side shaved that apparently compensated for a balding patch, her thick phlegmatic voice, her exposed turbinates, her... her... He really was attracted to ghouls now, wasn’t he? He remembered his promise to Angel—use Rad-X—and ribald notions of both Olivia and Hawthorne alike melted him apart where he stood.

He stood. Angel was right. He didn’t remember standing this much in a day, in months. His blood pressure didn’t feel like it had dipped or spiked. His posture didn’t feel especially infirm. He still ached, and the cane still made the going easier... but he didn’t quite feel himself.

_I should be crumpled over by now, bathing on a folding chair_, he reasoned. _I spent my morning repairing Bogey. It told me about the Rust Devils. I blew an hour on a bucket of golf balls. I traveled nearly two hours atop Angel without stopping, and avoided a Rust Devil attack right when we got to Chelmsford. I found out one of my coworkers survived and is still alive, and we got drunk... “And now I’m standing in the first hot shower I’ve had in two hundred years, waiting for the water to run cold and slap me in the face so I wake up. Too much for one day. Too much in so many ways.”_

When he finally turned the water off, he dried himself and sat on the bench in the changing area. The Gutsy had brought a folded khaki uniform and a set of skivvies to match, combat boots in his size, and also a navy bathrobe. He slipped on the tee, underwear, and robe once his skin was dry enough, but didn’t tie the waist. His eyes widened as he toweled at his hair.

“Oh maybe the problem is, I feel exactly like myself.”

He favored the ankle stability of a boot, over low quarters like his oxfords. Lacking confirmation that any living persons but Olivia and himself existed on this base, he remained in the bathrobe for the rest of the night. As he put his Pip-Boy back on, he noticed his orthotics, Vault Suit, and Pharm Corps coat had gone missing, only because his nameplate and bars lay on the bench atop the folded fresh uniform.

“Did G-3 take my effects, Angel?” he called.

“G-3 said that it waited until you had a convenient time to change clothes, to take them. It boasted that it knew a thing or two about getting out blood stains. _As do I!_ I tried to tell it that I could operate laundry equipment with my sensors disabled, but it insisted that I stay by you, as your escort.” Angel reentered the baths to hover before him. “My word, Sir. I... I have to say how good
it is to be back at Deenwood. We robots might have our exceptions with one another, but we were a complex and thriving network of chums. Just as you befriended your colleagues.”

‘Choly stared at the rectangular brooch of metal and brightly dyed embroidered ribbon, signifying ten years of stripes and pips mounted together. What did he really have to show for his decade of service? His throat caught at length, until he pinned his nameplate and bars to the robe in lieu of his coat.

“I... didn’t have friends,” he finally said in passing, starting toward the front door. “I haven’t eaten since breakfast. Finally hungry enough to do something about it. Shall we see if the officers’ mess hall’s furnished?”

They crossed South to the officers’ side of the property in the brisk night air. Entering the mess hall, he encountered a modestly cozy arrangement of vinyl-upholstered chrome chairs in sets of four at eight round tables. Large fake potted plants tucked themselves to each corner, and beside each support column. To one side of the space, he’d have found the beverage offerings, while to the other, he found an à la carte window winged by a pair of Eat-O-Tronic machines. In one, he found MREs, and in the other, he would have found desserts. After his experience with the pharmacy break room, it relieved him to find no moldy remains in the vending slots; in the same stroke, he praised the base’s stockpile of perfectly preserved rations. He eagerly selected the beef tips and mashed potatoes package, but before he could get it open, the Mister Handy at the window hemmed and held out a pincer.

“Monsieur, if I could get that for you,” it began, in a French accent.

“...Yes, of course.” He handed it over dumbly. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure!” In a flash, it produced a tray with the now-heated contents of the MRE on a plate, including the instant cocoa packet. “Bon appetit!”

“...I could have... Oh, no matter.” Angel zipped over to at least pull the chair for ‘Choly. “Sir, while you dine, I’d love the chance to catch up with Louis, if I may. I’ll be within earshot.” It didn’t await confirmation before darting behind the swinging door in the far corner.

The potatoes couldn’t help tasting like cardboard two hundred years later, but the beef tendered up like it had never been preserved in a jerky-like state, and the gravy had him lolling back in the chair to savor it. The soy-based cocoa struck him as an innocent indulgence amid the options he’d had in prior months. The hot mug in his hands comforted him, and he couldn’t help but smile dopily at hearing the two Mister Handies in the kitchen chatting and laughing unintelligibly.

Angel’s not lonely here.

‘Choly took his tray back to the window once he was done, and he and Angel thanked Louis and bid it goodnight. The walk from the mess hall was short, but was incumbent of the most anticipated part of the night for him. The officers’ residential block was a set of three identical rows of twelve two-story rowhouses apiece. Habitually, he walked up the three steps of the second row’s third door, like always, and opened the front door on bated breath. Standing in the entryway, he flicked on the light switch to find the electricity worked, and he smiled in distraction as he took in the thick layer of dust on every surface. The dark green velour couch and armchair were still there, as were the hanging floor lamp, the coffee table, and the kitchen table and chairs.

“I have my work cut out for me,” Angel beamed. It shut the door behind them and immediately set to dusting off the living room.
Compulsion seized him again, and he mounted the creaking stairs at a persistent, lurching pace until he stood in the doorway of what had once been his bedroom. The queen size mattress lay bare before him, in tact. His throat caught again, aghast, and he slumped against the door frame to gawk. It took a few tries before he successfully swallowed. Angel came up behind him after a spell.

“Oh Sir, are you all right?”

He looked to it with a haunted desperation.

“Nothing has felt this right since I thawed.”

He sniffed, and leveraged with his cane to stand fully again. He requested a canister of water, his toothbrush and toothpaste, mouthwash, and hairbrush, which Angel obliged, and he vanished into the upstairs bathroom closing the door behind him.

As he brushed his teeth, he stared at himself in the hoary glass mounted on the wall. A single crack ran from one corner to the other, right through the middle, but for the most part, the mirror functioned like a mirror. He nearly felt like the whole base had been transfigured by some perverse stasis just like he had, all but sheltered from the end of the world and here awaiting him all this time. He shivereded and cinched his robe, then spat and moved on to the mouthwash.

*Simple hygiene really is a luxury now, isn’t it?* he thought to himself as he rinsed his face.

He came out of the bathroom to find that Angel had made his bed with the hospital blanket and pillows before vanishing back downstairs. He sat on the edge of the bed to remove his boots and socks, and brushed out his hair which had finally dried by then. The brush went to the nightstand, and he hung the robe on the hook on the bathroom door. He turned out the lights, and passed out face-down in anticipation of the first quality sleep he’d gotten in two hundred years.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

’Choly, slow down. You're advancing the plot.

Kitchen sounds beneath ‘Choly woke him. He glanced to his Pip-Boy for the time. 4:47. He rubbed at his face. Angel had covered him in his sleep. He slumped upright, then wandered into the bathroom before heading downstairs.

Angel had opened all the windows downstairs overnight to air out the dust. The Handy hummed pleasantly to itself at the pantry. ‘Choly smiled to himself as he ambled through the living room and across the crusty, deteriorated low-pile red carpet, to sit at the small linoleum kitchen table.

“Good morning, Mister Carey! I was just about to rouse you, when I heard the plumbing. Oh, please tell me you rested well.”

“I rested... amazingly.” He nodded appreciatively at the presentation of coffee in his Billerica Golf Course mug. “You’ve been busy.”

“My apologies that breakfast isn’t elaborate.” It presented plated reconstituted egg powder with some hard yellow cheese and a mound of nondescript fruit preserves. “But I’ve made sure you have your morning coffee, at least.”

“Where did you get eggs?” He nearly didn’t think it could be eggs.

“It’s another MRE. G-3 was by already with your dry cleaning. I asked it to bring you an MRE fitting for breakfast fare, and also a percolator.”

With a mouthful of egg and cheese, ‘Choly gazed, half-awake, at the percolator beside the stove. Vaguely, he recalled that MREs may have precipitated his concocting Melancholia in the first place. The eggs weren’t bad. They were just... wrong. Scrambled eggs were supposed to be chunky and fluffy, but these were almost like aerated rubber. It was better than the Yum Yum smoothie. Just about anything was better than the Yum Yum smoothie. He washed it down, and sank into his chair.

“I want to try to dry the silt beans as soon as possible. Preferably dry roasting in the oven, I think. We’ll need a way to grind them.”

“I take it the meal last night gave you trouble.”

“Yeah, and this one probably will too. It’s got nothing to do with the taste. I have to eat something, though.”

The fruit preserves were neither tart nor sweet. He ate them anyway.

He glanced around the kitchen and living room. Angel seemed to have unloaded a majority of its storage to the locations typical of such items: magazines on the coffee table, rations in the pantry, and toiletries in the bathroom upstairs he realized. His syringer rifle jutted out of the golf bag in the front corner, an odd juxtaposition to what could have otherwise felt like just another day in 2070.
He supposed Angel still kept all the chems inside itself, though. He picked up his plate and stood in the living room, to look at the periodicals on the coffee table. The history textbook lay among them.

“You said G-3 stopped by?” He sat on the edge of the couch to finger through the book.

“I didn’t want to wake you, so I received your dry cleaning. Everything is hung or folded upstairs in your closet.”

He murmured in affirmative, and set his food in his lap to stare at the photograph Jared had shown him. *Figure 16.4, ‘Major Johnston and Three of His Pharm Corps Chemists.’ Left to right: Second Lieutenant Gary Sydney, and Captains Olivia Francis and Alan Carey. Major Theodore Johnston to the right.* The Major had been a grizzled old man with peppered hair and a bulletproof mustache, while 2Lt. Sydney with a slicked short dark undercut had likely been the youngest officer on base. His brow furrowed before slacking as he stared at Olivia. With a heart-shaped face and a full head of blonde hair pulled back into a neat bun, she had a few inches on Carey, who stood beside her with his dark hair in a mussed french twist and his eyes half-hidden behind crescent-frame glasses. No, he remembered her. Structured, punctual, and paradoxically recalcitrant to spite her rank. If there’d been anyone Johnston had indicated express dislike of on base, it was Capt. Francis. Everyone had to mitigate between the two of them by proxy. Just as the military had overlooked his more glaring traits, they were just as desperate to keep someone as skilled and versed as she.

His finger traced at his chin scar, recalling the photo predated his receiving it. He hadn’t had friends on base because he hadn’t let himself. He’d stayed to himself. The hardback book shut. No, unless it came up in conversation, he wouldn’t bother Olivia with his relic, or how he got it. He set the empty dish in the sink and finished off his coffee, then vanished upstairs.

As indicated, his orthotics and uniform pieces lay in the drawers of the chest in the closet. He strung himself into his orthotics, which now shone white they had come so clean, and brushed his teeth and washed his face. He dully traced at the metal he’d applied to his bathrobe the night before, only to remove them and set them atop the closet chest. The wool uniform, combat boots, and tucked four-in-hand khaki necktie came next. His hair swept up into the neatest french twist he’d achieved in recent memory, owing to the decent lighting and access to a mirror. He retrieved the white coat from its hanging bag, and returned the nameplate and bars to it, to wear it. The full length closet mirror had shattered, so he sized himself up in the bathroom. The echoes of 2077 snagged at him, and he loathed a moment what his work day might bring, until he could reassure himself that Olivia had sworn they no longer needed to test CM on soldiers. With a sardonic breath, he went downstairs in search of his bracers and holsters, to complete the ensemble.

‘Choly and Angel went to the General’s office, to meet G-7 waiting in the hall.

“The General got restless,” it informed, leading the way to the Robotics wing. “She’s always working on something.”

When they arrived, Olivia had powered down a Sentry Bot and crouched to do maintenance on one of its three mecanum limbs. An Assaultron stood nearby. G-7 excused itself, having accomplished its shepherding, and silence besides mechanical operations subsumed the space.

“Good morning,” ‘Choly began, hands laced behind him. He stiffened in the presence of two of the military’s most powerful robotic models.

The ghoul looked up, but didn’t stand, focused on her task.
“Take it the food was satisfactory,” she commented, deadpan.

“It would be apples to oranges, to compare an MRE to Angel’s cooking.”

Angel scoffed at him and he grinned at it with a side-eye. She guffawed.

“Since it’s just me, I don’t really bother much with getting meat and produce on base. I’m fine with the bicentennial MREs, with the occasional indulgences. They’re edible, and there’s enough variety left. It’s not like I’ve been stuck eating InstaMash every day, three meals a day, all this time.”

“--But don’t you miss things that can’t be in a Meal Ready to Eat? Salads? Or--”

“--Around the time the world ended, I took my grieving, Carey. Melancholy. I don’t need the pampering of fresh food, or... sweets... or a... rare steak...” She tossed down her crescent wrench and sat cross-legged. “Oh, who’m I kidding? I’ve just gotten so used to it, that I stopped questioning it. It’s convenient, and it’s still edible, and it’s not junk.”

“It sounds like you’re fishing for me to give you a reason to do something about the food,” he smirked.

“It’s certainly not something I’d fix, just for my own sake alone, that’s for sure.”

“Maybe once we contend with the potential security threat, we can work on improving the quality of the base’s food supplies. I feel like we both could probably stand to take better care of ourselves.”

Olivia’s features tightened just enough to notice, before she stood, and patted the Sentry’s thigh plate with a resigned satisfaction. She rounded to its back, and uncoiled the key prong of her Pip-Boy to plug into the robot.

“Maybe so.”

The Sentry powered back on with a series of hisses from both mechanism and steam, and it lurched as its hydraulics kicked in.

“Good morning, General,” it grunted in a low broken digitized voice.

“Good morning, S-2. I’ve replaced that cracked roller, and I rotated your belts. You’re free to return to regular operation.”

“Affirmative. Maintenance valued.”

The Sentry rolled out of the garage doors with unexpected agility for something as enormous and bulky as what amounted to a robotic tank. ‘Choly gave it a wide berth, straightening on his cane. Meanwhile, Olivia had begun to circle Angel with her hands in her back pockets.

“Parts from Handy, Gutsy, and Nanny,” she remarked, nodding. “You’ve gotten parts from all three models cooperating smoothly. Impressive. Angel, what’s your current ammo count?”

“Miss Olivia, I have twenty-seven 5.56mm bullets, and 59 fusion cells.”

“Oh, no. This won’t do.” She about faced and waved them to follow her to the next hangar over: Storage. They trailed behind her as she skimmed aisles for mental notes. As she spoke next, she produced the indicated items. “All three tendrils utilize laser attachments. You need at least a hundred fusion cells on hand. And I won’t accept anything less than a full 5.56mm belt.”
“Thank you!” It loaded the ammunition into its attachments, handing off the 27 spare bullets to her in exchange for the full belt of 500.

“Always thought any Handy could be a Gutsy at heart,” she grinned. “Angel, you’re a beautiful piece of work. Really something else.”

“It’s all thanks to Mister Carey,” it insisted in continued gratitude.

"You deserve the best,” he deflected, stressed to realize that the Assaultron had followed them.

“Oh, Melancholy. Lighten up.” Olivia gestured at the Assaultron. “This is Helen. Helen, Melancholy. Sorry I didn’t introduce you two earlier. I forget everyone doesn’t already know everyone.”

“H-- hello, Helen.”

“I won’t hurt you unless you deserve it,” the cyclopean robot greeted in a deep, coy tone.

A nervous laugh trickled out of him.

“The army didn’t issue me a robot like they did you, so I appointed Helen mine myself.”

“I see.” His composure slowly cemented. “You... mentioned my accent last night.”

She paused to find the best wording she could muster.

“We all knew you’re red, ‘Choly. You weren’t the only one of us that passed for an American. The Feds got real desperate in the final years before the Great War. Reached for just about any asset they could grab, including contracting well outside the Thirteen Commonwealths. You’re fortunate that of all your colleagues to survive, you’re stuck with one that worked alongside you long enough and closely enough to know you’re a loyal fuck.” She leaned in with a quiet grin. “Look, I’ve read the DIA papers on just about everybody who frequented this chem pit. I know you’re only half Russian. The other half behaved itself, never betrayed us. You’ve proved yourself just as much as any of us did.”

The truth rang in his ears like gushing water. What was his motivation? He’d told Jared he’s loyal to security and safety, and money in lieu of the first two. Confident the dollar no longer carried any weight, he wondered if how he’s changed as a person since Lexington was for the better. It hadn’t even been a week, and already his priorities had been turned on head. More than anything, they had to work toward preventing the raiders from overtaking and occupying the Deenwood Compound. The Rust Devils would abuse the chem resources far worse than the Deenwood chemists had, and in the wrong hands, Deenwood’s robotics could easily decimate what was left of the Commonwealth. The base was viably his new home now--the sense of belonging had not been stronger since he’d thawed out--and Olivia’s reply had him grasping blind for any way to prove what he was willing to do to defend it.

“It’s not just the two of us and all these robots, right? Surely not. And even if there really isn’t anyone else on base, there has to have been survivors in Lowell? Or Chelmsford? I... didn’t get a good look at the state of Billerica on the way up here, but I wouldn’t be shy to double back if it meant we could drum up allies.”

“Chelmsford and the Highlands are crawling with ferals. Most of Lowell and Pawtucketville’s wildlife. Pelts and Merrilurks. There’s a pocket of trappers in Centralville that call themselves the Furriers...” She trailed off into a frown. “I... don’t know if I like where this is going.”
“Would they help us? If I can get up there, would they talk with me?”

Somehow, she found cause to warm to the idea.

“I haven’t made contact with them in a long time. It’s been since before the Rust Devils settled in. Too nervous to leave Deenwood on automatic, especially without knowing how far the Rust Devils’ territory expanded. I don’t know. It’s a long shot. They keep to themselves. They’re descended from mill workers who survived since day one of the new world order.” She paced the stock aisles again, arms folded behind her. “The way’s dangerous without proper gear. You can’t cut North on Chelmsford Road and follow it up to O’Donnell Bridge, for a lot of reasons. The Devils recently took Back Central--from what my Eyebots have reported. You’re probably safest taking the West route across, and cutting across Rourke Bridge to follow the shore. Hermit crabs often hole up on O’Donnell Bridge, and believe me when I say you don’t want to know why I’m warning against encountering them if you can ever manage it.”

His face slacked. He hadn’t encountered any shellfish yet.

“If the insects got big, the crustaceans must have got enormous.”

She turned to grin at his naivete.

“Seeing it’s believing it, but you’re dead right. There’s another reason to favor Rourke Bridge. You need to go see Sticks. He lives at the Sampas Pavilion. Get him to go with you. He’s got clout with the Furriers’ sachem, Reese. Just you on your own, they might turn you away. But both of you? A much better shot.”

Doubt screwed up his face.

“What makes you think this guy will help us?”

“He’s helped me a dozen times. He’ll definitely grasp the stakes. And I’d warn you in advance, but you seemed less shaken that I’m a ghoul than you are I’m still kicking--he’s a ghoul, too. Try not to stare at him as much as you stare at me, all right? And don’t give the farm away, either. Negotiate without bartering, if at all possible.”

Caught admiring her, he poorly disguised his averted gaze with a cough.

“So you think it’s a good idea then?”

“We haven’t been able to outgun the Devils in two years. You know what an arms race looks like. You’re on the money, to propose calling in reinforcements. What’s important is, are you absolutely certain that you want to do this? You only just got to Deenwood, already flying to her defense.”

He glanced over to Helen, recalling the two savage robots that had torn after him and Angel on their way on base, and his mouth became a thin line.

“I don’t think we have another choice.”
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Nearer, my god, to thee...

TW: Trypo, mental break, unreality, tampered food implied.

‘Choly sat back at his desk in his townhouse, thinking over his errand. Thirty minutes before, over a morning drink that somewhat resembled a Blood Mary in spirit, ‘Choly and Olivia had discussed what she believed he’d need. She had offered up a few clips of .38 bullets, and a box of sharpened pencils which now soaked downstairs in coolant. The Mister Gutsies had tried to fit him with combat armor, but his infirm joints couldn’t even bear the helmet. When he’d refused grenades ‘to shuck the damn hermit crabs, if God forbid, you encounter any,’ Olivia had insisted upon tweaking one of Angel’s lasers to exhibit incendiary properties. She’d sworn fire was a crucial weapon for anyone traveling along the river.

She’d also voiced surprise that ‘Choly hadn’t sought to hash out compensation for the task. Whether he believed it or not, he coolly told her that sometimes, peace of mind is worth more than money.

He chewed at a fountain pen, with the map screen of his Pip-Boy pulled up. The night before, Angel had laid out his belongings in every room of the townhouse, including the office, which now included his typewriter, and also the deathclaw hand and bloodbug proboscis. The Handy had expressed revulsion over what it perceived as ‘dead weight’ and requested never again to carry pieces of corpses. He couldn’t entirely argue with the sentiment.

It was already eight. Provided they met no trouble along the way, the suggested route—to Voire, the Northeast Lowell location which Olivia had marked on his Pip-Boy map—wouldn’t take more than two hours each direction. He could be back on base before dark, if all the cards fell in his favor.

Olivia recommended traveling as light as possible, but something about the sentiment unsettled him in a way he couldn’t pinpoint. Was he reluctant to leave his belongings on base? No, it was the paranoia the Rust Devils would attack while he’s gone, and overwhelm Deenwood’s robotic defenses. He set his pen down to gripe at himself. In the event that happened, he should be more worried about Olivia and the base’s equity than his belongings. He’d lost almost everything in the pharmacy fire the week before. Leaving behind his belongings would posit a measure of his stability, an act of faith. There would be something to return to. Still, he insisted upon Angel keeping the history textbook and Merrick Index safe inside itself.

He committed to first aid and ammunition, a clipboard with pencil and paper, holotapes, cash and valuables in the event he had to barter, three MREs with utensils, and some water. ...And some liquor, in the event any of these folks weren’t the type to negotiate sober. He planned to take lunch once he arrived at the Sampas Pavilion, with the optimism to ply Sticks’s favor with the offer of a hot meal.

With his plan mostly cemented, he slipped on his visor and slung his syringer rifle to his back, the Nagant and his cane at his thigh, and the two headed out. No Rust Devils awaited their exit.
kept his .38 at the ready as they zipped down the two-lane street traveling West. Very few abandoned cars dotted the roads. Once they passed a schoolhouse, they turned North onto the residential thoroughfare. A mixture of Federal and Victorian architecture, with modest yard sizes, stretched both sides of the idyllic tree-swept road for some ways.

Demarcating Chelmsford from Lowell proper, they crossed the Route 3 overpass, of which a chunk the full width of one lane had fallen through. Commercial building strips sprang up intermixed with housing. The street dead ended, and they cut left along a street with an apartment complex to one side. Feral ghouls spilled out after them. Angel flew backwards to use its minigun attachment for the first time, and it successfully cut down easily half of them with one wave of bullets while still maintaining speed. The two knocked out enough of the ferals to outrun them by the time they passed the Hester’s Consumer Robotics. A bank lay at the corner of the next dead end, and they turned right to travel North again into another run of apartments and rowhouses.

“Ohhh, that was almost too easy,” Angel sighed, still laughing. ‘Choly nearly didn’t hear it, his ears ringing from the rapid gunfire. He’d have to invest in ear protection, if he’d be relying on Angel using these new accessories with him atop it.

A Red Rocket came up on the right, and Lowell’s Super Duper Mart to the left. The memory of Lexington’s SDM jolted him.

“We can’t stop for groceries today,” he choked out. “Not even on the way back.”

“So be it. But don’t complain if dinner’s not to your liking.”

They passed a drugstore on the left before Rourke Bridge began, and ‘Choly absently deliberated if Walden Drugs had owned it. Crossing the bridge, Angel slowed between the two shoulderless high-barrier lanes to maneuver around the handful of vehicles that had rusted out with centuries of exposure directly above the Merrimack. ‘Choly glanced up and down river to either side of them, in awe that the river retained its idyllic beauty despite the scorched trees and demolished buildings which dotted its shores. The bridge dead ended opposite Claypit Brook Bowling Alley. They turned right onto the four-lane Pawtucket Boulevard.

By the time they passed a boathouse, they noticed they were being followed--or rather, chased. ‘Choly’s head whipped around to look behind when Angel fired its lasers at their pursuants, to find five very angry knuckle-walking finned creatures of unknown morphology.

“Angel--”

“I know, Sir--”

‘Choly shot at them, and they shot back--or rather, shot from their backs. One would stop to take aim, spread its arms out for support, and the tumescent growths mounded up from gaping pores in their back would fire off almost like mortar shells, to launch their larvae at the intruders. A larva connected and skittered up ‘Choly’s coat tails to try to chew up his neck, and he couldn’t get the too-many-legged crustaceanoid thing off him before it had gnawed the skin open. Behind them one of the adult creatures shrieked in fury at being lasered in the face.

The sound of glass shattering, and all the Merrilurks shrieking, distracted ‘Choly from the pain, and the blood on his hand from the larva bite. He looked ahead of them to find a figure in faded gold longshoreman’s garb, chucking Molotov cocktails. Once the pursuants and pursued closed within range, the longshoreman took up his Flamer by both handles and unloaded a blast of gas-splatter and fire that struck both the chemist and the fish chasing him.
Disoriented and screaming, he fell off Angel. He rolled about the sand to put himself out once confident he was on the ground. He lay there panting for some time before the longshoreman approached and stood over him. The open lattice metal structure of the pavilion loomed behind ‘Choly’s head mere yards away. The longshoreman shoved the nozzle of the Flamer in ‘Choly’s face.

“The fuck is a Rust Devil doing wearing a... US army... uniform...?” The certainty washed from his coarse voice, and he dropped the weapon to the dirt to remove his ushanka and welding goggles. ‘Choly squinted up at the figure silhouetted by the sun directly above them. All ‘Choly could make out was a faint insinuation of a chin-beard. Absolute hurt and confusion came next. “...Mindy?”

Out of reflex, ‘Choly swept the longshoreman ghoul’s legs with a kick and tried to crawl away, but didn’t manage to knock him down. The longshoreman sidestepped around to cut him off, and crouched to grab him by a fistful of shirt to glare at him with a snarl. All the chemist could do was shake his head as his trembling denial sublimated into broken jealousy.

“No... No, you’re Sticks. The river ghoul,” he insisted, labored laughter cracking out of him. Tears streamed down his face as the sunlight seared the edges of his vision. “Jacob Hawthorne is dead. You-- You can’t--”

“This is a new low, even for her.” Sticks choked down sobbing. “How the hell did she-- Did she even know we have history?”

Angel finally unstuck, its tendrils curled tight.

“...Mister Hawthorne? Is it really you...?”

The ghoul clenched his teeth and let go of ‘Choly, and stood to collect his flamethrower. He walked across the street opposite the pavilion, toward what once had been an ice cream parlor. He waved them on in invitation.

“You’re going to come inside, and you’re going to tell me what the HELL this is all about.”

“No.” ‘Choly sniveled as he righted himself with his cane and followed, fringes of the Red Rocket in his peripheral as he conflated the two experiences. “No, you can’t be him. I... I saw him beheaded not a week ago!”

Angel remained outside to keep watch, knowing to give them space.

“I have no idea who or what you thought was me in that scenario, but I’m right here. I’m me--”

“--No!” ‘Choly couldn’t hold in his hysterics, and flew to collapse against Sticks’s chest. “No! It’s not fair! It’s not right! Why is everyone I know a ghoul now, except me!”

Sticks made him sit in a booth, then began pacing. After a moment he paused and threw out both hands.

“Carey, how are you standing clear as day in front of me? Where the fuck have you been all this time? Barring whatever happened to you, you don’t look like you’ve aged a day since you vanished down the vault.”

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“Carey, how are you standing clear as day in front of me? Where the fuck have you been all this time? Barring whatever happened to you, you don’t look like you’ve aged a day since you vanished down the vault.”

“I... I haven’t.” He sniffed, and tossed his glasses on the cracked linoleum table. “The vault... put me on ice. Cryogenics. The equipment finally failed a few months back. I don’t think I thawed properly...” Uncertainty made his despair-soaked features wander wild. “Jacob... if you’re still alive, why wasn’t there any sign you’d been in Sanctuary?”
“God...” Sticks had to start pacing again. “I took two things. But I couldn’t stay there. Not after what happened. I couldn’t even get my car off its side once the dust settled. You know security turned away the Vault-Tec salesman that signed your residency? He wouldn’t let me loot the neighbors’ houses, the nerd. Not even for first aid or food. We both turned ghoul while traveling together for a few years. But I had to go alone for a ways, just to get away from him. God, he’s annoying.” He flapped the thought process away, and sat beside ‘Choly. “I’ve been a lot of places since then. Here’s the closest to home I’ve found yet. Yeah, I go by Sticks now. I feel like Jacob Hawthorne died in the process of becoming a ghoul. I... hope the man I used to be died.”

“I... I don’t know what to say... None of this feels right... or real... I’m dreaming, right?”

When ‘Choly started at his nervous habit of stroking his chin scar, something inside Sticks cracked, and he ran a finger over the same place on himself.

“Mindy... know that I’m not the man who did that to you, not anymore. I’m not asking you to forgive me. Just. After that night, I realized just how volatile I can be under pressure. That I had a lot of baggage to unpack. That was lifetimes ago. I’ve had a lot of time to wander and sort myself out. I’m alive. I’m a ghoul now, but I’m alive.”

‘Choly could still smell the memory of recoolant and corroded metal around him. His stomach churned.

“No... no, he... The feral called me Mindy. No one else has ever called me that.”

“You think you could make sense of sounds a feral makes? There’s nothing left in the brain pan. Even if they could string together words, they don’t have meaning.” His volume trailed off again, only to pick up. “God, they froze you because I waved you on. Look at you. It’s my fault you’re this bad off.”

His bluntness lurched ‘Choly forward to press his lips to Sticks’ to shut him up. The ghoul stuttered in exasperation when ‘Choly wouldn’t pull away, and grabbed the chemist by the shoulders to force him to stop. Sticks bit his lower lip, overwhelmed.

“I’ve spent months blaming myself for what I thought had become of you,” ‘Choly insisted with beseeching affect. “Do you know what I keep trying to tell myself when I think about it? That I couldn’t have possibly known what kind of effect the bombs would have on you.” With a faint pained smile, his hands wandered to caress Sticks’s face. When Sticks grabbed him by the wrists, he relented. “That I would have... changed places gladly...”

“But then you might have bec-- oh.” He recoiled in a sneer, and stood to pace again. “Oh, that makes a fat lotta sense. Your brain’s soup, Mindy. I can’t think of a single ghoul I’ve met that’s happy to be one. It’s miserable, and everyone treats us like we’re infectious.”

“Olivia didn’t seem to mind,” he commented sheepishly.

“Oh, the General minds all right. One of the most self-conscious ghouls I’ve ever known. Doesn’t wanna get with a ghoul, ‘cause then it feels like she’s settling. Doesn’t wanna get with a human, ‘cause then it feels like they pity her. But it doesn’t work like that.”

“You... tried to get with Olivia Francis?” ‘Choly couldn’t shove down the reflex to laugh. “Jacob, she might be general now, but she’s always... been a sergeant. All shirts and trousers.”

The ghoul wilted in place after a moment, feeling very small.

“At one point, I thought I could be an exception.”
‘Choly shook his head pityingly.

“You haven’t changed at all.”

“Neither have you.” A confused smile crossed the ghoul’s face, which melted into concern and impatience. “So you did come from the base, then? She sent you? She needs something from the Furriers again. That’s the only reason anyone ever bothers me up here.”

“She says the Rust Devils are getting more brazen. That they’ve taken Back Central. She was hoping the Furriers would help. Do you think they will?”

Sticks frowned.

“Not for free, they won’t.”

“...Will you help?”

The ghoul softened.

“Only ‘cause it’s you, Mindy.”

The silence lingered a bit too long, and ‘Choly unstuck to hobble over to the front door to get Angel’s attention.

“It’s almost lunch time. I brought food from the base. Enough for two--”

Sticks grabbed him before he could poke his head outside.

“I don’t want Francis’s damn drugged food.”

‘Choly’s face slacked and he stared dumbly up at the ghoul.

“...Her what now?”

“You really are dull as a spoon sometimes. Don’t accept drinks from her. And don’t accept her food, not even stuff she’s dolled up to look prepackaged. She acts a misanthrope, but she’s a needy little thing.” Sticks grinned sarcastically at him. “Everything just felt so right, didn’t it? Like you were finally home.”

The cocktail. ‘Choly’s face burned. No wonder she’d only offered him muddled or opaque drinks. And the Meals Ready to Eat... He looked to his Pip-Boy’s health screen to find he’d been given potent doses of a mood enhancer. A dry swallow couldn’t dislodge the lump in his throat.

“Come on, don’t let the mistake get to you. She duped me first time I met her, too. She didn’t poison you. It’ll work its way out of your system in a few hours tops. Let me cook us both lunch. We’ll need the fuel to get across Howe Bridge and Cox Bridge. Even just cutting through the National Historic Park’s no walk in the park, tch.”

“She... told me to stay Pawtucketville side, and cut across the C.I.T. Lowell campus...” He had to sit again, lost as ever.

“The General either considers you that goddamn expendable, or knew that by sending you to me, I’d set you straight out of sheer self-preservation.” Sticks growled, loathing the position he was in. “The C.I.T. ruins are a hermit crab nest.” He threw his hands in the air and walked off to slap open the double-action swinging door, shouting uncertain expletives in the kitchen.
‘Choly wandered behind the bar counter, to poke his head through the service window with a nervous, tired smile.

“And what secret ingredient do you slip into food you serve people?”

The blond ghoul glanced up at him from the icebox and grinned to himself, shaking his head with a demented resignation.

“Depends on who’s staying for dinner.”
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Stir that pot, Sticks. Stir it up good. TWs: Mental break, mention of past assault.

Sticks came out of the kitchen carrying two steaming hot bowls, one in his right hand and the other balanced on the fold of his right arm. The ghoul set one in front of ‘Choly and one where he’d sit on the other side of the booth. In his left hand he’d carried in a sizable greyish egg slightly larger than a coconut, and he cracked it stifflly into ‘Choly’s bowl with a mindful deadpan. The egg was mostly whites, with a walnut sized yolk. He produced flatware from an apron pocket, and stirred the addition in to create egg ribbons in the opaque pale stew.

‘Choly could identify carrot and corn in the bowl, but little else. He decided not to comment on the one elbow-high leather glove Sticks wore on his left hand.

“What... is this? I know there’s no milk anymore, and it looks so creamy.”

Sticks cleared his throat and straightened, to project an exaggerated Boston accent.

“Squirrel chowder.”

‘Choly did his best not to make a face at the source of the small darkly color meat nuggets.

“...And the egg? That was not from a chicken.”

Despite what Olivia had advised, ‘Choly struggled not to stare at Sticks as he sat down opposite him, between his features and his familiarity. The ghoul still had most of his head of blond hair, though it had thinned out a good bit, and he still could grow facial hair contrary to being covered in what looked like deep wiry burn scars from his radiation exposure. The missing chunk of his upper lip exposed the incisor and canine near it. His dark-sclera eyes glanced off to the side, likely misinterpreting ‘Choly looking restlessly between him and the food as ‘Choly distrusting the food.

“Radscorpion. Wasteland remedy. Perfect for hangovers... and coming down from God knows how many consecutive doses of Day Tripper.”

“A scorpion egg. One. Help me, I don’t know if I want to--” He trailed off in a sputter. “Day Tripper. No wonder I couldn’t even hold up a combat helmet.” He finally held up a spoonful to blow on it, and try it. He appreciated the savory mouthful with a slow nod, brows raised. “Not bad.”

“Used to be one of the only chems I’d touch back in the day. Skate through dicey deals on a rough day. Don’t really touch the stuff at all anymore. ...You know, mouthwash does wonders for a nasty bite like that.”

‘Choly didn’t notice how much he’d been fidgeting and stirred his stew more diligently to cool it.

“I’d sooner pour vodka on it.”

Sticks chuckled.
“If memory serves, you’d sooner pour vodka on just about anything.”

Angel opened the front door, and poked its sensors around it.

“Pray I’m not intruding, but I just wanted to check on you gentlemen.” It rushed in once it saw the food on the table. “Why, you’re not eating the MREs Miss Olivia gave you! Did you forget about them, Mister Carey?”

“Oh, no. No, Sticks insisted on being the hospitable one.” He broke down into snickering. “I’m sorry. Sticks. Sticks?”

“What about it? Sticks set out some hardtack in a kerchief. He soaked a chunk in his stew, and offered some to ‘Choly, who declined it. “Nothing wrong with a ghoul livin’ on the river...” He trailed off to lyrical effect, with a long pause.

“Oh, you nerd. I’ve thought it was S-T-I-C-K-S all this time.”

“It is.” Sticks smiled to himself while he kept the hardtack sunk with the back of his spoon. “...Y’know, this isn’t even close to how I thought I was going to spend my day.”

“And how’s that?”

“A pot of stew, and then work on my refurb project some more.” The ghoul eyed Angel. “Those had better not be off Little Boy Blue.”

“My word, no,” Angel interjected. It proceeded to idly polish at the countertops.

“I could never--!” ‘Choly stuffed his mouth full of poached egg. “What are you restoring?”

“Usually my days are packed with maintenance and repair on my mirelurk traps, but I was gonna kick it easy today and try again to get a car running. I try every few years. Not without its risks, but it’s less dangerous now, being a ghoul. Cracked engines don’t risk a suntan anymore.”

So ghouls were resistant, or immune altogether, to radiation after all. For some time, ‘Choly worked on downing the meal.

“Mirelurk?” the chemist finally asked. “I thought they were called Merrilurks.”

“Oh, it’s like how a wolf spider’s a kind of spider. They’re particularly gnarly as far as Commonwealth crustaceans go. Lowell’s factories and mills used to dump directly into the Merrimack and Concord. And Deenwood, too, of course, but you lot couldn’t just dump straight from your backyard. Pipelines. Nasty stuff.”

‘Choly numbed to having had a source put to the mutated wildlife. The flavors of the stew clung to his mouth and he ran his tongue over its roof repeatedly.

“Are you trying to tell me that something Deenwood made, created those... things that attacked me and Angel?”

“Duller than a spoon.” Sticks clicked his tongue. “You think the base disposed of their waste safely? In war time? The mills were getting converted over to fabricating military textiles like QUARPEL, too, the year the bombs fell. Deenwood kept dumping for decades after the world ended. Wouldn’t be surprised if the General still dumps her project waste.”

‘Choly picked at the morsels in his bowl.
“...You go by Sticks now. I go by Melancholy now, for my degree in opiates. Do you... do you remember the Melancholia? Did I ever make any around you?”

“What, that stuff you drank instead of eating?”

“Yeah, I...” His throat choked him. “I thought maybe you’d remember what went into it.”

“...Melancholy, it’s been two hundred years since I last saw your face. You think I’d remember your recipe just from observing you make it a few times? I’m sorry.” The ghoul took a big bite and patted the table to stand, then held up his hands to suggest ‘Choly stay put. Once he could swallow half of it, he started, “I might not have that, but I do have something else.”

When Sticks vanished upstairs, ‘Choly looked to Angel.

“Oh, Sir, don’t look at me. I haven’t a clue.”

The ghoul returned with a jewelry box. He picked through it and produced a velvet drawstring bag, which he set beside ‘Choly’s food before sitting again.

“Before Gene dragged me out of Sanctuary Hills--the Vault-Tec guy--I took what valuables I could scoop together from the house. Including your stuff. I wanted to be able to liquidate easily. I sold off most of it, but something about selling off those just felt... off. It would’ve been like selling off your--” He stared at ‘Choly’s bars, realizing he still had them, and quietened himself a spell with another mouthful of stew. “--Your uniform.”

“I was just as surprised as you to find it hanging in the Walden Drugs mud room, still in the bag, after all these years.” He sat back to empty the bag into his hand, and the breath fell from him at the sight of his red enamel cuff links returned to him. He turned them in his palm. “My remembrance poppies. I did forget them that morning, didn’t I? J-- Sticks. You... said you took two things. What was the other?”

Sticks gave him a raunchy sneer.

“The lingerie catalogue. You remember, right? Duchesne?”

The two exchanged an ugly laugh.

“No wonder I couldn’t find it.” The chemist grinned insufferably.

“--You looked for it!” The ghoul slapped the table and guffawed.

Because the Pip-Boy forced one rolled cuff, he couldn’t wear both cuff-links, but ‘Choly threaded one poppy through his left cuff buttonholes with a fading smile. Memory of Duchesne from the nightmare the other day elicited a flinch. He started sobering from the chem that had likely been in both his breakfast and his early morning cocktail, and he rubbed at his forehead attempting to draw his eyes back into focus. His head picked up, his jaw askew. “--Wait. If you’re-- WHO DID I FUCK--”

Sticks choked on his food and laughed even harder, punctuating ‘Choly’s meltdown.

“Mindy, you fucked a FERAL? And you thought--” He could barely breathe he was in such stitches.

“I-- I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”
“No, no. Go on. This is the most entertaining company I’ve probably kept in fifty years or more.” He wiped away tears. “...Christ, I’ve missed you.”

‘Choly could feel himself trembling. His eyes wouldn’t focus, and his ears rang dully. His nostrils tasted like metallic dust filled them. He tries to steady his breathing.

“...You haven’t even the first idea how much I’ve missed you. I haven’t been adjusting well to waking up to all this. I’ve self-medicated with just about everything I’ve put my hands on. Essentially sampled the whole Wasteland... You’re sure you don’t remember what went into my meal replacement drink?”

“Ohhh, if you’ve only been defrosted a few months, you haven’t sampled shit. You wanna fool around with that junk, I can tell you what all to keep your eyes peeled for. And no, Mindy, no. I don’t. I’m surprised you never wrote down something you considered so important.”

After a long pause, Angel piped up.

“Mister Carey has sworn off chems.”

Sticks and ‘Choly made surreptitious eye contact like they always used to, and went back to finishing their meal. Both of them grinned that for as much as everything had changed, the knowing glance of scheming caprice still came as familiar as ever.

They headed out once Sticks shoved the bowls in the sink. He loaded up with canisters of flamer fuel strapped to his legs and back, and strapped a bandolier of Molotov cocktails across his chest. ‘Choly would have never recognized him under the ushanka and welding goggles.

“Hope you don’t mind that we’re going on foot,” the ghoul commented as they continued East on Pawtucket Boulevard. “I haven’t had a car running in years, and your guess is as good as mine whether the river locks even work anymore.”

“After our run-in earlier, I don’t think I’d trust the waterways. ...Man, I just can’t believe you really live right on the water. By all those things.”

“They know to leave me alone.” He shook the nozzle of his flamer. “They hate fire.”

They passed through the intersection for O’Donnell Bridge and continued along the river instead.

“I know it’s cutting it real close to the C.I.T. ruins, but O’Donnell’s always crawling with Merrilurks and hermit crabs. I don’t trust the vehicles I saw. They weren’t there last time I came this way.”

‘Choly’s ears were still ringing, but he’d begun evening out well enough. He steadied his syringe rifle with one hand on the handle, to rub under his visor at his eye sockets.

“Yeah, Olivia mentioned the crabs. I’m not understanding what vehicles have to do with it.”

Sticks held up a finger to hush him, and they crossed the next bridge down, Howe. Once they stood on the Southern intersection across the Merrimack, he pointed to the parking garages.

“Big crabs move into big shells. The tectonic activity from the bombs flooded the hook down into campus. The bottom story of a parking garage like that is perfect for them.”

‘Choly squinted at the building.
“Are you trying to tell me that the crabs are as big as Little Boy Blue?”

“A lot of them are bigger. Saw one take a freightliner trailer once.”

The chemist paled, but the ghoul didn’t laugh at him.

They crossed a single-lane bridge from the Acre into Downtown. ‘Choly had been watching the tick on his Pip-Boy’s map in comparison to their location, and hemmed when they didn’t cut straight East to the next nearest bridge.

“Why not Oullette?”

“It’s out. Cox or nothing.”

They turned right from the ballpark then took an immediate left, and followed the street until they hit a roundabout with a post office. With another left, they traveled down a single street for a ways, crossed into the National Historical Park district proper, packed to the brim with Federalist architecture both industrial and residential.

“Not to beat a dead horse,” Sticks started, his mouth difficult, “but that night, when I pulled a knife on you... I was scared. Like I’d misjudged you. You had a moral compass. Limits. That’s the last thing I expected from a Deenwood chemist. I think I took it, that you were trying to be the better man. The day of the bombs, I really believed you were. My brokering habits have made it hard to cultivate much of a compass of my own, really. I still broker chems in Goodneighbor and Diamond City when I get restless and have to get out of Lowell. To be fair, a lot of the history I’ve got with the Furriers involves chem trafficking, too.”

“I don’t think arguing the morality of things really has a place in the new world order anymore. At least, not the morals of the world that came before this one.”

One couldn’t say he was sorry. The other couldn’t say he forgave him.

“...You’re partly right. The way things have changed, different things take priority. Friends and security are still big ones, though.”

“As ever, I’m sure the big thing is what company one keeps, and how one achieves that security.”

“Amen.”

“Cheers!” Angel agreed. “It’s so good to have the two of you reconciled at last. ...I told you that feral ghoul wasn’t Mister Hawthorne, Sir.”

When Sticks burst into another peal of raucous laughter, ‘Choly flushed and sank down atop Angel with a frown.

They turned onto Bridge Street, and passed the long brick red textile mills to the left.

“I don’t doubt your navigation, Sticks. But if we’re taking Cox, why didn’t we just cut straight down Fr. Morissette? Or Hall?”

The ghoul shrugged.

“Well, I took you a way without any parking garages, didn’t I?”

“You mean all p--”
“--Yes.”

They stepped onto the pale green hybrid truss-cantilever bridge. ‘Choly looked North along the river and could tell the previous bridge across the waterway had in fact fallen out. Angel also looked every which way, and ‘Choly got paranoid when even Sticks felt on edge.

“My sensors indicate we’re being observed,” the Handy informed.

“Yeah, they know we’re coming. That’s fine.” Sticks sighed. “Mindy, let me do the talking when we get there, all right? They know me.”

‘Choly remembered that Jacob had always been the one of theme who cut their deals, and he nodded with a swallow.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Oh, and one more thing.” He held up his gloved hand. “Don’t touch them.”

They get to the other side of Cox Bridge without further comment. The entire area felt like another world, the closer they got to the designated marker on ‘Choly’s Pip-Boy map. The architecture didn’t look like it belonged in this landscape, let alone in the United States. Bizarre organic shapes jutted from the earth, a mixture of earthen material and warped sheet metal. Once they arrived in Voire proper, Sticks waved ‘Choly to dismount Angel, and the chemist walked by cane the rest of the way.

The deeper into the settlement they traveled, they began to notice people in fur and leather garments milling about their daily activities, which included skinning and butchering, weaving, cooking, and the like. They didn’t seem to mind the visitors much, though it looked as though Voire didn’t get many owing that everyone dressed so similarly. Sticks had dropped his guard, carrying his flamer more than wielding it at the ready, so ‘Choly put up his rifle as well.

It didn’t sit well for the chemist, that every single Furrier he’d laid eyes on so far wore Halloween masks. And he didn’t feel confident in his ability to read their silhouettes beneath their large, long coats.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

TWs: Vague sense of body horror, paranoia.

“Dismount before we go any further.” Sticks gestured down the way to a small red brick Federalist building on the embankment which led up to the reservoir. “Angel, it’s best you stay with us regardless. If I mistook you so easy for Rust Devil craftsmanship, anyone here could jump to the same conclusions.”

The Mister Handy scoffed. ‘Choly complied, though the reasoning eluded him.

“Mister Carey is far more adept than those curs.”

“Ohh, I know, buddy. Same goes for you, compared to those things they make.”

“I simply feel just awful that the robots likely don’t recall whatever model they began as. They’ve been stripped of their sense of self, and gain only greater capacity for violence in the exchange.”

“Violence, unfortunately, goes a long way these days.”

“Hasn’t it always?”

“Hasn’t it always,” ‘Choly mumbled in detachment, ignoring the strange attempts at compliments. As he took to his cane, he at least hoped there wouldn’t be too much walking. The persistent vague sense of claustrophobia from being surrounded by people with masks clung fast to the roof of his mouth. He couldn’t tell if it tasted like irony or hypocrisy on his part.

The Furrier standing outside the reservoir house wore long dark green and brown coat with a fur collar, and a simplistic skull mask with dark eye sockets, sunken cheeks, and yellow teeth painted on.

“They’re expecting you.” She pointed across the way from her dwelling.

Sticks nodded and led ‘Choly up to a non-geometric mudbrick dwelling which had incorporated sections of a farmhouse at odd angles and placements, more for structural purposes than as any functional openings. The cave-like hole in the front reminded of a mud swallow’s nest. Lacking windows, series lighting embedded in the mud ceiling illuminated the somewhat subterranean space. ‘Choly wondered how they had electricity. The owner wore a leather witch mask with a draped satin hood, and they sat on a dilapidated love-seat as one would an armchair. They didn’t even need to stand for ‘Choly to know this Furrier would tower over all three of them by at least a full head height. Their coat collar folded down in a broad plush dusty grey fur, and they wore royal purple leather gloves. Green fabric that seemed to once have borne semblance to a dress shirt wrapped their torso, and one of their arms made use of a single full sleeve. The other arm used one coat sleeve, but it wasn’t until the Furrier stood that ‘Choly deduced that they didn’t have both arms through the coat sleeves because their coat didn’t quite clear both their shoulders.

Sticks set down his flamer and offered his gloved left hand for a handshake. The Furrier chuffed and instead lurched forward to bear hug him. ‘Choly recalled the ghoul’s caveat not to let them
touch him, and would have intervened had the Furrier not let go. Only once they patted Sticks on the shoulder did it click that three arms had comprised the Furrier’s grip, and ‘Choly sputtered into a coughing fit.

“The General needs help again, Reese.” The ghoul did his best to ignore the chemist’s tactlessness.

“She knows the price.” Reese’s voice sounded both difficult and effortless, and ‘Choly could not tell if it belonged to a man or a woman.

“And you won’t agree to anything less?”

The more ‘Choly eyed Reese, the less confident he felt that he regarded someone with standard bone structure in any sense of the concept. Were they standing in a way to face him and Sticks, or were they standing facing away from them, and the mask obscured this? Was the third arm a real arm? A prosthetic? Did the third one sprout later, and if so which two were the originals? He nearly couldn’t follow the conversation between his ex-roommate and the Furriers’ leader, too beset by that mask which he knew he couldn’t ask them to remove for his own sake. Reese zeroed in on ‘Choly and stepped toward him to hunch down and get a better look at him. Up close, the eye holes on their mask didn’t feel like they matched up to the Furrier’s eyes, and ‘Choly squirmed with that long crooked leather nose in his face.

“Well…” they mulled, “she did provide a tribute.”

“--TribUTE.” ‘Choly frowned. “She sent me to get help. She didn’t say anything about--”

“--He’s not going to unfold with you.” Sticks slouched at Reese. “That’s not why we’re here.”

“Unfold?” ‘Choly looked to Sticks, then to Reese, then back to Sticks.

“You’re a fresh recruit, then,” Reese deduced. “She taught you nothing if she did not tell you about The Unfolding. You’ve much to learn about the history of the place you wear the uniform of.”

“The Rust Devils are pushing deeper into Back Central,” Sticks continued, trying to shepherd the conversation on track. “They’ll take the Acre and Downtown Historic at this rate. Belvidere’s at risk as well. You don’t want that kind of a neighbor just a stone’s throw across the river, now, do you?”

“We’re well aware they’ve been expanding their territory quickly as of late. Are you certain they’re spilling into the Acre?”

“As certain as my nose spites my face. She wouldn’t have sent after me if it wasn’t serious.”

Reese noticed that ‘Choly couldn’t stop staring meaningfully. They sidestepped Sticks to entertain ‘Choly’s confusion.

“A greenhorn doesn’t know what he’s looking at, does he? That base used to be ours…” they leaned in to inspect his nameplate, “Carey. A nice touch, that she’s promoted you to captain already. Surely, the masks unnerve you. You can’t stand not knowing the consequences of history, can you?”

Before ‘Choly could choke out some half-intentioned alarm that Reese might have the same unusual skill as Missus Murphy, Sticks stepped between them with an uneasy glance.

“I’ll talk to her about another batch of the original X-Cell if you’ll stop giving my friend here a hard time. ‘Choly is definitely... new around here, no question.”
‘Choly mouthed the word ‘original’ to himself in shock, but Sticks’s attention lay squarely on Reese, who wrung their hands together with slow delight.

“It’s been over a decade since we last had an Unfolding. We’re eighty-seven today. She’s to consider the rite our preparation for the task. Bring one hundred. I believe we’ve all been negligent to let this trouble get so close to us before quashing it flat.”

“Then it’s agreed,” the ghoul asserted. “Two factions against one. You’ll help the General set up against the Devils?”

Reese nodded.

“What stands after The Unfolding will help you. Go speak to Bones, and cement the year’s collective. Tell her I’ve appointed her Mistress of Ceremonies.”

“Admit you don’t mind having the General around as much as you suggest.”

“She has but one purpose in the Commonwealth.”

“We’ll return by the end of the week.”

“We anticipate your arrival.”

‘Choly’s ears rang as Sticks picked his flamer back up and they exited to cross the road back to the reservoir house. Was Sticks the reason Jared had assumed ‘Choly would know of X-Cell from his Deenwood ties? Or had the chem simply been spread around like so much petrified ribbon candy?

“She said not to give away the farm,” the chemist uttered with hushed punctuation. “I... I don’t understand.”

“Like I said before. You’ve only been walking around this place a few months, Mindy. You can’t even fathom the candy you can put your hands on these days. The base is the best house on the street to fill up your sack... if you can handle a little Hansel and Gretel.”

The comparison wouldn’t quit his recollection of Reese’s witch mask. His face drooped in a mental surfeit.

“And me without a pumpkin pail.”

Sticks entered the open door of the reservoir house first, then ‘Choly followed. Angel remained in the doorway of the small space, which was well lit midday by large windows facing the waterfront. The skull-faced Furrier had resumed her eponymous bonecraft, carving out sewing needles. All manner of taxidermy, including the twin heads of a mounted radstag with at least fifteen points, adorned her wall. Bones could barely sit still, and flew to stand and pace when the pair entered her house.

“M-- Miss Bones,” ‘Choly started, “we’ve got some... news of interest.”

Sticks wrenched him back by the shoulder and stood between them. When the ghoul tightened his grip, it was the first time ‘Choly could truly feel the ghoul’s gloved left hand, and he could recognize hard mechanical parts. The chemist flinched, recalling the personal space caveat, and took the gesture as a more insistent warning.

“What can we provide the Mistress of Ceremonies?” The ghoul forced a grin.
Immediately, the Furrier squealed with delight and clapped with all four gloved hands, each a different rich color. Once she flung off her coat to free her range of motion, ‘Choly could tell she had two functional pair of arms, one at her shoulders and another atop her hips. Her attire was a mixture of straps and strips wrapped around her as her limbs would allow it.

“Oh, no no...” Bones scrutinized a variety of ledgers strewn about the various desks and tabletops, retrieving baskets from drawers on occasion. “No! That won’t do. If we’re to unfold anew, we’ve got to have fresh textile resources. We’ve done all right the past few years, repairing what we have, but ohh!” She squealed again. “To have a reason to completely replace it all again! How time sensitive is our end of the bargain this time?”

“I’d give it a week, tops. The Rust Devils are moving in on your territory and the General’s both. We’re here to ask Reese to lead you all against them.”

She stroked at her collarbones in thought.

“Ick is still grateful for the last time. I’ll have you know, he’s told me to carry along the message, next you stepped foot in Voire: You really must see him.”

“I’m sure he would love that.” Sticks boiled frustration down into a stupid smile. “Are we talking a Downtown recon? Shouldn’t we secure the city from the bad element before we go getting more comfortable?”

“You wouldn’t see us stripped in The Unfolding.” She lurched forward with all hands tented. “You are to bring us The Unfolding, yes?”

“--What is this ‘Unfolding’?”

‘Choly shrank when Sticks scowled at him.

“It is our everything,” Bones moaned. She languored on a chair that clearly had been reshaped for her odd shoulders, then looked to guarantee she still held their attention. “You’re free to spectate... or even join... However you like. The more, the merrier. Isn’t that right, Sticks?”

“That was fifty years ago, Bones. Stop making this weird and be specific, or I’ll tell the General that you just want a case of Sugar Bombs.”

She gripped the armrests, aghast.

“Oh you awful, awful ghoul. You wouldn’t threaten such as this unless you really did mean to follow through with your promise.” She melted back into anticipation. “Retrieve for us a crate of ballistics fiber from Boott Mills. We must be unburdened in this task.”

“Ballistics fiber,” ‘Choly mumbled in understanding. “You’re going to make some new armor?”

“Many of us cannot wear armor,” she replied. “Our bodies unfold in unpredictable ways. We must instead rely on garb alone.”

“And you’re sure you can’t go retrieve it yourself?” the ghoul asked rhetorically.

“The crabs are in mating season.”

“I would ask what your point was, but you know what? I don’t know what’s worse: the hatchlings, or the Rust Devils.” Sticks picked up his flamer again. “Yeah, we’ll get it.”
“I’ll name your compensation once you bring me what I’ve requested.” She slapped the nearest desk with three hands, and went back to work. “Until then, I have many needles to carve out for the preparations ahead of us.”

“Thank you, Miss Bones,” ‘Choly called back behind them as he followed the ghoul out of the building. She waved at him as though he were a child, and he smiled anxiously.

The ghoul led them down the street and to the right, following the block of field which had been turned into a man-made body of water before the war. A large windmill stood at the Southeast corner across the water. Housing had been re-erected on all four sides of the field in the same fashion as Reese’s dwelling, remnants of vehicle and farmhouse plastered together with dark mud brick. To the Northeast, a ten-foot-high wall reinforced Voire against the woodlands.

“So we might have to encounter some crabs after all, hm?” ‘Choly laughed sheepishly. “It’s a good thing you brought fire.”

“Don’t act like I’m positive you turned down the General offering you incendiary materiel.”

“She outfitted me with a specialized laser,” Angel corrected.

‘Choly’s ears burned. Sticks rolled his eyes at them both.

“We’ll make it work. Not like we’ve got much other choice.”

“...Aren’t the textile mills in Downtown?”

“Ick lives up here. Two men and a robot isn’t enough. Can you keep your mouth shut this time?”

The chemist frowned, trying to keep pace enough to lower his voice.

“Are we pretending I’m new blood for a reason?”

“To be honest, if they find out you were one of the General’s coworkers? I’m not entirely sure what they’d do to you. There’s a few who honor the Deenwood Project, but there’s a good few more that only tolerate its continued existence for what it provides them.”

“So the whole damn world knows what Deenwood was for, then.” ‘Choly shifted into a stifled snarl. “There was never a breach of DIA intel.”

“Are you still going on about X-Cell?” Sticks squinted at him. “A lot of prewar secrets aren’t secrets anymore, ‘Choly.”

“No. You don’t understand. A raider. In Lexington.” He grew winded at Sticks’s pace. “He knew Psycho and X-Cell both originated here in Lowell. How did he know? And you’re trying to tell me that these mutated trappers just use a fuck ton of a top secret military prototype chem?”

When Sticks wouldn’t answer him, he grabbed the ghoul and made him stop.

“No. You’re going to talk to me,” the chemist snapped. “Raiders can’t get a hold of that stuff. It’s bad enough that they’ve been appropriating Lowell’s robots.”

Sticks shrugged out of ‘Choly’s grip with a curled lip, then continued walking.

“Goods go to the highest bidder.” He motioned to the dwelling on the left ahead of them, containing blue housing bits. “The Furriers have always been the highest bidder.”
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Things feel a little henny-penny. TW: Mental snap, body horror

A small building something akin to a shack or garage stood separate from the muddied dwelling intermixed with what had once been a blue country house. They walked up to the opening of the dwelling. Sticks poked his head inside, and knocked to somewhat hollow effect. A dry chuckle within drew a grin out of the ghoul, and he set down his flamer to wave ‘Choly inside. Angel, as always, remained in the Furriers’ doorways.

Hand-sculpted shelves both dug into and emanated out from the walls of the dwelling’s dome-like main room. As Reese’s house, series lighting embedded in the topmost region of the surface of the room illuminated it. While Sticks greeted the inhabitant, ‘Choly eyed the shelving, and the old man’s belongings. Hood finials, dashboard ornaments, rear view mirror dangles—so this Furrier shared a love of vehicles with Sticks. He glanced over to the pair to find them engaging in what seemed at first a sort of secret handshake: They crisscrossed their arms to grip together all four hands between them. Both the old man’s arms belonged to the right side of his body, one of which originated where a neck should have been, and his neck and head came instead from his left shoulder. Clad in an apron-like glossy, ruddy leather garment with a dusty grey-blue wrapped shirt beneath, this Furrier wore a mummy mask comprised of several materials. Its sallow eyelids hung heavy and sarcastic, and the lipless mouth shape could not contain the insinuation of teeth. Wild silver-white hair bushed out anywhere the mask was not affixed. ‘Choly stared as the two sealed the gesture with a long tight hug.

“Lacked you something sorry, Sticks. Know you visited the higher ups before you came to see me,” the old man known as Ick play-scolded. Barrel-chested and modestly burly, he projected his voice with a certain benevolent insistence. The hand of the top arm smushed down Sticks’s ushanka and the ghoul stifled a wheeze out of his noseless nostrils. “Who’s this picayune?”

“I’m...” ‘Choly stiffened. “I’m Melancholy.”

The mummy-faced trapper approached him and looked over his coat, then tapped his nameplate.

“Melancholy,” Ick repeated thoughtfully with a nod. “Sure he’s said it, but I’m Ick.”

The trapper offered his shoulder-arm and its bright red glove for a handshake and ‘Choly swallowed, trying to remember how Sticks had done it. But Ick didn’t give him the chance, and dragged him into a hug and vigorous shoulder-pat. The chemist smiled nervously once he let go of him, and did his best not to look unnerved by all the physical contact the ghoul had warned him to avoid.

“How’s the Riverhawk?” Sticks began.

“Keepin’ her sharp as ever.” The mummy skirted the ghoul’s directness. “Stay for dinner? I’ve got a bunch’a pelt hangin’ in the kitchen just this mornin’.”

“Meals sit better shared,” the ghoul quietly agreed. “You really gotta show me your curved needle
technique again. I think I’ve lost it. Last mounted animal I did myself came out looking more like a prewar cartoon character.”

Ick chuckled, patting his hands together.

“Then you’re around for a few days. Bless it all, I don’t even care if I’m getting too old to unfold. Really, I wish you’d move into Voire proper, you misanthrope. I’m not the only one that’s lacked you.”

“The fishing’s better out Pawtucketville side.” Sticks leaned against a smooth part of the wall. “You know I stay out there as the lifeline between y’all and the General, besides. ...Wish you’d move out to Sampas with me, gonna be like that. We’d get into much better mischief.”

“I do miss scavvin’ lots with you,” Ick resigned with a shrug. “But the fur and leather’s so much better in Dracut’s backyard. You tell me how much radstag runs into you.”

‘Choly mentally squirmed, excluded from the familiarity of their conversation. He’d known Sticks for less than a year and they’d grown near-instantly close, but from the sound of it, the ghoul and this Furrier had known one another for half a century or longer. Time hadn’t stopped just because the chemist had succumbed to a cryogenic coma. The jet lag hooked at his temples and stitched around his scalp.

As the two continued to catch up without him, he readily scrutinized Ick’s physique unnoticed. Something about the asymmetrical arrangement of Ick’s pair of arms unsettled him in a way the other Furriers’ oddity had not. He identified that the old man had a third hand, though he lacked full use of it largely owing to it jutting halfway down his left side absent of an arm. This third hand was gnarled up and fused to Ick’s flesh, and ‘Choly choked up at recognizing that the hand looked distinctly ghoulish. His delayed disbelief snapped all at once, and with a terse snarl he lurched forward to grab the mask off Ick.

The old man’s very regular and very aged features stared back at him almost expectantly. ‘Choly hyperventilated as he gawked at the fullest concept of the Furrier’s anatomical dishevelment. Sticks looked on, disappointed and pained but not the least bit surprised at ‘Choly’s behavior.

“--Mindy, what were you expecting?”

“...I thought you said your name was Melancholy.” Ick’s bushy eyebrows raised then lowered as he tried to figure out for himself why the chemist had unmasked him.

“I have a lot of names, I guess!” ‘Choly slouched apologetically, confused as ever. “I get the feeling Sticks nicknames anybody he gets a little close to.”

“The fifth.” Sticks feigned a sneer as he held up his gloved hand to flourish his fingers.

“No, no...” Ick stepped nearer the chemist, squinting. “Carey... Great-gramma talked about a Carey from Deenwood. General gave you the digs of a real dark an’ wicked man.”

‘Choly scrunched his chin into his neck to grimace down at his nameplate.

“Certainly looks so...” He laughed weakly in agreement. “How come great-gramma knew anything about Deenwood?”

“Furriers came from that place. Our great-great gramparents served the General’s lot. She won’t let us back on base, but most of us don’t want to go back no ways.”
He could feel something in his skull pop.

“...Do you want to go back?”

“Never been,” Ick shrugged. “Never met the General even. I... I can’t say. Got all I need in Voire. Sticks’s made it sound like Deenwood’s some kinda paradise full’a robot butlers, but what good would it do me to have a bunch’a robots do as I say?”

“Robots can do a lot of good,” he replied a little too readily, “...depending on whose care they provide.” He glanced to Angel in the doorway with a smile. “Angel’s become my everything as my health deteriorates.”

Sticks had watched to gauge the conflict, and his mouth hung open about to say something, but Ick grinned and patted ‘Choly’s hand in both of his good hands.

“Gettin’ old has its costs, just as everything else.” The old man laughed and took his mask from ‘Choly to put it back on. “Sticks, let’s turn over the ol’ Riverhawk and get ‘er over with. Wanna be back before dinner.”

“Music to my ears.”

Ick opened the wooden rolling shutter door of the shack beside his house, revealing a Pick-R-Up truck with paneling salvaged from three different colors--black, blue, and white. The old mummy popped the hood and cackled as he crawled around to check fluid levels on all the main lines. Meanwhile, ‘Choly and Angel followed Sticks’s lead loading up the cargo bed with two crates from the shack. A cradle mount jutted from the center of the bed into which the ghoul tossed his flamer.

“Mister Ick is most generous to be permitting us the use of his vehicle,” Angel lauded quietly.

“This is becoming an all day affair for certain.” ‘Choly took off his glasses to rub at his face a moment. “What the fuck is with the masks, Sticks? Do they think it’s Halloween every day now!”

Up in the cargo bed, Sticks slumped to sit on the crates to glare at him.

“Rhetorical question: Can you get your feet out of your mouth for two seconds?”

‘Choly’s face drooped, and he put his glasses back on.

“--Wait. You said there was a drainage pipeline from Deenwood to the river... Do you know where that empties out?”

“A half-baked theory, but an interesting one. You’re gonna drive me to smoke at this rate.” The ghoul shook his head. “I’d imagine that it emptied into what used to be the Christian Hill Reservoir. At least some of the cogs in that defrosted skull are turning. Not well, but. ...No. That pipeline empties out under O’Donnell Bridge. In case you were wondering why there’s such a crustacean issue there.”

“Then--” He deflated in a huffing pout. “You’re the only person being honest and full disclosure with me here, Jacob. Please... please just tell me.”

“You really don’t get it, do you? They’re family.” He grinned sarcastically at him. “All I can say is you’re right about it being Halloween every day for the Furriers. Symbols of harvest and unity celebrate this place. The masks are, ah. Ironic. Something for strangers to focus on over their folds. But they’re a nice leper colony. Pushy, and a real huge batch of weird, but they’re good people.”
“A leper colony that insists on throwing some kind of massive costume party before they’ll even consider agreeing to help Olivia Francis flush the raiders out of Lowell for good.”

The ghoul barked, and sniffed before laying into another roar of laughter.

“Costume party. That’s a good one. ...Which reminds me.” He jammed a finger his way. “Ick is probably the most milquetoast Furrier you could have unmasked. Don’t fuckin’ do that again if you value staying in one piece.”

“Are they really so grotesque?” Sticks deadpanned him and he screwed up his face. “Curiosity’s only worse now.”

Sticks mashed his face into his palm. Ick turned over the engine, and the ghoul stood up to square his footing and get his flamer properly mounted.

“Let’s just get in and out of Boott Mills already. Hopefully the wildlife stays small and manageable. Mating season can make Downtown recon hairy as sin.”

‘Choly hopped up on Angel with his syringer filled with pencils, to follow behind the pair in the truck. They made their way South out of Voire, and crossed Cox Bridge weaving through the vehicles long abandoned there. Once they crossed the river, Ick leaned out the window and waved ‘Choly to match pace. The Handy and chemist complied and the old mummy guffawed heartily, then spoke over the volume of the engine.

“Gawd almighty never met a body knew Sticks longer’n me. He’s lacked you something AWFUL. Told me all about you. Called you Mindy! You’re MINDY!”

‘Choly paled, not knowing how to even begin to object.

“Oh, don’t choke on your humility, son,” Ick insisted. “Won’t tell a soul. Not my business to say a body’s a ghoul when he doesn’t look it.”

Sticks could hear it all through the window opening which once would have held a glass panel between the cab and the bed, and he frowned to ‘Choly apologetically.

“Guess you know for sure now, that you’re family,” the ghoul quipped sheepishly off the side of the truck. “They’re your children, Mindy.”

The generational cascade of his military legacy crashed down on him like the sky shattered, and if Angel had not been steering he would have spilled off it.
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

I think everybody just needs a moment to yell at the top of their lungs at this point.

Ick parked the Riverhawk right outside the loading dock of Boott Mills, and idled the engine while Sticks, Angel and ‘Choly separated from him to enter. The chemist didn’t notice his own shivering or hard frown as they inspected the rows of textile equipment in search of stock or freight. The corner of the far wall nearest the waterfront had collapsed, but they paid it little mind.

The three of them happened upon the quadrant of the mill which contained different equipment from the rest. Sticks mentally skimmed the workbenches and looms.


“You said the government had mills in Lowell crafting military fabrics? That’s what this is?”

“One of these crates has got to have at least one bolt of ballistics fiber ready to ship out,” the ghoul continued. He set down his flamer to start popping open the steamer-style metal crates one at a time, to rummage through contents.

“This is such a strange departure from our standard fare as of late, Mister Hawthorne. I’m so glad Mister Carey is getting some fresh air. He cooped himself up something awful for the longest. Only went out for business. He’s not handling all this mess so well.”

Sticks threw back down whatever he’d picked up to toss up his hands and halt the train of thought.

“Just... stop. Stop. I can’t handle this nonsense anymore. You’ve got to be fucking with me. You can’t be standing in front of me like this. You and your damn Handy.” Sticks’s head drifted side to side in semblance to denial. “If you hadn’t taken that spill by the river this morning, your coat would be titanium white spotless. You can’t possibly be two hundred fifty years old. Your ghost wouldn’t have come all this way to haunt my ass. Would he? I probably deserve it.” He snarled a scoff. “You’re not really here! So are you leading me to my death like a pelt, or are you trying to show me the way?”

‘Choly could only glare onward to him in fresh hurt. He couldn’t pinpoint what had set Sticks off at a different timing than his own disillusionment. Sticks gawked at him with an incredulous anticipation, nearly as though ‘Choly himself wore a mask he could remove and end the charade now that he’d been called out on it.

The chemist began to sweat at the recognition that dozens of dog-sized crabs had poured in through the opening in the outer wall, following the volume of the ghoul’s voice. An ankle-biter rushed Sticks’s leg and when it chomped down, he kicked it and whirled around to retrieve his weapon. In an instant an arc of flames erupted forward to fend off the crustaceans, who squealed in frustration at the sudden burst of heat. The ghoul yelled, furious, and let out a second spray.

“We shouldn’t use fire in here!” ‘Choly yelled after him, eyeing the various tanks and barrels
scattered along the walls of the open space. “Especially since we haven’t retrieved the fabric yet!”

Angel, all circular saws, zoomed ahead of Sticks and set to cutting down the hatchlings. Meanwhile, the ghoul doubled back, desperate to locate their proverbial treasure chest. The scent of the hatchlings’ guts drew the attention of a matron crab, who lingered enraged at the opening in the wall. She couldn’t get more than her claw inside, but that was enough to send broken pieces of textile equipment flying. Angel fired its lasers at the matron, while ‘Choly tried to shoot it full of pencils.

Sticks ran for the loading dock and tossed his flamer on the truck mount, and yelled for Ick to follow him. The Furrier and ghoul doubled back to the military textile equipment to retrieve the crate which took the both of them to carry. The ghoul prodded Ick against their better judgment to load up as many S.C.Y.T.H.E. crates as they possibly could. Despite the chemist and Handy’s best efforts, the matron crab had not budged. But the ghoul could tell she’d gotten herself stuck.

“‘Choly, I think we’ll do best using fire after all,” Sticks bellowed. He pointed for Ick to grab one of the QUARPEL aerosol tanks. “Fling it! Hard as you can!”

The tank hit the cinder block rubble just inside the wall, and not the crab. But Sticks grinned anyway, motioning for the group to retreat to the loaded down truck. He leaped up to aim his flamer, and with a concentrated stream he ignited the textile coating chemical which had splattered all over the crab’s claw. As they sped off, the crab shrieked and battered more of the wall down. The flames spread through the work floor and several more tanks burst immediately. From the bridge, the team could see the crab had taken residence in a delivery van. Another tank of volatile chemicals burst, and the van flew into the river, divorced of its inhabitant.

When they heard a third series of explosions, they all unclenched in the confidence the crab would not be following them. They slowed across the bridge to weave back across it, laughing like crazy.

“So this is where you briefly consider keepin’ whatever it is we’re haulin’ for ourselves,” Ick joked. “Pitch to split it fifty-fifty. What good’s a couple hundred pounds of military fabric gonna do any of us on his own, though?”

“Represents a goddamn chance in hell against the Devils,” Sticks insisted, not even entertaining the nostalgia of pulling a con. His head still ran hot as he watched ‘Choly following behind the Riverhawk.

Much of Voire had gathered up to gawk down the street at the plume of smoke the four of them had caused. The Riverhawk pulled up to the reservoir house. Ick and Sticks tossed off the crates for Bones, who scrambled down the embankment to become a giggling tangle of limbs with the old mummy.

Sticks fell back to check on ‘Choly as the chemist dismounted and observed at a distance. Ick told Bones all about their blowing up the crab matron.

“God,” ‘Choly blurted out to the ghoul, “I can’t even begin to imagine what’s under those masks, though. If it’s even half as beautiful as you--”

“--You’ll get to see everyone’s faces if you really have to. Once they get to their goddamn communal orgy.” Sticks stewed at the comparison abutted to such tactlessness. ‘Choly’s face practically fell off. “You seem to respond better to bluntness. Yeah. They get all naked and pile together in the middle of town. And then once they’ve worn themselves out, they dress themselves in all new clothes. I don’t want to spoil the fun for you, but it gets real messy.”
The chemist sniffed, appreciating that the Furriers crowded around Ick and not either of them at the moment.

“...You said something about an original formula?” He squinted up into the partly cloudy late afternoon sky. “I’m going to assume that one of the things that preoccupied Olivia all these years was refining X-Cell past its prototype stage? Addiction rate was godawful with that stuff, if memory serves.” He trailed off into a raunchy scoff. “An X-Cell enhanced orgy. Now that must be something.”

“I’m not some history textbook,” Sticks snipped. “I can appreciate that you’re here, but I don’t know the first goddamn thing about babysitting. You’re the first messenger she’s sent my way that I’ve given half a shit if they survived the trip to Voire.”

“...Angel, does this make the third or fourth time this week now I’ve nearly died?” ‘Choly didn’t blink, or wait for an answer, as he turned to face the ghoul. “Lexington burned because of me. Concord’s laden with gore. I gave myself acute radiation sickness getting frisky with a feral ghoul in Sanctuary. Bloodbugs stabbed me in the chest in Billerica. I got chased by flaming Assaultrons on my way on base. I could have gotten eaten by Merrilurks in Pawtucketville. And now I was nearly in an explosion in Lowell trying to escape a crab as big as a delivery truck. All in what I can only strongly believe was a week. Time’s trying to catch up to me. It’s all happening at once...” He crinkled his nose to adjust his glasses. “...I thought you said the Furriers were good folk.”

Sticks didn’t know what to say, wearing a mental flinch on his face.

“They thought you were a tribute because the confused and unfamiliar face is almost always expendable. I was negligent. The fact I can’t just offer you up for them to rip up for parts is the reason we had to run this extra errand for them, to be honest with you.”

“--Wait, you give half a shit that I’m still in one piece?”

“Half a-- Tch, yes. Yes, I do. If it’s really you,” Sticks warmed, “it’s the bee’s knees. Don’t know anybody who stands a better chance than you at setting the General straight. She’s gotten too twisted up in her own head. Lost track of reality. I’m surprised she could even accurately assess the Rust Devils are this much of a threat. ...Though, her paranoia has caused a false alarm before. And Angel’s the first robot I’ve noticed cross the Merrimack since I got here in 2090. Maybe we won’t have that big a problem.”

“You’re expecting me to get her out of her head when I can’t even get out of mine?” ‘Choly ugly laughed at him, slapping himself in the chest for emphasis. “I don’t know what I am anymore!”

“You’re a dumb fuck who’s been through nine circles of hell. Kind of fitting, I guess, that they turned a war criminal into a popsicle. Told you before, I’m not the same guy I was before the bomb. Something tells me it’s unfair to imagine that despite everything, you’re that much more yourself for it.”

‘Choly looked around as the Furriers dispersed back to their houses. The sun was starting to set, splashing chartreuse and orange across the sky. Ick and Bones still lingered.

“We’re staying the night in Voire, aren’t we?” he frowned.

“We head out at daybreak. Too dangerous to travel the waterways at night. That’s when the Merrilurks come out to hunt.” Sticks’s face scrunched up in displeasure. “Damn waste of crab meat to have to blow up the mill.”
“Still got those MREs...” ‘Choly deadpanned.

“Sooner eat my good hand.” Sticks started off toward the reservoir house. “Besides, we’re guests of honor for the night. Abiding Bones’s wishes is all the proof the Furriers need to know we’re good for the other half of the promise.”

“Promise of...” The chemist trailed off in a prurient lyric and a broken, sloppy grin.

“Haven’t changed one bit.”

Sticks stepped inside with Bones to speak in private, leaving ‘Choly, Angel, and Ick alone a spell. The mummy Furrier looked on expectantly at the chemist, and eventually took a hand in both his own.

“He’s not acting it, but I promise you Sticks is over the moon to have you back. Give him time to cool down. He’s having as much trouble accepting it as seems you are.” Ick leaned in. “Where you been all this time, anyway?”

“...On ice.” He sniffed, withdrawing his hand. “You really think you’re too old to participate in the Unfolding?”

“Depends. You think you’re too old to participate?”

‘Choly doubled his face into both hands to sputter and cough at what he could only take as flirtation, all things considered. Sticks came out right after, and pulled down his welding goggles to look between them in confusion.

“So what can I do to help prepare dinner?” the ghoul insisted, nudging the four of them along back to Ick’s place.

“Oh!” Angel cried. “Do let me help you, Mister Ick!”

“A robot in the kitchen? ...Why the hell not.”

After a meal of roasted pelt and tatoes, the two slept in Ick’s garage in the back of the Riverhawk, on bedding of layers of leather and fur the Furrier had supplied them. Despite the chaos of the day, ‘Choly passed out immediately.

He shot awake in the middle of the night, the only lingering residue of the nightmare the memory of the sentiment that he’d become one of Deenwood’s enlisted. He panicked in the momentary disconnect of not recognizing where he’d fallen asleep, only to realize Sticks slept soundly feet away from him. His breathing evened out, but his mind went wild questioning the morality of supplying the Furriers with the same chems their ancestors had been subjected to through grueling human experimentation. He appeased himself only with the reassurance that he really didn’t have the full story just yet, and he wished the flamer mount didn’t separate him from curling up beside the man he thought he’d lost two hundred years ago.
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

TW: frank discussion of human experimentation.

There's two ways to dehumanize someone: tear them down or put them on a pedestal.

“Thank you again for the meals,” ‘Choly told Ick the next morning. “And the use of your vehicle. And your help. And, well. Everything.”

“Just sad I can’t drive ya right back to the base an’ drop you off,” the mummy Furrier replied as he stacked up the bowls by his wash basin. “Straight shot down cuts right through where you say the Rust Devils set up house. Mmm, though. The route to and fro will be clear soon enough. And then. Then the Riverhawk can take you both ways whenever you like.”

“Will that ever include a route down Pawtucket Boulevard?” Sticks thought aloud with whimsy.

“Wouldn’t have to worry ‘bout that, if you’d just move to Voire,” Ick started again, unable to resist the bait.

“We... really have to get going, Mister Ick,” ‘Choly interrupted, pulling Sticks toward the opening of the Furrier’s house. “The sooner we get back to Deenwood, the sooner we can return.”

The ghoul and old man both exchanged an endeared laugh as they were separated once again. Outside, ‘Choly mounted Angel, and they were on their way to retrace the path back to the military base. Even with the visor cutting the glare of the morning sun, ‘Choly could recognize the difference between his default physiology and how he’d felt on a heavy dose of Day Tripper. It wasn’t a painkiller, but hell if it hadn’t distracted him from his pain and exhaustion. He did his best not to complain of his stiffness, not to risk sounding ungrateful for Ick’s rather lavish amenities.

Once they had crossed out of Downtown back onto Pawtucket Boulevard, ‘Choly cleared his throat.

“Can I ask you something?”

“I don’t think I could keep you from asking things,” Sticks replied, surveying for crabs. “You’re like a little kid seeing the world for the first time.”

He paused to re-steal himself.

“We weren’t together, before... were we?”

The ghoul scoffed a laugh, only to sober and straighten his gait.

“Oh. You were serious. Uh.” Sticks whet his lips, and chewed at them. “I wouldn’t have even given it half a thought back in the day. I’ll admit, I’ve been a lot more open minded as of late. Supposing I can owe that to being a bit lonely, but it’s not like I’ve done much in terms of remedying that. I... I don’t know.” He tossed a glance to the chemist riding a Handy, but kept his eyes on the road. “What, did you think of me like that before I, y’know?”
“My memory isn’t working like it should.” ‘Choly choked up on his deep flush. “I think it’s what was damaged worst by being frozen. Regardless, if I did like you before, I... hhhH-I think I really like you now.”

When Sticks stopped in place, ‘Choly thought at first he’d spotted a threat. But when Angel continued on ahead of him, he stopped the Handy and turned to look at the ghoul.

“Tch. Don’t know why I’m even surprised. You’d watch monster movies and then take a thirty minute shower after. Guess I’m still all looks and no substance.”

“--Oh hhh h-all the substances,” the chemist blurted out, only to smear his face in stupidity. “That’s not what I--”

Sticks pressed onward again with a frown, and ‘Choly and Angel followed.

“I can’t handle this right now. I’m still adjusting to learning a day ago that you’re even alive. I feel like we’ve both got a lot to work through here. Give me a minute. I’ve got to grab some shit.”

“...That’s not a no.”

“--Mister Carey,” Angel scolded, stopping far back a ways to separate the two, while the ghoul went inside the restaurant at the Sampas Pavilion.

At a distance, the chemist could tell the ghoul had gestured around the front door not unlike some kind of secret handshake. He thought perhaps it had been him gesticulating while he spoke to himself, but a few minutes after he’d vanished inside ‘Choly understood it to have been disarming a handcrafted home security system of sorts. Recalling that Sticks had done the same upon their departure affirmed his presumptions.

‘Choly dismounted Angel and took to his cane, to get out of the street. The pavilion itself lay across the road from the restaurant, a slab of concrete with four latticed metal pillars connected at the top. He stood in the center of it, and stared up into the metal work. Nearly ladder-like, he thought. He tried to remember what the phrase Jacob’s ladder meant, but Sticks approached him now toting a satchel, and the deliberation sublimated.

Meeting no resistance, they went the rest of the way down to the base in silence. ‘Choly took Sticks in the West entrance, to avoid Rust Devil activity. The biometric scanners seemed to have the ghoul on file from previous visits to the base, and didn’t object to him. The same Mister Gutsy met them once they passed the first boom barrier.

“Captain Carey, you’re late again. The General was starting to worry the enemy had gotten you. I see you’ve brought the entrepreneur Sticks with you. Explains why you were waylaid. The General has indicated he cannot be permitted on premises without escort. Do not let him out of your immediate company.”

“So good to see you, too,” the ghoul shrugged off.

“I don’t intend to take my eyes off him,” ‘Choly insisted, watching as Sticks took the lead of even Green Seven to meet General Francis. He bit at his lip when he realized how it must have sounded, but said nothing further.

Sticks opened the General’s office door to let them all in, and he waved enthusiastically to find she had her Assaultron with her.

“Oh, Helen. It’s so wonderful to see you,” he greeted with lyric. “How are the kids?”
“I am inorganic and Olivia is sterile,” the robot replied. “In the possibility you are suggesting that her supervision and maintenance of the base’s robotics redefines them as her adoptive children, they are exceptionally lethal and high-functioning as usual. Thank you.”

Once the office had shut again, Olivia marinated on the cold shoulder, and undesired company, only to warm into a chuckle.

“Good morning,” she grinned. “Considering you survived the trip, I’m to expect you have good news.”

“The Furriers agreed to help,” ‘Choly blurted out. He bit his tongue, not to lash out at knowing she’d drugged him before.

She clasped her hands together in a stiff pleasantry, knowing exactly why Sticks had come. The ghouls made eye contact, but said nothing to one another. She knew better than to pour any of them a drink.

“For your trouble, I believe a promotion is in order.” She stood. “How does... Colonel Carey sound? It’s only right.”

Thrown for a loop, ‘Choly had to process the proposition for a moment. When she gave him a persuasive grin and a murmur, he scrunched his face up in cognizance of the ramifications of the title.

“I’ll bite.” He sat to ease his posture and smooth his confidence. “Funny you mention it. MKExcell would be to my pay grade, then, wouldn’t it? The sachem agreed because Sticks promised the Furriers a hundred units of X-Cell. Love to know how they’ve managed to form such an unrepentant habit for a confidential chem.”

Her face slacked, and she crossed her arms behind her back to pace. Sticks made himself comfortable leaning in the far corner behind the door.

“You’re a few centuries behind in debriefing. It’s not necessarily on topic, but I suppose I can catch you up, since the other day a history lesson sounded like why you came to Deenwood in the first place.” She glanced over to Sticks, who neither budged nor seemed to care. “What the Furriers want is called X-Cell-Root. It’s the earliest and least stable test formulation of X-Cell.” She paused only a moment to make eye contact with ‘Choly again. “Are you sure I couldn’t interest you in a drink?”

“Just tell him why I have to play your middle man,” Sticks snipped. “Better from your mouth than mine.”

Any composure she had crumbled apart like a fallen cake. She poured herself a drink, and sat to keep herself from pacing.

“MKExcell... subsisted of ten branches of research. The results of seven of them went toward formulating what is now known as X-Cell. The next step was to refine and perfect the performance chem. During the war effort, there were many fields of study as to how to create the perfect soldier. There... was also talk of creating the opposite: a chem which could weaken opposition without lethal intent. X-Cell-Root exited prototype phase about two years before the new world order began. X-Cell circulated on the black market for a good bit until its high addiction rate began to indicate that even spaced out usage bioaccumulated the compounds in the user. Withdrawals effectively disintegrate the user’s immune system, and eventually begin deteriorating all sugar compounds in the body.
“...And that’s where you come in, Melancholy. Like I’ve said, I’ve read up on all the DIA documents on base, and I’ll admit I brushed up on you once you arrived. The Psycho branch of research was one of the three that didn’t actively contribute to the formulation of X-Cell, but you did good work. Good, loyal work. You wanted to know what your return to active duty would have entailed? They wanted you to work on phase two of MKExcell—MKExceed.”

‘Choly’s face drooped in stupor, but she rattled on undeterred.

“As I’ve told you, I was already on base working on the project when the nuclear exchange transpired, and I continued my research despite the apocalypse. X-Seed remained lethal for years. I ran out of test subjects, and worked with what I had on hand, collecting ferals and raiders alike. I extended the offer for voluntary testing to the locals—the Furriers—in exchange for weapons and first aid provisions. All they ever want these days is chems.”

“--I’m sorry, but I don’t understand.” ‘Choly rubbed at his head in exasperation, being given on a silver platter what he had sought. “The Furriers all but told me outright that they’re descendants of enlisted soldiers dispossessed from Deenwood.” She sighed and shoved an anxious smile behind another sip of liquor, but he didn’t stop there. “If Deenwood’s casualties were, from the sound of it, at a consequence of chem testing, not radiation, then how did you become a ghoul?”

Sticks couldn’t contain a sarcastic snort, only to hold up his hands when she glared his way.

“I... was not forthwith regarding on base survivors. Confidentiality of MKExceed, you know.” Olivia softened. “The original drive to continue the MKExceed project was the hope that it might provide a... cure. I was exposed to an X-Seed formulation that instigated an acute onset of cancer. Using several Fusion Cores, I rigged a way to give myself radiation treatments. I’ve never said I had the strongest command of radiology.” A taut self-conscious smile pulled her into herself like a drawstring. “At least it’s bought me all the time in the world to continue my research. I’ve managed to formulate an X-Seed that doesn’t mutilate those exposed to it. And while I’ve also successfully created a stable formula of X-Cell without addiction rates, I haven’t yet ironed out the hefty side effects of withdrawal symptoms that come with X-Seed. You might find some legitimate benefit in X-Cell-Squared, all things considered.”

She reached into her desk to produce an inhaler with four ridged ampoules jutting back from the actuator and perpendicular to one another. When she set it in front of ‘Choly, he gawked at it, then around the room for advice. Angel said nothing. Sticks shrugged. Olivia’s enthusiasm only increased. He inhaled sharply and accepted it.

“I’ll have to think about taking it. In private.”

“Quite fine. First one’s on me.” She unclenched when he pocketed it. “It will take me about a day to synthesize the amount of chem the Furriers are requesting. The three of you are to stay on base until I can send you on your way with it. Keep Sticks in check, won’t you, Colonel?”

“What, you don’t trust me?” Sticks muttered playfully, falling in line and more than ready to get out of the same room with her.

“Old habits die hard,” she replied as they left.

“Don’t they ever,” ‘Choly sighed under his breath.
Chapter 49

Chapter Summary

It must have been that silt bean he ate.

TWs: drug use, mildly sensual.

‘Choly took Sticks back to his rowhouse in the Deenwood officers’ residential. Angel busied itself in the kitchen. Sticks tossed down his flamethrower beside the golf bag in the corner, and atop it his coat, goggles, and ushanka.

“This place have a shower?” the ghoul asked, looking up the stairs in a tank top.

‘Choly’s scalped tensed, recalling Olivia’s caveat. He couldn’t keep his eyes off the texture of the ghoul’s arms which likely covered him head to toe.

“I haven’t tried the plumbing since I got here.” You’re smoothskin. “There’s showers in the enlisted barracks, if you’d--”

“--Nah, if it’s all right with you, I’d rather a good old fashioned one-person bath. It’s been a couple weeks.” He started upstairs.

“Olivia told me the residential plumbing wasn’t safe,” he finally spilled out.

Sticks paused a moment before continuing upward.

“For you, definitely not.”

“...Then she wasn’t lying about it being safe for ghouls?”

The ghoul stopped at the upstairs landing.

“Therapeutic, even.”

Once ‘Choly heard the bathroom door shut, he milled about to survey whether his belongings had remained untouched in his absence. Soon after, the water started, and he found himself upstairs as well, under the guise of assessing his closet effects.

He decided that, during their day on base, he didn’t want to wear his uniform. Stripping out of it, he instead wore the golfing ensemble he’d compiled not a week ago: the cobalt pinstripe dress shirt with white contrast collar and cuffs, the golfing khakis, the mismatched striped and argyle knee high socks, the geranium red cashmere. He stood at length with his arms wrapped across themselves, running his hands over the softness of the sweater as he stared at himself in the broken closet mirror. I’m not a war criminal. Am I? He remembered who’d given him the clothing he’d put on, and knew that he had more important problems to take care of than attempting some vague metric of his morality.

The water had stopped long ago. The bathroom door opened, for Sticks to sit on the side of ‘Choly’s bed to put his gloved left hand back on. Now wearing a Beaver Creek Alley bowling shirt
and a pair of khaki slacks, the blond ghoul snorted through his lack of a nose as he noticed the chemist had joined him upstairs, and noticed the odd ensemble.

“Still fixated on dressing uncanny-sharp.” Sticks rubbed at his short under-chin beard. “Form over function’s such an ill fit in the Wasteland. Still, though. It’s nice to feel like I can disregard a need for functionality or security once in a while. Let my guard down and just be comfortable.”

“I just want to be able to stop and breathe and relax for five seconds.” ‘Choly’s hands dropped to his side as he mirrored the regard for the other man’s outfit, and they ended up in his pockets to disguise the exasperation in his body language. “...So you don’t wholly distrust Liv?”

“I only distrust her chem habits.” Sticks slouched back on the bed in dislike of his recollection. “God, she was one of your coworkers. No wonder you had such a hangup over administering chems yourself. I remember that one meltdown you had. Somebody came into the pharmacy, hadn’t used Med-X before. And you had to show them how. Your boss sent you home before lunch. It’s one of the only times you ever beat me home.”

‘Choly’s glasses slipped down his nose as his face slacked, and his cataracted gaze oozed out over the top of them.

“If I didn’t administer, I had to observe. Most days, I didn’t have the nerve to administer. She did. I... I saw things. A lot of things.” He flinched, forcing himself to instead remember how heavily he relied on the Melancholia to psychologically survive his military career. “I... I think silt bean flour would work as an ingredient substitute. Angel says it remembers one of the main ingredients was soy, so. I found some on my way through Billerica. You’re good in the kitchen. Would you help me dry roast them?”

Sticks could recognize the request for a meaningful distraction. He stood, grabbed his bag beside the baseboard, and gestured for ‘Choly to exit first. The two returned downstairs. Angel flitted about on the back patio, though neither could tell exactly what it was on about.

The Handy had placed the silt beans in the refrigerator. The chemist and entrepreneur sat at the kitchen table, peeling from their pods the beans and collecting them in a deep bowl. ‘Choly kept finding himself spacing out, staring, and smiling as he watched Sticks split the pods with his gloved hand and retrieving the beans with his other. He cleared his throat and picked up another pod to work at.

“You didn’t weigh in earlier... Do you think I should try the X-Cell-Squared? Should I trust Olivia’s word, that it doesn’t have withdrawal issues?”

The ghoul thought a moment, but didn’t stop working.

“Ultimately, it’s your call. Your body, not mine. You want my opinion, though. If you run the risk of not feeling normal without it, I don’t think it’s a good idea. There’s a lot of different ways to feel addicted to--and withdrawals from--junk.”

‘Choly did and didn’t like this kind of an answer from someone who had been, and likely still was, a chem dealer. He couldn’t tell how honest anyone was being with him anymore, or what motive honesty could have. He popped a raw bean in his mouth in compulsion and chewed it. Expecting a raw, grassy flavor, he warmed instead to its starchy vague butteriness. Maybe he was just paranoid of everyone.

The two finished the first step of the task, and moved on to the second. Sticks spread out the beans in a frying pan. He used a match to ignite the pilot light on the back burner of the oven’s stove,
then adjusted the flame to the lowest it’d go. He turned and started to say something, only for ‘Choly to lean up and grab his shirt, to press their lips together. Despite the abruptness of it, Sticks didn’t stop ‘Choly, and eventually kissed him back. He pulled back, slowly, with a dark heavy-lidded glance, and he ran his right hand around the back side of ‘Choly’s head as a smile tugged at each of them.

They both readily kissed again. Sticks backed ‘Choly against the kitchen table, who then sat atop it to compensate for being the shorter of the two, and dragged the ghoul back atop him as their tongues frustrated one another. The chemist removed his glasses and lost them behind him, letting out a wheeze when the ghoul let him lick the edges of the gap in the corner of his top lip.

“Perhaps my prior assessment of the relationship between the two of you was mistaken.” They both jumped, finding Angel’s ocular lenses inches from both their face. Angel’s lenses flickered before it withdrew them. “Forgive my intrusion. I’ll excuse myself.”

“--Angel, wait. Agh.”

‘Choly shot upright with a groan to reach out for the Mister Handy, who returned outside. His hair felt like it had fallen from its french twist, and he compulsively smoothed at it. Then he turned to find Sticks had walked into the living area, to help himself to the dry bar cabinet Angel had added all ‘Choly’s spirits into. After one shot of whiskey, the ghoul took a second with him to sit on the couch.

“If you’re in the market for some fantasy fulfillment, you might as well return the favor.”

Sticks set down his glass on the coffee table, to dig through the bag he’d set down there. He pulled out the lingerie catalogue and waved it knowingly at him. ‘Choly shakily put his glasses back on and a hand crept over his mouth in knit-brow shock of what meaning or purpose laying eyes on the thing again could have possibly been intended. He sank to kneel beside Sticks, readily accepting some unspoken proposition, and ran a hand over the top of the ghoul’s trouser sock, before slipping it under the hem of his slacks to push up the pant leg and caress his leg. In reflex Sticks jerked his leg out of ‘Choly’s hands, his knee coiled back and away, and he stared at him in bewilderment at length before he couldn’t contain a sharp, difficult laugh.

“Mindy, I think you and I had very different reasons for eyeing the same woman.” The ghoul reached forward to set down the catalogue. He retrieved his whiskey, and downed it, then patted ‘Choly on the head. In a stupor, the chemist pushed himself up off the floor, to sit beside him, hands in his lap wringing together for lack of knowing where else to possibly put them.

“If it’s all the same, maybe... Maybe we could just... Sit together on the couch for a while...” He couldn’t contain anxious pouting.

“...While the beans dry?”

“...While the beans dry.”

“You’ve got me for the time being...” Sticks put an arm across the back of the couch, around ‘Choly’s shoulder, and stared at the peeling ceiling. “What do you intend to do with that? Did you really think you could just continue where you left off? Nothing is the same as it was before the War. Not even you. You’ve looked in a mirror, right.”

When ‘Choly shrank against his chest, Sticks held him. The ghoul said nothing when he could feel the small man shaking with silent tears, and simply held him more firmly.
“I’ve never experienced a golden age in my life, but my brain keeps telling me that literally anything I had before stepping foot in that fucking vault could be better than life after the war. The world ended! Only the dead and dead-inside carry on.”

The hard resolve overwhelmed ‘Choly then, to break his promise to Angel, and he found himself seriously deliberating the best or easiest way to reclaim the Melancholy’s salts from its storage compartment without conflict. He nearly spoke aloud of it, to get Sticks’s input, but shut his mouth again, both for fear that he’d increased Angel’s ability to eavesdrop on him by upgrading its sensory matrix... and for guilt and self-awareness how it likely would sound to tell his once-roommate that he felt the strong drive to suffocate his emotions with drugs.

Sticks saw the look in ‘Choly’s eyes, and his features slackled before he bent forward to retrieve something from his bag. With a plaintive glance, he offered ‘Choly a thin metal syringe of pale purple fluid.

“Case you didn’t pick up on it by now, Sticks is also on account of the needles attached to most of the junk I have to offer.”

‘Choly snorted in a sudden agonized smile at the awful pun, and held the chem in his lap with his eyes shut tight as he tried to get himself to stop crying. *Maybe I could use the Med-X in the Melancholia, instead of begging or sneaking the salts.* He looked up when he could tell he was shaking his head at himself, and looked to Sticks, who wore a bated objection on his thin lips. Immediately sensing himself misinterpreted, ‘Choly steadied his leg against the cushion of the couch and held the syringe flush and perpendicular to his thigh, then seethed through his teeth when he depressed the plunger. The needle jutted through the fabric of his pants and his flesh to impart the chemical into his bloodstream.

*I need it now more than I’ll need it later.*

Sticks patted him on the shoulder and retrieved the empty syringe, then stood to check on the silt beans. ‘Choly set his glasses on the coffee table and let the heavy low overtake him as he laid down across the couch and curled up to stare at nothing.

The next thing that ‘Choly noticed was a loud grinding from the kitchen. He sat up and put his eyes back on to hobble over to investigate. He licked at his dry lips to see the ghoul had begun on the next step of the process: pulverizing the roasted beans into a powder. When ‘Choly sat in the kitchen, Sticks noticed and stopped, to hold up the pitcher of the blender.

“How much of that stuff you think this will make you?”

“I... I don’t know, maybe six. Eight.” ‘Choly rubbed at his forehead a bit. “It definitely smells right in here.”

“I take it we’re spitting balling it. What else are you thinking goes into it?”

“...You keep working on beans.” He stood again. “I’ll go get what parts I do remember.”

The chemist vanished upstairs, only to return with a careful armful of various toiletries. Once he had set them all down, the ghoul presented the pitcher in front of him without the lid.

“When Angel went to borrow the blender, it also brought back measuring cups, if that helps.” The ghoul’s face scrunched up in a poorly hidden grimace at identifying what lay spread out on the table. “Exactly how far gone are you right now?”

“About as far as one of these usually carries me.” ‘Choly started squeezing out toothpaste into one
of the cups. “Why?”

“Oh, nothing. Go on.”

He sniffed and scrunched his nose to push his glasses back up his nose, then proceeded to add toothpaste, a bottle of mouthwash, and a can of purified water. He fidgeted with the mechanisms of a Stimpak, but rather than waste the healing substance, set it down in agitation when he felt like he’d almost set off the pneumatic plunger. He rubbed at his eyes behind his glasses, then frowned at a fascinated Sticks.

“Your fine motor skills seem better than mine. Can you open up plunger end of all the reservoirs and pour in whole thing? Other one, too.”

“You’re putting Stimpak in something you intend to drink.”

“All right, all right. I know how stupid it sounds. I don’t remember what was going through my head, day it struck me to try drinking one. All I remember is, other stuff’s for covering up awful taste. Base is Stimpak.”

“The Stimpak’s awful, but the mouthwash is okay? And the toothpaste?”

‘Choly rolled his eyes in gratitude when Sticks sat down and resigned to the request.

“Touché.”

After another pass on the blender blades, Sticks poured a drinking glass about a third full of the now clearish yellow liquid, and set it before his friend. The ghoul sat with the pitcher and watched expectantly.

“You sure you’re not a vampire or something?”

“Bozhemoy if I’ve blocked out that there’s supposed to be blood in this.” ‘Choly clutched at his chest at the mere idea of it, only to seethe it out in one breath and pick up the glass to smell it. When it didn’t seem unappetizing, he took a sip and let it coat his mouth before swallowing. He licked at the front of his teeth with a sneer, then took another swig. “Yeah, mint and cinnamon don’t cover it up near as well as cherry.”

“Besides the flavor, you think you got it close to the prewar recipe?”

“Besides the flavor.” He melted into a dull stupor, and nursed at the drink, unable to enjoy his success. Distantly, he murmured to himself under his breath in Russian. Now that he knew what was in the MREs, was it really all that bad to eat them? It was just Day Tripper. “If she considers me colonel now, why didn’t she ask me to help her synthesize X-Root?”

“Technically, she didn’t really promote you. She hasn’t updated your designation... things on your coat, whatever they’re called. She just disclosed stuff to you that would’ve been confidential to someone of a rank lower than colonel.” Sticks’s face tightened, and he leaned just the slightest bit nearer with a slight squint. “What was that first part again?”

“I said--” ‘Choly stuttered a breath out of his nose and slouched. He set down the glass a little too hard, and glared at Sticks with a proud hiss. “I said, mne naplevat’ chto vse menya trakhayut.” He flicked the fig at him and slouched to finish off what remained of his initial batch sampling.

The ghoul straightened with a shit-eating grin, and, pointing at him, slowly wagged his finger with a growing chuckle.
“You kissed me with that mouth. Ha! Angel wouldn’t... gladly translate for me, now, would it?”

With a self-inflected glower, the chemist poured himself another third of a glass.

“Fuck off, Jacob.”

Sticks rested his cheek against a propped up fist, and probably couldn’t grin any wider, in stunned delight.

“Shit, I’m just learning so much about you today, Mindy.”

“I don’t know what use it would serve Olivia to register-- me...” He trailed off again in thought, dismissing the sharp nosedive the conversation had taken. His eyes widened, and he slapped the table with one hand. “…In system as colonel! I. I have to get her to upgrade me in system. Have Deenwood recognize me.”

The ghoul sobered to squint again.

“...Why.”

The more he explained himself, the more his face slacked into a vague smile.

“…There’s got to be things I could gain access to by having my rank that high. I’d be directly under her. Provided she didn’t lock everything behind an O6 pay grade, I might get information worth having come all this way for. I took trouble to get up here. Thought some kind of DIA breach was risking Deenwood assets falling into raider hands. But, I had everything about it all wrong... Bozhemoy, what if I could get those formulas. I could cook up anything this base has ever made.”

Sticks mirrored ‘Choly’s dumbstruck awe.

“If you didn’t already have my full attention, you certainly do now.”
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

TWs: NSFW, drugs, navigation of toxic fetishization and strong dysphoria, amputation/prosthesis focus, minor blood mention.

Speak in tongues.

Having made dinner off a serving of leftover smoked pelt from Ick, Sticks rinsed out his melamine bowl in the kitchen sink. Dish rag and bowl in hand, the snickering ghoul turned to ‘Choly, who still swam in the dull of the Med-X.

“Say something else in Russian.”

‘Choly blinked, and stared at him, from where he sat at the kitchen table.

“Like what? Why?”

“I don’t know, whatever you want.”

“Bozhe, pomogi mne.” He rolled his eyes, his face long and irritable. “You do know my father was Chinese.”

Sticks just laughed harder and grabbed him up to hug him.

“Does that mean you can say shit in Chinese, too? God, you’re a mess, Mindy. It’s a wonder they had you cooking Psycho instead of acting as a spy.”

‘Choly sputtered, noticing that Sticks had trailed off as his hand had run down his back, tracing at the orthotics lacing through his shirt and sweater. The insinuation choked him.

“This is why I don’t like using Med-X. Tangles up my tongue. Whh we should go upstairs. Wind down for bed.”

When Sticks quietened, very obviously taking it for entendre, ‘Choly squirmed. Upstairs, the ghoul sat on the bed while ‘Choly paced between his bedroom and the hall which ran between it and his office. The chemist had half a mind to disengage this stress altogether and sit in his office in the dark for a while, but he promised not to let Sticks out of his sight. There was just the one bed, he realized, and for the same reason he couldn’t split on Sticks, he couldn’t let either of them sleep on the couch while the other took the mattress. Unable to leave well enough alone, he thought again to the catalogue misunderstanding, and glanced around the room.

“I got one thing from catalogue, but you got another. What exactly were you asking me for downstairs? Spell it out for me. I’m only denser under painkillers.”

Sticks couldn’t make eye contact either, staring off at the ceiling with a faint smile.

“I… remember bits and pieces about you, from before. Like, I remember you had a corset, even back then. Saw glimpses of it when Angel did your laundry. And you have one right now. I felt
of it.” Smiling self-consciously with lips pressed tight, Sticks became uncharacteristically stuck on expressing himself, as though the words had sublimated into glue in his mouth. “I love lingerie. Garters, corsets, all that kind of stuff. I think a guy would be just as sexy in it as a girl.”

As ‘Choly resumed pacing, a hand rested on his chest, his breath fluttering. Sticks would surely ask ‘Choly to remove the corset. With how Sticks had considered all ‘Choly’s honesty and ‘true colors’ utter absurdity, he both felt no other choice but to come out with this too and no other outcome than to be laughed off for it like everything else. He stood in his room again. His mouth hung open as he tried to find the words to even begin to explain himself, only for Sticks to speak up first.

“…What… what does it look like?” Sticks reached out wanting to stroke ‘Choly’s side. “The one you’ve got now?”

‘Choly blinked, and moved to switch from the overhead light to the side lamp. He stepped closer and permitted Sticks’s touch. Disrobing would probably be the easiest way.

“It’s nothing Duchesne would wear,” he apologized, stiff as Sticks leaned nearer to run his hands all along both ‘Choly’s sides and his back. “It’s canvas. Medical. Just like wrist and ankle braces. Uh.”

‘Choly bit at his lip as he untucked his striped dress shirt, which he unbuttoned but left on. Sticks’s face slacked as he aed over the uniform boning lines in the corset, but he abruptly squirmed back on the bed to remove his glove with its prosthetic hand. He beckoned ‘Choly onto the bed with him, who followed with uncertainty. Where they knelt in the middle of the bed, Sticks steadied ‘Choly’s shy face with his left wrist while he picked the bobby pins from his hair with his right. The chemist couldn’t understand why Sticks had done either of these things. He worried that having his hair down in this state of undress would only hasten what conclusion he felt inevitable. The Med-X didn’t diminish how his head and heart raced.

“However useful it is, I can’t feel a damn thing with the glove hand,” Sticks explained, sensing the confusion. “I want to… feel this.” He tousled ‘Choly’s dark hair free once he got all the pins out, and admired how curly it was from being constantly pinned up, letting his fingers wrap in the coils in places. He removed ‘Choly’s glasses and put them on the nightstand with his glove, then lovingly looked him over. “God, man. Your hair’s gorgeous. You’ve never been in the habit of just… leaving it down. You… should. Sometimes. I imagine it… smells amazing…”

Sticks leaned in to smell of it while he resumed petting the sides and back of the corset. Being smelled of jolted ‘Choly electric, and he shivered with a nasal stutter, nudging Sticks to kiss him. Gradually, they melted into horizontal heavy petting. ‘Choly traced Sticks’s nasal opening with his tongue and Sticks pulled away with an awkward choking chuckle.

“Let’s… not do that. Maybe.”

‘Choly interpreted the boundary request instead as one to keep to Sticks’s kinks. He noticed his Pip-Boy wasn’t clicking like he would have expected, and took it off in a mixture of frustration and relief that he wouldn’t have to take Rad-X after all. It hadn’t chittered downstairs on the kitchen table, either. Why is this so hard when it came so easy with feral? He reclined again, whispering husky in the ghoul’s ear.

“You know, I have different catalogue if you like this corset. Lexington pharmacy didn’t have any there, but… catalogue lists warehouse in Nashua. New Hampshire. That’s… right up river, yes? Full body orthotics. Crafted leather. …Fan lacing…”

The more detail he provided, the more heatedly Sticks felt him up.
“Then this is to keep your spine put,” Sticks deduced. “…Leather, you say? God, you’ve got to show me this book. You… would wear that for me? If we got it for you?”

Sticks’s enthusiasm and interest softened ‘Choly. He really didn’t hate the thought of having and wearing the leather orthotics. After all, without the wheelchair from Lex Walden, he’d have to figure out other ways to retain mobility. Forcing himself to focus on the sex act, he slipped atop Sticks and curled his hips to rub his butt against Sticks’s crotch. He straightened and spaced out, his delirium escaping him uttered in Russian.

He sobered instantly when Sticks began spreading ‘Choly’s legs so as to stroke them in kind to the corsetry. Pinning down the ghoul’s hand and wrist, he ground breathily to buy himself some time and tease him in the same measure. ‘Choly’s eyes widened at the recognition that the ghoul had anything to grind against. Self-consciousness introduced an inertia to his gyration. This is Jacob Hawthorne. Mutated, disfigured Jacob. Rational, lucid. Real. I’ve never put him first in my life. I’ve. I’ve got to. He shoved down any self-indulgence. His sex only stood to hurt this very real person beneath him. He recognized he’d lapsed verbally again, and stitched into an aching grin.

“I… I could kiss you with this mouth… or I could…”

‘Choly sank down to run his hands along Sticks’s sides and hips and unbuttoned his slacks. He glanced up at Sticks while he ran a hand over his crotch through his boxers. Sticks’s foot twitched.

“You… wouldn’t want to add Greek to that laundry list, would you?”

The ghoul’s proposition didn’t compute at first. ‘Choly couldn’t grasp which way he’d meant it. Surely, he couldn’t have meant it-- He laughed like broken silver, flushing bright red. And we both think I’m the dense one. Just let me put you first, you idiot. Rather than mention his incredulity, he moved to free Sticks from his underwear.

“It’s my first time, with anything, with anyone,” fell out of ‘Choly as he eyed what Sticks had. The length didn’t strike him as anything extraordinary, but the girth of it had him wondering how to even go about anything at all. He licked at the side of it, knowing exactly how he’d want to appreciate that the wiry keloid textures traversed even this far south, but not having the first clue what might please Sticks most. “I think it’s good way to begin.”

A lyrical breath trickled out of the ghoul’s nasal cavity as ‘Choly’s lips went around him, and tried to fit over him, a breath which jolted into a delighted groan as his tongue pressed underneath. What ‘Choly had said got him trying not to cackle in a vapor of disbelief and delight; clapping his hand over his own mouth did not contain the sound from still coming out his lack of a nose.

“Jesus Christ, you were in the army how long and you never even--” His hips flinched as another moan cut him off. “Always thought you’d have been the one demanding attention, not doling it out.”

‘Choly slouched forward, his hair spilling over his shoulders, and he glanced up to Sticks as he pulled off. Licking at the sinewy texture was driving ‘Choly wild, but he couldn’t tell if it did any good.

“This isn’t how to demand your attention?” His eyes drooped shut and his native tongue murmured his overstimulation before dipping against Sticks again. “Another meaning for ‘Sticks,’ mm? Let me know if I’m doing this right.”

Greed overpowered his compunction, and he dipped his hands underneath Sticks to hold his scarred buttocks while he did his best to fit all of him in his mouth. He couldn’t move his tongue
around much like this, but he could at least bob and pull his lips and tongue along it. Sticks’s hand and wrist went to either side of ‘Choly’ s head, to pet his hair. ‘Choly found himself drooling to excess, and had to pause a moment to swallow. The almost metallic muskiness of the taste of Sticks in his mouth left him heady and even greedier to experience not just a dick, but a ghoul dick. His dick.

A ragged, rasping moan tore out of Sticks as ‘Choly found his tempo. ‘Choly’s eyes shot open before knitting shut with determination, his rationality come undone. God, this is driving him feral. He wouldn’t beg Sticks to make that sound for him, but he would do everything in his power to draw it out of him. Approximating Sticks’s moaning to his ecstasy and madness, his nasal breathing stitched viscous, desperate, and erratic.

When Sticks sat up but didn’t push ‘Choly off him, ‘Choly thought at first he’d done something uncomfortable. But Sticks’s hand dipped between ‘Choly’s shoulder blades to stiffly drink in the eyelets and cord which decorated the curvature of his back, and his wrist urged ‘Choly to continue. God, yes, feed the insect. In his mind, his tongue and Sticks’s thickness became ravenous lapping worms, and a hand wandered to cup the ghoul’s balls practically begging him replete.

Sticks locked up with a guttural gag, and with a series of jagged hip jerks, coated ‘Choly’s mouth with himself. Despite anticipation and preparation, ‘Choly held the thick, heavy musk in his mouth, and no matter how badly he wanted to swallow what had been gifted him, the reflex simply wouldn’t come. His ears rang, the longer he tried. Pursing his lips shut, ‘Choly sat up and let Sticks lay back, before shooting up off the bed to expectorate. He spat repeatedly, reaming his tongue against his teeth in an attempt to rid his mouth of the overwhelming taste and consistency, and grabbed for what was left of his mouthwash.

‘Choly glanced at himself in the broken mirror. He stopped swishing, holding the antiseptic in his mouth as his jaw drooped. A trickle of blood had pooled up around his nostril, starting to drip down his upper lip. The implications of having tried to swallow burned in his ears, and he wiped his nose with the back of his hand in agitation that he had been unable to make himself follow through. So at least that part of him still exhibits rads... He gargled and spat out the minty stuff. He might not have swallowed, but he still now contained a part of Sticks. Maybe ghouls and ferals have just enough key things in common after all.

Sticks had rolled over to watch from the bed.

“Sure didn’t feel like that was your first time. ...You all right?”

“...I used all my toothpaste earlier.” He spat one last time in an attempt to dislodge the taste. “Are you sure you’re all right with...”

“I wouldn’t be averse to returning the favor, if that’s what you’re asking.” Sticks grinned at him knowingly. “You’re good at that, in case you couldn’t tell.”

He struggled to keep his breathing in line as he leaned forward on the counter.

“I, no. Doing that for you was plenty enough stimulation for me. But.” He stared at himself, licking at his lips and trying not to scowl. “...I can’t sleep in the corset.”

“...Unfortunate, but understandable.” The ghoul’s grin melted into a dozzy drowsiness. “I’m not gonna make fun of your pajamas. Or lack of them, if that’s the case.”

“--Mostly been sleeping in undershirts, if I undress at all.” The burning in his ears turned to ringing, and he straightened to focus on removing his wrist and ankle braces. He sniffed to himself.
“What I had before. It wasn’t a corset. It was a bust flattener.”

“Tch. So it was an antique. So’re you.”

The admission wouldn’t come outright, so he just gave up trying, and he dipped into the closet to change. The light didn’t work anymore, so he had to leave the door open.

“I just cannot believe there’s articles like that, that provide form and function…”

‘Choly glanced to double-check that Sticks wasn’t watching him, and hastily finished removing the corset and his golfing ensemble. With his back to him, he put on an undershirt, and wrapped himself up in his robe. By the time he came back to the bed, Sticks was down to a tank and boxers, and had folded down the hospital blanket for him. Sticks reached to turn out the lamp, and ‘Choly slipped into the bed facing away from him.

“You really do go wild for ghoulishness.” The ghoul sidled up to him to spoon him and share the pillow, and sleepily nuzzled into his hair with a playful snarl. “You cold?”

“I... I’m not...” ‘Choly pressed himself up to fit against Sticks, and tugged the robe tie even tighter. “I’m... not--”

“Not... what?”

“I’m not a man.”

“Could have fooled me.” The ghoul pulled the covers up over them both more thoroughly, and got even more comfortable holding ‘Choly. “Look, whatever you’re trying to tell me, I already knew. But it doesn’t make you any less the man you are.” He sighed dreamily, too comfortable for his own good. “I don’t mind the things about how I am that turn your crank. Just... stay out of my nose, though, maybe? Makes me gag a bit.”

“No... ted.” He stifled tears. He held Sticks’s arm and pressed his wrist to his lips. “You’re... you’re beautiful, Jacob.”

“I’ve... missed proximity like this... Never would have guessed laying with a man would be so comforting... I’m... glad you’re the one showing me that, Mindy.”

Maybe it was all right to be like this, and all that meant.

“I’m glad it’s with you, too.”
Ghoul limbs wrapped around Melancholy. A smile bubbled up on his face as he pressed himself back against Sticks, who reciprocated in kind and pulled the hospital blanket up over both of them to spite the clammy, gauzy chill of twilight.

“Do we have to get up,” ‘Choly mumbled.

“I’m not averse to staying... just like this... as long as time allows.” Sticks sighed, not quite lucid. “I like this dream.”

“I’m glad it’s not one.”

Just as ‘Choly began to drift off again, the alarm bleated on his Pip-Boy on the nightstand. The two of them grunted. Sticks rolled over to reach for the device, but ‘Choly had already stood and circled the bed to retrieve it. The room returned to quiet as he held the disarmed Pip-Boy, undecided at first whether to put it back on. For a moment, the regret throttled him that he’d left it off the whole night. Had it been a military-issue Pip-Boy, the negligence in the company of non-military personnel would have been unforgivable. He swallowed despite a dry mouth, and put it back on. Surely, the ghoul hadn’t done anything to it in the night, or looked through its data. Sticks looked up at him with bated attentiveness from where he still lay, putting his left hand back on. Impatiently, ‘Choly tossed the covers off him and retied his robe. ‘Choly didn’t even wait for him to get any clothes before ushering the two of them downstairs.

The rich, petrichoresque aroma of fresh coffee drifted up the stairwell. ‘Choly wondered whether Angel had been distancing itself on purpose, but said nothing seeing the Mister Handy already busied itself downstairs.

Sticks boiled some water in order to reconstitute some dried noodles he’d brought. As it steeped, he gave ‘Choly a glance in offering to share, but the chemist glanced dully over the edge of his Billerica Golf Course mug with the exhaustion of the impending day already weighing on him. The ghoul fetched a Melancholia from the fridge and set it on the table, then finished preparing his breakfast, stirring in some jerky shreds and a fistful of something ‘Choly only speculated might be trail mix or dried vegetables. Whatever Sticks had added made the entire kitchen smell savory. Pouring himself a teacup of coffee, he sat at the table with it and ate straight from his pan with a pair of metal chopsticks.

After a few sips of the minty meal replacement drink, which they’d re-bottled the night before, ‘Choly’s face screwed up a bit. He switched to the hot black coffee, only to sour and return to the Melancholia.

“Not so great second day?”
“More that there’s a dozen reasons mint mouthwash is probably the worst flavor to make it with.” He rubbed his tongue on the roof of his mouth a bit. “Haven’t had a chilled one since... before. ...Maybe chocolate would at least bridge the flavor with the coffee.”

“Would it be dangerous to figure out how to make that stuff chocolate flavored?” He swallowed and grinned at the chemist. “Or coffee flavored?”

‘Choly’s chuckle faded as he watched Sticks eat.

“...Forgive me if it’s coarse of me to ask, but you’re... eating with the left hand? Are you. Were you left handed? I barely have the dexterity for chopsticks with my good hand, and yet-- No, forget I said anything.”

The ghoul’s raised-brow gaze sank into his meal for a few bites, while he took the observation as a compliment on his dexterity.

“It’s something the General threw together. Mix of stuff from the RobCo building. I think the tech’s called something like... Nostradamus?”

‘Choly’s face drooped in recognition, and watched more intently.

“She reverse-engineered the Nostrus glove to fashion intuitive prosthesis.” He finished off the Melancholia, so he could focus on his coffee. “I understand now, why you said it doesn’t fake sensory input. It’s basically a glorified typewriter.”

“Nah, doesn’t even typewrite. It’s got precision, but that’s about it.”

It struck him, that Sticks leaving his glove on the nightstand likely held an even greater severity than his leaving his Pip-Boy beside it, and he soured over the fact he’d distrusted the ghoul for even a moment.

“...You got it from Olivia. I can’t tell whether that must have cost a fortune.”

“Cost more than it did to lose the hand in the first place, that’s for sure.”

Angel included itself finally, pretending to scrutinize the state of the cabinetry before taking its time washing the blender pitcher and measuring cups that had been left in the sink.

“Good morning, gentlemen. I would ask if you slept well, but we all know neither of you were asleep for some time. I see you’ve succeeded in a batch of Melancholia, Mister Carey. I trust that you didn’t add any... Med-X to the recipe as you promised, mm?”

He jolted upright, choking on his coffee. Angel offered him the dish rag to wipe his nose and chin, seemingly oblivious to the discomfort of the temperature of the beverage. Sticks had scooted back away from the table to hold the pan in his lap with his left hand to finish eating with his right, watching wide-eyed from a distance.

“I... I don’t think I should have to announce every single time I use a chem,” the chemist asserted, shaking. “Sticks was acting in my best interest, just as much as you do. He knew how much pain I was in yesterday, and he offered me the Med-X dose. One. Dose. Which went into me directly, not my food stock.”

Once it could retrieve the dish rag, it set the inverted pitcher on it spread out on the counter.

“Well, you could have declined the offer.”
“--Now you see here.” Sticks shoved his mostly-broth pan onto the table to glare meaningfully at the robot. “Would you turn down something that makes it easier to function?”

“You’re asking about a chem, not a replacement part or upgrade! Pretending there’s nothing wrong can only stand to make a problem worse!!” Exasperated, Angel started toward the back patio before a full argument could break out. Before it shut the door behind itself, it tearfully cried out, “You promised me you’d make use of Rad-X the next time, Sir!”

The pair finished their food and drink in lethargic, sullen silence.

‘Choly tossed his mug into the sink.

“Unlike you, I’ll have to take my shower in the barracks. If you could, go ahead and get dressed, so you can follow Angel and me over.”

“Are you mad at me?” Sticks asked while he finished rinsing out his pan to set it beside the pitcher.

“I’m mad at myself.”

“...For?”

“Making promises I knew I couldn’t keep.” He took to the first step, and motioned his head at Sticks. “It’s no matter. Get on with it. Get dressed so I can get dressed. So we can go check on Liv.”

Upstairs, Sticks was putting back on his bowling ensemble, and he asked him, “How did Angel know? What you had and hadn’t been putting in your body? ...Who you’d been putting in your body?”

Flushing in the face, ‘Choly didn’t look to him, gathering together his uniform, combat boots, clean undergarments, binding, and other effects he’d require to dress fresh out of the shower.

“In case you couldn’t tell from all the different colored parts it’s made of now, I upgraded Angel before we came to Lowell. Replaced parts that had gotten damaged from raider attacks. It’s got the sensory array of a Mister Gutsy now, as well as the minigun of one.” He snorted, shaking his head of his mentality. “I thought if I watched what I said aloud-- It was a mistake to give a DIA Handy a sensory update. Once a bug, always a bug.”

“It’s coming from a place of concern and care.” Sticks put his right hand on ‘Choly’s shoulder. “And you were, too. Upgrading it and repairing it like that. I don’t think it’s just hurt that it thinks you went back on some promises. I think it’s getting jealous I’m back in your life, ‘Choly.”

“If the three of us could live together in peace in 2077, the three of us can make peace in 2284.”

Angel carried ‘Choly’s things and accepted his Pip-Boy once he disrobed. It supervised Sticks all the while, who sat in the changing room of the showers poorly hiding a pout that he had to get stuck alone with the robot. ‘Choly got lost in the steam and his head space, recalling truthfully that laying with Sticks had in fact irradiated him. He’d meant it when he’d promised that he’d try the Melancholia without painkillers, but he could tell he hadn’t even come close to a genuine promise that he’d do what he could to prevent his own radiation poisoning. By the time he turned the water off, he stood dumb overhearing that Angel and Sticks were yelling--and that neither cared whether ‘Choly could overhear it.

“--How could you give him a painkiller like that!” Angel spat. “He’s a lifelong history of opioid addiction! He’s clean right now, Mister Hawthorne. You will not ruin that for him!”
“He’s a grown man, Mister Handy. You forcing him to abstain from all chems means you’re keeping him from learning how to make that choice himself. Don’t you trust him? D--”

“--I don’t trust you.”

Cut off, the ghoul snarled.

“Don’t you trust him to make his own choices! And you don’t seem to understand the scope of pain he experiences! In just the past three days, I have seen how bad off he is from what Vault-Tec did to him. Not just physically, but emotionally. He deserves some respite from that pain, even if it’s implausible to turn it off completely. Or did General Atomics not program you with any compassion!”

The Handy sputtered, incredulous.

“Of course he has free will! We have an arrangement!” It brought ‘Choly his towel and robe, continuing to speak to Sticks from the showers. Excluded from an argument about him, ‘Choly frowned and dried his hair. “I have all the chems in my storage. If Mister Carey needs a chem, he can ask me to dispense it! I’m not stopping him from doing a thing. I’ve simply required that it be a conscious choice on his part if he seeks chemical alterations.”

“--And you don’t think forcing a request for every dose shames someone in constant pain for asking for pain relief?!”

“Get... out, you two,” ‘Choly sneered, snatching his things from the robot and stamping a bare wet foot at them both. “Out! Get out...! Let me dress!!”

They complied.

The only sound for a while was the dripping shower head. He sat in clean briefs, and dropped the robe and towel to work himself into the surgical corset. Despite how much of it he’d overheard, he couldn’t make his mind up whether either of them had been wrong or right. The canvas clung to his body in a way that prevented facility of stringing into it, and he sniveled feeling like having two companions at odds with one another had divorced both of them from him. It really came down to him causing trouble, didn’t it?

“Can I... help you with that?” Sticks knocked at the open doorway, but didn’t enter. “Not that I don’t think you could do it yourself, but I imagine it’s much easier with two sets of hands.”

‘Choly picked up his long face and sat up from lacing up his ankle braces over his socks, the corset still hanging loose off his shoulders.

“--I.” He punctuated a breath, noticing the ghoul had returned inside independent of the robot. “I haven’t had somebody help me with it before.”

“Can I--”

“--Yeah. Yeah, sorry.”

“All good.”

The ghoul slipped behind ‘Choly and ran his bare fingers over the laces of the corset, to scrutinize its construction. At first ‘Choly could only imagine the offer had been made out of self-indulgence, but he permitted it regardless. Then Sticks began a precise and attentive adjustment one pair of eyelets at a time, from the top and bottom inward, cementing some manner of altruism in ‘Choly’s
mind. They exchanged only murmurs of affirmation or doubt as to proper fit, and before ‘Choly
knew it Sticks had him strung into it like it came second nature to the ghoul. ‘Choly felt his front,
and down his sides, brows raised at the perceived difference it had made to have someone else do
it for him. He couldn’t tell if it really did fit better adjusted by someone else, or if it just felt that
way on account of whom had helped him.

Before he could thank him, Sticks had already stepped back outside to wait.

He dressed in uniform, but put his hair in a messy french twist so that a good front third of it hung
loose. If asked, he’d say it was so it would dry faster, but he’d really done it so the vague curls
could frame his heart-shaped face.
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Deenwood's mirrors are just broken enough.
TWs: discussion of chemical weapon artillery, hair clippers, vague sense of identity politic.

“Now then,” Angel remarked as ‘Choly stepped out of the enlisted barracks’ baths. “We can all collectively agree to be civil, can’t we?”

“I don’t think either you nor I can be civil, all things considered,” ‘Choly quipped as he hopped up on the Handy’s foot pegs for a ride across the compound grounds, already dreading what could come next. “Today, I’m in uniform and ready to get tasks taken care of. We’ll be agreeable. Sticks can be civil.”

A Gutsy rushed up to give directions.

“Not entirely correct, to consider Sticks a civilian, Captain Carey. Come with me. The General is in Wing IV of the R&D.”

Sticks noticed both the army green robot’s verbiage and the chemist’s flinch as to where they headed next, and he straightened to stuff his hands in his khaki pockets to pretend he hadn’t noticed anything at all.

The Gutsy, G-5, led them to the smallest but most fortified of the three standing warehouse-like buildings on the property. In previous visits this week, Deenwood’s robotics had escorted ‘Choly here to Olivia’s office, but today, he was taken past encrypted pneumatic doors to the high-security laboratory floor. It was the most minor of consolation to ‘Choly, that this was not the floor where he and his colleagues had developed the Psycho which they perfected through exacting trial and error--but it was, instead, an area which required even higher clearance, and none of the equipment here was familiar.

Under the mixture of fluorescent and incandescent lighting, ‘Choly nearly didn’t recognize the back of Olivia’s head at the terminal where she sat, already hard at work supervising the computer-assisted manufacturing process. She heard the doors open and shut, and footsteps and flames approach, but she didn’t look up, only waving a hand at the Gutsy to dismiss it.

“Thank you, Green Five.”

“At your beck, Madam General.”

“I’m sorry to say you’re ahead of me. The synthesis process is still yet incomplete. When I said to give me a day, I meant twenty-four hours or so.” After a moment poring over figures, she saved the programming variables and spun about face on the swivel stool to clap her hands with a firm smile for her company. “Still, though, we can discuss the game plan while we wait.”

“A hundred units of X-Cell-Root,” ‘Choly parroted dully, dismounting Angel to look around. “This is the wing where they created X-Cell, isn’t it.”
“There were thirteen wings during your last tenure on base, for ten branches of research. Most of them are no longer in use. Right now, you’re currently standing in the only known laboratory on the Eastern Coast with both the precursor and formula for Day Tripper.”

“I’m sure you spend a lot of time in this room, then,” the chemist remarked a little too sharply.

Sticks snorted with a dumb smile, and shook his head at him.

“I’m sure I do.” A strange knowing glint filled her dark eyes. “The raw materials I needed for one of the shells we’re to use against the Rust Devils are stored, and best processed, here.”

“I’m going to pretend you’re pulling at least a few punches,” Sticks quipped, no longer of any humor. “Mixed artillery, I’m guessing?”

“Artillery? What are you--” ‘Choly shut up abruptly, recalling how she’d mentioned the day before that MKExcell had begun as a Chem Corps study, only to shift to a Pharm Corps study. “You’re planning on using the Day Tripper ‘Root’ on the Devils.”

“Quick on the draw.” Olivia grinned, appreciating the fact ‘Choly could keep up. “You’ve got it backwards, though. Klutz was engineered from Day Tripper. We researched both X-Cell’s pharmaceutical refinement as well as its weaponization, remember. Once under the influence of the gas grenade, the affected party is far more readily plied. Provided key frequencies, someone affected by Klutz also exhibits a tendency to spontaneously disrobe. Klutz shells are shaped such that they...” she snickered at the thought of it, pantomiming the trajectory, “whistle one such pitch.”

“They’re notorious for wearing heavy armor gutted from robotics,” Sticks nodded, appreciating the disarmament tactic. “Not questioning the use of the Klutz... but you still haven’t said whether it was only Klutz.”

“The game plan, Sticks. Are you going to let me speak yet?” When he crossed his arms and watched expectantly, she slouched back on the stool and lit a cigarette. “The Furriers’ greatest skill set is their stamina hunting and their ability to set traps. Provided proper firearms, they’re exceptional snipers, but my Eyebots that survey Lowell and Chelmsford estimate three hundred raiders in Back Central, and at least another hundred in RobCo Towers. Deenwood has less than a hundred robots at her employ, and the Furriers don’t even have a hundred heads. Considering the Devils--”

“I dunno,” ‘Choly mumbled under his breath, “one of them might have a hundred heads.”

Olivia glowered at him for acting as her peanut gallery. He looked over to Sticks, who was straining not to die laughing.

“...Considering the Devils have their own handcrafted robotics,” she continued, through her teeth, “much of which is crafted from robotics they have captured and stolen from Deenwood, we must have the element of surprise on our side. Or we will lose.” She stood, to pace with her smoke. “That said, I plan for the Furriers to shepherd the Back Central Devils into one central location to maximize the efficiency of the gas grenades. Once the Furriers utilize the indicated formation to pin the Devils in position, my Sentry Bots will fire Rad-I-Canned shells. We’ll do the same with RobCo Towers once we’ve secured Back Central.”

“Rad-I-Canned!” Sticks blurted out. Incredulity flung his fists to his sides and his face into an exasperated scowl. “You’ve only used that once before, to my knowledge! I know you could cut the conflict tension with a knife here, but do you really take this for some Gordian knot! Surely we
can achieve this with less.”

She took a long hit off her cigarette, and she stopped and turned to make unblinking eye contact with Sticks while she exhaled all the smoke his way, through her nasal gap.

“Wars have been started over less.”

‘Choly finally noticed where the Assaultron Helen had been in waiting all this time, by the door where they’d entered, and couldn’t stop staring at her. With a coughing fit, he broke the uncomfortable silence with his guts full of moths.

“About making me colonel... Green Five still called me captain earlier. You did mean it, that you wanted to make it official, right? Colonel Carey?”

Getting caught in her misdirection, she softened in place and resumed pacing. Sticks appreciated the shift in subject.

“Oh, I just didn’t consider it all that time sensitive. Figured we could get into all that after this debacle’s through with. But, if you insist, it probably wouldn’t hurt to look the part of the colonel in charge of the Voire troop.” The ghoul general strolled over to the nearest standing ashtray, took one more hit off her smoke, and extinguished it in the sand. “Go get your prescription updated. Those godawful glasses aren’t regulation issue. And you’re going to have to get a haircut, if you plan on wearing the officers’ martial dress uniform, you know.”

She made a buzzing motion with one fist at her own nape in a mild jeer, then glanced to her steel-tone Pip-Boy to flick a series of dial settings. ‘Choly touched the temple of his glasses with a frown, then felt of the back of his head with anxiousness. Green Five reappeared while he stressed, and he straightened when he noticed he was visibly losing his cool over a handful of superficial alterations. She held out an upturned hand expectantly.

“Before you get out of my hair for a few hours, fork over your nameplate and ribbon rack. I’ll update the RFID data while you get cleaned up, so that the base responds to your... new rank. I’ll have your designations, and new uniform, delivered to your rowhouse.”

“Leave the supervision of Mister Hawthorne to me, Miss Francis,” Angel offered helpfully as its owner complied. “I’ve already been his shadow this morning, whether he likes it or not.”

Olivia picked her eyes up before her head, glancing first to Angel, then to Sticks. Her brow piqued as her lips furrowed in thought, and she paced some more while Sticks sweated.

“You know, I could fix that. Reboot Angel’s imprint matrix. Reintroduce yourselves to its fixed variables. It would have to relearn who you both are, of course, but the second time it gets acquainted would go much faster since it’s already learned both of your personalities.”

‘Choly gawked between them all in a stupor over what was being proposed. Sticks nearly cut through the pause to agree on ‘Choly’s behalf, but ‘Choly cut him off.

“--I don’t want to wipe Angel’s memory of me.” He hemmed, hating where this was going. “I, I’ll think about it. Let’s get going, Green Five.”

“We’ll come with you,” Sticks blurted out, drawing Angel along as he stayed twenty paces behind ‘Choly.

“I’ll send for you all when I’m done with the Furriers’ chem cache,” Olivia called after them fake-sweetly. “Don’t bother me again until then.”
“Was that a gesture or a threat, to offer that... service,” ‘Choly asked with a flat distress, once they were no longer in her presence.

“Probably both, knowing her,” Sticks replied, just as terse. “Angel, you don’t have any arrangements with me. Could I bum a smoke and light off you?”

“Certainly,” it provided without skipping a beat. It also gave ‘Choly his cane, which he appreciated. “Do you need one as well, Mister Carey?”

“Why the fuck not,” he resigned, nearly concussed by being jerked around by so many different individuals. The leathery taste did little to soothe his nerves, or his disorientation, but he persisted.

Once ‘Choly stepped inside the storage hangar, and the Quartermasters’ Wing, Green Five directed him to the left hall. Angel and Sticks remained outside.

“The General has instructed that you begin with Optometry. As you’ll recall, the barber is at the other end of the hall once you’re done.”

“Why hello!” the Miss Nanny inside the office greeted in a soothing, effeminate affect. Green Five vanished again on its way, trading off ‘Choly’s care to the white robot. “It’s been so long since I had someone to examine! Let us get started with the phoropter, shall we?”

‘Choly took the ashtray from the waiting area with him, and puffed at his cigarette intermittently throughout the examination. The Handy, nicknamed Lunette, did not object provided that ‘Choly kept it out of the way and kept the ashes tidy. With a flurry of numerical annotations and shuffled lens metrics, Lunette determined his prescription. It felt like the Nanny leaned nearer when its optical lenses craned into his face to inspect him, and he sat back in the high-back exam chair, cradling the ashtray close to his chest with a frown.

“Our diagnostics equipment indicates that your cataracts are severe enough to require surgical correction. The cause of these is unknown, however, and it seems to chiefly impact your light sensitivity rather than the acuity of your vision. We would have to refer you to an ophthalmologist to receive corrective surgery, but it’s my understanding that it’s neither necessary nor afforded at present. I can script you medical permission to wear a visor or other such brimmed head gear on duty, if you like, Sir.”

He nodded tersely, and put his round frames back on. Lunette eased off the personal space intrusion, to retrieve a catalogue and provide it. To skim through it, he put out his cigarette and set the ashtray aside.

“Our inventory hasn’t been updated in around two hundred years, I’m afraid,” it apologized. “The General hasn’t revised dress code to forbid any of them, at least. Hopefully there’s still something available to your liking.”

The booklet fell open in his lap when he found the crescent-shaped acetate frames were still listed. He pointed at them, shakily, and Lunette snatched up the catalogue to see the model number he’d indicated.

“Ah yes! My records indicate you ordered these 218 years ago. Gravitating towards the familiar! We’ve still got several. Shall I fill your prescription with these then?”

“I’d like that very much, Lunette. Thank you.”

“As you like! Off you go, then. I’ll bring them down the hall to you once I’ve got the lenses cut. Shouldn’t be but fifteen minutes or so.”
He caned his way down to the barber’s office, to sit in the chair. A Mister Handy with a cockney accent approached him.

“What’ll it be, Gov?”

“I’m in a bit of a predicament, Burns. I’m told I... have to get a cut appropriate for the officer’s martial dress uniform. But between you and me? I don’t want to cut off my hair.”

“I hear you. Remember you objected to a crew cut in 2066, too. Martial uniform, though.” It gave him a thoughtful whistle. “‘Bout to get a might bit hairy, I imagine.”

The pun made him flinch, and the Handy guffawed.

“Do you have any suggestions?”

“Oh, say no more. Leave it to ol’ Burns. I’ve got just the thing for ya. It’ll take a Love guide to get it trim proper nough for regulation, but you’ve got the Burns guarantee you’ll appreciate the results.” Its tendril attachments whirled to comb, snips, and an electric razor. “Let me take a little off the bottom ‘ere, mark the state a yer Barnet off the list of things you could possibly be worryin’ about.”

He swallowed, and sat up straight as Burns fetched the barber’s cape.

“I trust you.”

“Attaboy!”

Given the indication to begin, the Handy removed ‘Choly’s glasses. Then it unpinned his hair and brushed it out, and it proceeded to pin back sections to isolate the patch from his nape to just above his ears. He tried to watch, but couldn’t really see in the cracked mirror, with or without his eyesight. The sensation of the clippers jolted down his spine and he shivered, barely keeping still enough for Burns to steady the attachment along his scalp. It touched up the hair in front of both ears, then with scissors trimmed his split ends as well. Once done snipping away, the Handy swiveled the chair one-eighty to dip the back to the counter at the wall. It gave him a quick rinse and blow dry, and propped him back up to use fresh bobby pins to return his hair to a taut, slick french twist, positioned slightly higher up on his head than before.

By the time Burns was done with him, Lunette entered.

“Burns, I’ve got Colonel Carey’s prescription ready,” the Nanny said.

“Ah, yes! Let’s have ‘em. Perfect timin’. He’ll get to see how it matches up with the ‘do we’ve done him up wif.” As he took the glasses gratefully from Lunette, Burns turned the chair to his right, to face the wall where a full length mirror remained in tact. “How’s about it, Gov?”

To have heard the Nanny say Colonel, though, he thought to himself. Olivia must have just gotten finished with his designation updates. He shivered, and put on his new glasses. He let out a low whistle, his face long as he turned his head to run a hand over his shaven nape. He could see. Truly see.

“Doesn’t feel so bad, after all,” he appreciated quietly, both awing and dreading the context which such a cut came requisite. He repeated flatly, “The colonel of the Voire troop. Huh.”

“Just one step left before you’re off to your camp, Colonel,” Burns remarked, watching him appreciating the trim. “Gen says Green Seven’s en route to your place as we speak. Better get
“Oh, tell me they’re to your liking,” Lunette begged.

“It’s perfect,” he ingratiated, his head ringing when he saw the hair Burns now swept up into a dustpan. He started off toward the front door of the hangar, trying not to think about it too hard. “Thank you, both of you.”

Where’s your loyalty lie, Carey? Do you even have to be Carey anymore? Does Carey even exist now? Should I have asked her to program my nameplate to truly be Melancholy? To properly be Melano Kara? Is becoming Melancholy a step forward? Would becoming Kara again be a step backward?

He choked down the urge to ask Angel for a Mentat, or another cigarette, only to open the door to find neither the Handy nor his ghoul had waited up for him. He snarled and hobbled along back to the rowhouse, knowing G-7 would without question beat him home.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

...Or maybe not broken enough.

TW: mental snap, description of the sources of disfigurement and injuries.

By the time ‘Choly had crossed the base grounds, G-7 had likely stood idle outside his rowhouse for upwards of half an hour. His new uniform hung gingerly in one of its tendril pincers, in two garment bags. Wheezing hard, he snatched it from the Mister Gutsy and thanked it with a pat on its tendril, then slouched up the porch stairs. Before he even got on the porch, the front door flew open, and Angel came out to try to help him inside.

“Oh, dear, Mister Carey, do forgive me--” He swatted the air angrily at it. “Mister Hawthorne refused to wait a moment longer, and I promised both you and Miss Francis that I wouldn’t leave him alone--”

“JACOB!” Snarling, he mounted the stairs, his head running hot. “What the FUCK was so important that you couldn’t wait on me fifteen GODDAMN minutes! Angel is my fucking WHEELCHAIR--”

Standing stupid in the doorway to his bedroom, ‘Choly stopped in his tracks. Dressed again in his longshoreman’s garb, Sticks sat on the end of the bed with the Vault 111 jumpsuit slung across his lap. The ghoul’s face was all screwed up in what could either have been a smile or a grimace. He sniveled, not looking up to ‘Choly.

“What kind of sick fucking joke is this?” Sticks’s voice cracked, rough enough to nearly sound underwater. Transfixed on the blood stains, his fingers tangled up in the stab hole in the front of the otherwise royal blue bodysuit. “I was right. You are haunting my stupid ass.”

‘Choly hung up the garment bags in the open closet and sat beside him to catch his breath. Unsure what to say, he sat wheezing for some time.

“Jesus Christ,” Sticks continued at a hush with a broken pitch bottomless glare, the grimace falling slack. “Those glasses. If it’s 2077 all over again, why am I still like this--?”

“Hey. Hey, stay with me.” ‘Choly tried to put a hand on Sticks’s, but the ghoul withdrew it and let his attention knot back up in the vault suit. “I got attacked by bloodbugs on the way up Route 3. One of them got me, just under the collarbone. Would have got me through the heart, if it hadn’t been for the surgical corset. If Angel hadn’t had its Nanny tendril and programming, it wouldn’t have been able to administer the Stimpaks it did. I-- You think I got shot in the chest, don’t you?” A weak, defeated laugh escaped him. He loosed his necktie and began to unbutton his dress shirt. “I can show you the scar it left. And I know Angel would hate to produce it, but I did keep the thing’s proboscis. A sort of trophy. Angel! Bring the bloodbug proboscis, will you?”

When Sticks was uninterested in entertaining the spectacle of ‘Choly’s scars, ‘Choly got up from the bed and went into the open closet to change into his new uniform. He discarded the service uniform in the floor and put his Pip-Boy atop the chest of drawers, and stood there in his
undershirt and underwear by the time Angel approached with the requested object. At first the robot offered it to its owner, but he urged it to hand the foot-long hollow structure to the ghoul instead. It also offered the deathclaw’s paw with tacit displeasure.

“Please tell me we’re not taking these with us,” it complained. “You really must rethink what you keep from the awful beasts that attack you.”

“How— a deathclaw!” The desiccating clump of mostly bone fell in the floor rather into Sticks’s lap. He brandished the proboscis at him like a knife from where he sat. “No. No, there’s no way you’re standing in front of me alive.”

‘Choly was immune to the gesture, too absorbed in getting dressed again.

“You’re convinced I’m a ghost. Is that it? Maybe I am. It would explain a lot.”

‘Choly leaned nearer his reflection in the broken full-length mirror as he fastened the brass snaps of the high-collar charcoal shirt’s wide asymmetrical strapped placket. He adjusted how the piped edge sat around his neck. Already affixed was the colonel’s eagle. He straightened to scrutinize his transformation progress, and could only continue to wonder whether accepting the promotion was a mistake. Leaning against the frame of the closet door to steady himself, the matching slacks came next. He tucked in his shirt, then argued with his ammo case harness to get the belt through the loops and the suspenders in place. He dragged his combat boots over to the bed to sit and lace them up.

“I guess I’m just struggling with the reality,” Sticks admitted quietly, “that despite everything that’s happened to you, you could possibly still be alive. It’s my understanding that the majority of people who got into the vaults didn’t usually last more than a few years, for the variety of evil shit Vault-Tec did. Forgive me for having such a hard time imagining that you survived two centuries in one, and have somehow managed to keep from getting killed by the Commonwealth ever since, having to crash course it all first hand.”

“Didn’t do it alone.” He pointed at Angel, warming to a grin, and it brought him his Pip-Boy. He folded up his right sleeve and put it back on. “I had to repair Angel for a lot of reasons, you know. Damn if it’s not foolhardy as all abandon, though! You know raiders chopped off its one laser attachment, and even though it only had its saw and pincer, it still ran headlong toward that deathclaw to keep it from ripping up the settlers that the raiders had been trying to kill!”

“If I hadn’t done something, Mister Garvey would have had to contend with the monstrosity all on his own,” Angel stated humbly. “The power armor could have only done him so much good against something so large and so angry!”

“Settlers?” Sticks mumbled after a good moment, spacing out. “There’s settlers in Lexington? They’re not raiders?”

“One of them still fancies himself a Minuteman, if that means anything to you of their substance.” When the ghoul couldn’t help a bittersweet smile, ‘Choly chuckled and patted his knee. “All that happened in Concord, actually— and they’re living in Sanctuary now, believe it or not!”

Any good humor fell right back out of the ghoul.

"You’re kidding me."

“Serious. I told them the vault isn’t safe— and it’s not— but they’re—” ‘Choly’s mood soured in kind, himself haunted. “The old woman’s living in Jahani’s house. Jh-- Hhha--” He squinted tight, the
words difficult as he tried to divorce his sense of self from what he was now wearing. “Why did the Gutsy earlier insist you’re not a civilian? Liv doesn’t seem especially against disclosing high-ranking military intel in front of you.”

“She hasn’t said anything around me I haven’t heard before,” the ghoul shrugged, unsure how to navigate the ghost seeming more distraught than he was. “And Deenwood doesn’t consider me a civilian because it still thinks of the Furriers as off-base reserve troops. And it considers me a Furrier. And a defector, too, I guess, if we’re being honest.”

Still in the fumes of recalling his ties to Jahani, ‘Choly got up from the bed to retrieve his remembrance poppies from the top of the chest of drawers in his closet, and leaned in the door frame to thread them onto the shirt he had on. He watched Sticks expectantly, hoping for elaboration. Sticks scrunched up his mouth to one side and decided to fold up the vault suit like he’d found it.

“I was the reason for the General’s last major meltdown. Fifty years ago, I nicked a Mark V Pip-Boy from the RobCo Towers. Thought if I had sophisticated enough tech, even I could hack my way on base. But I’m sure you remember that I am and always have been rubbish with computers. She caught onto me immediately. She hit Voire with a metric fuckton of Rad-I-Canned, and had me hunted down so she could throw me in a cell on base. Had my hand ripped off me, and she gutted my Pip-Boy and turned it into... this, as a way of guaranteeing that I couldn’t try to use it against her again.” He made a face at his glove prosthesis, and dropped his hands into his lap. “Still not totally sure how I managed to convince her not to experiment on me anymore than she did. But no, ‘Choly. I swear I wasn’t going through your shit. I had to come back here, and get Angel to start packing up so you wouldn’t lose anything important if she doesn’t let us back on base, and I was in here when it started packing up your closet, and--”

“Why don’t you think she’ll let us back on base?”

“--Because someone gave away the fact you and I knew each other prewar.” He couldn’t contain a glare toward Angel, who flinched in remorse. “I guarantee she suspects some kind of foul play. The fact she’s following through with your requests at all, as closely and correctly as she has, is suspect to say the least. Either she’s that desperate to keep you doing exactly what she wants you to do, or there’s something really, really wrong.” As ‘Choly fished the knee length white overcoat from the other garment bag and put it on, Sticks motioned for Angel to come back in the room from where it had withdrawn to the hall. “Angel, those are legit insignia things, right? You can scan ‘em and tell he’s Alan Carey? A colonel...?” He shuddered, haunted afresh. “Colonel. Good god almighty it just all comes so natural to you, doesn’t it.”

“Oh, yes, of course they’re genuine,” Angel reported, its ocular lenses combing over the nameplate, ribbon rack, and other various brass and silver insignias which all indicated his rank, branch, and tenure. “Though, I’m not certain as to the significance of this addition to your ribbon rack.”

‘Choly withdrew into the closet to conceal a snivel in adjusting his broad collar and fastening the buckling utility belt of the coat about his waist. It wasn’t that he was wearing a uniform—this was his uniform. He’d only had one commanding function during his last active duty, directing the administration and observation of the enlisted troops upon which Deenwood’s military chemists had experimented. But he wasn’t about to admit in the moment that his rank had never put him on the battlefield, and risk planting doubt in his ability to lead where he would need to.

“Please, do forgive me, gentlemen,” the robot continued, feeling like ‘Choly had been stewing in silence. “I don’t mean anything by it, that I refer to you as I was introduced to you. My
programming was scripted before it was commonplace for people to change their last names, or omit using them altogether. I know it’s not just you, Mister Hawthorne, who’s nettled by it. Mister Carey can’t stand it either. Maybe it would be for the best, to permit Miss Francis to reset my imprint matrix.”

“She’s not touching your goddamn grey matter,” ‘Choly snapped, rolling his coat cuff as he had his shirt, and buttoning the first three covered buttons of its front. He slipped on the reinforced black leather gloves from its side pockets, and let out an agonized snarl as he punched out the closet mirror. Glass scattered all over the balding carpet. Breathing ragged, he turned in full posture to glare at Sticks. “And who do you think you are, to suppose what comes naturally to me?”

The ghoul shrank on the bed, unable to form a coherent response to the chemist’s apparent derangement. A knock came at the front door, and Angel excused itself to check on it.

“Was it a bad idea to encourage you into this?”

‘Choly’s head fell askew as his arms crossed his chest, incredulous.

“Too late to hesitate, don’t you think?”

“Miss Olivia is ready for us,” Angel reported, returning to the room. Its tendrils curled against its spherical body, recognizing the tension. “Let’s finish gathering the last of things so we can head out, shall we?”

“A fantastic idea,” ‘Choly agreed a little too sharply, despising the likelihood that, despite the duress and consequence of his transformation, today very will might be the last he’d ever step foot on the Deenwood Compound premises.
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Giving toasts, and getting toasted.

TWs: Drugging, lascivious behavior, heavy inebriation, surveillance.

Outside the rowhouse, ‘Choly mounted Angel, but between the rigidity of his orthotics and the weight of the uniform fabric, he struggled to sustain the jockey-esque crouch he had used to ride the Mister Handy. He knew he’d need to modify they way he rode Angel in order to be able to ride it.

“We’re visiting the storage hangar before we go see Olivia.”

A Mister Gutsy intercepted them before they got to the door.

“State your intent,” Green-One barked. “This is not the destination that’s been requested of you.”

“We wanted to stock up before we left,” ‘Choly began, dismounting with some difficulty. Angel handed him his cane, which he took appreciatively. “Do you... happen to have any straps? I’d take a fistful of uniform belts, if that’s all you’ve got.”

Sticks had decided, after the argument at the rowhouse, that he’d keep his mouth shut for the rest of their time on base, if he could help it. This decision, however, did not prevent a wide range of facial expressions. To the request, the ghoul cocked his head to one side.

“Request to enter the storage hangar has been confirmed,” the Gutsy replied after a minute of floating idly. “Come in, gentlemen.”

Although ‘Choly disliked the awareness that she could communicate wirelessly with her network of robots, he, Angel, and Sticks all followed regardless. As the rolling hangar door peeled fully open, the Gutsy sped off into the uniforms section of the hangar, returning with its pincer full of various leather, fiber, and metal.

“I have five belts, as well as lengths of rope and chain, if they’d be of use, Colonel. I take it these are for better affixing what your Handy’s traveling with?”

“No, well, yes. It is carrying me. I’ll take all three things, if that’s all right. So I can figure out what will work best.” It handed over the things readily.

“Will you need any materiel stock?” it pressed gruffly. “I’m instructed to ask if it’s the real reason you came here first.”

“We came here for the belts,” Angel started before anyone else could reply, let alone explain why ‘Choly had wanted to come to the hangar first. “But if you could top me off on fusion cells, that would be truly divine, G-1.”

“Of course, Handy Angel.”
As G-1 worked, Sticks eyed the incendiary laser attachment customization Olivia had done for Angel.

“I could use a fresh tank for my flamer,” the ghoul requested, to deflect G-1 from its tinkering.

“We always try to keep another tank handy for the next time you pop on base, Sticks. Just have to leave the low tank with Deenwood.”

The ghoul shrugged explicitly, setting the flamer on the ground where G-1 could do as asked. Between the physical exertion and soup of charged emotions, ‘Choly’s head had begun swimming hours ago and had yet to stop.

“--And anything else for you, Colonel? Or will the ropes and such suffice?”

“--Oh!” He jerked back to reality with an unpalatable high-brow squint to shove down his mental state. “I don’t-- Actually. If you’ve got ammunition on hand for Sticks, you’ve likely got something for me as well. What variety of Syringer darts might you have?”

“Variety, we do not have, Sir, but we most certainly have darts for your Syringer. Pax darts don’t come free, mind you. They’re not standard military issue.”

The chemist nearly blurted out incredulity that the flamer was considered such, but he recalled the flamethrowing Assaultrons that chased him and Angel onto base. He dry swallowed and nodded as his face tightened, motioning to Angel to gain access to its storage compartment. He rifled in the false bottom, his wallet in many ways.

“You still accept the American dollar, don’t you? Silly of me to ask such an obvious question, but--”

“--Caps only,” it snipped, showing its first impatience with him.

He straightened in an instant with a thin smile and a cap-stuffed paper sack in hand. He disliked affirmation that caps were, in fact, a common currency these days.

“Say no more. How many for a case?”

“Three-hundred fifty, Sir.”

Any color left in his face washed out, but he grinned and simply handed over the bag without counting. In its pincer it scaled out the value of what it had been given. Its programming sounded off in the affirmative, and it left to the aisles and returned with the requested ammunition. The bag of caps had vanished in the shuffle.

“Here are three cases, plus two. You forfeited a little over a thousand, so that should be to your liking.”

‘Choly warmed to the exchange once the ammo cases fell into his hands. He gave G-1 a genuine smile, and nodded, then used the strap-snaps to affix them to the harness under his coat. The loose darts went into one of the incomplete cases already threaded onto his person.

G-1 escorted them to the R&D building personally, but vanished once they had entered. They came to Wing IV to find the heavily encrypted door already open, and Liv on a desk sprawled out atop a recumbent Helen. The ghoul general didn’t wholly unglue from her mate or tidy herself when she realized they had company, but she did sit up. Disheveled and incredibly drunk, she grinned broadly with heavy lids, patting to either side of her to suggest her guests take a seat.
“Oh, yes, please, thank you,” ’Choly wheezed out without hesitation, slouching back in the office chair.

Sticks did not follow in kind, and crossed his arms to listen.

“So good to see you both again,” she murmured. “I hope your visit to the hangar was benefih-shul.”

“Very.” ’Choly glanced to Sticks for a cue what more to say, but gleaned nothing.

“The case on that one desk over there is the X-Cell-Root Voire’s requested. There’s enough Furriers partaking in the conflict, that I didn’t have enough inhalers on hand. So! I used ampuoles instead.” She couldn’t keep one hand from wandering the inside of Helen’s thigh while she spoke. “It’s been mixed with adjuice-- advu-- adjuvant. Adjuvant! It’ll last longer. Ideally, long enough to carry over into shepherding maneuvers. My Eyebots scouted the past two days. The Back Central Rust Devils are holed up in the Robert House Charter School.”

The red-headed ghoul kissed the Assaultron on the breastplate, unable to resist another moment without her tongue against its chassis, then stood to retrieve the flare gun from atop the aforementioned enameled metal pharmaceutical case.

“’Choly, you’re to instruct the Furriers to herd the Back Central Devils off school property and out onto the South Common. Sticks, you’re to use this flare gun so I know everything’s in position for my Sentries to fire. If you don’t wanna get hit, don’t fire unless you’re on the other side of the river.”

“We wouldn’t want to get hit with Rad-I-Canned, now, would we?” Seeing her so inebriated disenchant ed ’Choly, and he couldn’t read whether this was celebratory or as a consequence of stress.

She gave him a dopey smile as she sat again, in Helen’s lap.

“I forgot just how well you clean up, ‘Choly. It suits you.”

“I noticed you did more than edit the RFID in my ribbon rack... What exactly does this ribbon suggest?” He pointed to it.

“Oh, silly, that’s not a new ribbon. Your memory must not be too sharp. Certainly a new concept, though! Much like the addition of stars shows count of things other ribbons signify, I applied a star to your Meritorious Service bar. Consider it simple gratitude for having attended active duty two separate occasions. Though, it will be your first time having attended the battlefront proper, hm?”

She laughed, bubbling into pointed mocking as she sank comfortably across Helen and ran an arm behind the Assaultron’s neck.

“It didn’t have to be civil war for it to be bad and you know it. It was worse here than the front line every day of the Battle of Anchorage.” He gnashed his teeth at her, desperately shoving down anger as he eyed her. Deeply unbecoming of a commanding officer. “Have I missed the wedding?”

“Wedding?” Olivia glanced up to Helen, brow raised. “Don’t we seem already long-since wed?” Sweetly, she kissed the front side of Helen’s skull-plate.

“Olivia has a point,” Helen seconded. “Though my programming predates our meeting, I feel as though I were manufactured just to be hers.”
“And I’m yours,” Olivia beamed.

“And did she—” ‘Choly flinched in recognition, his brain processing what he was saying as he said it. His eyes widened as his volume escalated. “...Take your name or keep her own?” He waved a finger at his commanding officer indistinctly. “You... your offer to wipe Angel’s imprint matrix. That’s not the only way to achieve the same results and you know that.”

“Liquor’s even quicker,” she slurred through another bolt of cognac. She got up again, to pull two more glasses from the makeshift wet bar by the storage closet. “Gentlemen! Join me in a toas-scht.”

A Mister Handy that had idled in the far corner came to her, and with unspoken instruction it mulled the glasses and iced them. She then filled them with cognac. It stirred them and brought them to ‘Choly and Sticks. The ghoul broker’s tension didn’t go unnoticed, but he didn’t interrupt the ritual. ‘Choly didn’t object, either, but the offer of spirits certainly dulled his anger.

“To the success-sh of Deenwood! And to Voire, and their bi-shen-tennial alliance with the base! We’ll stamp out the Devils once and for all.”

Olivia raised her glass, and they followed suit. Once the glasses clinked together, Sticks wrenched ‘Choly’s from him and knocked it back in three swallows. ‘Choly staggered back. Olivia choked on her own drink in incredulity. ‘Choly immediately understood Sticks suspected it was drugged as usual.

“It’s just Daytripper, isn’t it!” The chemist nearly hissed in exasperation.

Furious and fed up, he tried to grab Sticks’s glass for himself. To get it away from ‘Choly, he drank that one too, and set down the glasses on the next nearest desk to catch his breath. When he turned around again, ‘Choly slapped him in the face, but he didn’t budge otherwise.

Olivia stared softly at ‘Choly, nearly sobered.

“Just what exactly do you think I do to the drinks I offer friends?”

“You think of either of us as friends?” Sticks choked out, terse. “Could have fooled me.”

“Well, you two are sher-tainly more than friends,” she quipped, poorly concealing her hurt. “We don’t we all just lay bare some honesty while we’re at it?”

“It wasn’t Daytripper, was it.” ‘Choly began to melt apart mentally, finally forefront with what had been chewing steadily away at him since the argument at the rowhouse. “What did you do to him. All the years you had him here on base, what did you DO to him? It all comes so easily for you, doesn’t it!?”

“He told you I experimented on him?” She laughed, elated again. “Who do you think helped me perfect the Daytripper formula? Most chems aren’t potent enough to work on ghouls. Nerves are deadened, chem receptors broken, by the mutations and keloidal scarring. There’s no short supply of ferals in Lowell, but they’re not viable to test charisma. I needed a sub-ject of like physiology. The day he could convince me to let him out was the day I knew I had it right.”

“...And the artificial hand?” he asked, carefully sitting back down.

“Serves him much better than the Pipboy did, if you ask me.”

The chemist slouched into a stupor, between how bad he ached, and how mentally frayed he grew.
He failed to shove down trembling.

“So it really wasn’t Daytripper, then,” Sticks began at last. “And you were testing me. To see that I’d step in, and keep ‘Choly from taking whatever you gave him. If it was meant for me, it had to have been Klutz.”

“It was meant for you, and it was Magnetizer. I did expect you to drink it, but I didn’t expect you to drink both of them. Have fun overdosing, Hawthorne.” Ignoring the dread in Sticks’s eyes, she instead concerned herself with Angel. “You sure are traveling heavy, Angel, dear. Aren’t you bogged down with all that?”

“--I want to be as prepared as possible on site at Voire,” ‘Choly interjected dumbly. “I’d be remiss to have left something behind, only to end up needing it.”

Sticks disliked the transparency, but let it go unaddressed when Liv shrugged off any tension she could read on the chemist or the other ghoul.

“You always were one to be over-prepared. Mm mmh.” She clicked her tongue.

“We’re going to get going before we lose anymore daylight,” Sticks blurted out in pointed impatience.

“Oh, don’t let me stop you,” she pouted, slinking against her Assaultron again. “Blow it out for anyone but me, Sticks. The faster the two of us can regain our privacy, the better. Isn’t that right, Helen?”

“Affirmative, Tiger. Please leave.”

Angel grabbed the case and carried it behind itself as they exited. On their way off base, the trio all felt like Deenwood’s every eye was upon them, as though every robot set to ensure these potential defectors followed through with their announced intentions. Once off base, the whole perimeter came to life, complete with locking mechanisms, rotating warning lights, and a low bleating siren.

“Deenwood Compound will fully enter DEFCON One in sixty seconds,” the robotic speakers announced. “After this time, approach by any entity, personnel or not, will be met with lethal force.” It would repeat this announcement for the next minute, but the trio did not wait around to observe the final stages of lockdown.

Once they were two blocks away, ‘Choly stopped them so he could catch his breath.

“Guess you were right,” the chemist wheezed, sweating. He remembered the straps he’d shoved into Angel’s storage, and he requested them. Without them in the storage compartment, Angel could fit the Voire crate inside. “About Liv locking us out.”

“We’ll get back on base,” Sticks said, distracted. “We just have to do it on her terms now. What are those straps for, anyway?”

“I’m having trouble, crouching on top of Angel, in this uniform.” He continued speaking as he could, while he worked, in stuttered phrases. Angel helped him string the twist of straps through its car door handles. “I figured, some kind of reins might work better, than the handles. These reinforced gloves, make it easier, to grip things.” He hooked them all together into a loop, then mounted the foot pegs and steadied himself upright with this latest fixture to Angel’s body. “This works much better. Almost like jewelry for you, hm, Angel?”

“It’s for more than simple decoration, Mister Carey. Ha-ha!”
Silence followed as they made their way North through the residential Highlands. Sticks led them a different way than how ‘Choly and Angel had come the first time, but while they passed more housing this way, they encountered no ferals. They ended up again on the street that became Rourke Bridge, but before they got to the bridge itself, Sticks fumbled with the flamer and sniveled, only to snort-chuckle when he picked it back up with some difficulty. ‘Choly wasn’t sure whether to say anything, certain the chem had begun to take effect.

“Should I ask what Magnetizer is? Or what it does?”

“Magnetizer is like Daytripper, but dialed up. All the way up. The mood enhancement is more potent, but the side effects are, too. My muscle power and stamina are both gonna be shit for a few hours.”

“Guess it’s a good thing we’ve planned to unload the majority of our stuff at your place, then.”

“You’re not going to like me once it takes full effect.” Sticks choked up his grip on the flamer, but still didn’t look to ‘Choly. “Fuck, actually-- you of all people might.”

Words eluded ‘Choly, and he stewed on his worries. Sticks pressed on across the bridge, weaving carefully between the weather-rotted vehicles congesting the way.

“...Why did you drink it, without knowing what it was? If you thought it was anything at all?”

“I was confident I knew what it was. And I didn’t want her to poison you.”

“--Why drink it, if you thought it was poison? Couldn’t you have just... poured it out on the floor or something?”

“We don’t always make the most rational decisions when someone’s life might be on the line.”

“Are you... glad it wasn’t poison, at least?”

“That much Magnetizer would have killed a lightweight like you, that’s for sure.”

Silence overwhelmed the trio again, and they crossed the bridge without further comment. By the time they were on solid ground again, ‘Choly hemmed.

“...You had the feeling, too, right, that we were being watched on base?”

“Yeah. Definitely. Why?”

“Do you still feel it?”

“I want to be wrong, but honestly? Yes.”

“I didn’t want to mention it,” Angel agrees sheepishly. “I still don’t trust my sensors, I’m afraid.”

“What is it?” ‘Choly asked his Handy.

“Something robotic, I believe.”

“Fuck-me-in-the-mouth, she tailed us.”

An Eyebot rattled through, with a prerecorded script on loop. Anytime a specific name or noun came up, a different quality of voice and recording interrupted with it. The spherical hovering robot, with a grill plate guarding its front and a myriad of antennae jutting backwards off it, did not
seem bothered at all that it had an audience, and announced its information readily and repeatedly without a care. ‘Choly unclenched when he realized it was just an Eyebot, but Sticks remained poised, watching.

“RobCo Industries. A household and industrial power-House since 2042! Are you looking for a rewarding career in computer technologies? RobCo Towers is now hiring for a variety of positions specializing in data processing! Apply--”

The ghoul lost his composure and let loose with the flamer, immolating the robot. It turned hostile, and got off a single unaimed laser shot in their direction before it crashed to the shore sand. Its speaker crackled and sputtered, and at first the three of them thought the sound an indicator how quickly the robot was melting, but then a third voice came through.

“--Olivia, it doesn’t have to end like this--”

The trio jerked back when the Eyebot exploded.

‘Choly started to yell at Sticks for having destroyed it, but the ghoul cut him off.

“--I haven’t seen a robot Pawtucketville side in decades. Can’t be a coincidence. And it didn’t come from Deenwood, that’s for damn sure.”

‘Choly’s face slacked. “...The Devils. They know we’re mobile.”

“No, they think The General’s mobile. I guarantee you, she’s about to get some very surprised unannounced visitors. I don’t think the DEFCON One was for us.”

The chemist dismounted, to walk the remainder of the way to the Sampas parlor. He didn’t like what Sticks was insinuating the Eyebot signified.

“...She dressed me up as a high ranking officer to decoy the Devils’ surveillance. They think I’m her. They think no one’s home. Am I really that disposable to her--”

“--Ideally, she’ll have knocked out most of their robotic assets before we have to deal with ‘em. Stressful as it sounds, it’s bought us a little time for me to let this stuff wear off before we get to Voire. Let’s get inside, hm?” Sticks thumbed at the parlor expectantly. Once he had the security mechanisms disarmed, he held the door open for the Handy and its owner. “Angel, get in there so we can unload ya. We’ve got some time to kill, and a lot to get done today.”
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

NSFW, consent issues, sexually charged violence, (non)lethal overdose, what amounts to safeword suppression. Adonta ta mele.

The chemist and the longshoreman unburdened Angel of all but the essentials of the former, and added on some for the latter--‘Choly’ s liquid assets including all his chems, the remaining batch of new Melancholia, a jerrycan, a coffee tin of assorted preserved rations, a leather roll of tools, and the crate of X-Cell Root. Each thing that Angel had carried this far, they placed somewhere appropriate for its purpose. They then dispatched the Mister Handy to stand watch outside with the instruction to alert them to impending threats from river wildlife or Rust Devils.

When Sticks began to dig around in the kitchen, ‘Choly hemmed a bit. Observing the ghoul metering his own carrying capacity, the desire to help him tangled ‘Choly’s mouth. To test the length of their stay, he decided to remove his coat and hang it on the rack by the front door.

“It’s the nerve,” he mentioned as he passed through the double action door into the kitchen, and took to the wooden stairs in the back which led to the second floor. Not having followed the robot upstairs, he had to confirm for himself exactly where Angel had put his Merrick Index. “Can’t bring myself to ask it for chems. I find myself rehearsing my justification, and just... not following through.”

“This is the exact thing I hate about your arrangement with that tin can,” the ghoul groused up at him. He stood at the foot of the stairs, and threw out prosaic hands. “What do you need, that Angel’s keeping from you? It’s small but I’ve got a stash here. Med-X? Calmex? Mentats? I’m remembering right, that you liked Mentats, right?”

‘Choly stopped halfway up the stairs, to bite his lip as he stared up at the landing he couldn’t quite see over.

The very idea of telling him yes terrified him. And yet,

“...You don’t happen to have... a working percolator.”

“Tch! This place was a restaurant before the war, and I tend to keep it equipped as one. Coffee, however, is something I can’t do you for. Percolator shorted out months ago. Never really drank it much, so I haven’t bothered to replace it. If you’re staying around after the dust settles, we can definitely invest the effort though.” Able to intuit his old friend’s nerves, Sticks warmed, but didn’t soften. ‘Choly would never hesitate to beseech Angel for caffeine. “You took off your coat, but not your holster or harness. Getting comfortable, but not too comfortable?”
“I’ve had my Nagant stolen from me once before. It’s a special gun. Modified to shoot Syringer darts. I’m not taking it off... unless you’re going to give me a tour of your bed while we’re here?”

The ghoul couldn’t make out the entende for a greater likelihood of seriousness or for stress-talk, and he blew out the absurdity through his noseless nostrils. His deeply scarred face screwed up as he rounded back to the front counter, and spoke through the service window as he resumed mentally preparing himself for every-thing the trip to Voire would entail.

“You know, back in the day, they apparently used to hold car shows in the parking lot.” Sticks eyed the faded flyer on the cork board by the register, but ‘Choly forced a breath through his nostrils and finished his trek upstairs. “Whole city’d descend on the place, flaunt their vintage Corvegas and Luxuriques. Came here once, back when it was still Glenn Johnny’s... Place swore they had the best lobster rolls in the Commonwealth. Lobsters aren’t lobsters anymore, but anyway I’ve got the recipe. Merrilurk makes a great roll, and I wouldn’t hesitate to whip up a few.”

“You’ve got bread?” burbled vulnerably from ‘Choly’s mouth as he sat in the living area, on the leather couch. He licked at his lips, pining absently for seafood as his mind divorced the notion of the Merrilurk from the lobster it once was. “I regret not getting off base more than I did, even after I was discharged. Maybe if I’d eaten something besides mess hall offerings, my stomach would have fared better. --Wait. The pieces of this conversation are giving me the vibe of... how do you put it. A restaurant that’s a good restaurant, but it’s a. Front? That the real money’s in some black market deals under the table. Have you got many patrons to your restaurant, Sticks?”

“Hah. You’re not all too far off. I mostly cook to cement business arrangements. You can get to just about anyone’s caps if you go through their stomach.”

“Caps, caps, caps. Cap-i-tal,” he enunciated with a global pity. “Forever at the heart of it all...”

‘Choly stood after he caught his breath, and wandered to eye the gambrel upper story. To the back end of the story, a door stood with a blown-out window to either side, leading out onto a patio-balcony the chemist could see his friend had turned into a covered work area for taxidermy and leathercraft. The Merrick Index sat propped with other books on the secretary desk on the northeast wall. A steamer trunk and a chest of drawers sat to either side of the queen size bed in the opposite corner.

His mind lit upon the notion of their belongings intermingling like they had at 103 Old North Lane. He smiled.

“So what would you like to do for lunch?” the chemist wondered. “It would be nice to eat something before we get to Voire.”

In one gabled arch-top single-hung window, Sticks had propped up a single square pane of geometric floral Nouveau mosaic that he’d salvaged, such that it caught sunlight. ‘Choly understood the ghoul’s implication, that sharing the squirrel chowder had cemented a reunion between them, that offering to make the surf rolls could cement that further. A business relationship... Perhaps the ghoul really wasn’t interested in him, or anyone else, in any other capacity. The silence between them bloated into a distended tension, and he found himself lost staring into the filigrees of the boldly colored antique glass fragments. Even if the pieces fit, you can’t make it whole again the way it was. He’d only identified large shuttered picture windows downstairs and gabled windows upstairs, and couldn’t place where in the quintessentially Cape Cod style restaurant Sticks must have saved the pane from, but he knew the secular art couldn’t have come from anywhere but here. A sardonic sigh trickled from him.
Sticks appeared behind him as though he’d stood there all along, and ‘Choly jumped. He wondered how long he’d drifted off in thought, for how disheveled the ghoul appeared. Clothing half-unfastened, he didn’t say or do anything, and he stared at ‘Choly with an unblinking evenness.

“I wasn’t-- I’m sorry--” ‘Choly stuttered, desperate to insist that he hadn’t been going through any of Sticks’s things. He noticed the ghoul had removed his inverse Nostrus glove.

Sticks continued to stand there, rasp ing steadily as though oxygen had been un-invented. ‘Choly flinched when the ghoul took a step closer, and he could see the rictus in Sticks’s jaw. The gloss in his dark eyes, the pained frustration in his brow... Olivia had indicated a double shot of Magnetizer was an overdose. ‘Choly’s eyes fluttered wide in alarm, at the understanding an overdose would bring about a death of his friend’s rationality.

“Oh. Oh god. No,” ‘Choly stammered, putting up his hands to resist Sticks closing any further distance. “No, no, no. This happened because of me. You’ve gone feral because of me--”

Sticks lunged at ‘Choly with a snarling roar, tackling him to fall back on the bed. He tried to push the ghoul off him, but despite the frailty of the chem, the ghoul still overpowered him, and subsequently endeavored to undress him. His glasses tumbled off in the bedding. Sticks managed despite lacking a hand, but struggled to remove the holster and harness.

“O-- oh, you’re taking me up on the offer after all,” he joked weakly.

Maneuvering his hands to minimize the risk of getting snipped, he panicked to help Sticks unbuckle him. He heaved. His mind couldn’t decide whether to cry or drown in arousal, but he knew he refused to draw the Nagant to tranquilize Sticks: he couldn’t risk any interactions with a chem he wasn’t familiar with, hurt his friend even passively, or, greatest of all, bear to halt the encounter. The mere subconscious fear to call for Angel choked him.

“You were just trying to protect me-- Oh, fuck-me-in-the-mouth, I’ve found the real you, and seen you fall feral, too-- I poison everything-- Gneteia, you can’t-- The chowder should have been enough--”

With his shirt and harness unfastened, the ghoul flayed open the garment with a hiss to bare the orthotics corset. ‘Choly watched all the while, heavy breathing stifled by the corset. The ghoul lingered kneeling over him for some time, laying his eyes upon it stilling him, before he heatedly felt of it with both his wrist and hand, and licked of the canvas hungrily with a guttural delight.

“Y-- yes. The corset. Jacob... Jacob... You like the-- oH-- Ah, hello--”

The ghoul moved to unfasten and pull down the chemist’s pants, only to stop short of pulling down the underwear, and he straightened to stare heaving at him, a certain crushed devastation creeping over his gnarly slack-jawed face. With the ghoul both frozen and speechless, ‘Choly pawed about in the bedding to retrieve his glasses and put them back on.

“You... you stopped...” he uttered with sheepish disappointment. The dream couldn’t evaporate so easily.

Agony drew back the corners of Sticks’s mouth, and his head cocked askew.

“You’re damn right I stopped. I might be an easy bag, but I am not a rapist. Jesus Christ, Mindy. You really thought I was gone. You really thought I was gone, and you just let me keep going. You wouldn’t have stopped me, would you? You wouldn’t ha--”

“--YOU FUCKED WITH ME?” ‘Choly jolted upright in the bed, finding the momentum and force
to shove Sticks off him at last. He glared at the ghoul in languorous knotted lust. “Go-ohd it wouldn’t be rape. I want you so bad. Please. Please turn whatever that was back on. I have never been more throttled in my LIFE.”

The ghoul’s jaw slacked again in a mental exhaustion.

“You really are attracted to ferals.” He laughed, shaking his head in defeat. “Yeah, yeah we can fool around before we go. But... didn’t you promise Angel something?”

“The Rad-X.” ‘Choly tried to get out of the bed, but couldn’t manage it with his pants down to his knees. Sticks slammed down his hand on the waistband of the pants to keep him from escaping, and ‘Choly squirmed with a whine. “I’ll take two-- No, three-- if it’ll make you happy. You think three’s enough? To keep Gneteia away? God, please. I’m inconsolable. You’re such a fucking tease. I canNOT-- Drag me down with you--”

“--Stay put,” the ghoul snarl-grinned before letting go and standing. “No need to clue Angel into our little role-play. I’ve got some.”

A stuttered, husky chuckle trickled out of ‘Choly as he watched Sticks sift through the bottom drawer of the secretary desk. He half believed he might be more coherent while high.

“You’re not allergic to any antibiotics, right?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Macrolides,” he uttered mechanically, briefly as though telling a doctor. He shook the circumstance, and wondered, “What, why? Rad-X isn’t an antibiotic.”

“If you’re gonna stack it, you need to chase it with one. You’re the chemist. You should remember Rad-X increases risk of infection. Penicillin is okay? It’s really the only one I’ve understood has a reliable shelf life.”

“I was a chemist.” He paled, stifling a pout. “I’ve kind of slept since then.”

“Don’t sweat it. It’s not every day I remember something a chemist doesn’t. I’m just ribbing.” Sticks gave ‘Choly a carton of water. He opened one pill bottle, and shook a few pale blue capsules into ‘Choly’s hand. “Three, you said?”

Without waiting for an answer, he also shook out from a small prescription bottle a scored dark green tablet as well, then gestured with his wrist to the drink. ‘Choly glanced down trembling at the medication, and did his best to take them one by one despite great difficulty. Put the pill in his mouth, add a sip of water, tilt his head back, mentally insist as he stared at the peeling ceiling that he needed to swallow... and then he’d gulp. He set the water back down, and tried to snatch a fistful of shirt to drag Sticks back into bed with him. He missed with a whine, but Sticks obliged regardless, relenting to a sloppy heated make-out punctuated with husky nasal snarls.

When ‘Choly ran his tongue over Sticks’s upper lip crack, Sticks lapped at ‘Choly’s chin scar. The chemist jolted, and he stuttered out his panic and jammed his boot heels in the bedding trying to hike himself higher up in the bed, but the ghoul was fast on him, hungrily chewing from his chin all the way up his jawline. Sticks tipped ‘Choly’s hips to one side, to facilitate his right hand feeling up the orthotic corset’s lacing. The petting didn’t last long, and his hand dipped into the waistband of ‘Choly’s underwear, to grip a buttock with rigor.

“I fear I’m going to lose track of how many times I’ll get dressed today at this rate,” ‘Choly wheezed with a whimsy-drenched smile.

Sticks snarled and ground against his hip in vague protest, eliciting a panicked blissful laugh. A
pair of arms wrapped around the ghoul, begging him to remain this close despite his seeming derangement. With the limb pressed against ‘Choly’s chest, he craned down to lap at Sticks’s terminated left wrist, straightening only long enough to guarantee he could reiterate the attention uncontested. The ghoul couldn’t make sense of the interest, until ‘Choly’s mouth found itself from wrist to elbow with the same diligence it had paid him the night before.

“Do you want to suck me off again,” the ghoul supposed, watching. “You can suck me off again, if you want.”

With a self-conscious moan ‘Choly straightened and desisted, trying to fish instead for more kisses. Ultimately, the thought couldn’t quit him.

“You’ve-- misunderstood me,” ‘Choly insisted. His chin nuzzled drunkenly at the ghoul’s underchin beard as the words came. “You want to be inside. Right? This... should be... the part that you...”

“You want me to do what--” Sticks blurted out, eyes wide. “Did you really mean it last night, that you’re a virgin? How--”

The incredulity sublimated into more obeisant grumbling when ‘Choly guided his hand to instead dip down the front of his pants. His fingers dumbly traversed the hair, to come upon his softness. At ‘Choly’s urging, he slipped the first joint of a fingertip inside with a caution. He moved it slowly, back and forth, and observed the delight on ‘Choly’s face. After only a little of this, he jerked his hand back and pushed ‘Choly off him, to rise again from the bed with a great deal of unintelligible grousing.

“Of course I’d forget the--” The ghoul hissed his exasperation as he vanished down the stairs. “Hold on.”

‘Choly languished on the bed just long enough to sit up and throw off his boots, pants, underwear, and socks. Then he covered up with the heavy blanket, ears locked on the sound of Sticks rummaging. He’d nearly drifted off in throbbing disappointment, only to have the cover ripped off him by the wild-eyed ghoul.

On the nightstand had appeared a wine bottle. Before the purpose of it even came into question, the ghoul was already climbing atop him with hungry teeth bared. Clicking horribly up at him, the ghoul snapped at his crotch, only to smell of the hair, and lick of him firmly. ‘Choly pressed his knees together abruptly, heaving electric with panic all over again, his head cocked back into the stiff pillow. Sticks gnawed at the side of his neck and let his right hand wander again, letting his fingers dip inside one at a time until all four fit for some time in a wet writhing mess.

_Just reach inside me-- Reach in and know me-- Chew me up, consume me--_

The ghoul’s tongue lapped in a single track from shoulder to larynx, before he felt he’d sufficiently reduced ‘Choly to a total need for the requested act. Sticks urged ‘Choly to get diagonal on the bed, and grabbed for the already-open bottle. He poured a little into his hand, to spread it all over his wrist and forearm. It smelled like stale linen, but not offensively enough to frustrate. After a moment of mental logistics, he draped ‘Choly’s right leg over his shoulder, and got comfortable on his knees and elbow, before rubbing his wrist against ‘Choly. ‘Choly couldn’t help but moan, starting to pant from the endless march of unrelenting teases.

Slowly, the limb tried its best to slip inside. Sticks shifted the weight on his right elbow a bit. He held ‘Choly still by the laces, his cheek against ‘Choly’s thigh. A sudden and dramatic increase in tension prompted a dripping yelp and a languorous posture. The deeper Sticks succeeded, the more
tangled up in the pillow ‘Choly’s arms got.

Then the ghoul slowly began to pull out, only to push it back in again. The more confident that he became, that the girth of his arm was helping far in excess of causing any hurt, the more frenetic and jagged he let the motions get, and he fell back heatedly into the roleplay. He let out a roar-hiss as he sucked ‘Choly off while still pumping his wrist into him, and ‘Choly dug his heel into the ghoul’s back flesh in a desperate grab for traction.

Sticks built his pace, and eventually reached up over ‘Choly’s torso to clamp his hand over his mouth to silence his pathetic whining. When the chemist’s left foot wandered to the ghoul’s groin, he flinched, thinking he was about to get kicked in the crotch, and pulled away without pulling out. When the foot stayed, and toes wandered to play with his length, he slouched in glossy-eyed resignation and verbally brokered peace with the understanding that ‘Choly was doing his best to reach and reciprocate.

“I, what, what, oh, oh uh. No. No, okay. Okay, uh. UhhhhYOU know what go for it. You’re just continuing to rack up first times for everythinG OH--” The ghoul panted, rigid all over. “Monkey tOES. THAT IS-- HI--”

With Sticks disarmed enough, ‘Choly shifted his right leg underneath the ghoul, so he could use both feet to jerk him off. The ghoul disrupted the whole arrangement just long enough to confirm he liked it enough to welcome it, grabbing for the bottle, and lubricating himself before refreshing the lubricant on his arm and resuming the revised posture. The arrangement continued in mutual torment long enough to drench them both in sweat.

“No,” ‘Choly wheezed in fevered supplication, “no, don’t, please just, pomogi mne, go easy. Stop being so rOUGH--”

It wasn’t until the ghoul pressed down his teeth to grip a wide-open jaw-full of pudendal flesh that ‘Choly came undone in a writhing, inconsolable mess, his toes twitching in rigor around Sticks’s dick. Unable to think straight but recovering his coordination, ‘Choly got precise with how slickly he dragged the balls of his feet and coaxed with his toes, occasionally grasping the sides with his big toes as he could get a grip. ‘Choly twitched, his eyes lolling as he came a second time, and the double success was enough to drive Sticks to satisfaction.

Eventually, they both slumped in the bed, tangled in one another.

“That’s certainly one way to de-stress before a major life-threatening conflict,” ‘Choly mumbled, delirious. “Fuck. Twice in twenty-four hours.”

“If you had any idea how the rest of our day is gonna go, you wouldn’t be letting yourself get this bed-beached.”

‘Choly floundered dramatically in protest with what little energy he had left.

“Bozhemoy, just let me lay here with you a little longer.”

“Only if you don’t fall asleep on me. Big day. Big... fucking... day.”
Chapter Summary

TWs: Drug culture talk, abuse loop narratives, sensual-ish. (Revised 4/4/20 because I am a fool and an idiot and didn't realize I had already written this chapter, so I wrote it twice.)

...Swapping your love... for hate...

"You were right."

The pathetic words fell from ‘Choly before he could even process it as an admission. He whimpered, at last mustering the determination to turn onto his side and curl against Sticks, and would have shut his eyes if he didn’t enjoy mentally tracing every feature of Sticks’s physiology and attempting to approximate them with his memory of what the ghoul had looked like before. He couldn’t make sense of whether it felt like centuries or months since they’d lived together; at once, they equally made sense and didn’t. His weak lips grazed at Sticks’s scarred neck, and his face found itself in the crook of his shoulder. The ghoul was staring off into the gambrel trusses above them, but murmured. He explained,

"That it was a mistake to let me lay here. Like this."

He climbed atop Sticks, and Sticks let him. He nipped at the ghoul’s lower lip a moment before kissing him. He disguised his conflicted, deep exhaustion by laying down on Sticks’s chest with a smile. Sticks wrapped an arm around him.

How am I going to get through this day without any chems? He could invoice each individual muscle in his body by the magnitudes of his aching. The dose came to mind, of the designer chem Olivia had given him the day before. Had it even been just yesterday? The day felt like a week, or a month, already, and they weren’t even yet to Voire. He couldn’t recall where the X-Cell-Squared had ended up in the shuffle to get off base. I don’t know how long it’d last, anyway, or even how well it’d help.

"Do I need to dress you myself?"

“I’d rather you und--” He bit down the words before he said anything further. I'd wonder what got into me, but he’s under me. “Sticks.” His heart stuttered as he felt himself grow even heavier. “If this was you on Magnetizer, and Magnetizer didn’t exist... before, what was your excuse when you gave me the chin scar?"

A choke knotted from the ghoul’s larynx to his exposed turbinates. He petted disarmingly at the chemist’s dark, disheveled head.

“Though never a habit, I’ve admitted to falling back on Day Tripper on occasion. They’re related. I don’t remember if I took any the day I... ah. Supposing I could blame the chems if I really wanted... Look, I don’t mind that we fooled around. Gave me time to work out the Magnetizer before we get to Voire. It was... nice, besides. Thank you.”
Self-consciousness gripped ‘Choly tighter as time passed, and at first he believed the compulsion
to cover himself accounted for by a simple creeping chill. He couldn’t get why Sticks wouldn’t
want the upper hand in negotiating with and managing the Furriers, if the chem would have further
informed his influence. Were all the details of this Unfolding really all already hashed out?

“Is it... still you on Magnetizer?”

“Probably why I can’t shove you off me yet,” Sticks chuffed. He flopped his head for emphasis,
finding the incumbent admission difficult. “I... think it would help me. A lot. If we did this again.
Maybe, if you show me what you like about ferals, I might be able to unpack how the inevitability
of it makes me feel. Perspective. Been forever since I ripped open old wounds like this. Really
makes me feel alive. Maybe it’ll finally... heal right this time.”

‘Choly nodded faintly, all he could think to do. He hated that he couldn’t piece together Sticks’s
motive, but he hated more that he even found himself trying to. If he didn’t trust him, why had he
laid with him twice in one day? The ghoul’s head sounded more a mess than his own, though, and
he willed the periphrastic toward something more direct by skirting the hedge himself.

“If Magnetizer and Daytripper are used for the same thing. Magnetizer being the league of
difference between morphine and cyclo-morphine. Then, why didn’t you... ask the genie for a wish,
when you had the chance? Standing right there, in front of General Francis?”

Sticks let out a lyrical snort.

“The General never extends opportunities like that without covering her ass. The side effects of the
chem were her security. Helen could’a struck me dead right there for perceived insubordination.”
Sticks gesticulated with his left wrist as he spoke, seemingly more to the room than to anyone in
particular. “Let’s continue your fantasy analogy. I’m sure it’s like there’s ancient treasures,
protected by a puzzle. There’s any number of ways to get to the treasure, but a million more lethal
missteps trying to extract it, let alone escape with it.”

‘Choly’s chest tightened.

“So you do want something from the base, then.”

“Anybody who knows what that place is wants something from it.”

“What is it you want so badly?”

It took some time for the ghoul to form the answer, and he chewed at his cracked mouth all the
while.

“Connecting people to their vices is and always has been my addiction. Never been able to kick the
habit, ‘cause I never felt the pros outweigh the cons.” He paused a moment in hilarity of his own
nonsense pun. As he articulated what came next, his energy and enthusiasm gradually managed to
draw him—and ‘Choly—upright in bed. “Before you came along, I would’ve asked for payment in
as many crates of rare chems as I could tote off. That was our standard exchange for my services.
But things are different now. I know a guy who can interpret and even use chem formulas. One
I’ve got history with. You could... cook stuff up for me. For us. You know what they say about
teaching a man to fish. I’d never have to deal with Deenwood, or the General, ever again. Neither
of us.”

Before the thought could even come to ‘Choly, Sticks stiffened in place to throw up his arms.

“You wouldn’t even have to touch Psycho. Nothing you don’t want to. Only the good junk. The
safe junk. General’s gotta have formulas for just about everything under the sun. If we work together, you could cook up whatever you want. Most chems are a finite resource these days, without chemists alive to, well, chemist them. All anybody’s had was ancient junk, or the easy junk like Jet. You could change all that. We could.”

‘Choly stared dully into the crumbling ceiling. There was no such thing as a truly safe chem. That’s where Angel was right. And yet,

“She... did say she’s got the precursor formula for Day Tripper... I wonder if she’d have the formula for Daddy-O...”

“And don’t forget the formulas and research for anything Deenwood hashed out, too! No DIA left to argue with us for... sharing notes with the Gen, hmm?”

What exactly is he getting out of supplying me with all this? The chemist’s face slacked, struggling to follow. His eyes shut as he came to the understanding that his Lexington arrangement fell through because he’d tried to broker and cook. Things wouldn’t have soured so badly if I’d only had Jacob handling the business end of things. I’m an artisan, not a businessman.

“I’m going to lay this out simply.” ‘Choly cleared his throat. “You need stock that customers can’t get from anyone else. You need to be their exclusive dealer. But Olivia only gives you the chems, not the means to manufacture them. What she gives you, and what you can steal from her, is a finite resource. She’s got you in a position that you have to rely on her, in order to have people rely on you. And even if you do obtain any of Deenwood’s pharmacological data, you wouldn’t have someone to decipher it, let alone engineer it.”

Sticks grabbed him by the shoulders and did his best not to shake him, almost to beg him yes, yes, yes, the intensity of his glare emphatic on its own.

“Oh, thank God, we’re on the same page. I’d do anything in the world for you, if you’d be my partner in crime again, Mindy. We were perfect together back in the day. You remember that much, right? It’s so much easier these days. No rations. No bans. No government regulation. Just imagine, if we opened up shop.”

Despite the vulnerability, he trusted Sticks’s memory better than his own. No, he didn’t remember, and he got lost inside his own head trying to. Desperate to dismiss his head space, he tried to drag Sticks atop him for another go. Instead, Sticks brushed the gesture aside, and exited the bed. The cold shoulder elicited a vague frown, and he turned over on his side to watch Sticks getting dressed.

“You’ll get plenty more attention like that this evening, I promise. We really need to get going. If things play out anywhere close to ideal, we’ll have all the time in the world to fool around.”

Sticks rummaged the desk while ‘Choly righted himself and pulled his outfit back together. He came over to the bed, where ‘Choly sat, and gave him the glass bottle of antibiotics.

“You shouldn’t have to prompt Angel for your chems every single time you need them. Begging for something--regimental or occasional--shouldn’t be the default. And I don’t care if it hears me,” he hissed over his shoulder at nothing. “You tell me what you need, I’ll make it happen.”

As ‘Choly eyed the faded label, all the mysticism of the act washed out of him. I took this without even thinking twice that it was what he said it was. He tried to remember the standard dose for Clarimentin, let alone how to use it as a preventative rather than a treatment. Loopholes in his agreement with Angel wormed through his thought process. It’s going to be very difficult to keep
“—But hey,” Sticks leaned in to pat him on the knee to get his attention, with an enthusiastic smile, “first, lunch?”

Silence echoed between them while Sticks threw together a pair of bowls of noodles with nuts, carrots, and some kind of dark, gamy reconstituted meat. While the ghoul cooked, ‘Choly did his best to pin his hair back up, and nearly regretted that he’d never get it pinned again as neatly as Burns had, if it weren’t for him reminding himself how it fell out of the french twist in the first place. He smiled to himself as he ran his bare hand over his shaven nape.

Alongside the bowl, the ghoul produced a second pair of chopsticks, and ‘Choly managed with them by putting his reinforced gloves back on. To wash it down, Sticks popped the cap off a Nuka-Cola Quartz and handed the faintly glowing white-clear drink to ‘Choly.

“I was keeping it for a special occasion, but I guess this is special enough. To our partnership.”

“Where did you even get it?” was all he could ask the ghoul as he sniffed of it. It smelled enough like Nuka-Cola. “I don’t remember it being a Mass Commonwealth flavor...”

“That, you remember,” the ghoul ribbed, pocketing the cap. “Nuka-World sold all its available flavors. The rarer ones crop up all over the Commonwealth from time to time. Guess people kept them for souvenirs.”

“To our partnership,” he resigned. He set it down with a sigh, and slid it across the booth table, suggesting they split it. “I don’t get it. Tastes just like a regular one.”

Sticks took him up on the offer with a smirk and a shrug.

“All style, no content,” he supposed.

They headed out without catching Angel up on anything, Sticks with his flamer at the ready, and ‘Choly atop Angel with his syringer rifle. They assumed it knew everything that had transpired, and been said, in the same way it had known how their night at the rowhouse had gone. After a ways, ‘Choly couldn’t help but attempt to fashion a daydream of how he imagined this imminent ritual must go, but couldn’t form a concrete thought without details.

“I found two ampuoles of X-Cell when I looted Sanctuary Hills,” he started.

“You don’t say.” Sticks didn’t look up at him.

“—How it got there is besides the point,” he dismissed, sensing the comment taken as accusation. “I’m asking, would it be relevant during this... what is it called, the Unfolding?”

“It’s too different a formula from X-Cell-Root. Keep it.”

They said nothing for a ways.

“What about the X-Cell-Squared?”

‘Choly gave his coat pocket a surreptitious pat, and did his best to conceal confusion at palpating the X-Cell-Squared. This was a completely different coat from the one he’d been wearing when he’d been given the chem. Hadn’t it?

“You shouldn’t participate.”
“Why not.”

Nearly, he wanted to ask if Sticks had anything to do with his possession of the Squared, just as he had to do with his possession of the Clarimentin. He hoped, at least, that asking about the Squared hadn’t prompted Angel to scrutinize its inventory file for where it had put the inhaler.

“You’ll thank me for sparing details.”

“--Well what about the X-Cell-Root itself, then! There’s a hundred units, and only eighty Furriers. Isn’t that plenty!”

“I thought you couldn’t stand your identity as a Deenwood officer.”

“I can’t work on my past if I keep trying--desperately--to pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Well met, Sir!” Angel beamed. “Need I say thank you, Mister Carey, for using the Rad-X. And thank you, Mister Hawthorne, for being responsible about it.”

“They’re my soldiers. My men and women. And what all else,” he added under his breath, reminded of Reese. “I’ve got to behave if I’m being graded. Am I right?”

Sticks slouched, only to straighten and square up his shoulders.

“...From the dram, down to the grain.”

“Need I remind, that we do still possess three doses of Rad-X,” it added.

‘Choly blanched before turning scarlet in the face. The Clarimentin. The only reason I’m not suffering radiation poisoning is how much Rad-X I took. I had to take Rad-X as a prophylactic. Just how sick would I be right now, if I hadn’t-- He stiffened, doe eyed.

“The third hand. It’s yours, isn’t it.”

Sticks stuttered for a bit.

“Wh-- what,”

“Ick. I noticed Ick’s got the third hand. No arm attached to it. It’s yours it’s got to be.”

“You know, I’ve got so much more than just Rad-X at Glenn Johnny’s,” the ghoul deflected.

“So much more,” Angel scolded, “that Mister Carey will refuse. Do not tempt him.”

“I’m not tempting!” Sticks insisted. “I’m exhausting available options. It’s up to Alan to make decisions like this, not me.”

“...But it is your hand,” ‘Choly continued, at a loss for the conflict between his partner and his companion.

“And did you only just now arrive at that conclusion, or was that part of what was getting you off upstairs? Plenty more where that came from today. Just keep moving.”

The only sound for the next hour was the Handy’s thruster flame, the ghoul’s footsteps, and the river.
Chapter Summary

States of becoming.

TWs: body horror, total community nudity, forced nudity, body horror, human experimentation talk, discussion of drug use and body horror.

As they crossed the faded green truss-cantilever bridge between Downtown Historic and Voire, several scattered plumes of smoke took fresh to the air. A recent altercation had spilled the metallic, offensive stink of burning robotic fluids, and carnage from Eyebots and Protectrons littered their entry into the area of Lowell known prewar as Centralville. None of them liked the look of it, but they could find no evidence that the Furriers had suffered any casualties.

“If only we could run the Devils against whatever ungodly defenses these folks have,” ‘Choly whooped, glancing down around them and trying, from how many parts he could identify, to count how many of each kind of robot had been here. “We wouldn’t have to bother with this Unfolding nonsense.”

“No, we need to ‘bother,’” Sticks said, scanning for Furriers. He pulled a metal pea whistle from his pocket, and trilled it in lieu of being able to produce a similar sound with his cracked lips. After a pause, they heard the sound returned, and Sticks encouraged that they continue further into the suburb to Voire proper. “We’re talking a full robotic threat. Hard to say how many Eyebots and Protectrons the Furriers demolished, with how the Devils jury-rig them.”

‘Choly glanced down into the pit trap with an impaled Medical Responder Protectron in it. Its defibrillator pads sparked one more time and ‘Choly frowned. He wondered whether a similar setup could contend with a Sentry Bot.

Some robots managed, despite the damage they suffered from the defense traps, to catch fire to some prewar cape cod structures. As far as either could tell, the non-geometric composite mudbrick Furrier architecture remained in tact.

Having dispatched the robots, several disrobed Furriers, wearing only their Halloween masks, circled the three Rust Devils captured in wire snares. Though some trappers had partly fastened on their bandoliers, harnesses, or holsters, the rest seemed to have simply drawn their knives and guns, grabbed the nearest length of fiber, and run headlong to the Southwest route into Voire at the start of the invasion. The naked trappers better bound their captives at the joints with a mixture of rope and wire, and removed parts of their armor to make it easier to drag them into the settlement. As they hauled the Devils away kicking and yelling, they sang out:

“Our officer’s arrived at last! Our officer’s arrived!!”

Sticks dropped his flamer and slouched awfully, eyes on one of the burning prewar houses the Furriers were too unaffected to try to save. ‘Choly didn’t really notice his companion’s demeanor, too absorbed in watching the mutated locals joyfully leave behind an unceremonious trail of armor and rent garments as they toted off their prisoners and stripped them down to bare skin. The angles and placements of their limbs and joints, and the particular heft of their unusual musculature, felt
“Fucking weird that this place is an eye candy shop to you, but I can’t say it enough that it needs to stay at just that. Can’t believe I’m struggling to convince you not to do anything stupid. I’m jogging your chemist brain again, because I genuinely don’t think you’re getting it. Either that, or you’re not thinking with your brain. Sometimes it takes multiple doses of Addictol to kick X-Cell withdrawals, but it doesn’t work at all on the rest of the X-Cell family. If you do it, you’re not just getting addicted to the chem: you’re getting addicted to its point of origin.” The ghoul ripped off his ushanka and threw it up at ‘Choly, who fumbled to both catch it and balance. “It’s only right, you Russki. The Colonel needs a thinking cap. May it give you a level head for what you’re about to do and witness. You get with Bones, Carey. I’ve got to speak with Ick before all this goes down. Alone.”

Donning the hat, ‘Choly pressed the fur lining of one flap to his face, lost in a moment of familiarity he couldn’t quite place. By the time he looked up, Sticks had made himself scarce. Albeit a bit deflated, what Sticks said soaked in. The chemist mouthed to himself, dully, “Are they her responsibility… or her project…?”

“Sir, if I may,” Angel interjected at a caution, unsure whether it was a legitimate question. “It’s not so much what they mean to her… What do these individuals mean to you?”

The Mister Handy made him double-take, and he chewed at his lip. “They’re people. I can’t even begin to tell whether they’re still human, but they’re people. Just like Jacob. If all they want before marching off against killer robots is an afternoon of nursing a chem habit and spending time together, who am I to deny that? Didn’t he and I just do exactly the same, in a way?”

“Didn’t you ever,” Angel scoffed with exasperated indignity before spiriting off its owner in search of their Mistress of Ceremonies. “Hopefully, this afternoon goes for the Furriers nothing like it did for the two of you!”

Bones wasn’t at the Reservoir House. ‘Choly struggled to locate her among the hundred trappers, with them all socializing in the nude. All he really had to go on was her simple skull mask. Though ‘Choly didn’t know it, Angel’s sensors seemed to know exactly where she was, and followed a comfortable, steady speed directly toward her.

Meanwhile, awaiting ceremonies to commence, the Furriers, masks on as always, had resumed bathing one another in the pond-style semicircular reservoir. Angel sped ‘Choly along around the perimeter of the waters, tracing the gradual slope of the embankment as it took a comfortable curve to round to the side and behind. Along the way, ‘Choly overheard some of the Furriers discussing their Unfolding plans. With them all disrobed, he could discern three stark ‘stages’ of Furrier–very mutated, somewhat mutated, and a small handful who seemed to lack mutations altogether. Some intended unions ‘like Terence and Irene,’ and he swore he heard another propose, professing they wanted with their lover ‘what Reese has.’ Others planned out with their neighbors, friends, and lovers what anatomy they wished to give or receive. They put their peculiarly gnarled bodies on display to offer their own parts, and admired one another with disregard for personal space seeking what they might request others to bequeath. Juxtaposed with what Sticks had told him before vanishing, ‘Choly understood that X-Cell-Root did this to the Furriers, and that the more disfigured they were, the more times they must have taken the chem.

Unease clammed up behind his ears. He leaned across the top of Angel to steady himself long enough to tie up the flaps of the ushanka.
Angel found Bones at the northern edge of the property, which had once served as a small recreation field beside the waters. The athletic skull-faced woman with four arms, three breasts, and short shaggy steel grey hair sauntered up to them and laughed, wringing her hands.

“Aah! There you are. Follow me up to the observation round.”

To the Southeast of the field rose a forty-foot incline, and she led them up it. ‘Choly remained atop Angel as they took to the highest elevation in the suburb. He assumed she believed that by doing so, he played the part of the officer, putting himself both mentally and physically above his enlisted, but he didn’t clarify his wilted constitution out of paranoia of voicing that he already felt so poorly by the afternoon. The hill’s crest held a second smaller, circular field from which they could see the entire settlement and surrounding area. A tall wrought iron guard fence once stood to the water side, to prevent anyone or anything from spilling down into the reservoir, but time had eroded, or invention had transplanted, much of it away.

“I appreciate your regard for the gravity of the rite,” she commented, taking note his behavior. He straightened, admiring her shoulders. “You look… distinguished, riding so. Your illustrious robot must have our X-Cell-Root. This will truly be a grand Unfolding.”

“Thank you, madam,” Angel beamed. “I never would have imagined I’d be compared to a mighty, commanding steed, eager to carry its owner into victorious battle!”

She glanced to toss it the grin in her eye.

Perhaps not all metal life forms are so bad after all.” Once atop the observation hill, Bones urged ‘Choly to dismount, crossing her lower arms over her hips. “I must check your robot’s inventory for myself before we begin, to guarantee we have enough for everyone.”

‘Choly complied to make way for Bones to access Angel’s storage compartment. Angel noticed him stumble and steadied him with a tendril. Bones whispered instructions to Angel, and the Handy gave affirmatives at equal volume.

“Oh!” Bones cried, at first indiscernible as to elation or dismay. “So good the General provided us with extra. She thought ahead, in the event of unexpected guests.”

She guffawed warmly, and patted Angel’s chassis, then helped push ‘Choly back up atop the Handy. Angel left its storage compartment door open, so that it could reach freely into itself once administration commenced. He looked down between the front of his feet at the crate nestled in the middle of all his chems, and frowned feebly to himself.

How could Angel be all right administering chems to a hundred people, when it now resists giving me even one Mentat? When did it start turning into a mobile vending machine for everyone but me? When I was captain, it helped me administer to a thousand enlisted, and it knew I smuggled morphine in my Melancholia but always dispensed it gladly. What’s changed, now that I’ve awoken into this freakish terrain?

“Everyone!” Bones called out from the front edge of the mound, rhythmically clapping both pairs of hands. “Everyone, come!! Come now! We commence!”

As the Furriers in the reservoir and the settlement congregated at the mound, ten split off into the center of the circle–six very mutated, two somewhat mutated, and two unmutated–with the three Rust Devil captives in tow. The rest gathered around them. Angel positioned ‘Choly slightly off center, sandwiched between those in center and those congregating around them. ‘Choly couldn’t even begin to keep his eyes from wandering throughout the sea of anatomical singularity, so he did
his best to focus on Bones alone, who paced around those in center. With everyone present, Bones started with a speech, her fruity voice clear and eager:

“We, the Furriers, Unfold today that we rejuvenate our perpetual stock. It is our tradition and our right that we accept this chem into us, that we usher the next era of our Voire. We cast down our masks in the rite--” she paused as everyone did as instructed, “--that we may slurry together and stand again anew in community, oneness, and purpose.” She gestured to those in the center. “These thirteen, our tributes today. They will over-dose. In a permanent death of ego they will witness our Unfolded infinity, and bestow it upon us all. May they each now speak their name, their intent, and their final wishes before their entireties become completely one with us all from this moment on.”

The ten Furrier tributes nudged the stripped-naked Devils to speak first.

“Please just let us go,” the first begged. She glared desperately out to those surrounding them, but received scorn rather than pity. “My name is Cherry.”

Reese rushed forward to kick her from her kneeling position, into the dirt. Undressed, the duality of their form became far clearer, and ‘Choly could understand why they had been referred to as both Terrence and Irene. Their vitiligo-mottled physiology mesmerized him. To their left Reese appeared to once have been a tall blonde woman, and to their right, a dark-haired man. The blonde hair, they kept short, while the dark trailed long, loose, and thick, intimating the look of a dyed side-shave. Their faces had fused together partly, down to a one-third overlay of skull and grey matter. Irene’s features contributed two pale left eyes, one embedded in the maxillary sinus, while Terrence’s only brought a single dark right eye to the face. Their orbits only seemed deep-set, for sake of the contorted angle of their join line, though their noses had fused nearly neatly. Their jaws had joined at an odd angle, still able to function provided they took turns. Supported by two lower legs, their right leg bifurcated at the knee. They each brought an arm to their remarkable geometry. From the approximate point of what would otherwise have been the symmetry of either, a second right arm jutted at the breastbone, and their shoulders and ribs captured the permanent backward curvature of a breath bolted in a moment of rhapsody.

“You’ll speak respectfully of the rite,” Reese growled, their left gold earring swinging forward with animation. With each phrase they alternated between the left and right side of their mouth with a terrifying snarl amounting from having infuriated both constituents of their persona. Their voice held in it a gravelly smoke, and ‘Choly could hear from the approximate throaty echo that they still possessed both larynxes. “This is our one holy day, Cherry, and fortune favors you that you’re included. This is not a death warrant: It is a life warrant. We are to let you carry on among us.”

The veritable goliath dragged her back up by the rope binding her, and she knelt again, sniveling, dirty, and furious. “We honor one wish. One... respectful... wish.”

A second Devil blurted out, “I’d sooner die than play this sick shit. I’ve heard what this is. You call what you’re doing religious? It’s a fuckin’ CHEM HI--”

Before the young man could finish his tear, Reese had pulled their pistol from a thigh holster and shot him in the head.

“No one Unfolds without their consent. Even war captives have a choice here.”

Shaking, Cherry murmured, “We’re fucked. We’re fucked no matter what. Just let the chem shit be quick and painless. I’m begging you.”

“You wish for that which already is,” Bones soothed, petting the woman’s sun-worn buzz-cut face. “It’s the most painless thing you’ll ever experience.”
‘Choly noticed Sticks among the Furriers that had gathered around the tributes, declaring with his nudity his intent to participate. He did his best not to fall into a coughing fit, but still managed to choke on spit anyway.

“I...” The third Devil shook his head, broken from having his gang-mate murdered right beside him with the three tied up. “I don’t know what you want me to say... I’m Shrapnel. I... I don’t have anything more to say...”

“If you have no wish,” Reese replied, “I instead offer a gift. Furriers! Whoever retains the first memory from this Rust Devil, come to me for personal apprenticeship. Either you have unmatched humility, Shrapnel, or you will learn to.”

Jealousy and confusion burbled up in ‘Choly like bad heartburn, to understand that Sticks planned to participate all along only to insist ‘Choly shouldn’t do the same. He couldn’t make up his heart whether a matter of trust or confidence separated them now in the moment. Deep down ‘Choly could already see that the way things would pan out, Sticks took the role of the enlisted, and ‘Choly that of the officer. He swallowed, his ears ringing like static. *Surely, Jacob can’t have purposefully put me in such a position.* Hurt contemplation distracted him from the other tributes’ speeches, whether it had been Ick’s or Sticks’s idea for the ghoul to participate, and he was trapped between trying to figure out which of them to be angry at, and trying to shove down his grief.

‘Choly didn’t even realize that Ick stood among the tributes until he recognized the voice when he began his speech, and his jaw slacked in recognition, his attention snapping back to the ceremony itself. The old man with wiry, wild clear-white hair had some of the gnarliest of anatomy of anyone on the observation mound. His head emanated from his left shoulder, his left arm from where his head should have been, and his torso and legs were mangled and reshaped to where ‘Choly couldn’t even make sense of the bone structure. He thought there were three legs, but he couldn’t tell, too intent upon the leathery, keloidal hand protruding from the ribs of his head-side, which gesticulated just as the other two while he twanged away anciently at his address.

“Today, I am Ick. Today, I become you all. I recall through my original Deenwood stock, and beseech the original stock that exists in you all, that every of the base’s officers was a different kind of wicked. My body remembers lots of the captains an’ lieutenants, remembers the tests. I know we all have some manner of nightmare in our guts, what happened on that base, before the war and after it a ways. But, there’s a reason we all carry generational memory of the General specifically. Most of ‘em only followed through with it all ‘cause their country told ‘em it was what was right; same applies to any original stock. But, we all know that the kinda wicked the General was, she still is: she wanted to, an’ liked to, make living creatures suffer for her personal scientifical gain.”

He went on to speak his wishes. The words came difficultly as he attempted precision in his vocabulary, to match the tone of the ceremony.

“My wishes are two-fold, as I am honored in my sixth memory of Unfolding. I’ve decided to attempt to give back the given, and return to Sticks the flesh he’s lacked fifty years. Two Unfoldings ago, the General took from him his hand, and unrightfully gave it to me. Half a century, he’s been denied true Unfolding. He’s learned not to try to trick the General. An important lesson we all learn in one way or another. A body must only ply her or avoid her altogether. Today, Sticks becomes a Furrier in entirety.”

Sticks took a step forward and held up his wrist in expectant affirmation. Reese merely nodded and closed their eyes, awaiting the other half of the request. Before ‘Choly could compute the significance of having guessed correctly about the hand, Ick spoke next of him.
“In this way also, we must honor that Melancholy is only following out orders, by dosing us today. He is unique among the officers that have dosed us in all six Unfoldings I can remember. The others were honorary, but he, he holds the actual rank of Deenwood colonel. Look at his uniform! My stock recognizes it as genuine, for certain, as should ours all! He plans to lead us against the Devils, that we excel and triumph. That is why I beseech, Reese-- beseech that we must leave him as he wishes to exist, to choose where he has had no choice--that today, we let our commanding officer choose whether he becomes us all.”

“--Sticks! If you had anything to do with this--” ‘Choly started, stooping to a jockey posture ready to fight.

The contention Ick’s request stirred among the Furriers, to break tradition, drowned out ‘Choly’s outburst, and he piped down to stew in gratitude of Ick’s self-censorship. He’d referenced ‘Choly as an officer of Deenwood, without explicitly waving a finger and reminding them all his full identity. His mind wilded in his skull, knowing Sticks told Ick exactly who he was and that Liv had promoted him, but mounting details just continued to further obfuscate anyone’s intentions, especially not those of anyone willingly volunteering to be made tribute.

“OFFICER!” Reese roared, to silence the Furriers. “We refuse to exclude you. State your name and intent: Do you spectate, or do you participate!”

With all eyes on him, ‘Choly sputtered and his head swam. For a moment, he believed the ultimatum presented him wasn’t whether he lived, but rather how he would die. He cleared his throat to steel himself.

“I didn’t think I needed to have a speech ready, so forgive me... If this stuff really does make it so you can access the same memories of Deenwood from over two centuries ago, then many of you already know me, or will in the moment, just as you all know General Francis. It’s inevitable that you learn the truth, so I may as well state my name and intent.”

He choked up the reins fashioned from chain and leather, and stood as straight as he could, balanced on Angel’s foot pegs. He ripped off the ushanka and visor and tossed them down into Angel’s open storage compartment, poorly tolerating the chill and the sun in his face.

“I am your colonel. Colonel Alan Carey, of the Deenwood Pharm Corps. Call me Melancholy! I’ve been asleep since the Great War, but stand before you today. This Unfolding business is different from when I supervised the testing of Agent CM on Deenwood’s enlisted. You may again be my enlisted, but you lot were not drafted: All have volunteered to aid the effort to eradicate the Devils from Lowell. This is your settlement, your community. There is no longer any country telling ANY of us what’s right. So tell me, Furriers! What is right! You’ve tributed all others who delivered your X-Root. You called them your ‘officer’ for your ritual. Is this an effigy against the General? Ick just admitted the others weren’t officers. But today, I’m giving you the chance to put a real Deenwood Colonel to death.”

“Mindy, you idiot!”

‘Choly glared at Sticks with desperation, but quickly had to shut his eyes, the sun too intense.

“But... it’s our gratitude to include you,” a meek, gnarly Furrier from the crowd murmured, recognizing him. “The officer of the Unfolding holds the highest honor. You provide the X-Cell-Root. You administer it. The chem will fade from our bodies, but if you tribute yourself, we carry you in us forever. The Unfolding will be your doing, and we celebrate this.”

The sentiment sank in ‘Choly’s heart like a demented love letter, but he couldn’t convince himself
for a moment that any of the description of physicality of the ceremony itself could be taken literally. Surely, the mutations they all exhibited were the sole consequence of chronic chemical exposure and experimental chem abuse. Surely, there was a better explanation for Reese’s anatomical arrangement. Possibly, the X-Cell-Root could, at least, provide the Furriers with a vision of history akin to Mama Murphy’s Sigh. The idea that his dying experience might be another heaving ego death sent him back to the Jet overdose he suffered in the Corvega plant, and he nearly puked recalling it. Shaking, he made it look like he rubbed at his forehead, though he really needed to shield his eyes with his hand.

“As much as I hate to say it, ladies, gentlemen, and all, but watching is what I’ve been trained for. I’m going to make the executive decision that you do not want my stock, as the conditions that made it possible for me to be alive today corrupted it. Since I can’t test how the chem will react with my body, I can’t, ah, tribute myself. But, I’m already, in my own way, made of past, present, and future, and I’m already a part of you all. I’m a ghost. I’m content to remain a memory. This day is about celebrating and respecting you all, because none of you got your dues when it mattered most.” With a look in his eye of knowing dying wasn’t good enough for all he’d committed in life, he weakly held up his left wrist, so that his enamel remembrance poppy cuff link caught the light, to represent in the circumstance all fortitude he needed but had drained from him across the entire day. “We do this in honor of all those before us, and all who come after. I will supervise, and do all I can to monitor your chem use to keep you safe. My Mister Handy, Angel, will dole your chem. Promise me that if I do this for you, whatever stands after the Unfolding will march with me.”

Everyone gaped rapaciously at Reese. With a conflicted look, they warmed to excitement.

“Then you spectate. Melancholy, you spectate! Today we truly have our commanding officer. This Unfolding will be like none other.”

“All right, everyone!” Angel cried out, excited to get to work. “If we’ve all had our turns to speak, I believe administration is in order. First, I’m to give the tributes their three ampuoles each. Next, to all betrothed, I’m to give two. After that allotment, I’ve three pincers, so you can form three queues! Ha ha! Plenty to go around.” As it began handing out its special stock, it turned its ocular lenses to look up at ‘Choly, and spoke at a hush. “I’m proud of you, Sir. At least one of you all ought to remain sober and lucid amongst all this.”

At once disappointment, remorse, and relief washed over ‘Choly. The tension of committing to a decision fell through, and he failed to process that he would probably never get a chance now to experience Unfolding. Yet, he warmed knowing he would still experience it vicariously, a feat at which he excelled.
Chapter 58

Chapter Summary

Why did god create a dual universe? / So he might say, / “Be not like me. I am alone.” / And it might be heard.

TWs: Major body horror, major gore, major dissociative episode, NSFW, drug use, multiple implied deaths, mention of ambiguous animal death/cruelty. I've started losing entire days without noticing.

Each tribute cracked the neck of an X-Cell-Root ampuole, pressed it to one nostril to inhale its contents, discarded the glass, and proceeded to the next in methodical succession. They held the Devils still and opened their X-Cell-Root for them, and made it impossible for the vapors of to escape their panicked breathing. In an effort to hold her breath, Cherry only managed to hyperventilate, inhaling an entire dose at once. She didn’t bother fighting the remaining doses. Shrapnel, meanwhile, could only be dosed by holding a hand over his mouth and the glass beneath his nose.

The rest of the Furriers cracked into their own X-Cell-Root in as close to unison as they could muster. Reese took two, one in each nostril. When ‘Choly noticed, he nearly objected, only to trust they understood a need to adjust their dosage scaled up to their stature. He couldn’t tell if it had been five minutes or five hours since the ritual had begun. As the Devils sniveled and heaved, he worried whether he’d got on the wrong side of history yet again. His grip on the Syringer rifle choked up in anticipation of aggression, psychosis, paranoia, and excitation from the crowd.

Surely, I afforded myself enough Pax darts. They might all require sedation as a consequence of this test. ...I hope I’m able to fire on all ninety-some subjects before they overpower me. One case, that’s fifteen, and three times is... how many?

He squinted diffculty, math beyond him. His senses blanched. The Furriers commenced the first stage of the orgy Sticks had described. At once, the tributes existed in a state both of total presence and absence, cowed and compelled by the transcendental effect of the chem. They pawed at one another in a mutual, deferential urgency, asphyxiating on the immediate, deafening dissolution of identity. But then, that dissolution became literal.

I’m constructing this scenario to navel-gaze. It’s all purely symbolic. His jaw locked. ...Of what.

The tributes’ flesh softened at the edges, streaked beneath one another’s touch, became pliant to their collective desperation. Colors blurred as their complexion lit up like the disrupted strata of many hues of raw clay. Unable to ground himself down, his breathing shallowed out. He flicked the gesture capture lever on his Pip-Boy, and steadied the stock of his pneumatic weapon against his hip to free up his right hand, favoring the computational device over his weapon so he could flourish into rote stenography. He had to remain professional. Impartial and removed from what transpired before him.

I must write it all down. It’s my job to observe and annotate everything that transpires as a result of this formulation. Symptoms. Behaviors. Events. Social dynamics. Every detail I can. History or allegory, it still stands to serve society, to know what happens here today.
“Sir, hold steady yet,” Angel cautioned, noting its rider slipping inside himself. It nudged back to the side of the observation hill with the sloping incline, in case its rider needed an easy escape route to preserve his sanity. “We’ve only just begun administration and observation.”

Fleetingly tethered, he weighed whether to switch to the Nagant over the Syringer. When he’d practiced centering himself atop Angel with the rifle in the robotics yard, he’d steadied the weapon against the top of it, and he hadn’t yet added the reins which required a different balance. It felt a little too much like juggling, to add balancing himself to the equation of wielding a rifle and transcribing at the same time. He estimated the modified revolver only weighed a few pounds less than the rifle, but would be steadied one-handed if he could help it.

He caught himself reaching for the Nagant anyway. His mind flickered the Nagant’s past and present identities over one another. In trying to tranquilize someone with Pax darts, he might instead kill them with 7.62mm bullets. He couldn’t confirm for himself with any certainty that what he understood to be real, was. Had the weapon even been modified at all? Had he shot that poor dog at the Red Rocket, when he’d only meant to subdue it? He whet his lips and caught his teeth on them ever so slightly.

*I had to steady a pistol with both hands, even before the war.*

He forced himself to recall his routine firing range training at Deenwood, rationalizing his frail constitution to give himself a different reason to keep it holstered than forcing himself to wade through his status as both the lead character and unreliable narrator of his own motion picture.

His little surviving sense of focus remained on the tributes. Sticks neared Ick, and held out his left wrist to receive the hand they’d agreed upon. The dilation of time hiccuped, and they made a fleeting connection before the crowd dragged Ick in. The communal orgy swept into full swing faster than ‘Choly’s attentions could follow. Over the mounting moaning and yelling, any meaningful communication fell to Babel. The ringing in his ears escalated into pressure and sound isolation, and he became convinced the events before him now occurred inside a jar.

*Shit, they might not respect Ick’s last wishes. Or Sticks’s boundaries.*

His heart ratcheted in his ribs, in a dialectic of delirium and dread. Past and present played tug of war with his vagus nerve, wringing him clammy and pale. The Furriers, in every sense, ripped one another limb from limb, all with the liberty of jaded enthusiasm. His throat filled with bones as he, trembling, felt himself deliberate whether to steady his aim to stop the carnage. Not a single one seemed concerned by any evident pain or discomfort, transfixed in the fleeting interstices between their individual microcosms. He persisted in transcribing his account, desperate to stay focused.

They don’t exhibit the rage of the other formulations of CM. In addition to numbing and agitating a subject, many formulations can exhibit potent psychedelic properties, especially if they’re allergic to opiates. They appear numbed, and are definitely hallucinating. They might not be numbed, but rather simply rewired to feel pain rather than agony from their apparent dismemberment. But they don’t behave anything like they’ve taken CM. There’s some outright stimulant property to it. It’s more like *Day Tripper, Mentats,* or possibly even *Calmex.* *This can’t be CM. What did they give me to test today!*

They stirred together, such that they could not be unstirred, the tangle of orgiastic flesh blooming pink with voluntary bloodshed.

Not unlike the conditioning of clay, or pulling slip, they contorted and clawed and flowed with a non-euclidean logic ‘Choly’s mind couldn’t quite follow. Much of the Furriers’ actions, rehearsed and habitual, served to smooth down the flesh as it left its current owner and found its next. Yet,
just as much, the petting and attention served as worship and appreciation of one another, acclimating the commune to its shared new forms and angles. Nothing had to be permanent. Not for long. The tributes deliquesced altogether, betraying these deductions immediately.

The Furriers weren’t a commune. They were a colony, a hundred pieces of the same general creature. It occurred to him, that the chem might make it possible they all did share the same mind, if even only while simultaneously high on the chem that had fated this for them in the first place. Yet, he couldn’t wrap his head around the emotional and psychosexual proximity of these re-enlisted, that they’d allow this manner of simultaneous, all-inclusive coitus.

_Wasn’t there an ancient military that encouraged pre-battle coitus to foster connections among its troops? And then there’s those monkeys. They have sex with each other as a social dialogue. ...That’s what this is. Social dialogue. It’s how they communicate and sync up with one another. If they’re all constituents of the same entity, is this some manner of autoeroticism? Dialogue with the self? There’s chems that have a history of making a person fall in love with themselves. Takes self-love to a new depth. Zenith or nadir, I can’t be sure._

Now that he had some command of context for what _compatibility_ could mean, he saw himself compelled to recall the conversation he had with Sticks on the way to Voire, regarding X-Cell-Root and X-Cell-Squared. Compatibility. Proximity. Understanding. Mutually, on every level. As an officer, he’d never to his knowledge been dosed with the same chems he tested on his enlisted. Jealousy stung his lungs.

_I kidded myself. And everyone here. Of course I want to be included. I want more than anything to be included. To experience this myself! I’ve NEVER been included!_

The agent of his agency dismounted him from Angel, and the world became a recolored black and white film, as though he’d been led into a remastered feature at the Starlight Drive-In. Everything felt like it filled his ears to capacity, as though the world didn’t fit inside itself. Staggering about the fringes of the group, his eye came to scan desperately for his swain. He could find no better way to anchor his sense of the material than attempt to include himself. If anyone was to combine with Jacob, it would be him.

“Colonel Carey--!” Angel cried out, cutting short at evidence of its owner’s next series of actions.

He didn’t hear it. He didn’t hear anything.

He felt himself yell for Jacob. No one seemed to hear him, either.

He questioned whether he’d actually made a sound, and yelled again. His lungs and body trembled, but his senses only registered what vibrations that could resonate through his flesh.

_I can’t beg the X-Cell-Squared from Angel now, especially now that it knows what Root does._

One hand fished blindly in his pocket, finding the inhaler he repeatedly forgot he’d somehow retained despite the shuffle of dress and redress. The other hand ripped at his harness buckles and the snaps of his shirt collar. The actuator went to his mouth, and as the tart vapors of the compact four-ampoule chem mixed in his lungs and head, his cataracted eyes blurred behind eyeglass lenses which, in the moment, no longer matched them. His body piloted him in search of ghoul limbs.

Before he knew it, the Furriers had dragged him in, plunged him into the tang of blood and viscera, smeared him with their writhing vitality and sex. They had seen him take the dose of X-Cell-Squared, seen him begin to strip, and understood that he’d changed his mind. With him half-undressed, the Furriers continued pulling the clothes off him in alternations, unable to fully
disengage one another for more than a moment.

He clammed up. The whole thing was off. He should have begun melting by now. They should have begun ripping him asunder. Rather than let this convince him the orgy was a hallucination, he instead took this development to signify something far more disappointing, and uniquely disturbing to him.

*It wasn’t the X-Cell-Squared that’s off bubble to the X-Cell-Root. It’s my stock, to theirs. My stock’s all wrong.*

Though the chaos of collective ecstasy frustrated his attempts to locate Jacob, he found meaningful distraction with a leg sprawled across him. He captured it, with a feeble determination to feel something, and dragged it up to and across his face. Caressed and kissed and sucked at it. Paid delicate but ravenous attention to each individual toe. Grazed and nipped and traced the very edges of its sole. With his right hand, the Pip-Boy’s capture lever still open, he drunkenly traced poetry all along the calf and thigh. He paused agape every so often, intoxicated by stimulation, simply to bask in the sensation of a sole pressed against his solitary cheek and nose. In the moment the care eluded him, who it could have belonged to, not that he’d have been able to tell more than the fact it was probably attached to at least one of them. It could have been attached to him, or not attached at all, for all he knew. It only mattered that he be subdued and trapped indefinitely in the vulnerability of his moral destitution. He felt a heel grind down on his crotch, sobering him and shipwrecking him in the same measure. He was so helplessly disoriented that he couldn’t even tell if the Furriers had succeeded in fully denuding him. A turbid moan wheezed from him as he snatched another foot that came near him, and he breathlessly implored the same of it as the first, and the rest hundredfold, begging that he be kept underfoot forever.

“--Rastoptat’ menya, navsegda--”

The sudden understanding effervesced in him, like some dull filmy spume, that he experienced a vision of the future. He had lost control of his actions because he was witnessing that which was about to transpire, not participating actively in the present in any way. As he fell unconscious from heart strain even the performance chem couldn’t overcome, he fully anticipated he’d awaken to watch it all over again, for real the next time.
Chapter Summary

TWs: Nightmare sequence, incongruous chronology, unreality, body horror.

Lol, we haven’t had a flashback episode yet in Second Instar, have we? Have fun, ‘cause ‘Choly’s not. In the future this becomes another installment in ‘Choly’s Rexford Press Originals. (: 

As he muddled through prescription fulfillment, Carey looked over his shoulder yet again. He saw the customer he anticipated finally entered the drugstore, and hastily finished up his current order. The thirty-some man he’d called earlier that morning had dusty blond side-parted hair, and stood as short as Carey, but seemed more sawed off than grown that way. Owing to the nature of the medication, as the head chemist, only he could take the customer. He pulled the pencil box size prescription carton from the cage, and confirmed it did in fact indicate it was for ‘Sal Mendez.’ He watched Angel busying itself in the front end straightening aisles, and waited until Sal was next in line before hopping onto the other register to wave him over. Mentally unable to set down the box on the counter, he kept it in both hands.

“Apologies, again, Mister Mendez, how it took weeks to get this filled. Calmex is one of the most rationed chems in the country at the moment.”

“I know. I know. But it. I talked to my doc.” Sal frowned to himself, and repeatedly smoothed at his short sleeve silk button down shirt as he eyed the various hard candies at the front counter at length. He eventually looked up at his chemist with a crumpled resignation. “The Milque wasn’t cutting it. You... you sure you don’t need it more? You look peaked, Doc.”

Carey glanced down, at the lab coat tossed over his favorite ochre jumpsuit, the cobalt scarf tucked like a cravat into his collar, and his navy oxfords. He lingered on the unfamiliar braces on both wrists and both ankles, but readily dismissed their explanation as unimportant. What mattered was that he didn’t look the part of his vocation, and a head chemist had to command reassurance and reliability. It was one thing to be haggard, but another altogether if he looked it. Well, that just wouldn’t do! He thought to what Hawthorne could usually put his hands on pretty quick, and weighed his choices against what he thought Sal might find most useful. With a big, wide grin, he straightened and patted at the Milquetoast display on the counter.

“Milquetoast is completely and totally safe. Fantastic for insomnia, shakes and nerves, headaches, nausea, you name it. But... I wouldn’t recommend using it alongside this prescription. Or with alcohol, were you to have access to any.” He leaned in and turned off his customer service voice, to discuss the consultation more privately. “I’ll see what I can do about getting you some Day Tripper, if you can water me down. I’ll even take moonshine at this point, Sal. Between you and me, I thought I was done having this war effort kill me inside-out.”

Sal’s jaw dropped a moment before he, too, leaned in with a nervous smile.

“For you, Mister Carey, I will find you something very nice. Really, though. Should I be worried? To take this? My doctor said it’s tranquilizer. She explained it all to me, but that was weeks ago...”
“Alan!”

Gretchen Nordstern didn’t seem all that gangling from where she sat on the far counter in a Peter Pan collar tea dress with the confidence to match a pair of trousers, chewing a lit cigarillo and taking notes against her lap with the phone receiver wedged between her shoulder and cheek. Her low, dark bun wore a colorful crocheted snood.

“You’ve spent half an hour with that client.” She didn’t have to look up to impose, waving him off with her free hand. “Let Mary and Trudy handle front end already.”

Carey hemmed a spell, unsure how that could be true. But he didn’t want to question his boss. He stared off in her direction as he addressed Sal.

“I, I’m sorry, Mister Mendez. I’ve got others to see to. If you’ve any questions...”

When he turned to his customer, he trailed off. Sal had vanished.

Gretchen shoved into his hands a letterhead with a handful of scripts. He stuttered, glancing it over. Med-X. Clarimentin. Immunoluxe. His eyes glazed over the usual orders until he encountered the words Psycho (Cyclomorphine Chloride). His heart hiccuped, and his eyes briefly lost focus.

“Wh-- Gretchen, please. Please. Please tell me this is some kind of-- How did this-- How did-- It’s on the--” He cleared his throat and whet his lips, but it didn’t help. He shakily pointed to the line on her invoice. “How is this on the market, ma’am.”

“Don’t be such a worrywort. It’s government approved. It underwent rigorous testing before it hit the market. What could possibly be wrong with the stuff!”

He couldn’t argue without breaching military confidentiality. Walden Drugs had to make ends meet somehow, right? And if whoever was getting the Psycho had a prescription for it, at the very least they’d be taking it under a physician’s supervision. He knew the dwindling prescription numbers didn’t mean people weren’t getting sick or injured less often: it meant more people were dying. Between the malcontent of the Canadian annexation, the endless crisis against the Chinese causing the deepest economic depression the country had ever suffered, and the mounting volume of riots taking place on home soil, the United States teetered on a second Civil War. And yet, these factors didn’t explicate in his mind why people had begun to drop like flies as of late.

*Usually hear from Jacob by now.*

He frowned as he dialed the Lexington branch to call in the Psycho prescription order, and got to completing the invoice Gretchen had given him. He and Jacob had planned that morning to have lunch together at the malt shop. He decided to go check on him and Sal. He hung up his lab coat in the mudroom, and waved to his coworkers to let the two ladies know he’d be stepping out.

“Angel, I’m going on break.”

“Right along, then, Sir!”

The Mister Handy followed at his side.

He popped his head into the small bed and breakfast across the way, wedged between the Wright’s Inn at the corner opposite the drugstore, and the bookstore further down. When he didn’t see Sal, he approached the check-in and asked after him of the young attendant in a chignon and sheath dress. She indicated no one had seen him since the morning. He declined her offer to take a message for him, shook his head, thanked her, and left.
It sat uneasy with him, but he chalked it up to still feeling awful about the local call for cyclomorphine. Nothing that he wanted as far away from him as possible ever stayed very far away for long.

Once a Pick-R-Up passed, he jaywalked with Angel to the hardware store at the corner. Only a few customers loitered, some genuinely lost without advice from an employee, others genuinely considering unattended theft. He got to the foot of the employees-only stairwell, but stopped short of scaling it. His gut quivered.

“Angel, be a dear. Pop up and see if you can find Jacob.”

“Yes!” It came back quickly. “Not a soul on the roof, Sir.”

He frowned and gestured that they leave. His leg felt tight and stiff, but he shrugged it off.

Hm. Was I limping earlier? No, I’ve had this limp a long time already.

On his way back down the street, Carey glanced in the windows of the malt shop. Jacob wasn’t there either, nor Sal. Jacob’s car was still parked outside the hardware store. The repairman was disinclined to go anywhere on foot all that much if he could avoid it, so Carey doubted his roommate had gone home for lunch without saying anything about it. He gave up on the idea of malt shop food, as he preferred to share it. Instead, he sat down across the street from the drugstore, on the Wright’s Inn’s spacious porch, with a Nuka Cherry from their vending machine and an order of three arancini from Piretti’s Bakery. Sometimes the texture of the rice balls reminded him of ezhiki, and he got a bit homesick.

I should just stick to Melancholia. There’s only one flavor of toska to it.

He noticed the construction sounds in front of the municipal plutonium well had ceased. He glanced up with his mouth full to see there were no workers in the street. He supposed it was their lunchtime, too. When he finished eating, he required Angel’s help to stand again.

Am I starting to feel my age, or am I just that full?

He returned to work. Once he had on his coat again and come back out to the front end, he saw some kids poorly picking the lock on the adult care case. He side-eyed Angel, who handed him the keys. Spinning the wrist coil on a finger, he strolled up with confidence that belied his limp.

“Hey there, gentlemen! Looking to buy some No-Gesta today, I see. A fine choice in preventative care!”

The boys sputtered in embarrassment at being caught trying to shoplift. Angel simply hovered behind them to cut off their back escape route out of the drugstore, while Carey withdrew an entire case of product. They followed the veteran in service uniform speechlessly to the counter. The older one scrambled through his pockets along the way, desperate to figure out if he even had enough to buy what they’d intended to steal.

“I’ll tell you what!” the chemist announced—in his stress of recognizing he’d put on the wrong white coat, a little too loudly—though they seemed largely alone all the same. “They’re usually fifteen dollars each, but if you buy six, I’ll give ‘em to you for seventy-five.”

“Gee, that’s awful generous of you,” the older one started, urging the younger one to play along, so as to curb the possibility Carey might call the police on them. “Bruce, you wanna go in on this with me fifty-fifty?”
“Only if that’s the only thing-- never mind. Lemme count how much I got.” He produced a fistful of wadded papers Carey could tell weren’t money. “I’ve got twenty-eight bucks. What about you, Jeb?”

“Thirteen. Awful.”

Carey smiled with a twisted, cool benevolence as he set two out of the case and nudged what was left toward the boys.

“How about just four, then. Hm?” He wagged an eyebrow and held out his upturned palm expectantly. They uncertainly exchanged all their cash for the prophylactic kits with entendred packaging which resembled an exclamation point but reminded of something else entirely. He tucked them into a paper bag and folded it off lackadaisically, then handed it to them. “Off you are, then!”

Mary walked up soon after he shooed off the boys. The older squared, thick woman, in a pencil dress and cardigan, held a hand to her mouth to hush herself, aghast.

“You sold No-Gesta to some high schoolers?”

“You’d rather they have stolen it?” He shrugged at her. “Age means nothing whether someone needs that sort of care. They’ll copulate, whether or not they can get things like No-Gesta--and wouldn’t you rather they did so safely?” He tucked the vaguely paper-like wad into the register, and his glasses dipped off his nose, caught from falling by his eyeglass chain. “Besides, a sale’s a sale, and customers get scarce.”

Why haven’t I been more worried where everybody’s gotten off to?

He looked out to find Jacob’s car had been left, abandoned and askew, run up onto the sidewalk. Like it was, morning of the bombs. The cognitive disconnect insisted he had no idea what he could have meant. He slipped his glasses back in place.

“Hey, Angel...” He cleared his throat. “Have you-- Have you seen Jacob?”

“What a silly question, Sir! Just look down!”

He did, and succumbed to fever, short breath, and sweats. His legs writhed, granular, tumescent, and grotesque, more like a filariasis than the countless bodies he knew comprised them. The tightness and swelling paralyzed him from the waist down, and kept him upright in substitute of bones or any meaningful ligature. He identified Duchesne among the clumped, corpuscular rivulets, and choked up.

He looked up. Gretchen, Mary, and Trudy were nowhere to be seen.

He didn’t have to look down again to understand he’d soaked them up as well. He dry heaved, to no effect. Desperate to reach help from someone, anyone, he tried to walk to the phone at the other end of the counter, only to fall after a single step. And he continued falling, into himself, having become an infinite labyrinth of flesh, a Klein bottle of grief.

Concord’s empty because I subsumed everyone. He cried, slipping through narrow, trembling corridors of sopping tissue. I’m the sole survivor of Vault 111 because I stole survival opportunity from them all. I stole this from my customers and coworkers. From my neighbors. From Jacob. Everyone gave their lives, so I could keep living.

And for what!
Disoriented and sweating as he awoke, ‘Choly’s ears rang. He did not recognize the bed, made with soft woven textiles and patched together fur hides. He found his glasses on the nightstand, and he rubbed at his face before putting them on. Noticing he was not alone, he drew up the covers to his chest as he sat up.

A man sat in the far corner, in a thickly furnished, well-loved armchair, working attentively on something in his lap. At least, he assumed it was a man. As before The Unfolding, the figure had resumed wearing a mask. ‘Choly’s head pounded as he tried to make sense of recognizing the mummy mask. The man had taken Ick’s.

*It can’t be Ick. He, he died in The Unfolding. That’s not what he looks like. He’s not a--* The figure in oiled leather garb glanced up to him, aware he’d awoken, and gravity slacked ‘Choly’s face.

...*Not a ghoul...*

The figure raised his scar-marbled left arm to ‘Choly, indicating the lack of a hand, and as he casually resumed the task in his lap, he spoke with incisive softness.

“It belongs to Voire now.”

Hearing Sticks’s easy, rumbling voice come from Ick’s mask startled the chemist. He pulled the fistful of leather sheet to his chin, wary of Sticks’s possessed demeanor. The ghoul’s project was the prosthetic Nostrus hand. Although the mask neutered the ghoul’s capacity for facial expression, he still conveyed his devastation loudly through his tone and posture. He couldn’t bring himself to ask whether his friend was all right, already fully aware of the answer.

He flinched when he noticed Sticks was fully dressed, but he was completely naked, and frantically patted around in the bed prioritizing his Pip-Boy. The device lay unlatched on the nightstand, beside where he’d found his glasses, and he slapped it back on, panicked while the device booted back up. He scrambled through the menus to get to the vitals page, to find nothing significant. It didn’t indicate anything had changed, besides an elevated heart rate. He recalled the Clarimentin, but the Pip-Boy’s clock indicated he’d only taken it a few hours ago at most. His heart raced while he tried to process everything, sitting cross-legged in the bed, his eyes the one part of him unable to sit still. The very idea baffled his nightmare-gnawed brain, that the health metrics did not report filariasis or any blood diseases.

“You’ve got the constitution of wet cardboard, Mindy. Worse than a house of cards in the rain. Coming down from X-Squared knocked you out cold. Be glad you listened and didn’t take the unspun stuff. Won’t do. Won’t do at all.”

“I, I am.” A cracking smile picked at ‘Choly’s mouth, and he picked up the covers again to shield himself. “If I’d have known I were to conduct orgiastic chem frenzies of my enlisted, I’d have begged for this promotion well before the world ended. I wouldn’t have been content with my position as a captain.”
Sticks slouched harder, shoving down any reply he could have given to the sexually loaded comment.

‘Choly stared at the ghoul’s wrist. Nothing had really changed about it. Its topography resembled a contact smear, marbling his scarred ghoulish flesh with that of a human. The more ‘Choly glanced him over, the more he figured the mottling must have extended to more than just the arm, positing a bizarre variant of vitiligo.

“Gonna have to trust you’re gonna get us through this, Colonel. We’re gonna need to loot Deenwood after this.” Sticks’s breath snagged, and he stopped what he was doing for a moment. He didn’t look up. “--I’m. Going to need it.”

When their gazes finally crossed, the icy desperation in Sticks’s eyes sobered ‘Choly, and he frowned. Sticks’s head drooped again.

“How bad is the X-Cell-Root comedown going to be?”

“Not important right now... Right now.” Sticks slipped the glove on over the adjusted Nostrus armature and tried it on, unable to look at the stump anymore. “Right now I’m having the ultimate job on me. The General had to know who received my hand fifty years ago, could still be alive. She had to know that by now, that same Furrier would volunteer as Unfolding stock. She had to know that following through with this would strip me of the Furrier I shared that bond with. Five decades of phantom limb spasms, for lacking it. For lacking him. ...Still unsure whether she knew for sure before-- before, that you and I knew each other prewar. But now that she does, for certain... It all boils down to her stripping me of the two people in my life I’ve ever let myself be close to.”

“I could tell you were close to him, but...”

‘Choly’s voice burbled silent. He could still taste foot in his mouth, and imagined it could only be his own.

“Ick was my best friend,” the ghoul snapped.

“...And what does that make me...?”

Sticks stood at a start, to yell, only for his voice to crack into diffusion.

“--A ghost. A fucking buck naked fREAK of a ghost--” Shoulders askew, Sticks steadied himself in embarrassment when ‘Choly shrank against the carved headboard. He nearly apologized, but couldn’t find the reason to. “No. I can’t lack you, too.”

“Pardon the intrusion,” a voice interrupted, with a vague familiarity. They looked to the bedroom doorway to a silhouette with four arms akimbo. Clothed but maskless, ‘Choly figured she was Bones until he noticed two more arms carried a garment. “I was sent to check on our C.O. and I’m taking the opportunity to confirm with him a detail before I proceed.”

As the sprightly woman with wild grey hair approached the bed, he could identify that whatever she had brought had at some point been his officer’s coat. He frowned and pulled the white leather coat toward him. She’d cut a massive long-pile collar from the pelts of an animal with peppered, gradient brown-grey fur. He ran his hands absently through it, captivated by its softness. When his head eventually picked up, his eyes were wet. He croaked, unable to figure the amount of time it must have required. His fingers gripped the fur tight, his jaw in rictus. He glanced to the dressing table on the opposite wall, atop which he saw his orthotics, cane, and a loathsome combination of
royal blue and metallic gold. Only then did he notice Sticks had taken the opportunity to duck out with ‘Choly distracted.

“How long was I out?”

“Just an hour now.” She snatched it from him just enough to lay it out more purposefully on the bed. “Though many of us feel it’s more like already an hour. You like the Pelt I picked, yes? This is all that could be salvaged of your uniform. Here, I’ll help you with your laces.”

“I, I don’t--” He stared in alternations between the Vault Suit and the six-armed Furrier scooping up his braces and dumping them in the bed. He couldn’t decide whether to object to her time estimate or to the garment across the room from him. “I didn’t think I brought that--”

“Is it a problem? It’s a Vault Suit, yes? I’ve never seen one myself before. But I’ve heard they’re good protection from the elements. It’s good for you to have brought a change of clothes. It will do.”

He removed the Pip-Boy for the moment, and put on his reinforced gloves, only to absently trace his Bloodbug scar in some distant horror. She coaxed him to pay attention and kneel on the bed faced away from her. He almost asked her not to look at his body, but rebuked the anxiety with the reminder that he’d likely been naked among the whole commune during the ritual. They’d all likely seen him head to toe now. Yet, when he slipped the corset over his head to put his arms through, and her hands wandered beneath it, his chin still tilted up in distress, torn whether to welcome the myriad overstimulation to which Voire had inured him.

“You’re Bones, right? I wasn’t introduced to many of you, and--”

“--I have been, yes, and I suppose I am now,” she replied a little too quickly, over his shoulder. “I might not continue to be for long. I didn’t stop being Bones any more than you stopped being Carey.” She lacked tact or personal space as she gained understanding of how the corsetry needed to be tightened by foremost understanding the form it needed to contour. “Surely, you’ve Unfolded before. You look it. Just as you confirm me, I confirm you. Do you seek a new name? A new face? You are Melancholy now, yes? --Or Mindy? Or Carey?”

His voice stuttered and he put his hands on two of hers, trying to ease her out of caressing his chest and sides. Interpreted as an invitation, the gesture only spurred her on more heatedly.

“I, no, Melancholy will do. I. I, ah--Bones.” His voice cracked through his nose when she pinched a nipple. “Weren’t you just saying we need to get going?”

“No harm in learning more about you as we go.”

Curtly, she pulled back to take visual measure of the eyelets. She traced a finger down both sides of the limp back, then promptly pulled the laces taut in a single fluid tug. She smoothly tied the corset in place, then moved to swing his legs off the bed, and knelt to help him with his socks and ankle braces. Once accomplished, the three-breasted woman patted the inside of his thigh and looked up at him between his knees.

“I wish there were time to know you.” Her dark eyes begged for the ability to stay right where they were. “You’re so feeble, but so... capable. You fascinate me.”

His thighs closed around her face just slightly, and he moaned at just the thought of all those hands not just curious but ravenous for him. He withdrew from the posture sheepishly, and quickly finished dressing himself. I do, too. He glanced over to her apologetically, only to notice her
smoothing her cheeks where he’d squished them ever just so.

“‘You’re still... activated, then.’

He toed guiltily into his boots and laced them, then clipped his Pip-Boy back on, for the excuse to stare at the screen rather than her.

“We will be for some time. I’m uncertain what you partook in during the ceremony, but you weren’t... we call it conditioned. Made pliant. It wasn’t X-Cell-Root, then. A shame. Though you didn’t Unfold like us, you did Unfold with us. We’re blessed to have you included.’

“You say that to all your officers,” he blandished, still recovering from a deep blush.

“You’re our first full officer.” Bones scooped up the coat. He almost expected her to help him into it, if he hadn’t remembered it looked incomplete. She handed him his cane. “Since before, at any rate.”

They got to walking, back southward to the Reservoir House.

“You’re not mad, then, to know who I am?”

“Raving and ecstatic!” She grinned, demonstrating she now had far too many teeth. “The Unfolding gathers together pieces of the past, present, and future, and layers it into a single form. It gathers us. It gathers resources. And it gathers time. The ceremony dilates us, makes us ready. But then, after the X-Root, reality shrinks and solidifies into its next iteration. Infinity seems so much more infinite when it’s spaced out as it is.”

Geez, where did Angel get off to? He watched everyone around them working on their armor and weapons with an abnormal diligence, and noted how manifest the effects of X-Root were. They’re so quick. Agile. Inspired. Like they’re in effect truly posthuman. In some regards, they appeared more restless than motivated.

In looking around to try to at least lay eyes on Angel or Sticks, he also attempted to locate any other of his belongings he had not yet recovered. He saw someone with his harness and guns and dragged Bones along to the Furrier with his things.

“Oh no, no, no. This won’t do,” the old woman wheezed out, fretting over the guns and their ammunition with the nimble toes of legs that replaced arms at her shoulders. She noticed the two approaching her, but didn’t stop her scrutiny. “You need something that can penetrate that Devil armor!”

Bones smiled as the two watched her create shavings with a piece of sheet metal, then hammer and clip the dart-like pieces into uniform sizes, to give them both a sharp end and a fletched end. She bundled them up in a leather pouch and handed them over to him with an exuberant nod.

“Flechettes will shred into flesh easily, but these can additionally puncture metal. They’re inelegant, but they’ll do better than pencils!”

“Did you just... hand craft ammunition for my rifle...?”

The woman’s only reply was to chuckle and pat at his hands encouragingly. ‘Choly only unstuck to affix the new pouch to his harness, at Bones’s nudging, and put the harness and belt on over his Vault Suit. He slipped his rifle onto his back, thanked the Furrier, and they resumed their walk.

“One more thing for the moment, Melancholy,” Bones said, once they got to the Reservoir House.
“I came to collect you, to ask you. Do tell me your favorite color. Even before I saw you standing here before me in that garb, you struck me as very much a blue person. Please say it’s so.”

He stared at her in a dull stupor a moment, caught between the formation of an answer and her guessing correctly.


“I must finish lining your coat!” She shooed him. “Now get on to speak with the sachem. They’ve awaited you more impatiently than any of us.”

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